



EL PORTAL

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EL PORTAL

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About El Portal

El Portal offers a unique venue for the original work of writers, artists, and photographers. Published biannually, *El Portal* is funded by a generous grant from Dr. Jack Williamson, a world-renowned science fiction writer and professor emeritus at Eastern New Mexico University.

Founded in 1939 as the creative forum for the students, faculty, and staff of ENMU, it was Dr. Williamson who gave us the name of *El Portal*, along with his vision to showcase the region through art. Since then, we hold a soft spot for the West, but our eclectic tastes make us open to everything. Consequently, views expressed in this issue do not necessarily reflect those of ENMU.

Our mission is our name: *El Portal* is a door to poetry and fiction, photography and art, nonfiction and flash works striving to transgress boundaries, straddle borders, and most importantly, move us. *El Portal* is accepting original, unpublished short stories, creative nonfiction (<4,000 words), flash fiction (<1,000 words), photography/art, and poetry.

ENMU students, national, and international writers are welcome to submit their works for free. ENMU students are eligible to win cash prizes awarded to first-, second-, and third-place winners in each category.

Guidelines

Please submit all written work in .doc or.docx format. With the exception of poetry and art/photograph, please limit entries to one story/essay per submission. Simultaneous submissions are welcome; we ask that you notify El Portal in the event that your work is accepted elsewhere so that we may remove it from consideration. When entering a submission, please include a third-person biography of no more than 50 words to be printed in the event that your submission is selected for publication.

- Fiction (up to 4,000 words)
- Creative Nonfiction (up to 4,000 words)
- Flash Fiction (up to 500 words)
- Poetry (up to 5 pieces)
- Art & Photography (up to 5 pieces)

Prizes will be awarded to ENMU students only. Prizes are awarded in the Prose, Poetry, and Art/Photography categories.

Deadlines

Our staff reads year-round. Please note that we are a university-based publication. Response times may be slower in the summer. Please allow one-hundred and twenty business days for our staff to respond.

E-mail: El.Portal@enmu.edu
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Category Winners in this Issue

Prose

1. The Reservoir at Chestnut Hill, Lina Wong
2. I'm Not Your Mary Sue, Emily Priddy

Poetry

1. Blooming, Lucy Martinez
2. I'm Desperate, Veronica Morgan
3. The Things I Struggle to Throw Away, Amanda Owens

Photography/Artwork

1. A Survivor's Journey, Irene Martinez
2. Sun Down, Caitlin Kreider
3. Breathing Fire, Trenton Crookshanks

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ALWAYS AND FOR NEVER

JORDAN DARKIS

Slurred laughter and screams filled the air after RCU won their fall homecoming game. Bike cops zipped up and down sidewalks and alleys, catching anyone they could walking with an open container or stumbling out from the several house parties taking place. Calvin and Marcus kept their distance from the Paul Blart Brigade by walking through the front lawns of every house they passed.

“Man, are you sure this is going to work?” Calvin asked. “Because I highly doubt walking through people’s yards with all this alcohol in your bag is going to keep these fools from trying to stop us.”

“Will you calm down before you give them a reason to come over here?” Marcus hissed. “A guy in my freshman seminar class told me that if you stay in people’s yards while partying, the cops can’t arrest you. Because it’s private property. So, we’re good!”

“Uh-huh. If you say so, fool.”

“Will you just trust me? I told your heartbroken ass that I got you tonight. For nearly two months, you’ve been locked up in either your room or the library with your face in some Walt Disney or Emily Blunt poetry you’re always reading.”

“You mean Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson?”

“See? That’s what I’m talking about? You’re too uptight. You know what?” Marcus scanned the area around them and pointed to the side of a house where trees provided plenty of darkness and cover. “Let’s head over there for a second. You need to get your mind right.”

Calvin followed Marcus over to the house’s side. He continuously looked over his shoulder toward the street while Marcus dug in his bag. Calvin’s leg shook rapidly as the clinking of glass in Marcus’s bag got louder.

“Ah-ha!” Marcus cheered.

Calvin looked down and saw Marcus grinning with a bottle of brown liquid in one hand and two shot glasses in the other. Marcus set the bag gently up against the house and placed the two shot glasses on

a nearby air conditioning unit. Uncorking the bottle filled the air with a familiar scent that sent Calvin's mind reliving memories of what felt like a previous life. He watched Marcus fill the two shot glasses to the top, then picked both up and held one out to Calvin.

Hesitation locked Calvin's body up like an emergency brake as he looked at the glass extended out to him. Marcus raised his brow in response to Calvin's stiff body. Marcus took a breath and relaxed his extended arm.

"Cal," Marcus said. "You good?"

"If you go to that party, we're done! You hear me?" Calvin's eyes glossed over as he got lost in the voice invading his head. "All your friends are sinners, you know that, right? I'm so glad you gave up that life for me." Calvin's heart started to beat through his ears and pounded like tribal drums. "I'll always be yours." Calvin snatched the glass from Marcus and swallowed it in one gulp.

Marcus looked at Calvin with a blank stare. "Well, cheers. Damn." Marcus then took his shot and began coughing seconds after. He started pounding his chest as he continued to cough. "Woo! That'll put some hair on your peaches!"

"Let's do another." Calvin felt his body overheating; the heat was loosening every inch of his being as he took in a deep inhale and let out a heavy exhale.

Marcus's face lit up, and he let out a hearty chuckle. "My man!" The two took another shot before wandering back onto the yards of strangers searching for the baseball house.

Calvin and Marcus arrived at the party, and Calvin was taken aback by how many people filled the house. He knew moving from a small town to the city would be a change but everything Calvin witnessed reminded him of an American Pie movie, nothing like the country bonfires back home. Even though he had never been to a party of such magnitude, it reawakened a part of Calvin he thought to be dead.

Calvin stood in the living room and rubbed his hands together with an eager grin on his face. "I think we're going to need something bigger than those shot glasses."

Marcus slung his bookbag off his shoulders like a warrior about to do battle. “Who do you think you’re talking to?” Marcus’s hands dove into the bag and pulled out various bottles of alcohol and soda along with two tumblers. “I think we’re going to need a bigger glass,” he mocked. “This ain’t Jaws! I stay ready!”

Calvin looked at Marcus with a blank and judgmental stare. “Boy, if you don’t start pouring some drinks!” Both of them fell into laughter as Marcus poured their drinks.

After a few victorious rounds of beer pong, Calvin searched for the bathroom. He tried his luck on the main floor and the upstairs and found that both bathrooms were occupied. Calvin carefully descended the stairs back to the main floor with a full bladder, out of options until he saw a door on the other side of the kitchen. He had explored nearly every inch of the house so far and touched every doorknob in search of a bathroom. What was a few more doors as long as he found what he was searching for?

The door led to a tight space with a descending staircase at his left. Calvin took the stairs down, and it led him to a straight, long, dimly lit hallway with two doors on each side. Calvin heard the cautionary voice inside his head that most black people get in scary-looking hallways and everything within him said nothing good was to come if he continued any further. He ignored his gut, and every horror movie ever made, and started down the hallway. The first door on the left was nothing but the laundry room. The next door was locked, so that was a bust. However, the second door on the opposite side of the hallway led him to the promised land he had been searching for.

Calvin was ready to continue the night of drunken glee and wonder with the seal broken and hands washed. He was drying his hands when a hard knock came from the wall and shook the glass mirror. The knocking became more frequent and louder, accompanied by grunts and screams.

“No fucking way!” Calvin laughed so loud that his cackling echoed throughout the entire basement.

“Who the fuck is out there!?” The voice was deep and forced, a clear sign that the male on the other side of the wall was trying to make himself sound tougher than he probably was.

Like magnets, Calvin's hands shot up to cover his mouth and muffle his laughing. He quickly turned off the light, raced down the dim hallway, and returned to the party.

Calvin found Marcus in the backyard with many people who had turned the deck into a makeshift dancefloor. Marcus was dancing with a couple of girls who were from their dorm building. He waved Calvin over, but Calvin's mind froze.

"I don't feel comfortable with you being friends with her." Calvin quickly took a long, stiff drink, emptying his cup. "It's either her or me." The pounding in his ear returned, canceling out the music and voices around him. Calvin balled his free hand into a fist, placed his thumb on the inside of the fist, and then proceeded to use the inside of his fist to tug at his thumb as if it were a weed being pulled from a garden. "I'm sorry. I know she's your friend, but I don't want any other girl being closer to you than me." He saw Marcus's mouth yell out his name. "I'll always—."

There was a solid pop in Calvin's hand, and his mind was set free again. He gently stored the hand into his pocket and walked over to join Marcus and the girls. The girls introduced themselves, and one who had wandering eyes for Calvin held out her hand for him to shake it. With his tumbler in one hand and his dislocated thumb in his pocket, Calvin quickly fumbled his cup, handing it off to Marcus so he could shake the young lady's hand. Marcus raised an eyebrow at Calvin's body language and jitteriness. As Calvin and Marcus stood among the crowd, in their own world, the two girls, and nearly every other girl on the deck, let out a deafening scream as Buss It by Erica Banks started playing. The boys were snatched away from their thoughts as the two girls dragged Calvin and Marcus further into the middle of the deck to dance. Calvin quickly freed his hand from his pocket and used his good hand to relocate the thumb he had previously snatched from its joint. Calvin grimaced slightly at the pain before making two quick fists to confirm he had done the procedure correctly. As everyone was dancing, Calvin was overcome with ecstasy. The sensation of a warm body pressed up against his felt like laying on the beach with the sun embracing your skin.

After a few more songs played, the girls joined Marcus and Calvin in the kitchen to play beer pong and make idle small talk. The girl who particularly fond of Calvin was on his team, and the other girl was partnered with Marcus.

"What are you doing after this?" the girl asked Calvin.

“Not entirely sure yet. Why?”

“Well, we are thinking about having a couple people over for an afterparty if you guys are interested.”

“Oh yeah? Well, maybe. I’ll just have to see what the plan is when we leave.”

Taking Calvin’s coyness as playing hard to get, she flashed him a smirk. “Let me see your phone.”

Calvin handed over his phone and unlocked it. The girl input her number, sent herself a text, and returned Calvin’s phone to him.

“I think we’re about to head out. Text me later when you guys figure out what you’re doing afterward.”

“Okay. I’ll do that,” Calvin said as he returned a smile.

The two girls left; Marcus walked over and gave Calvin an encouraging smack on the chest.

“Okay! I see you, Mr. Smooth!”

“What are you talking about?”

“Pretending you aren’t into her! Making her ask for your number and shit. What time you trying to head over there tonight?”

Calvin dodged eye contact with Marcus. “I’m not going over there. I was just friendly, is all.”

Marcus’s face straightened. “Nigga, you weren’t acting friendly when you were grinding on her out there on the deck with your hands all up on her waist.”

“How else was I supposed to dance? I can’t exactly waltz to those songs.”

Marcus took his hands and wiped them down his face. “How much longer are you going to be hung up on that girl? You guys broke up the first week of classes. Now here it is, halfway through the semester, and all you’ve done is mope.”

“We’re not broken up. It’s just a break for right now. She said she wanted to get closer in touch with her faith; that way, our relationship would be stronger.”

“Now, does that even make a lick of fucking sense to you? Have you really sat down listened to stupid that sounds? She forces you to go to a college four hours away from your friends and family, then ends shit with you days after you move in. And it’s all supposed to be for the good of your relationship?”

Calvin stood there silent, he looked at Marcus before moving his gaze to the ground. He knew how stupid it sounded, but it fell out of his mouth anyway. “She said we would get back together soon.”

Marcus threw his hands into the air, spun on his heel, and moved a few steps away. “Negro, please! If you don’t get this Riverdale ass love story out of my face. Oh! And don’t think I didn’t catch you popping your thumb back into place either.”

Calvin’s eyes widen at Marcus. “You saw that?”

“Yeah, I saw it! Cal, just how messed up does this girl have you?”

Calvin started chuckling, and it quickly became a short hysterical laugh. “Man, you have no idea. And it’s not like I was ever like this before either, but I guess over time, she knew my feelings weren’t going anywhere, so she took advantage of that.”

Marcus looked around and noticed how everyone else was smiling, laughing, and enjoying life. He gave Calvin a solid swipe across the head and walked to the kitchen counter where their alcohol was.

“Hey! What was that for?” Calvin asked as he rubbed his head.

“For having us out here looking like a couple of punks talking about our feelings. This is college, not Oprah! Now, are we going to finish this Hennessy or what?”

Calvin let out another laugh before joining him at the counter. The two fixed themselves a drink. “Hey, Marcus?”

“If you say something sappy, I’m going to do you like Craig did Debo.”

The party started to die down as people were beginning to leave. Calvin and Marcus stood in the kitchen, gathering their stuff before leaving themselves.

Calvin handed over the last of the bottled to Marcus when he glanced over and saw the door leading to the basement. “Oh shit. I meant to tell you! I found a bathroom downstairs, and in the room next door, somebody was straight getting it! Had the entire mirror shaking.”

Marcus fell out. “No shit?! Well, that’s exactly how I’m trying to be with ole girl later on tonight!”

“You’re heading over there?”

“Yup! We’ve been texting last few minutes. You trying to come through too?”

Calvin checked his phone and saw that he had four unread texts from his new admirer. “Not tonight, man. I just don’t think I’m ready yet. And before you start, it’s not because I’m expecting Taylor to magically come back.”

“Uh-huh. Whatever you say.” Marcus nudged Calvin with his elbow.

Calvin’s ears soon became filled with a faint pounding. He stiffened, bracing himself for the invasion of his mind, but the voice had left his mind and reached his reality.

“Calvin?”

He knew the voice without even having to look up. In the basement staircase doorway stood Taylor, wearing an oversized RCU baseball shirt that clearly wasn’t hers with her hair pulled back in a half-assed ponytail and sweatpants.

“Hey, Taylor. Calvin’s body went hot, and his knees had begun to shake. Both of Marcus’s eyebrows shot up as he watched the two stare at each other.

“Hey, babe,” another familiar voice called out. Calvin recognized the deep, forced voice; he felt his stomach drop into his ass. Still, when the person caught up with the voice, Calvin saw Brad, the university’s

starting pitcher for the baseball team. “Did you see where I put my phone?”

Without breaking eye contact from Calvin, Taylor said, “It’s in the bathroom next to the towel.”

Brad looked over at the two guys and how Taylor seemed to be speechless. “Friends of yours?”

“No. I just wasn’t expecting to see anyone right around the corner, is all.”

“Oh, okay. Well, guys, I hope you guys had a great time tonight, but it’s getting late, and I have practice in the morning. I’m going to have to ask you guys to clear out.”

Calvin tore his face away from Taylor’s gaze and looked up at Brad. “Brad, was it? You wouldn’t happen to know if someone named ‘Faith’ lives here, do you?”

“Uh, no. Why?”

Calvin’s speech became monotone as his eyes slowly returned to Taylor’s. “No reason. I guess I was simply mistaken.”

Calvin watched as Taylor’s face turned bright red. He turned around and walked out of the room with Marcus bringing up the rear.

Out on the street, Calvin and Marcus stood on the sidewalk in front of the house as stragglers from the bars walk around them.

“So, what now?” Marcus asked.

Calvin took out his phone and responded to the messages that he had left unread. “I don’t know what you’re doing. But I’m going to find an afterparty.”

Calvin and Marcus busted out laughing and proceeded to walk through front yards toward their destination.

THE CHIAROSCURO OF REGRET

DANIEL BAILEY

“A man without regrets cannot be cured,” wrote Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Conversely, I thought a man with them could. I had a brief ready to present to this effect, but now the matter seems less clear. The brief ran as follows.

At 69, the ship of my conscience is sunk to the gunwales. I know the 3 a.m. guilts; in daylight hours, the same newsreel of old regrets is prone to unspool in my mind. Is this healthy? I thought it was.

“The first 40 years of life provide us with the text; the next 30, the commentary,” Schopenhauer wrote, describing my case nearly to the week. The commentary he mentioned is some I sought out and some I made up. Both kinds improved my act in middle age, I still believe, and they continue to guide my conduct as memory begins to outweigh hope (as a Hindu proverb defines old age).

The fact is a functioning memory and an intact conscience compel regrets. Many people hold they have none; I’m with those who say this can only be true of angels, monsters, and amnesiacs. Michel Templet goes further: “I question the moral integrity of anyone who says they have no regrets.” Yet, the matter is more complex than this.

Before addressing why, it seems worthwhile to pause and parse, for regret is various. The *Shoulda-woulda-coulda blues* come round after we don’t act in the face of perceived opportunity. The thrilling chance that all but begged us to grasp it, yet we didn’t; the feelings we didn’t express; the growth opportunities we didn’t embrace; the still small voice within that we ignored. These sins of omission are the hardest to bear. What we never did and whom we never expressed our love to, will remain the perfect path and the ideal partner forever.

Next come the sins of commission, the *How-could-I-have-been-so-stupid? blues*. It’s painful to face one’s lack of self-control in the past and depressing to acknowledge one is still blundering like a juvenile at a much later age. These are the *Still-crazy-after-all-these-years regrets* (with a nod to Paul Simon).

Finally, there’s anticipated regret: the sins of projection. The *If-I-don’t-do-this-I-will-die* feeling is a fear so acute of contracting the *Shoulda-*

woulda-coulda blues a person is spurred to action no matter how ill-advised. We seize the day, we cross the Rubicon, and sometimes rue it for life.

Soren Kierkegaard held it doesn't matter what we do: "I see it all perfectly; there are two possible situations. One can either do this or that. My honest opinion and my friendly advice is this: do it or do not do it—you will regret both." Obligated to choose what to discard from our brief turn between earth and sky, we feel, correctly, we're missing out on many good things. For Kierkegaard, regret would seem to be the Siamese twin of mortality.

Setting aside this existential frame and returning to regret as the product of poor past ethical performance (as I do) is considered bad form by the bulk of opinion. Katherine Mansfield is typical: "Make it a rule of life never to regret and never to look back. Regret is an appalling waste of energy; you can't build on it; it's only good for wallowing in." (Yet you can build on it.) One also hears, "You did the best you could at the time." (How would another know?) And: "The future is what counts." (Implying that the lives one impacted don't, or not as much?)

Also: "In your busy schedule of not forgiving yourself, perhaps you can find a moment to accept the forgiveness of God" (Kierkegaard again). This last came by way of a religion professor in my 35th year. Yet, from the perspective of a believer, did not the Creator forge regrets like all else? If one harbors some, ought they not be put to good use? Ceasing to continue to regret wrongs increases the chance of resuming them, or the logic behind International Holocaust Remembrance Day is flawed.

To view the 25,500 days and nights of my existence as a gradually ascending spiral of conduct with some understandable mistakes along the way not warranting enduring regret seems too easy. Over the line too often and too far, engendering trust and hopes I betrayed for selfish purposes, it's likely I hurt more than one woman for life.

When the eyes, voice, form, and attire of a woman united with her words in a single compelling effect, it was as if a nimbus had embraced her. At such times I truly woke; in those intervals I deeply perceived. Those beheld responded with gratitude and happiness. It was then I was most dangerous.

For the nimbus would disperse, my need to know depart.

“Who did you think I was, and who do you think I am?” an ex once asked.

“I liked it when you thought I was special,” said a woman friend. Thus it was with projects through the years: cooking, carpentry, learning musical instruments. I am a man of sporads. Cat-like, my interest dims, I sleep again. Until the nimbus mantles a new notion or a new person in its glowing almond orb.

The professor went on to peg me for narcissism. An online questionnaire fell one point short of later confirming him. My continuing self-condemnation, he said, masked self-aggrandizement. Rehearsing my regrets strove only to display what an extraordinary fellow I was and remain whether in rogue or soulful mode.

The unequivocal brief I thought I held for regret trembles right here. I’m forced to acknowledge the chance my regrets are fake.

And indeed, how short is the distance, how fast the fall from repulsion at selfishness practiced to pleasure—recalling interludes, luxurious and detailed, that same selfishness procured one. Is it even possible to regret pleasure? Pain, of course: the step into the busy street, the cooking oil spattered in the eyes. But the women in my picaresque youth: Do I regret the splendid gifts of themselves? The answer is the purest form of no.

Am I, then, remorseful? Or *Je ne regrette rien*?

What I want to believe is that regret builds a better self. Err we must; regret corrects, putting right in reflection and forward intention what went wrong before. Not narcissism, masochism, or autoeroticism, it’s the whole self improving on what the partial self did; the soul eclipsing the id. Love takes in its gentler hands what one grasped with younger hungrier hands.

But I cannot believe this.

Instead, I conclude that regret is Manichean. It sobers *and* intoxicates. It’s portal to reform *and* mnemonic for transgression. It’s the only route to a better self *and* path to illicit pleasures otherwise irretrievable. Regret upbraids and reforms while it delights and depraves.

“How sweet the silent backward tracings! The wanderings as in dreams—the meditation of old times resumed—their loves, joys, persons, voyages.” Walt Whitman.

EIDOLON
CODY WILHELM

You possess me
with your thirsty lips;
curve them to a smile
and beg me without words.

I trick you again with
my silver tongue,
speak tender words
that are not my own.

We become what
we behold.
You've always committed
to seeing what you want
and not what I am.

You've become so helpless
dependence like addiction.
You hold me tightly
as if an iron grip
can contort
an iron heart.

I steal your praise
and make it my own;
You steal my breath
and make it yours.

You ask me
if I will love you
when there is nothing
left to love.
When you're hand and hand
with whichever grace
your god offers.

I'm a waste of your time,
A false witness
for all what I behold;

but you may be the only good
left in my veins.

I keep you
in my blood;
yet I wish I knew
the depth
of what you feel,
if only to understand
why you are
relentless
in how you
you love
me.

WASTING TIME

CODY WILHELM

I'm wasting time
writing poems about drugs
I've never taken
as if I was an addict.

Maybe it's to make myself
feel like a victim
like I have something
to cry about.
As if I have anything or anyone
to blame but myself
for being so alone
and wasting the one thing I have.

I don't know if
it's comforting
to know that the earth
will keep spinning
and the sun
will keep burning
without me here.

The flag won't be at half mast
for someone as inconsequential as me.
I'm one of many disillusioned youth
obsessed with doing something,
of being someone.

I've been told to take my time
to sort this out,
but I've lost so much
brooding over such
inane bullshit
like this.

PARTY GIRL

HAILEY GORE

Party girl gets ready for another night.
She has to look her best.
She has to forget last night.

She arrives to the house,
the music loud,
the people alive.

She dances until she cannot breathe.
Another drink.
Another drink.

She stumbles and falls.
She can barely open her eyes.
Party girl feels alive.

She gets pulled on the dance floor again and again,
handed shots of lemon-lime vodka,
body against body in a crowded room.

The night is coming to an end.
Party girl gets pulled onto the dance floor.
She says no and tries to fight.

She cannot open her eyes,
body against body,
dancing as she cries.

Bruises cover her body,
her dress torn during the commotion.
She asks how a dance could be so painful.

She makes it home the next morning.
She showers and cannot remove the self-hatred.
She cannot remove the bruises and tear stains.

Party girl cannot wait until the night.
Another drink.
Another drink.
A vicious cycle of forgetting last night.

I WORRY FOR HER

HAILEY GORE

I worry for her.
The girl she used to be,
so much pain and fear
packed inside her tiny body.

I worry for her.
The girl she is now,
unsure what is going on in her head,
unsure whether this is better or worse.

Half the time she feels nothing
as if emotion is impossible to reach.
Other times she sits in front of the window
staring out with empty tears streaming down her face.

I worry for her.
She cannot even write a poem
in first person
because she has detached from everything.

I AM NOT A MOSAIC

VERONICA MORGAN

a tik tok trend called “mosaics” is currently popular and is where young creators are detailing habits they’ve picked up from those close to them.

i am not built from the tiny pieces
of stained glass that others have donated
to make up who i am

i am not something hung from the wall
a painting to enjoy
instead
i am a bowl

carefully centered on the wheel
pulled from the sturdy hands
of the people who shaped me

hands that made me wobble
despite the love used
to coax me into a solid form

i’ve been dropped
one too many times
discarded
because cracks are ugly
and crookedness
cannot be fixed

but my broken pieces
are filled with gold resin
and the fissures
become my strengths

no, i cannot be fixed
but i can build myself
into something stronger

no, i am not a mosaic
i am build of stone clay
and gold dust

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i have survived firings and falls
and have stayed beautiful all the while

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I'M DESPERATE

VERONICA MORGAN

To reach any part of you I can.
To hear your voice over hundreds of miles.
To see your name.
Feel your fingers between mine.

CURSES

JOSLIN HUSKIN

when my mother meets you she will shake your hand, she will shake your hand and trace your fingers for anger, her hug is the referee counting the seconds till someone flinches. her smile will search mine for signs of forcefulness, she will don her reading glasses to read in between the lines of the sentences I've coached you on, she will make an off-handed comment about how she wishes I would move home. that will be the life vest she'll throw me if the waves get too high. you won't notice any of this.

when the chains are left behind, they will not give flesh to the skeletons in her closet, they will not repair the holes in the walls, in the doors, it will not straighten her broken nose, my ability to walk away from situations that no longer serve me is the WD40 for this generational curse, it will loosen her palms' strength around her rosary.

the chain will hang on my bedroom door, it won't knock when I introduce you two. the broken chain eases the strain on my mother's eyes, allowing her fingers to unlearn Braille searching so desperately for a sign reading "help." This poem in itself is evidence enough to my mother that God hears her.

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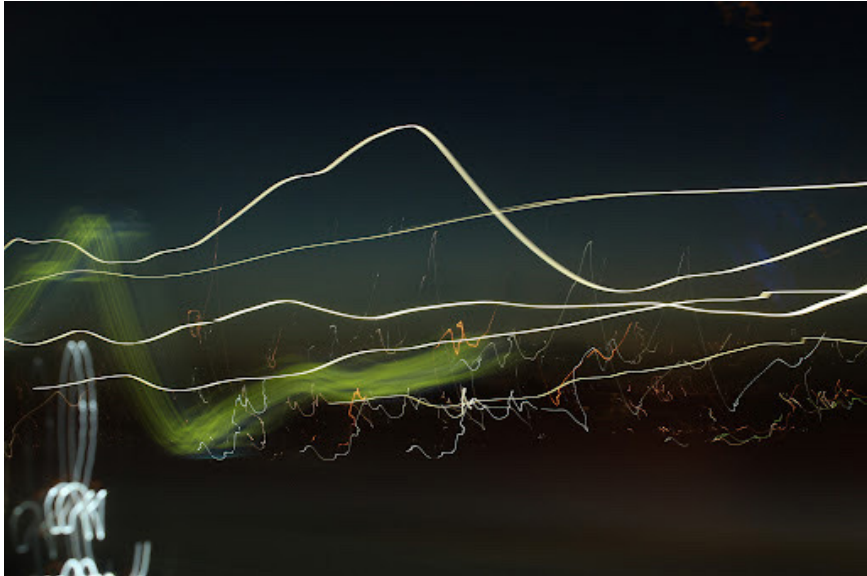
DOG
ELLIS BLACKSTONE



Volume 79

LIGHTS

ELLIS BLACKSTONE



Volume 79

BLOOMING
LUCY MARTINEZ

Build a flower garden on my grave.
Make beautiful life out of me
since I never found
beauty in
myself.

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SAND WAVES

DIANE WEBSTER

Sand with texture
of petrified waves
now shimmers
in heat-wave mirages
of an ocean once
in high-tide undulation.

CHESS MATCH IN BROOKLYN

G.H. MOSSON

Two chess champs slip past
 ducking their rent.
I check the book for what's due
 and plot my moves.
Play a grin, pass a wink,
 no mate without a check.
In the game out here, debts
 trigger new rules.

*Six flights of crash pads
with a concrete façade
where youth bed like rats
to reach king of the board
and lean-tos of bagged trash
pause on curbs by the cars.*

Slip me a hundred—wink—
 but not the back rent.
Will you miss this sass
 that stages your exit?
After intermission and barking dogs,
 curtains rising on stained furniture,
a check might stall the end game,
 but not this pawn's advances.

*Sherriff posts an eviction notice.
Checkmate, bit actors.
Landlord's books are zeroed clean.
A fork lingers in the kitchen
near a chessboard without pieces,
a vodka of the heart.*

A LETTER TO MY SISTER

JIM BEANE

May 17, 2017

Dear Gin,

You told me to stay away, so I have. Don't call, you said, so I haven't. But I need you to know what really happened. Please read this letter, Gin, it might help you understand. Please don't throw it away. Keeping everything inside is killing me. Bad feelings grow worse, and I feel like they are eating me alive. I close my eyes and their faces flash through my head. All they do is whisper, Why? I can't sleep, I can't work, I'm drinking too much and smoking like a chimney. You don't know this, I couldn't bear to tell you, but I lost my apartment two months ago. Now I shuffle from one shelter to the next. If I'm sober, I sleep indoors. If not, I crash in the warmest place I find. I feel like I'm getting sucked down a drain, Gin, and I have to tell someone the truth before I'm gone.

Tonight, the night man at Saint Ann's shelter let me in. The Catholics give you pen and paper to write letters. I thought you might want to know the truth. Course, you'd already know if Tom hadn't been such a hard-ass. Sorry about that whole mess but Tom had it coming. I know, it shouldn't have happened in front of the boys, but I can't change the past. Besides, your husband's always bragging about the great health insurance he carries. So, I'm sure he's fine, and if not, he will be soon.

But I'm not. I will never be fine again, but it sure feels good to write to you, baby sis. Feels almost like talking and we haven't talked in a long time.

For starters, I wish I'd never taken the damn job. But \$4 over minimum with bennies was hard to pass up. Aren't many jobs out there for 57-year-olds with no skills and bad ankles. The interviewer said my military service helped. But I didn't ask a whole lot of questions; I needed the money.

For two years I patrolled halls, joked with the kids, stopped fights, and actually felt good about what I was doing. Good energy being around kids, and some of them at least pretended to like me. Remember how, when I started the job, I was on top of the world? Well, for the first time, it finally felt like I might make it to Social Security. My plan: take my little

bit of Social Security and move to Clearwater, where Pop was born, get a fishing shack, maybe a dog, and live out a life of ease in the tropics. Thought I might even splurge and get a skiff with a canopy. But that dream is over. The television news painted me as such shit, even the President called me a coward.

What happened?

Well, six months on the job, the security agency I worked for issued us sidearms. I never understood what we needed sidearms for or when we were supposed to use them, but from then on, I carried a .32 caliber, six-shot revolver in a shoulder holster beneath my uniform coat and a concealed-carry permit in my wallet.

I never told you any of this; I didn't want to fight about it, and I know it shocked you when you heard about the guns from the news. Sorry, I should've told you. But, at the time, I needed the job more than a lecture about guns in our country.

You remember how we were as kids? We told each other everything, all our secrets, all our fears. Remember? Sorry, but knowing how you feel about guns, I couldn't bring myself to tell you about my gun. Just read this letter, Gin, please. It's the only truth I know. Forget what others say, Gin. What matters is the truth between us, and I better hurry up about it—the night man promised to get this letter in the mail tomorrow if I finish before lights out, so here it is.

* * *

The kids at West filter into the school between 7:30 and 7:45 every morning. They walk to school or ride a bus or get dropped off. No matter, the first bell rings at eight, and Mr. Thomas, the vice-principal, herds them inside. Our security details work in two-man teams. Mister Inside and Mister Outside. Josh and I were partners. Remember Josh? Good guy, Josh. Married, thirty-five, a father with two young girls, and he loved his job.

I was working the outside detail that week and Josh was inside. Around 8:30, I started patrolling the grounds. Josh and I carried radios. Josh did most of the calling; I didn't listen much but said "Roger" no matter what he said. Around ten on that Monday morning, Josh called me and told me the students and faculty were filing into the auditorium for the

“Welcome Back” assembly.

When Josh called, I had been watching a rusted Toyota Corolla pull into the lot and park. I was on the rise behind the school under the shade trees, where I could see the entire lot. Two boys climbed out of the Corolla. The driver, a long-haired kid I didn't recognize, popped the trunk and yanked out a dark-colored athletic bag with WEST written on the side in yellow letters. He handed the bag to a hefty kid with a buzzcut and grabbed a second one from the trunk for himself, identical to the first. I figured they were football players.

They stood talking by the car for a moment, then walked toward the auditorium entrance. I left the shade trees and headed down the rise to cross the parking lot to complete my rounds. I passed under the auditorium windows and heard Principal Powell addressing the assembly.

But Powell went silent mid-sentence, and a burst of popping sounds like firecrackers erupted inside. Then a silence, as if there were no sound left in the world, until the screaming started. I pulled the .32 from my shoulder holster and leaned against the building. I waited and tried to calm my heart and regulate my breathing.

The next thing I heard was a boy's voice shouting “SHUT UP, SHUT UP” and then more popping that I knew by this time was gunfire. I slid along the brick wall toward the auditorium entrance. My heart pounded in my chest as I neared the corner of the school building. Then my radio crackled and Josh came on, gasping for breath as if he'd been running. His voice was a whisper. I couldn't understand what he was saying.

“Settle down,” I told him. “Speak slowly.”

When I turned the corner, I could see the auditorium doors were closed and hear the screams inside. The screaming haunts me still.

“Two shooters, Joe,” Josh said finally. I saw him hiding in a garden of untrimmed shrubs planted along the wall at the auditorium's entrance. When he saw me, he held up his radio and slashed his finger across his throat. I snuck forward until I was under cover in the garden across the walk from the garden where Josh hid.

Josh slid upward, his back to the brick wall, until he stood full. He leaned his head against the wall. His eyes darted from me to the doors.

He held his .32 revolver in both hands and pointed the barrel upward to the sky. I could see his fingers trembling. He lifted his chin toward the door, but I shook my head no. I was senior man and thought we'd have a better chance taking them down outside. We had no chance if we charged them inside.

Nothing in our training prepared us for anything like this. We had to make our own decisions. A wide concrete sidewalk separated Josh and me. There was nothing I could do to stop what happened next.

Josh stepped from his cover and pointed his .32 at the doors. He shouted for the shooters to give themselves up. As he waited for an answer, the glass doors exploded. A hailstorm of bullets ripped Josh apart. He staggered backward and fell dead to the cement without firing a single shot.

Those two boys I thought were football players murdered Josh without a second thought. I must have gone into shock. I could not move nor take my eyes away from the blood pooling beneath Josh.

But then the sound of sirens and the sight of flashing lights; then officers in helmets advancing with their guns drawn. One officer pointed his pistol at me.

"Drop the gun," he said. And I tossed the .32 into the grass between him and me.

Two short bursts and a half-dozen pops sounded from the auditorium. The officer's attention shifted from me to the auditorium. A bullhorn crackled, shouting, "Give up." But more gunfire followed. Then quiet until the SWAT cops burst out the broken doors of the auditorium, leading the kids away from the building in single file with their hands on their heads. Their teachers walked beside them.

Twenty-three killed, Gin. Four teachers died trying to shield their students from harm. Twenty-three dead. Josh died trying to save them all. The dead teachers were called heroes. Josh was called a hero.

Another police officer picked up my gun from the grass, took my badge, and demanded my concealed-carry permit. He loaded me in his cruiser and drove away without lights or siren. He offered no words to help or hurt me. But, inside the station, two officers seated at desks looked up

when I was brought in. Their stares made my world shift, Gin. I knew what they were thinking, and since then nothing has been the same.

No one has approached me and said, “You did the right thing” or “I’m sorry for the way you’re being treated.” No one has defended me. No one. Funny, I feel like the only thing the press and the cops wanted from me was to know why I didn’t die with Josh.

* * *

Gin, I’m a good man. I spent eight years in the military serving my country, I don’t lie, I don’t cheat, and I don’t steal. I don’t run from fights. My only crime was I needed money, so I took the only job offered me. What else could I do?

I should have jumped out from under cover with Josh, I’m sure of that now. Maybe everyone is right about me being a coward. I should have stood alongside Josh shoulder to shoulder, like Butch and Sundance, with guns blazing.

But I didn’t. What should I have done different, Gin? What did I do to deserve all this? Tell me.

The lights are switching on and off. Must be late; the night man’s tapping my shoulder and holding his hand out for this letter. Well, Gin, guess I’d better go before lights out. I hope you can understand.

Love, Joey

COFFIN OF THE LEFT BEHIND

LYNN HOGGARD

Love is grief with no place to go.

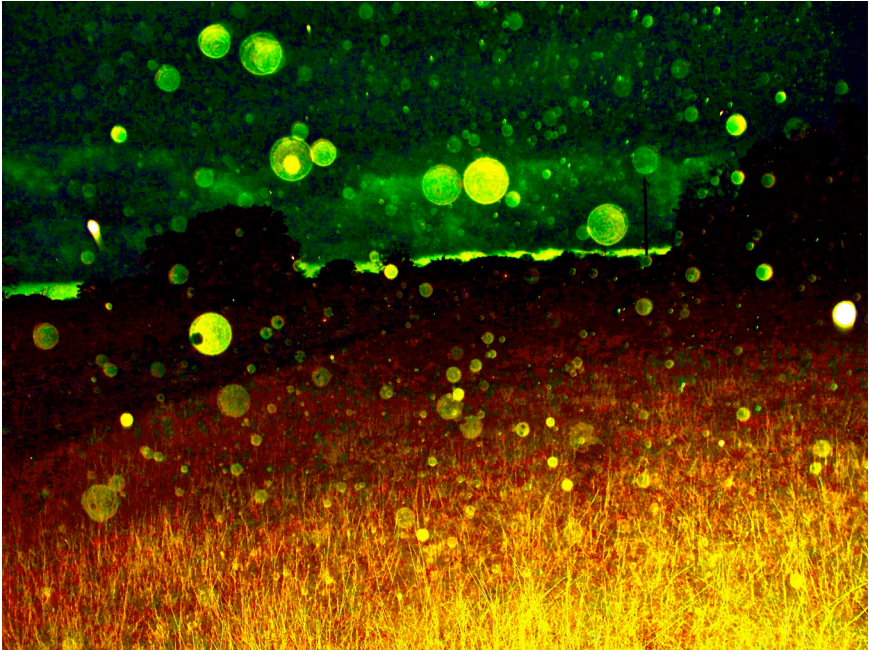
—Jamie Anderson

I hold his hand,
the fingertips already cool.
I want to crawl inside
his flesh, hold him
to life from the inside.
I kiss him again and again,
as if kisses can wake him
from his more-than-sleep.

Where can this love go?
I hang my head.
Fragments of no sense
fall on me.

WHEAT FIELD GLOBULES

CHARLES TAYLOR



SESTINA FOR THE RIGHT TO LIFE

ALISE VERSELLA

Silence equals death

I see the refugees stitching closed their lips

The image becomes protest

Stitch means the last bit of a thing, it also means bring

Together. Like how the Egyptians believed they'd be in an afterlife

But first, against a feather, the heart must be weighed

How would your heart weather if it were to be weighed?

Isn't it enough that we will grow old and ill and meet death,

Must we always be hating and killing when we only want to live our life?

If no one listens to what drips from our lips

What good is the mouth for, what would the tongue bring?

Once the soul passes on, the body remains. The vessel, a protest.

We stand defenseless in protests

Rubber bullets and tear gas, the trampling of bodies, how heavy
hypocrisy weighs

Cops and their blue duty to serve and protect who are they protecting?

When those cops bring

In a Black man or woman they meet their death

No deaths for the white shooters with their smug, privileged lips

Who deserves this pursuit of happiness, this liberty, their life?

The huddled masses are fighting for their lives

Hospital beds scream against mass graves in protest

Forgotten prayers tumble from lapsed Catholic lips

No stars pull at our hair—only crows, pulling at our bones, it's all so
heavy

This march toward death

When he comes, with what would he bring?

Death comes for all of us but no one appreciates the gift he brings

Reminder of our mortality, bittersweet brevity of life

There is so much to be learned from death

How to be like the blaze of sun that protests

Dusk. When the legs that keep you treading grow heavy

In empty waters watch how the humpback whale returns to the Hudson,
hope on his lips

There is so much still to snip the stitches through lips
A woman stands triumphant above this city begging you to bring
Her your dreams, though the sorrows endured have made the bag heavy

There is still so much burgeoning life
The roots claw through the sidewalks in protest
The seedling persists silently objecting to its death

We will keep objecting to the death oppression brings
Every kiss we throw away from cracked, chapped lips pleading for life
Smile in protest, the muscles fighting against the aching jaw and the
heaviness.

GRIM-FACTS FILE

YVONNE HIGGINS LEACH

Our faces above the colors of morning
Trix, Pebbles, and Froot Loops bob
in milk, like plastic floaties on a white lake.

Wonder Bread PB&J shoved in a plastic sandwich bag.
Red Delicious bruising against a bag of Doritos.
Sixteen cubes of sugar in an after-school can of Coke.

The fingers of wind in the freedom of our hair
as our bike tires kicked up stones in the springtime sun.
We rode through parks familiar as the slight pull of the snack drawer.

Thursday dinners our working mother stacked McDonald's bags
on the kitchen table. Plastic straws squeaked into the milkshake lids.
Our hands gripped Big Macs and Quarter Pounders with cheese,

the oily salt on our tongues as we ran back out
to explore shortcuts and vacant lots until dark.
Water plentiful as we bathed, scrubbing day's dirt from our nails.

School field trips to the zoo.
The red-and-white striped circus tent raised in the middle of town.
An animal-control officer loading up a dog we knew by name.

Six weeks at Liberty Lake in summer, sitting side by side
on the drive in the station wagon, sweat bleeding into each other's arms,
paralleling the crop duster dodging trees and power lines.

The moths thick as sauce at the porch light.
The barn owl tucked behind the cabin beam for the night.
Tree frogs so loud we had to raise our voices to talk.

Memories I now place into a grim-facts file, blown in with a hard truth:
sugar, brain injuries, fast food, plastic, child murders,
cages and cruelty, car deaths, pesticides, and extinction.

All the while, butterflies have no milkweed.
Cows and pigs in factory farms stand ankle deep in their own manure,
and the orcas in the Sound hunger for vanishing Chinook.

GOLD RUSH BRIDE

JENNIFER FERNANDEZ

We ate meals in near silence, forks clinking on tin plates. We gazed at one another, our eyes searching the other's until inevitably she would break away, glancing down to mop up a splotch of gravy. Who is this delicate creature? Even after some time, I wondered. She was not delicate in a fragile way, in the way that small birds can break. Neither was she delicate like a crisp fall leaf underfoot, instantly crackling into dusty pieces when disturbed. Rather, she was delicate like a secret, one kept closely and gently, lest it be heard by those undeserving.

When she arrived, I will admit, I was relieved. Up until that moment, I had seen but one small photograph of her sent by mail. Two months earlier I had placed a matrimonial advertisement in *The Morning Call*. I heard many men had already done so, and with so few women in San Francisco, it made sense. George mentioned that he knew several men who had successfully corresponded with women who, for one reason or another, sought to venture west to find marriage after the war. I hesitated initially, as you can never trust the stories you hear these days, full of vagueness and misrepresentation. The notion, however, would not leave me, and figuring there was not much to lose I scribbled a draft giving the details of my stature (6 feet tall), my age (25 years), and my occupation (gold miner, though that was and remains a half-truth). I also added information on what I was hoping for in a wife—a young woman who was curious, focused, and clear-headed who could set about making a warm home, and someone who liked to laugh. George ridiculed me for this last detail, but I left it in all the same as I believe laughter can warm a home much more efficiently than a fire.

Her letter stood out as thoughtful and good-natured. She asked questions about our home, its location, and what surrounded it. She asked about what shops she might frequent, who her neighbors would be, and how far our children would have to walk to attend school. I smiled at the thought of children, moreover, that she so casually included them in her inquiry. The photograph enclosed showed a young woman with broad shoulders, dark hair combed into a tidy pile, soft wisps floating down framing her face. It was truly a lovely face—neither elongated, nor particularly round, instead featuring a jawline that conveyed self-possession and determination. She struck me as poised and amiable, and I wondered what her voice sounded like and which way her curls fell down her back. Her shapely lips, I must admit, excited

me as did her eyes. Neither stern, nor harsh, they looked directly at the camera and projected a kindness and confidence that made me wish I had been the photographer that day.

It was thus that she became a promise. Though the idea had been presented to me as a method by which my house would be clean, my clothes washed, and my meals cooked, she became for me something much more—a possible companion, the opportunity for fullness in what had become a lonely life, and for a soft touch amidst all the brutal beatings and bruising I come by naturally. I believe I read her letter fifty times during that long stretch while I waited for her response to my proposal. The day her acceptance arrived I purchased her a ticket aboard a steam ship, a pillow, cup, plate, and fork as well as a bar of the finest lavender French soap City of Paris Dry Goods Company had to offer (as I wanted her to have something fine and pleasing here, not simply items of utility). We figured out the rest on her arrival.

I hesitated to tell her about the boxing at the start as I worried she would not accept the proposal. After all, how does one know what to share and what to hold back? Once she was here, we wed straight away, and it was only then I shared that mining had become unpredictable and could not be relied upon for steady income. I explained the landscape is indifferent to your comings and goings. It has been here long before you and will continue long after you die. It is of course hopeful that you will love it, offering itself to you wholly and willfully, though it has learned that you will likely lie to it, steal from it, and do so with impunity. Because of this deceit gold had become scarce, the land holding back once again what was its own to begin with, guarding it like a secret in its bosom.

The word gold conjures warmth and light but the pursuit of it is cold and harsh, as such I had learned to guard my earnings carefully. While others chose to whittle away their wealth, I put mine away for the days when the gold's glow dimmed. We would live off of the hefty savings I had and whatever extra I made boxing, which was substantial in and of itself.

To soften the news, I lied stating, "The danger is not terribly high my dear." But to my surprise she did not object. Instead, she took my hands and kissed them, first the inside of each palm, then the knuckles. She held my face for a moment, then went about the business of cleaning the dinner dishes.

There were moments shared when we were quiet, either lying in bed before falling asleep or in the slow minutes of morning, when in our gauzy dreamy states I suspected she would divulge her secrets— what her life was like before she arrived, what made her choose to come, whether or not she was happy. But she never did. Her silence a swaddling blanket. On nights when I fought, I would arrive reeking and crusted in sweat and caked cruor, but she never complained, not once about the smell or dirt or grime, neither San Francisco's nor my own. Pigs and sewage ran through the roads when the rush and fever for gold began, and though by the time Sarah arrived it had improved in some parts, it was most notable around saloons, gambling parlors, and the wharf. Streets were mostly dirt and sand, with garbage thickening the sea of mud in places. The idea being that it would be easier for horses and carriages to make their way through. The sludge, however, makes it quite dangerous and in the dark of night it is difficult to know where it best to step. Indeed, some have known great injury for lack of a proper walking path. One particularly rainy season, the mud was thick and deep enough to swallow a horse.

* * *

Sometime after her arrival Floyd Royston attempted to land a haymaker during a fight, a lethal swing that has been made illegal in some parts of the country. And while I was fortunate enough to anticipate the foul shot, he immediately followed his attempt with a left hook to my right side, which I was not able to dodge and for which I was wholly unprepared. The wind knocked out of me; I was floored. George, my second, cheered me on, urging me to stand and get back at him. I admit to having taken much worse in the past, but this instance was unique in its impact as the instant I was down, my mind turned to Sarah and I was overcome with perturbation.

A tension roiled within me as the countdown began. As I lay on the ground of that pub that smelled of piss and beer with dirt and gold dust in my mouth and sweat stinging my eyes, I felt as if I needed to stay safe for her. Sure, the money would have been keen and though I surely could have taken on Royston despite my broken ribs, I felt conflicted: come home safe to my beloved who would surely not think less of me for not having continued or stand and brawl, earn money through blood and spit and sweat and keep my reputation as a good bet? But my deliberations took too long. While for me it was mere seconds, the countdown was completed, and I was deemed the loser.

“You’ll get ‘em next time ol’ pal. Not to worry, not to worry. You’ll be fine. Not to worry,” George offered in comfort.

We lost the purse, of course, but he was confident we could make it up in a few weeks easily, maybe in a rematch against Royston himself.

“They’d pay handsomely to see that!” he said. How right he was.

When I arrived that night, she did as she had always done since that first night I came home cut and scraped. Having heard the door, she rose from bed and brought out her kit of salves and potions. Her dark and mysterious eyes took me in and with a tilt of her head, motioned me to the kitchen table where she saw to me as a doctor to a patient. In truth, it is as if I have two doctors, Dr. Maynard, who has become too old for his profession with his milky-eyes and trembling hands and Sarah, my bewitching healer at home who is each day more mystifying than the last and whose kindness and alchemy soothe more than any of Doc Maynard’s efforts.

In the fractured light of night, she cleaned the cuts on my hands and face, rubbed liniment and salves on my body so I would bruise less. All the while humming a tune which, at first, I did not recognize, though now it is familiar to me. It is a haunting melody, and one I catch myself humming throughout the day. After the Royston fight, I stayed home and helped when I could, though rest and minimal movement had been prescribed by both of my physicians. The landing of a punch takes but an instant; recovery, however, takes a good deal longer.

* * *

She was up most mornings before me, her body having barely made a dent in the sheets, as if she floated above them when she was sleeping, dreaming of clouds and dandelions. A hearty breakfast, her prescription, was always ready when I woke. She claimed the meal would do me good, give me strength and help me heal, and she was correct. I ate carefully both as not to frighten her with my hunger nor induce a sharp ache at my side. Each day she sat and watched as I ate all the while humming her song.

One morning, I asked when she might like to go to the shops together, but she laughed at the suggestion that I might meander through the streets of San Francisco without a care, when I should be lying in bed.

Her care for me was striking, immediate, and profound. I explained that I enjoyed walking by her side, her arm wrapped around mine. And I meant it. When she stepped by me on her way to the sink, I pulled her over with my good arm and whispered that I very much wanted a kiss from her. When I said this, the left corner of her mouth kicked up as it always does when I say something she finds amusing, then conceded my request. She smelled of orange blossoms and warm honey, and there were days when I was convinced that this life with her was all a dream and that someday I would awaken to find that it has all been a cruel bewitchment. Perhaps the day has finally come.

I spent my days watching as she floated through the house. Every motion and movement belying a secret interior world. I at once admired her for it and was jealous of it as her thoughts remained mostly her own. She did not share them unless I inquired directly and I did not dare do so, enjoying the thought that she could have a whole world inside her, dreams and visions, thoughts and feelings that need not be shared with the world. As I watched her stir a pot for dinner, I imagined all the things she had touched in her young life. The railing of her previous home, for instance. Did she run up the stairs as a child while no one was looking? Did she use her lithe fingers to tie a younger sibling's shoes? What might have she told the child as she looped the laces—did she wish them well at school or admonish them for running with their shoes untied? When she combed her hair at night, I wondered if she wished the mirror bigger or more ornate.

It was in these contemplative moments that an odious image settled within me. It crept into my thoughts when I least suspect it, doing more harm than I would like to admit. I envisioned myself beaten on the floor of a dark tobacco-spiked saloon, brains scrambled, eyes pummeled shut, anemic. In the vision, I called out to her, to what had turned out to be my whole heart, the answer to a question I did not know I had. But I could not rise and no manner of cheering on from George or any of the inebriates can levitate me from the anguished singular truth that I am dying on that befouled floor. It is an image I did not share with her out of superstition, as if putting words to it would bring it forth, a premonition sealing the end of the enchanted life we had created.

During the days of my healing, we did not live beyond our means. She offered to take a job, but I assured her that it was not necessary and that she could continue on caring for herself and our home.

“And you, of course,” she added, that left corner kicking up as she half-smiled.

“Yes. And myself, of course,” I conceded coyly, winking at her cleverness.

She is not capricious, never asking for more than she needs, never wanting anything too lavish or outlandish. That said, she is not homely. Early on she sewed curtains for the windows—buttercup yellow, creamy lilac, and pale fawn-brown. They were quite an improvement on what I had fashioned before she arrived—bedsheets held up by nails. Though I have my tidy sum, I do not pretend to know how to arrange a home or how to introduce softness to it by way of furnishings. She enchanted our house upon her arrival, and it is in this fashion that we live in humble luxury—French soap and chintz curtains, tin plates and cups.

One morning, I read in the paper that a man by the name of Gordon had imported an idea from Europe of a pleasure garden where one could amble, sit, and visit with friends. He called it a park and the first of its kind in San Francisco had opened nearby. Despite her insistence that I remain cloistered, I sent a message in secret to Mr. Glover, the proprietor of a carriage to come for us on Saturday afternoon. It was a glorious outing, she in her periwinkle dress and teardrop-shaped bonnet trimmed in pale green ribbon, violet and verdant feathers. We had done three revolutions around the park before she offered quietly, “Ennis, I have a secret to share with you. We are to have a child.”

Upon hearing this news, a rapturous warmth unlike I had ever felt came over me. It was an overwhelming radiance for her, for our child, for this life that had taken on the shape of truest and deepest love and then, almost as quickly my morbid apparition descended upon me, my death by blows, but I said nothing of it. She took my tears for tears of happiness, and I let her believe they were just that.

In the weeks that followed, the specter continued to haunt me. Sarah, of course, could sense my dis-ease and though her belly grew full and plump, her thighs and breasts fleshy, she continued to nurse me in both mind and body.

She whispered comforting words whenever she noticed a darkness overcome me. “Soon you will be well enough to box, my love. Do not fret. You shall soon feel the exciting rush once again!” I did not share the

truth about my worries. When I thought of it, my stomach soured, my heart sank, and I grew dim, but she only took this as further evidence of my longing for the sport.

Her body changed in the most glorious ways in those days. She was warm and round, her hips ample. She was an herbaceous garden, growing new life within her. Her sweet smell transformed to bay laurel and sage, and I loved and desired her in all her shapes and forms, scents and colors. I was grateful to be witness to her transformation, another mystery brought into my life. A growing family grows one's responsibilities, however, and as the days passed, I knew that I would need to set a date for the fight. George arranged a rematch with Royston. He was elated when I gave him the go-ahead. And so, we got to training.

* * *

George and I sparred some and though my arm felt stiff, we decided to move forward with some smaller matches. In a fight with Bill Richardson, I took a punch to the head which left me dizzy for a moment, but I was able to quickly compose myself. George advised I go easy as it would allow me to last longer, but I wanted the mess over with as soon as possible. We went 16 rounds, and with my eye swollen shut, I landed a heavy blow to Richardson's shoulder dislocating it. There was no doctor that evening to put it back, so the fight was called in my favor. The purse added up to an extraordinary sum putting me in a good place not to have to fight for some nights. I welcomed the reprieve, but George quickly declared me fit and ready for Royston. I wanted desperately to postpone.

While she slept hard and deep at my side, I was restless and uneasy. My inner life an occult darkness that churned me. George visited one foggy afternoon to say that dislocating Richardson's shoulder was the best thing I had done to drum up bets.

"Bully for you old boy!" he said as he slapped me on the shoulder, smiling wide as the ocean and bright as a gold nugget. He advised that all I had to do was last eight rounds.

"He's played out Ennis! Fat and full as a tick e'ry night, drinkin' his way through town. All's you need to do is go easy, get a few licks in, and yer right as a trivet."

I doubted him at the time, but I do say he was right.

* * *

The fight tonight with Royston was everything George said it would be. I thought surely streets must be empty for all creation was present, the air heavy and moist with all those bodies pressed up on one another. Men of leisure, miners with too much stuffing in their pockets looking for a way to burn their new-found wealth, fancy girls, and entertainers of all stripe and color, all drunk and sweating before the fight had even begun. Royston arrived looking like an old, grizzled bear, his legs thick as tree trunks, his ham hands barely able to make a fist. He was in awful good spirits, cocky having won the previous fight. We smiled at one another in a gentlemanly-enough way, though when I offered him a word of kindness, he threw it in my face in hubris, but it was no matter to me because now laying eyes on Royston, I knew I had him. Stripping down to our trousers I could see his bulging belly and chuckled to myself. George was not far behind whispering in my ear, "That fucker's gotta be off his chump. Look at the fat bastard!"

In the first round, the bear came at me full chisel, but I kept light, ducking and weaving out of his reach. I let go a right hook but Royston simply grinned and nodded egging me on. Sharp left-handers were exchanged, I drew first blood. He followed with a peg to my nose bleeding it immediately, a steady stream down my front. He is a powerful beast I will admit.

We fiddled with one another for a while, my eye, his neck, my shoulder, his nose. At one point, I knew the brute was about to attempt his haymaker once again. He is a lumbering animal though, and so when he pulled back to take his swing, I spanked him hard with a right hook to the left side of his head causing him to tumble unsteady. I laid into him quickly taking advantage of his position. He is such an imposing figure I could strike without needing much use of my vision. His second shouted above the din for him to return to his corner, but he took his beating.

In a white hot rage, I flew at him viciously our blood and sweat spraying onto those closest to the action. He attempted to right himself several times and landed another pop or two to my already bulging eyes, but I was undeterred in my attempts both to kill my funeralizing vision and the great behemoth before me. In the end I was victorious, lifted up above shoulders I could barely see while they chanted my name. Beer and

whiskey poured freely in celebration, and several were put in my hands by rich men who had just gotten richer. With my right eye completely swollen shut and having drunk enough to numb my face, I made my way outside, desperate for Sarah's magical touch. And it is now here that I lay in a pool of mud struggling to breathe, my face engorged, nostrils full of sludge and blood. Some time ago, I called out for someone to come to my aid but words have never seemed do me much good. I have tried to right myself, the pain searing me awake and the liquor back to sleep. I must make my way home out of this thick grave to my Sarah and our child.

But first I shall rest.

LA CASA DE LOS NIÑOS PRESCHOOL

D. SETH HORTON

Earlier that summer, they'd moved from Seattle to accept tenured track positions at Texas A&M International University. During their interviews, the other faculty members in the Department of Biology and Chemistry openly discussed the importance of finding a balance between work and family, which is what they most needed to hear. Dr. Ying Yue Jiang and Dr. Isaac Pierce were interested in research, but she was also five months pregnant. The department chair explained their publishing requirements weren't as strenuous as other institutions. She also promised them flexibility with their teaching schedules. That they'd be able to work with some of the underserved students from Nuevo Laredo was another important bonus. After weighing their options, Ying Yue and Isaac accepted the offers and bought a small house in Laredo.

Halloween was their first holiday together as a family. They kept it simple. Isaac dressed Lei in a pair of orange pants and a Halloween-themed shirt that read, "Daddy's under my spell." As they handed out candy to some of the neighborhood children, they tried to imagine what Lei would be like when she was older. Would she be shy or outgoing? Would she have a scientific mind? Would she have much of a sense of humor? Sure, it was all just silly speculation, but it was a pleasant way to spend the night.



Year 2

Halloween fell on a Saturday that year. Isaac and Ying Yue waited until the afternoon to carve the pumpkins so they wouldn't rot in the heat. In the middle of the project, Lei dropped her goldfish crackers onto the ground and started to cry. To distract her, Isaac began telling her a story about how he'd also gotten upset with some fish once when he was a child.

"Let's see. I was probably around seven or eight when I asked my parents for a dog. My daddy said an animal like that would take too much attention away from my studies, and so instead, he gave me a pair of angelfish. Guess what? I was super upset. I refused to change their water, and I even wished they'd go away and not come back. They'd never be as cute or as cuddly as a dog. That's why I gave them weird, abstract names like Zechariah Caldicott and M. Wright Frelinghuysen.

Anyway, at some point I realized the water tank was not a neutral medium. It wasn't like the air that's all around us. The glass slightly warped their faces whenever they looked directly at me. They appeared to be way too thin. But here was the rub, Lei: if the glass distorted what was inside the tank, then so too must it have distorted what was outside the tank. I must have appeared to be misshapen in the eyes of those fish. It's like they were looking at me with crazy glasses."

By the time he'd finished his story, Lei had not only stopped crying, but she'd also fallen asleep on his shoulder. "We need to work on how you interact with her," Ying Yue whispered. "You're talking way above her head."

"Hey, it worked, didn't it?" he asked, putting Lei down in her crib. He picked up the crackers and tried to throw one of them into Ying Yue's mouth, missing by at least three feet.

"So athletic," she said, laughing at her own little joke. She leaned over for a kiss. "I'll bet your students love such long monologues."

They managed to prepare a few lesson plans before Lei woke up from her nap. They dressed her up as a ladybug and carried her around to a few of the neighbors. Isaac pretty much hated taking photographs—he found most family images to be manipulative in the cheap way they produced feelings of sentimentality—and so that job was left up to Ying

Yue. Within a few short years, he would come to see this as a ridiculous mistake. Why must he always be stubborn? Was it genetic, or learned behavior, or was it a combination thereof? If he could go back in time and change just one of his shortcomings, this would be the one.



Year 3

The aroma of percolating coffee carried throughout the house, reaching Isaac in the back bedroom where he was still basking in the goodness of a post-coital haze. Eventually, he stumbled into the kitchen and kissed Ying Yue on the forehead. She was dressed in a silk robe, and he thought the contrast of the early light against the shadows of her body created a queer kind of silhouette. The inversion left her looking more like a spirit than a defined body of flesh and blood. “You were amazing this morning,” he said.

Ying Yue scooped up the scallions and put them into the yellowy egg mixture already speckled with tomatoes. Isaac could see the goosebumps dimpling up on her arms. The backs of her legs were tight together and shivering, the muscles in her bottom showing themselves in tiny quivers. “I have to tell you something,” she whispered, looking out the window. “Before Lei wakes up.”

Later that morning, Ying Yue was too much of a wreck to join Isaac and Lei at preschool. All the children had dressed up in their Halloween

costumes. The parents hovered about the classroom basking in the cuteness of the outfits. Isaac, unfortunately, had to leave the room before Lei saw him cry. And yet, she seemed to sense something was wrong. Based on the photographs the teacher later emailed out, she was the most earnest child in her class that morning. When Isaac would later look back on this particular image, he'd see her seriousness as a kind of premonition.



Year 4

Isaac told Lei the next year she could be anything she wanted to be for Halloween. A unicorn. A rainbow fairy. A flying mermaid. Anything. Daddy would do whatever she wanted. He realized he was overcompensating, but it had been a tough year. The tests. The hospital rooms. The clicks of his and Lei's footsteps echoing off the tiles of the corridors that stank of ammonia. The rooms stuffed with monitors and bodies and wires. The hopelessness of the entire situation. And then there was poor Ying Yue, glazy eyed and wheezing. Her hair was thinner now, and it often stuck out into the electrostatic air in a way that scared Lei. Actually, most everything seemed to scare Lei now. She'd become extremely anxious, especially during drop-offs in the morning. Isaac had to tell her over and over again that she didn't need to worry. He'd pick her up in the afternoon. She could always count on him.

Towards the very end, Ying Yue was on so much pain medication that she mostly drifted into and out of consciousness, which was around the time Lei began to burst out crying numerous times each night. When

that happened, Isaac would hold her with all the strength he could muster. How do you explain death to such a young child? He almost wished he believed in heaven. Somehow, he'd find a way to help her understand. Up until this point, he'd been a good father. Maybe a little abstract in his demeanor, but still, no regrets. Now he was going to have to double his efforts. If he couldn't help his wife, at least he could find a way to be there for his daughter.

In the days leading up to the funeral, Isaac got a haircut, bought a new suit, and replaced his old cufflinks since they'd been dulled from years of neglect. He pushed his own emotions aside in order to be as present as possible for Lei. He was desperate for her to feel something other than mere pain. When it was finally time to say goodbye, he helped his daughter into a black dress and put her hair into a bun. He told her she was going to have to be brave even though this would be a very difficult day. She simply nodded.

Isaac and Lei weren't alone. Most everyone from the department—faculty, staff, and even students—showed up to the funeral. They couldn't have been more supportive, thank God. President Ayala was in attendance and afterwards insisted Isaac get paid leave for the fall semester so that he could at least try to cope with everything. Isaac was touched. He'd heard administrators talk about building university communities, but it always seemed like mere rhetoric to him. This was a completely different situation. As painful as their time in Laredo had been, Texas A&M International was starting to feel more and more like his actual home.

Shortly after the funeral, Lei said she wanted to be mommy for Halloween.

"I'm sorry, kiddo, but we can't do that."

"Why not? You said I could be anything. You promised."

"Well," Isaac said, but he had no idea how to explain it. Instead, he bribed her with ice cream, and she eventually accepted her second choice: Curious George wearing pink and red, her two favorite colors. He taught himself how to sew in order to make the costume. He was particularly excited about the little monkey face he'd managed to cut out from one of Ying Yue's old jackets. If she were still alive, she'd would've been proud of his ingenuity.

Since it was just him and his daughter now, he decided to dress up with her as the man with the yellow hat. He bought a yellow shirt and yellow pants from a local thrift store and extended a sombrero by gluing a sphere on top of the hat and covering it all with yellow paper. It wasn't perfect—he couldn't find any yellow shoes—but it didn't need to be. At least for one day, Lei was happy as they drove off to school. Given the circumstances, the teacher allowed Isaac to participate in the children's Halloween parade that morning.



Year 5

Their final Halloween together was a particularly cold one. Isaac was afraid Lei might not be dressed properly. The jacket he suggested didn't go with the costume, and so she'd turned it down; already she had an eye for fashion. She also didn't want her wings to get wrinkled because of what they represented. Whenever the two of them had visited Ying Yue's grave, usually once or twice a month, they typically stumbled across a few hummingbirds darting through the air. At some point during these visits, she came up with the idea of dressing up as a hummingbird princess. She thought mommy would like that and Isaac agreed; it really was a terrific idea.

He started by sewing sequins into one of her dresses. "This will look like dew," he explained. Then he cut a piece of felt, attached arm bands on the inside, and sewed dozens of small feathers together on the outside. He found one of Ying Yue's old hats, glued a crown on top, and

attached a tube around the front to serve as a beak. As for his matching costume, he wrapped an old swimming tube in brown paper and added on a strap so he could be the nest. On Halloween morning, it took a little longer than he'd expected to get ready for school. He rushed to set up his camera to take a shot of them together. Unfortunately, they were both looking away when it snapped.

"That's okay," Isaac said, about to make yet another decision he'd later come to regret. "We'll have time to take more after school, before we go trick-or-treating."

The drop-off was uneventful. Lei seemed to be adjusting and had stopped being so clingy. As it turned out, when Isaac drove away that morning, he passed right by the teenager who was about to make front page news. The kid was idling in his car, alone of course, toying around with a crazy looking pair of military-grade sunglasses. If Isaac had looked closely at him, he'd have noticed just how anxious he appeared to be. Despite the cold, he was sweating, and his free hand tightly gripped the steering wheel as if he were still driving. Hidden in the trunk of his car was a load of weaponry, including two handguns, a shotgun, and a semiautomatic Bushmaster .223 caliber model XM15 rifle. Afterwards, when Isaac spoke to the police about what he'd seen, he admitted in retrospect that the kid seemed like a fish out of water. For reasons that he still can't explain, however, he just didn't think anything of it at the time.

According to the young man's anti-Latino manifesto, which police later found uploaded on a white nationalist website, the goal was to kill all forty-six people inside the building in the first five minutes and then, right when the cops arrived, shoot himself in the head as a kind of grand finale. He'd already been casing out the building for weeks and had figured out the best route to take in order to cause as many casualties as possible. The plan would be a shocking success.

Isaac can't imagine what the kid was thinking there in the car before all the ugliness began. During those final moments of peace, was he excited about the pain he was going to cause? Did he look forward to the gore? Was he aroused? Exactly how distorted did he see the world, Isaac wonders. He has reconstructed the event over and over again in his mind since it happened. This is one of only two activities that he now engages in after work or on the weekends; the other is to pour through the photographs of the family he used to have.

All he knows for sure are the facts. The young man waited for about fifteen minutes after school had started to enter the building so there wouldn't be any stragglers. By then, the parents had all left the parking lot and the teachers were distracted with their students. At 8:17 am, he walked in the front door, faced the front office, and shot the school's secretary and principal right in their faces. He must have felt a sense of power, Isaac thinks. Maybe even disdain for their weakness, given his psychological background. Two teachers ran out of their classrooms to see what had happened, and he shot them down dead in the hallway.

"Dumb bitches," he might've whispered.

Isaac can clearly see him entering the first room on the left, which was the classroom for three- and four-year-olds. After killing Mr. Chávez and his six students, he ran to the first room around the corner, which happened to be Lei's pre-K class. Considering the shoe marks on the linoleum and the nail scratches etched into the door, the teacher, Mrs. Alvarado, must have been pushing against it with all her might. She was old, however, and no match for the young man. She probably died before she could even finish saying, "No, por favor." If only there really was a heaven, thinks Isaac, she would surely be granted admittance.

The children, no doubt all of them either crying or frozen in shock, were next. The stupid brats weren't even smart enough to try and hide under their tables, right? Was that the kind of hatred the young man felt in that particular moment? And what of the children and their emotions? What were their final thoughts? Did any of them hold hands or cry out one last time for their parents? Did Lei? Did Lei? Did Lei? Isaac tortures himself with these questions even though he knows he'll never be able to answer them.

At this point in his remembrances, he usually looks through the photographs of Lei and her classmates. Occasionally, he lines them up in order. Judging from the bullet holes, blood splatters, and resting places of the corpses, the police have told him the young man started on the right side of the room and worked his way to the left. Isaac closes his eyes and imagines their last moments. Superman was the first, then a queen, a doctor, a robot, a pirate, a witch, and finally, a hummingbird princess.



THE THING ABOUT PERSIMMONS

GINA WILLNER-PARDO

When Lydia and Chris got married, they were crazy in love, but Chris was the one who proposed and then pressed for a date. Lydia would have been okay with living together for the foreseeable future, but he wanted to lock it all down. She gathered he thought her unpredictable, which wasn't at all how she saw herself. Secretly, though, she was pleased he worried about her changing her mind or moving on.

In love but not stupid. They knew what could happen. So, about a week before their wedding—held in a Napa winery, catered by Cat and Fig, paid for by all the parents, although Chris's stepmother couldn't stop talking about how the whole thing was wildly overpriced—they had a big talk.

They agreed they would always love each other. "I might not be in love with you, but I'll always love you," Chris said. "I'll always want to be married to you."

Lydia must have looked startled, because he quickly added, "Being in love is really just at the beginning."

"You mean like infatuation?"

"Exactly!" he said, as though she hadn't asked a question. "And at some point, it gets hard. Kids and bills. The way it's always the same."

Now she knew what he was getting at.

"I don't want there to be any lying, any sneaking around," he went on. "And it shouldn't be all the time. Just once in a while."

"Let me think about it." She wasn't stalling. She really wanted to ponder the whole idea: that she could sleep with somebody just for fun and not get blamed. That he could do the same. It seemed like a practical way to cut down on confrontations. She always felt weepy during the simplest disagreement, and Chris could be agitated for days if he asked her to buy almonds and she forgot.

"So, we always tell each other, right?" she asked, wondering if it was some kind of kink he was into that she didn't know about.

“Before. So, no one finds out from someone else and feels like they’re being cheated on,” he said. “No details.”

Like a hall pass, she thought. Permission to break a rule. A nerd’s desire to be teacher’s pet and bad boy at the same time. It did not seem to have anything to do with his parents’ marriage, which had ended after twenty years in amicable divorce. There had been no infidelity, and both parents remarried happily. When his father died from injuries suffered in a fall, Chris’s mother and her new husband sat next to them at the funeral.

What she mostly remembered about that day was Chris, dry-eyed throughout the service and the burial.

“You didn’t even cry,” Lydia had said in the car on the way home, her hand on his thigh. It was just the two of them.

“I don’t cry,” he said.

“Ever?”

He thought for a moment. “I can’t remember the last time.”

“But your mother—”

“She’s wired differently.” After a long pause he added, “It would have to feel unbearable.”

She took this to mean more than it seemed on its face. That she should not expect dramatic outbursts. That life with his mother had been taxing, and he wanted his own marriage to be a place of evenness and peace, a notion she also found agreeable.

* * *

It happened about two years after the wedding. Ramona, another lawyer at Chris’s firm. Lydia remembered her from the last holiday party. She was from Hong Kong, severe, with very pale skin. She had listened without smiling or nodding as Lydia explained about not remembering the different kinds of persimmons, which they were discussing while drinking pickled persimmon martinis. Ramona had taken a delicate sip, paused, and said, “Hachiya are the most common.” And after another

pause, “I’m partial to the fuju.”

“Remember what we agreed,” Chris said now. “This has nothing to do with you and me. I love you the way I always have. You’re the one I want to be married to.”

Lydia nodded. They were eating fried bananas at El Paisa.

“I know,” she said after swallowing. And she did. They were solidly happy. They made each other laugh. They liked the same things: hiking in Tilden Park, cooking rustic Italian dinners for friends, lying on the grass at Lake Merritt and eating fritters from Colonial Donuts. They watched old westerns on TCM. They had taken up CrossFit.

There was a lot of good, sweaty sex. Often, after, he said he adored her.

In the car on the way home she asked, “So is this going to be a one-time thing?”

“Yeah,” he said. “Maybe twice, tops.”

* * *

They had agreed not to talk specifically about when any rendezvous would take place, but Lydia knew. She tried to reach Chris at lunch and he didn’t pick up, and even though it could have been a meeting running late or coffee with a client, she just knew. She sat quietly in her studio, surrounded by brushes splayed in coffee cans, paint-spattered easels, half-finished canvases. It was a gray, foggy day beyond the north-facing window, but she made no move to turn on the lamps.

Instead, she went for a walk around the lake. She began to feel more serene. Would she be upset if she knew Chris was masturbating in the office restroom? How, really, was this any different? Maybe he wanted to fulfill a fantasy; maybe he’d experienced a momentary craving for variety, difference. She knew he would be in their bed tonight.

She did not feel cheated on. She felt magnanimous and loving. And relieved that it had finally happened, and she knew her own mind about it.

She had questions, of course, but she made the conscious decision not to ask them. She did not want to hear what it was about Ramona that

had piqued his interest. Perfume that lingered in the elevator, a wicked sense of humor not on display at holiday parties, long, willowy limbs? Just what was it that had caused him to want to fuck her?

When she had such thoughts in the days that followed, she found ways to distract herself: a walk, a run, a drive alone. Eventually she came back to the realization that she, Lydia, was the one he really loved. Better not to ask. It allowed her the luxury of imagining that their coupling was the result of Ramona's dogged and possibly even unseemly pursuit of him.

That agreement they had forged so easily, using so few words, was inadequate, though. They had made clear their ongoing love for each other but hadn't bothered to specify the feelings they were allowed to have for other people. Sometimes Lydia wished she had thought to add a rider of sorts: The fuckee can only be sexually desirable. You can't actually love the fuckee.

* * *

She didn't really want to sleep with other men: Chris was all she needed. But at some point, she figured she had to give it a whirl. She didn't want to feel that her abstinence was, in fact, a tacit rebuke.

She ended up having sex with Gerald, a sculptor whose studio was down the hall from hers. They had known each other a few months, sometimes running into each other on the sidewalk, chatting briefly. When he invited her in to see his newest work, all the old tricks came back to her: standing closer than was necessary, grazing his arm as she leaned in to inspect the female torso rising from a block of wood. Smiling in such a way to suggest that everything about him was a delight. When he kissed her, she let herself marvel at the way new lips felt.

She slept with him twice. (*Tops*, she thought.) But she didn't tell Chris. She knew it was a violation of their agreement. She justified it by telling herself Gerald and Chris would never meet and knew none of the same people. Chris would never find out and feel betrayed.

As long as she was having sex with a near-stranger, she wanted to experience the illicitness, the danger. That was the reason—or part of the reason—she kept it to herself.

* * *

During her pregnancy Chris was ecstatic, singing to her belly, bringing her KFC when she craved it and only gently poking fun, shopping with her for a stroller and a carseat. The notion of family began to take hold. Their genes swirling and melding inside her: mysterious rearrangements, a new taxonomy.

In the delivery room, they locked eyes—Lydia’s blurry with tears. She felt the immensity of what was happening pass between them and took this as a sign that sex outside the marriage was no longer anything either of them needed or would seek. A moment later, her body convulsed (as if given permission) and Liam appeared.

* * *

She knew instantly that Liam was Gerald’s child: The condom pulled from his weathered wallet must have failed. And now, in her squalling newborn, she saw the heavy-lidded eyes, long, delicate fingers, thin chest. His baby nose poised to burst into beakiness.

In the first bleary days, she felt this knowledge intrude into every moment. The family she imagined they would be seemed in jeopardy. Would Chris know this distinctive-looking child wasn’t his? Would he suspect her duplicity, be unable to feel the fatherly love he had anticipated for months?

He must never find out. She would not allow him to be hurt. She would keep the knowledge buried deep: a smooth brown seed.

She found herself studying her son when she was alone with him, trying to spot herself, wondering how her wide smile and long nail beds had found their way into this magic amalgam of a boy. And puzzling, too, over what it meant that she and Gerald, who hardly knew each other, were now commingled here eternally.

When Lydia looked at her husband, she felt sorrow for what he didn’t know. They only planned on having one baby. She had consigned Chris to biological childlessness, something that never before struck her as tragic. No one would be given the gift of his strong jaw or muscular calves, his measured, persuasive voice, the habit of biting his lower lip as he concentrated. Was all of this heritable? She didn’t know, but the

fact that he would take the chemistry of himself to the grave struck her as unutterably sad.

She was always looking for ways to yoke them together. “He’s so even-tempered. He hardly ever cries,” she said all the time to Chris, who marveled equally.

* * *

Sometimes she thought about persimmons, remembering the trees on the grounds of the winery where they’d gotten married: leafless in winter, with gnarled, roughened limbs, their bark blackened by morning fog. Boughs loaded with baubles of fruit. Diospyros kaki. The enologist who led the tasting at the rehearsal dinner explained they were genetically fluid. Sometimes, he said, a persimmon would grow a branch that produced a different kind of fruit from the rest of the tree. A taxonomic study had never been compiled; growers never knew precisely which varieties they had. “That’s the thing: You get what you get,” he said, resigned to their showy, complicated ways but preferring the constancy of grapevines.

* * *

Once, when Liam was four, Chris asked, “Why didn’t you ever do it?”

“Do what?” They were in bed, watching the evening news. She knew what he was asking.

“Sleep with anyone else. Like we talked about.”

“I never wanted to.” In its own way, a true statement.

He turned the sound off. “Why?”

She rolled onto her side, took his hand, kissed it. “You’re all I ever wanted. The way you take care of us. How you’re so sweet with Liam, answering all his questions, taking him to see the dump trucks, explaining gravity. The way you look at me sometimes. The way it is here.”

“You still could, you know.”

“Do you want me to?”

“No,” he said, pulling her closer, “but it feels unfair. Uneven.”

He kissed her.

“No worries,” she whispered, so glad she’d never told.

* * *

Early the next year, she was taking a break in the studio, sipping tea, reading emails. One from Gillian—a partner’s wife who kept the staff attorneys’ significant others apprised of holidays, celebrations, and pertinent office news—caught her eye. The subject line read “Ramona’s Funeral.”

She read the funeral mass would take place at Cathedral of Christ the Light on Friday, there was underground parking, a reception would be held at the event center. Nothing about how Ramona had died: from an illness or some sort of accident, whether she’d been sick for a while, if she had passed peacefully in her sleep or been the victim of a heart attack or an aneurysm—a violent, catastrophic cessation. It was the kind of thing Lydia always wanted to know; It helped her see the dead person fully, know them more. It rounded out the story—a closure of sorts.

Healthy persimmon trees could die for no discernible reason, the enologist had said. They are unpredictable that way.

* * *

Over the next few days, she waited for Chris to say something like, “Hey, I forgot to tell you,” and then divulge the rest. He did not seem agitated or melancholy: He gave Liam his bath and read him books after. Once she heard them laughing about something as she folded laundry in the other room.

On the third night, late, as they were getting ready for bed, she couldn’t hold it in any longer. “Gillian sent out an email about Ramona’s funeral.”

He was slipping on his pajama bottoms. “Yeah. Horrible thing.”

“What happened?”

“Breast cancer. Very fast-moving. She died just weeks after they found it.”

“Oh my God. She was so young!”

“Our age.” He went into the bathroom to brush his teeth.

“Was she married?” she called out.

“No,” he said after he’d spit into the sink.

She waited until he came back and got into bed. “Do you have any particular feelings? Because you slept with her that time?”

He propped himself against the headboard. “I heard her parents are flying in from Hong Kong. They’re pretty broken up.”

“Do you want me to go to the funeral with you? Liam’ll be in school.”

He shook his head. “I might not even go. Work is crushing me right now.”

They read for a bit, turned out the lights. Lydia tossed and turned. She remembered Ramona from that first party years ago—tall and slim, hair shiny and bobbed. Her careful, mild attention to everything being said. How awful for anyone to die so young, but how especially awful for her. She was used to getting what she wanted with unflappable, lawyer-like efficiency. Lydia imagined the response to her body’s betrayal: disbelief at first and then an unfamiliar rage.

* * *

Emerging from the parking garage into daylight, she looked up at the cathedral, a geometric wonder of glass and refracted sunlight. She decided Ramona would have appreciated its angularity, the cool, twinkling splendor.

She did not know why she had come.

She walked around the block a few times, not wanting to go in early, so that by the time she entered the building, there was a crowd. Taking a

seat in the last row, she scanned the sanctuary. Gradually she began to recognize some of the lawyers she'd met socially over the years. They sat in clumps, speaking in low tones. Catching sight of them in profile as they whispered amongst themselves, she thought she could detect a certain professional discomfort. *Knowing how to talk your way around things doesn't do you much good in here.*

The organist began to play, and everyone rose. She turned to see the priest walking slowly up the aisle, followed by the tight knot of pallbearers hoisting the coffin. She wondered idiotically why so many men were needed for such a thin woman. Because it isn't for her. It's for them. And it came to her then: She was there to bear witness to what she knew. Ramona—impeccable daughter, kind friend, principled lawyer—had disgraced herself with a married man.

Disgraced. It shocked her, that it was in her head like that.

Not until the procession had made its somber way to the front of the sanctuary did she notice Chris bearing the back end of the casket. She watched as he took a seat next to a coworker and hunched forward. Throughout the mass, his shoulders shook, and when the time came for the casket to be walked back out to the hearse, tears coursed freely down his swollen cheeks.

* * *

She snuck out a side door, drove around the glimmering lake. The day was mesmerizing—a cloudless sky, budding trees, breezes that smelled like some intermingling of sunlight and lemons and pavement still wet from the night before. A lightness. She rolled down the window, welcoming the rush of it, breathing it in, knowing she had to keep her head, not be taken in by the promise of a false spring. It was January: She knew it could all change on a dime.

* * *

August lay hot over the neighborhood that year; The crowds on Lakeshore roamed the shops and cafes slowly, squinting behind their Oakleys, sucking down cold brews. Shopkeepers set out water bowls for the dogs.

Lydia and Chris were sipping margaritas at Boot and Shoe Service on a

Saturday night when Lydia asked, “Would you cry if I died?”

She had to yell a little to be heard over the buzzy throng of people at the bar.

Chris laughed. “What the hell?”

“Would you?”

“Lydia. Come on.”

“I mean it. I really want to know.”

He set his drink down. “We almost never get a night out. Why are you doing this?”

“It’s a game people play. Like, who would you marry if I died? Or would you sleep with someone else for a million dollars?” She licked salt from the rim of her glass. “Just a way of getting better acquainted.”

“We’re married. We’re already acquainted. I don’t like games like this.”

They sat in their own silence as the room thrummed around them. She wondered how many people laughing and drinking together were on first dates, thinking they were having an amazing time, really clicking. Believing they were getting to know each other in some deep way.

She and Chris had met online and, in spite of an awkward phone conversation, had decided to hike part of the Dipsea Trail the next weekend. They sat under an old oak and talked about their families. They were both children of divorce. They understood each other’s childhoods: early happiness, sudden upheaval, the confusion of different houses, blended families, multiple parental voices. Easing into new ways, a different sort of happiness, which wasn’t really happiness at all so much as careful, wary relief. He really gets me, she thought then. She did not know many men willing to talk candidly about their families on a first date. It boded well, she thought.

Now she understood you never really knew what you thought you did: the whole of a person. There was always something you only learned later. Sometimes it was tucked away, undisclosed for the longest time. Sometimes it was in plain sight, and you had just failed to notice.

In the crowded bar, she tried one more time, “I won’t be mad if you say no.”

“I’m not going to play,” he said. And then, “You know how I am. You’ve always known.”

* * *

She waited until he’d parked the car in front of their duplex. They sat in the summery darkness, nearly silent but for the faraway hum of freeway traffic. She told him everything. “I never meant for this to happen,” she said.

She watched as he tried to collect himself. Finally, he asked, “Are you sure?”

“If you mean, did I do any sort of genetic testing, then no. But I’m sure.”

“Who is this guy? Does he know?”

“He’s married now. He has his own kids. I never told him.”

Chris shook his head. “We had an agreement. We were supposed to tell each other.”

She felt a flare of rage; She would not allow herself to be chastised. “I didn’t know how to tell you, when it came right down to it,” she said. “We took every precaution, he and I. There was just. . . danger we didn’t anticipate. And now, well.” Pause. “I can’t regret it.”

He nodded. After a long moment, he whispered, “But I’m not his real father.”

“Of course you are.”

Something outside the realm of ordinary science—an elaborate, tangled alchemy—had made it so.

Her anger lessening (for she had evened the score, after all), she grabbed his arm. “You are,” she said again, flooded with love, wanting him to know she meant it.

THE VALENTINE

SUZANNE STE. THERESE

*I love thee with a love I seemed to lose
With my lost saints. I love thee with the breath,
Smiles, tears, on all my life, and, if god choose,
I shall but love thee better after death.*

—Elizabeth Barrett Browning

Grace Anne stands on the cobbled walk in a foggy lane in front of their favorite pub, the Ravens Inn, in Whitchurch. She pulls her wool cape closer to keep away a growing chill from the thick mist. He's late.

They had said their goodbyes at the Liverpool-bound train station the previous January in 1945. Frightened but resolute, they anticipated what to expect: he would be working in tent hospitals surgically repairing the war-wrecked just as the officers Grace Anne had been nursing in the former asylum hospital outside of Chester reported unrelenting attacks.

She fingers her gold-set, tiny pavé diamond and ruby engagement ring, repeating to herself: He will be fine. He will come back to me just fine.

In the filtered distance, she sees a man stumbling down the walk, overcoat swung over one shoulder, in uniform, his hat jaunty on ragged hair. He's three hours late this May evening. The closer he comes, the more disheveled he looks. One half block away, and she can smell the booze and body odor.

This is not the romantic meeting she pictured after five months apart. The fact that they are engaged seems even more reason for him to look his best, she thinks, disappointed. She has applied makeup to accentuate her blue eyes and high cheekbones, made her lips fresh red knowing he loved to touch them. Her red curls protrude from the front of her cap, the nurse's caduceus shiny on her collar, the line of her tights trailing down the center of her back legs, her shoes mirror polished. He, on the other hand, smells like he's been sleeping in his uniform for days. Drenched in the smell of stale whiskey, the top of one shoe pulling apart from its sole, he's worse off than anything she anticipated.

“Hullo, Princess Gracie Anne!” He weaves toward her, his tight smile revealing a broken front tooth, nicotine yellow. He has seen too much, Grace thinks.

“Hello, Wood! You want to step in?” She nods toward the blacked-out pub without returning the proffered hug.

They take their regular table by candlelight, both scraping back the chairs after hanging their coats. They order two rye whiskies and assess each other.

“You look so beautiful.”

“Thank you, Wood. I’m glad to see you too.” She can’t return the compliment. He’s a mess. And she feels shy about her feelings. This is the man she has committed her life to and hasn’t seen in months. In that time, he has devolved into a person she barely recognizes.

“Did you get my Valentine, princess?” A tight, forced smile.

“Oh, yes. I did, and I have it.” Grace Anne pulls out the precious Valentine she had received in April.

She has memorized the poetry and small pictographs drawn in eight rows, clumsily in stick figures, with a fountain pen on correspondence vellum, showing their entire year’s relationship: their first date walking in the rain bicycling in the countryside ringing bells in morse code, assignations in inns and pubs, catching a ride in an ambulance for a night out, picnics, long walks, nights together rowing down the little stream near the hospital, the times apart when tears lit a fire of loneliness; rowing into Chester where she picked out the ring at GJK Brown & Sons, Silversmiths and Jewelers. His proposal in a rose-bedecked pergola at Highgate. And booze, bottles drawn scattered in the eight rows along with lots of music notation. That year he had heard music, but as she shows him now and asks, “Remember?” she sees the music has stopped and he remembers nothing.

Wood lowers his head, examining the page carefully, mumbling to himself. Grace Anne still feels hope for the future and fear because, when he looks up, she notices his eyes, bloodshot and unseeing. He seems to remember her as a vague colleague—he a surgeon, she an officers’ nurse—but not as a lover and a friend. Someone had made the Valentine, and someone remembered, but it’s not him at this moment. Something in his mind is missing.

“Wood, let’s talk.” She slides the Valentine back into her purse.

“What’s going on?”

“I can’ t splain.” He takes a deep breath. “It din’t stop. Eyes gone, burns, amputations, terrible, terrible. Screaming!” He yells this last word, hitting the table, and people drinking quietly in the pub stare.

“Shhhh, Wood, shhh. Let’s go for a walk.”

It’s eight thirty, and she’ll never make it back to quarters in time. Earlier, thinking there might be an intimate opportunity, she had booked a room in the village close enough to be on time for her duty assignments the next morning. She quickly pivots to officer’s nurse and plans on a respite for this one soldier she truly cares about. She gently takes his soiled coat arm, and they walk quickly through the village streets, Wood weeping. He sometimes looks up at her, and she gives him her embroidered kerchief for his eyes and dripping nose.

“Wood? I took a room. Come this way and we’ll get you a bath.”

They make their way to a first-floor room, a converted stable. She heats water in an old chamber pot on a single gas burner balanced on a rickety, wooden cabinet, combining the steaming hot with cool water from the tap into a footed tub. It is a luxury she’d hoped they would have shared.

He undresses behind a wood partition, and she averts her eyes when he steps into the half-full tub. She grabs his clothes as they appear, thrown over the screen’s top, and sets to bar scrubbing his underwear, T-shirt, socks, and uniform, stretching each piece in the half light on the warmed radiator.

Finally, she approaches Wood, still weeping, still mumbling, too thin and white.

“Wood? Would you like me to give you a bath?”

He looks up from the warm water, eyes ringed black, whispering gibberish, and nods his head. “Yes.”

“OK.” And she lathers the large sponge from the tub’s rim and starts to scrub as only a nurse who has administered hundreds of baths can.

Her mind is racing as she systematically washes: What has happened to him? He's upset. He needs help. He doesn't know me. I need to help him. I can't. I can't. I can't. . . marry him this way. He doesn't know me. He doesn't remember.

"Wood? Where do you go after this?"

"Back to base. Then to Liverpool for my reassignment." His voice stays at a whisper.

"Reassigned to where?"

"I don't know. They haven't said anything yet."

"Hmmm. Well, we'll get you cleaned up. You'll want to look your best."

She brings him a tin of tooth powder, and he uses his index finger to brush. She holds a pewter cup with water in front of his mouth, and he spits. She expects to find his Dopp kit with razor and shears in his coat but doesn't. She's grateful: the intimacy of shaving feels overwhelming.

"You'll have to take care of this before you meet with the brass, OK?" She strokes his cheeks.

After shampooing and getting him to dunk his head, she takes her comb and smooths back his choppy hair.

It isn't until she's wiping him dry that her heart kicks in, and the break that is about to come teases her with a little quake. She wraps the towel around his waist from the back and tucks him into the double bed. She sleeps uncomfortably covered in her cape on the one chair.

Her body's clock awakens at precisely 5 a.m. with the Lauds prayer church bell. Wood is sleeping soundly when she hears a tray set at the door. She brings in a pot of herbal tea and some scones for their breakfast.

"Wood?" She gently shakes his arm and steps away as he rouses himself with a jerk.

"Wha? Wha?"

She shows him aspirin and a glass of water as he clears his eyes of

sleep. He takes it meekly, saying, “Thanks, princess.”

For a second, her heart leaps, and she thinks, He remembers! He remembers!

But in the next moment, he stares at her as she gives him his tepid, dried clothes. “You Grace Anne? Grace Anne, is that you?”

“Yes, Wood. It’s me. You’re not dreaming,” she says, giving him a wry smile. “Here. I’ll give you a minute, then we can have a bite to eat before we go.” She wants to say, “our separate ways,” but she isn’t ready.

He dresses in seconds, helping himself to the comb and mirror. He grabs a tea towel and buffs his shoes. He shakes his overcoat, surprised at its tidy condition—Grace Anne has scrubbed it the night before.

“Wood? I want to thank you for the Valentine. I really appreciate all the time it took.” She pours the tea and takes a deep breath. “It looks like we are going different ways. I know you don’t remember, but do you want the ring back?” It’s burning a line into the fourth finger of her left hand.

“What? I’m sorry, I don’t remember. Please.” He is furtive. “Please keep the ring to remember the person I can’t. Please?”

She later feels reassured that she’d seen him off better than when she found him. The next week, she’s assigned to an “Enrichment Leave” in Oxford where she will keep a journal, go to lectures, and stay out every night seeing shows, concerts, and films, soaking herself in male companionship, trying to forget the one person she wants to be with.

Eighty years later, a niece will find the journal, the ring, and the Valentine hidden in an envelope in a wooden box deep in the back of a high closet, objects that break Grace Anne’s heart for a lifetime of one hundred and two years. She never marries.

Volume 79

TINA SAYS
DAVID ROMANDA

Before I sleep with you
I need to look through your wallet
and check your sock drawer.
You can watch—I just need to be sure
that you are who you say you are.

MOURNFUL CELLO

ZEBULON HUSET

The long, low howl
blended with Dvořák trio
but in the lull between movements
the coyote's cry crept through
like safety scissors—more
a tearing, a rending, than a slicing.

My mind followed the music
down a dark street lined
by frayed cardboard box beds
and the enduring, quiet sob
which began as ambient noise
has taken over the backline
along with the hum of streetlight
outside my single paned window.

THE CLARITY OF COLD

CASSONDRRA WINDWALKER

She was getting soft, no question.

She'd started picking up the boy in overalls with the cardboard sign and his droopy-eared pup more days than not. He chopped and stacked wood for her, cleaned her gutters, tore out the thistles. She fed him and the pup and scrounged up some money when she could.

He was simple, she thought, or maybe just different. She'd find him wandering as often as not and have to remind him what he was doing. Likely why he couldn't hold down a regular job when he didn't seem to be allergic to hard work. He was good-natured, though, and she never doubted the wisdom of bringing him back to her home.

So, she couldn't help defending him when she overheard folks at the store.

"Lazy riff-raff."

"We don't need that sort here."

"There's plenty of work to be had. No excuse for begging like that."

"Them what don't work oughta starve."

He does work, she protested, and no one ought to starve. She laughed to hear the words leave her mouth—old age, it seemed, had made her radical. If kindness could be considered radical.

But no-one else heard her. She'd been dead, after all, since that cold snap last winter. She'd run out of wood, the roads were impassable, and she'd always been the solitary sort. She'd clambered into her car with blankets and turned on the heater till the gas ran out. She was there still, waiting to be found.

Not unlike the boy and his dog, who'd met the same fate on the same night, huddled together in the woods on the edge of town.

It had taken dying to make them friends, but that wasn't such a bad trade-off, the old ghost decided. Sometimes the living world was colder than the grave.

HERE IN PURGATORY

JOHN BALLANTINE

Here in purgatory, we fallen angels look each way at the dark clouds, swamps, and bright stars. We wonder what are we to do now—caught between two unknown worlds full of tales and storytellers. We walk each day with questions, delights, slights, and do not know which way to turn. Life here in purgatory is a mystery. Why did we fall to a world in between, and how do we set it right, get out? What now?

I see the bad—the news channels shout at us each night—the rapid-fire talk of my family, traumatized still by tales of neglect and much worse. There is panic out there, bad stuff. But these cries are tempered by the call of the owl, as the tree tumbles in the forest. The night is not silent, an unknown creature cries, another bird sings. Nature is majestic and I am here. I stand in purgatory—a desert, a mountaintop, and fertile plain—it is neither foul nor fair, but a multitude of possibilities. Our worlds turn 'round; there is no predetermined path, as the moon crosses the sun and shadows evaporate.

I sit with my family, feasting on summer fare—wife, cousins, sister, and friends. Happy, sad, and in between. We look at the setting sun, knowing that soon that will be me; still, I rise with the day and coo with mourning doves. We talk until our stories seem settled, and then we talk again. Ready for another take on our days.

Little did I know, here in purgatory, that my journey would take me to a screened porch with family and friends bathed in the ebbing light of summer. I started out as a young boy on a three-speed bike early in the morning, dreaming of good and evil. I climbed atop George Washington's sandstone statue, mounted on a horse as he crossed the Delaware in the dead of winter. Washington pushed the British out of Valley Forge and became our First President, even as he told the lie about the downed cherry tree with sweet, tinted blossoms. At nine, I knew the revolutionary promises of the USA when I marched as a young patriot behind the lumbering tanks rolling down Nassau Street. I saluted the crowds, a Boy Scout who was proud to be an American. Years later, Vietnam would tear the stones from the streets, and drugs would scatter the hearts of my love generation.

The smiles of the young boy biking through childhood smacked me in the face—later police beat me like any black man, a peacenik who

did not love his country, me not a patriot, but some “nigger lover” who would date a black woman and hold to the promises of Martin Luther King. The bras of my generation were burned and mixed with the cinders of draft cards. Death and war continued unabated. Purgatory’s trials were everywhere. None could escape.

I see today the roiling sea, the storm clouds of dissent, and the temptation of Mammon. Yes, gold won out, as I, too, walked down Wall Street, sat with the money changers, and did not hear the polemical admonitions of kinder souls. But I did not kill my father or sleep with my mother—my sins were less obvious, more middle class and mundane. Wife, dog, home, and comfortable life with poetry salons full of laughter, tears, and the warnings of Polonius. We listened and did not always hear.

There were few revolutions, faint truths, and not enough justice. Still there was love and beauty in my world, but out there, purgatory persisted.

And what, they will ask when I approach the pearly gates, did you DO while wandering through the wild plains, valleys, and mountaintops down there? WHAT did you do to make a difference?

I stand mute. Maybe a couple of encouraging words here and there, even some kind gestures. I rose to the challenge once in a while—stood tall and was almost brave. But I didn’t do as much good as I dreamed. I took the bait of living well, pulling weeds from my garden, and telling stories. Cities burned and storms raged as I watched TV. I stood on the ramparts far from the valley of darkness.

Isn’t this what I was supposed to do? Till the fields, feed my family, and hold what is dear close to me.

YES, that was part of the riddle, but did you share your bread and open your doors to others? No, you turned your back and were lost in a private purgatory—you lanced your boils and covered your eyes. You did not join the suffering or rejoice in the everyday trials of our days together. You broke out on your own.

You should know that we live in a land without midnight, or the cold moon of day. We must push back so the sun shines on you, me, and others who wander in purgatory. You are here among us, the fallen

angels, dancing with joy, sadness, and laughter. Join us, believe, and be saved. That is all we ask.

SADDLER'S CREEK

DANIEL BARBARE

I come
to Saddler's Creek
where the grass
overgrows the road
and blackberries grow
in the red mud ditch
and the wind stirs the
pines and hardwoods.
Crickets chirp and
cicadas shrill, just when
I realize I'm not alone
the water ebbs at my
feet and is blue and
white capping. I have
the lake as wide as
the blue sky.

THE LOST GENERATION

JOE SONNENBLICK

Raised up on cigar smoke in geometrically defunct rooms
How can four guys in a pool hall feel like a packed Madison Square
Garden?

Danny Rocco, making collections

Eddie Stix, running numbers. . .

Feels like I imagined it,

As my grandpa Dan was being lowered into the ground

As they handed my mother his American flag from the war

I remembered the abuse she and my grandmother took

From a beer swilling, gallivanting, hero of the German theater,

I'd spit on his grave now

It's too far though, Calvary cemetery is a two-hour drive

That's how I'll remember the man,

Not even worth a drive.

A VISITOR
JOE SONNENBLICK

Peering eyes through white hexagonal fence slats,

“What are you writing?”

“Poetry. Who are you?”

“I’m you.”

I tip my hat,

Going back to scribbling about women, horses, loss, and misgivings.

Nothing to see here.

THANKSGIVING DINNER

JASON SIBERT

Christine stood at the stove in the kitchen with her mother Kate. It was Thanksgiving, time for a meal with her family—people she no longer recognized. Christine worked as an editor for Independent Press, a publishing company that published experimental, literary fiction in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

“Can you bring those potatoes to the table?” asked Kate as she walked to the table.

“Sure,” said Christine. Next, she took the potatoes to her mother. The whole scene told the story of how Christine’s life had changed over the years. Kate saw her as that little girl she raised in the small town of Robinson, Illinois. However, the life Christine now lived did not resemble the life her mom still lived. Christine worked for a few newspapers in downstate Illinois, small towns, before landing the job with Independent. She dreamed of being a writer, a novelist, when she grew up and was coming close to living her dream at this time, as working as an editor allowed her the chance to be a part of the creative process of producing literature.

“So, do you have any young men in your life at this time?” Kate asked as she looked at the meal she and her daughter prepared. It was the question her mother popped every holiday when she was home.

“I have this neighbor named Charles, he’s a nice guy,” answered Christine. “We’ve been going out for about fourth months now.”

“Good, am I going to have a son-in-law before long?”

“I don’t know, mom.” Christine then sat down at the table right by her mom.

“It’s not serious then?”

“He’s a great guy. Charles is a lot of fun, but I do not know about marriage. However, I do know he’s a swell guy.”

“OK.” Christine knew her mom could not wait for her to be married. However, it was not really on her mind right now. She was doing as

much as she could to establish herself as a quality editor. Christine had her dream as a child, and she was still following that burning desire in her heart. Relationships were now, at age 29, something on the back burner as they had been most of her life.

Her sister Rose, Rose's husband William, and their two-year-old son Terry walked in the door right before the food was ready to go on the table. She could tell how happy her mother was to see her grandchild, daughter, and son-in-law. Terry ran toward Kate, and she picked him up and then gave him a hug.

Christine's father David walked into the kitchen and took his seat at the table. David started a little light conversation on how everyone was doing this Thanksgiving and Christine started eating her Thanksgiving dinner and listening to everyone's stories, as they all still lived in Robinson. William talked about his job as a sales manager at the local auto dealership and Rose talked about her job as an office manager for a local dentist.

They all had lives that were so typical, and Christine worked all her life to make sure hers was atypical. Her mother asking about her personal life always made her think about her shortcomings. For all her success in the career area, Christine could not score a real win in the relationship department. She could not help but think that maybe it was the person she had worked so hard to create—curious, hard-working, and determined to make a mark in the fields of writing and editing. Christine thought that maybe her creation of herself kept her from being someone attractive to the opposite sex.

“Are you OK, Christine?” asked Kate.

“Yes, this is a good meal by the way,” said Christine. She answered in a simple manner because she did not want to break her train of thought when everyone else was busy discussing everything in the world that was so mundane. After the meal, Christine helped her mother wash dishes. She looked over her shoulder and saw Rose and William talking to Terry. He was just a bit excited after his tasty meal.

Watching the three did make Christine a bit jealous. They were a family, a successful family. Rose found the man she loved, and she was happy with him, no matter how stale the whole thing seemed at times. Love was something that she experienced once in high school and another

time in college via two different boyfriends, but she barely recognized its presence anymore. Christine managed the lack of love in her life by telling herself that her career was too important for love, which could be time consuming and emotionally draining.

Christine and Kate finished washing dishes and then headed to the living room for some conversation. The two talked a lot about life at Independent Press, as it was the only thing Christine could really talk about at length. Eventually, Kate would ask a few questions about Charles. Christine said again that he was a nice guy. Her mother wanted to know more, but she could say no more. Of course, it bugged Christine. She wondered why her mother had nothing else to talk about. Then she remembered the typical life her mother lived. In a way, Christine envied the life because it was simpler than hers.

But maybe she was making things too complicated, her mother made her think. Charles was a great guy, she had to admit that simple fact. She also admitted to herself that maybe she was not giving him much of a chance. She looked over at her father who was reading in the kitchen.

“He reads so much it makes me crazy at times,” said Kate. “Then he always wants to discuss everything he reads with me after he finishes the book.”

This simple point of conversation made Christine think just a bit. She kept telling herself and her mother what a nice guy Charles was. However, she knew there was a sense of sameness there, and it bugged her just a bit. She had painted a picture of the experience of love in her head—something that featured physical beauty like she could not imagine, that picked her spirits up after a hard day, that entertained her in her time off, and that never let her down when she was in a jam. Charles was cute but nothing like the perfect picture of beauty. He did a good job talking to her when she needed conversation, but he could also be aloof at times. When it came to the entertainment part, he was good enough.

“What does Charles do in his spare time?” her mother asked.

“Oh, he likes to play handball. He plays at his health club on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday and does an aerobic exercise routine on Tuesday and Thursday to stay in shape for his handball. He sets up competitive matches occasionally.”

“Really, I bet he stays in shape.” Charles did bug her a bit with all his handball talk. He worked in the accounting department at the local, municipal hospital. Christine spent a much of her spare time writing short stories, which she occasionally published and then made a little extra money. Christine had never really told Charles that their conversations were too often about handball, as she did not want to run the risk of hurting his feelings.

She asked herself about the ramifications of her most recent thoughts. Christine had to admit something to herself—she cared! She started to question her expectations of a potential partner. Christine told herself that maybe she was reaching too high, as many did.

She then looked back at her father reading. He was a common man, but he was a good man. She had the luxury of building a creative vision of what the perfect man was like. Her mother had the experience of living with the same man day in and day out. Kate had done what she had never done. Then Christine asked herself if she could ever accomplish what her mother had accomplished.

Maybe she would have to work at it. However, work was something she was used to. Christine reminded herself what she had done with her life. Just a little more effort could take her relationship to a new place—a place where she would find happiness. Happiness was not something that would hit her like a religious awakening and then stay with her for the rest of her life after the initial encounter.

Happiness just might be something that she experiences from time to time. When she was not experiencing it, it would be just a matter of time before she would experience it again. Happiness was something that she would have to work at.

“Well, I guess I’ll see you at Christmas,” said Kate.

“You will, I’m planning on coming,” said Christine.

“You keep up the good work.”

“I love my work, and I can’t wait to be back in the office on Monday.” Christine gave her mother a hug and then walked out the door. She was the last one in the house, as Rose, Terry, and William had left 30 minutes ago.

Christine drove her rental car to St. Louis and then flew back to Minneapolis. She told herself on the plane that Thanksgiving dinner had been quite a learning experience. Christine knew what was missing in her life: building a relationship with the idea that her partner was not going to make her happy all the time, but she would strive to create as much happiness as possible. In turn, Charles would do the same and they would learn a lot about each other in the process.

When she arrived at the airport, she told herself that within the next few hours a new phase of her life would begin. Christine retrieved her luggage and then fired off a text to Charles saying that she wanted to meet him in two hours.

Christine had just unpacked, and she stood in her apartment waiting for Charles. She could not wait until he came so she could ask him the all-important question. Christine took a deep breath and she heard him knock on the door. She opened it and Charles walked in. He seemed a little nervous.

“Are you OK?” asked Christine. She sensed something about the way he carried himself.

“Yes, I’m doing fine.” He continued to act a little strange, but Christine felt that he would respond to what she was going to ask in a positive manner.

“Charles, we’ve been going out for about four months now.” She could tell he was paying close attention to what she was saying, and this made her hopeful. “I’ve really enjoyed our time together.”

Christine pauses and expects him to say something, but he does not. “I want to take this relationship to a whole new level. What we have can be a lot better. I . . . I want to call you my boyfriend! I want to have an honest relationship with you. It is something I realized at Thanksgiving dinner with my family!” Charles took a few moments to say absolutely nothing.

“I’m sorry, I can’t,” he said with all the seriousness he could muster.

“Why?” She shed a tear as the mood changed.

“I’m going back to my ex-wife Maggie. I am glad you called. Now is as good as time as any to tell you. She came over for Thanksgiving, and I

guess you could say that we found the old magic.”

He left immediately and Christine was floored. Now she stood in her apartment all alone, but she told herself she would be OK in the end. She had worked hard to be what she was and her self-image would hold. Christine told herself that if she continued to be the woman that she had worked so hard to be, she would never be alone!

TOLERANCE AND CLOTHES

M.A. ISTVAN JR.

Tolerance shields us from the bite of insults just as clothes shield us from the bite of cold. Just as cold fails to bite so long as you add clothes, insults fail to bite so long as you add

tolerance. The problem is that with too much of both you become immobilized. Swollen with so many clothes you collapse into the snow until someone else, perhaps a friend or two,

picks you up. On the other hand, not having enough inner drive to escape from the source of insult means you must wait for someone to bring you to safety. What to do, however,

when the cold becomes severe? You should also generate your own heat, move about. Likewise, with severe insults you might need to push back to shut them down, or at least just move away.

THE RESERVOIR AT CHESTNUT HILL

LINA WONG

My classroom is on the first floor, next to the nun's lounge. I go there whenever I want. Not that I need to talk to anyone—I just hang out there. Being a senior's not that great without Mom. I'm surprised nobody seems to notice though. Either Sister Eve or Sister Sue is always there. They almost expect me. Funny how they act like they just happen to be there. I ended up being accepted to a Catholic college. More nuns. And then I have to live with Aunt Phil. Lucky me. That was the last entry in Cristina's diary, August 15, 1968, before she left for Boston College five months ago.

Evening crept into the shallow bowl of Chestnut Hill. Light brushed the ice, shimmering as it crossed, phantom-like, to skim the woods beyond. It was as still as January vespers when it palpated the reservoir's perimeter like a mother tucks in. Diminishing sunbeams traversed a fishing hole. Then they dropped to the shoreline and over the edge of the earth. The expanse glimmered blue-gray, reflecting lamplights on Commonwealth, where a few windows winked knowingly.

“Cristina, when are you getting home today?” called Aunt Phyllis from the kitchen.

It miffed the 19-year-old no end. It wasn't that she disliked her aunt. Who else was savvy about Bostonian style? Which Cristina happened to be wearing this moment, and in BC colors no less: maroon and gray Mary Janes with a bow and a buckle strap, cream tights, brown suede mini skirt, and sheeny gold sweater with a pendant from the college bookstore (Go Eagles!). All supplied by the aunt (who was bent on sewing a name tag on each article of clothing, in case Cristina left them somewhere). She did make the best chowder—fresh clams, soft potatoes, minced onions, parsley from the sill, and real cream in an ultra-thick broth. Who would give a niece her own room, furnished with desk and goose-neck lamp? Moreover, Phyllis had insisted Cristina pick out the linens for her room. Surprising, since she didn't have children of her own—and was known for being frugal. But her aunt was a cool cat. So, Cristina felt momentarily guilty about her plan.

Yet she still intended to be late, to go against the dictum of home-by-five, and slowly pry the tentacles off.

“I hate to be devious, but. . .” Cristina said to herself. Later she was going to meet a few classmates from Creative Writing at a popular hangout and linger there until at least past dark, then bounce home like it was normal. That afternoon, Biology lab having carried over, she was running late. Hurrying along St. Thomas More Road she had an idea. Mary Ann’s Bar was parallel, with the reservoir in-between.

Mid-winter was unwelcoming. Biting temperatures, the disapproving sky, the waning sun drove wanderers indoors. The slippery, corrugated pathway circled the pond forlornly. Gnarled trees, stripped of their vital juices, overhung the trail, their pendulous arms cracking in the acid breeze, poised to crush intruders. Birds lacked sustenance now, and the oak, maple, and sumac were devoid of autumn’s blood. Younger branches rustled archly in the aimless wind as it wound among the knolls.

Cristina felt a familiar stab—about her mom, and about Phyllis, who was Mom’s sister. She had really stepped up for Cristina. But it was second semester now, time to loosen the knot. Temperatures were thaw-like this afternoon. She picked her way through melting snow and soft dirt for the sake of the new shoes. The mile-and-a-half trail went in and out with the bank. Despite the bareness of the trees, the view of traffic was obstructed by undergrowth.

Suddenly, a figure emerged from the brush. His hand was at his groin, as if he had just relieved himself. Cristina thought nothing of it—a pit stop. They approached each other on the path. The setting sun flickered. With the changing angle and the eclipse of buildings, a cold shaft of light slid across the ice to strike near the man’s hand. It reverberated off steel like a volt. Then the sun dropped below.

Cristina stared in confusion. His eyes bore into her as the knife came forth. In one hard turn, she wrenched her feet right out of her shoes and took off. The trail felt foreign. His breathing was close, laboring, strident. The bank, the ice, the woods—nothing looked safe. The rough surface tore at her stockinged feet. His pounding vibrated the earth beneath. She felt his air on her neck as she twisted away from the bank. He lunged, exhaling sharply. The blade grated into her backpack, seared her backside, and caught her left calf as she churned. She heard him hit the mud with a splat and an “ooph” as he rolled, then only her own palpitations as she raced up to Beacon Street.

“This doesn’t look like a scrape from sitting on the T,” Margaret O’Hanlan said in a questioning tone. “Do you feel safe at home? A boyfriend. . . ?” The nurse practitioner’s eyebrows went up and the corners of her mouth down. She gave Cristina a pamphlet on domestic abuse after the stitches. Anticipating push-back on the supposed cause of her injury, Cristina didn’t think the nick on her buttocks worth mentioning.

When she claimed fatigue after classes that day and “feeling unwell” the next, Phyllis looked puzzled but for once said nothing. On Cristina’s part, the whole situation was tenuous.

“The police would contact Aunt Phil,” she rationalized. It would set Cristina back in her quest for independence. Her chest felt heavy, and she hadn’t slept for the mulling-over. That night she wrote in her diary, *if I tell Aunt Phil, she’ll restrict me even more. I’ve got to find a way to get through this on my own.*

The day dawned clear. Some other girl—or anyone—could be attacked the same way. She tried to bring up his face. An older face—but Cristina had no idea about ages.

“I’ll go to the police tomorrow,” she decided.

The next day was frigid. As she stomped into Student Services, Cristina glanced at the newspaper rack. A headline read, “Peace with Honor,” “Half Million May Leave Vietnam.” At the bottom was a smaller heading, “Body found at reservoir; foul play suspected.” Cristina felt nauseous.

“It happened,” she gasped under her breath. She turned and headed to the spot.

There was still yellow tape up, close to the place he gashed her. The tape extended down the bank. No one was there—but it was over 24 hours since the body was found, according to the paper, and nearly 36 since her mishap. She peered around and saw indents where the body had lain. Her eyes fixed on the frozen lake with its opaque pallor. A faint streak went along the ice to the waterhole midway.

With a deep breath, Cristina opened the door of the Boston Police Department.

“I want to report an assault,” she trembled.

Getting her name, the receptionist called Sergeant Maloney.

“Cristina Higgins? Is that right?” he barked. “Just the person I was about to see. And maybe we should take a trip to the morgue. On suspicion of the murder of Pierre Richard Ouellette, you’re under arrest.” Cristina stumbled forward as she fainted, striking her head on the marble counter as she fell.

Cristina’s diary, May 1, 1969: *The ice is long gone from the reservoir. Now the water just sparkles with a luminescent shine. The branches are all filling in and birds are zooming like crazy. Aunt Phil and I walked through there today. She always makes me feel better, even though she’s got her ways—but that’s because she feels she needs to watch over me, for Mom. She bailed me out—but so did the medical examiner after another look at the wound. I’ve told her so many times how I feel, as if I had something to do with that man slipping and falling on his own knife. Then she’ll tell me, “Cristina, if I hadn’t put your name on the soles of your shoes, the police never would have suspected you—but the crime wouldn’t be solved, either.” Then I say, “Aunt Phil, if the ice hadn’t shown me where the knife flew, they wouldn’t have sent divers down to look for it, and he wouldn’t have been connected to those other murders in Rhode Island.” I guess I need to tell that story a lot to get it out of my head. We talk more since the “accident,” and she hasn’t put any edicts on me lately. She bought me a new pair of Mary Janes. And she promised not to write on the soles. Aunt Phil is a really cool cat. Lucky me!*

MEMORIES OF EACH KIND

AMANDA OWENS

You were my destination when I thought you were my journey—my path. Now any path I take brings me back to you. No matter how hard I try to avoid it, I always end up with you and your memories.

Just about every time I get around to feeling like I'm "ready" to let you go,

A veil comes. A waterfall. The jackhammer in my chest that intensifies when you come to sit in the lobby of my brain.

And it whispers. . . "no" and proceeds to convince me that I must cling to every bad memory as much as the good. That I could've done something, anything, to have kept you here on Earth and it's my fault alone. That it wasn't just your time to go, but a coincidence. That I still need you as much as I need the misery, the anxiety, the emptiness.

One day I'll feel better, they say. I'll get "there." I'll "make it."

You were my destination. . .
now what?

THE THINGS I STRUGGLE TO THROW

AWAY

AMANDA OWENS

I hold onto self-loathing like I hold onto old tubes of deodorant that still have the tiniest bit left, but if I roll it up to use it crumbles to the floor.

I keep my depression around like the toothpaste from months ago that has maybe a pinch left at the tippy top—the kind I have to put all of my body weight into to squeeze out.

I experiment with negativity like I experiment with heads of lettuce in the fridge. I saw it start to rot long ago, yet it still resides in the drawer.

Volume 79

SUN DOWN

CAITLIN KREIDER



Volume 79

ALTITUDE
CAITLIN KREIDER



ONCE

DENNIS VANNATTA

Trying to be a good sport although it didn't come naturally to him, Alan Cork joined the end of the conga line, or perhaps it looked more like a game of follow the leader with Alan's younger brother, Kevin, forty-three years old, in front followed by their septuagenarian mother, Paulette, then William, Alan's son, and Meredith, his wife, trying to be a good sport, too, although it didn't come naturally to her, either. The only holdout was Kevin's girlfriend, or maybe she was his wife, Tonia, who sat on the loveseat looking bored.

In early December, Kevin had called his mother and told her he was coming home, for the first time in twenty years, and of course they had all been excited, but he hadn't told them he was bringing someone. He introduced Tonia by her first name only. Was she Tonia Cork, his wife? Everyone was curious but no one asked, and now it seemed too late. Maybe if someone had spoken up, shown a little interest, she might now be joining in the fun. Who knows?

Around the living room they went, Kevin looking left, right, high, low, and the others grinning and laughing the more Kevin frowned in perplexity.

"Are you sure it's in the living room?" Kevin asked.

"Yes," his mother said. "Although maybe I should say—and I'm giving you a big hint now—I should say it's not in the living room."

"Ah, so it's something that was here. . ."

He stopped and looked at Tonia, or rather at the wall behind the loveseat.

"The mantle! You had the mantle taken out!"

They erupted in laughter.

"Not just the mantle, you nincompoop," Alan said. "We had the whole fireplace taken out."

"The fireplace?"

Kevin shook his head in wonder. "But without the mantle, where do you

hang the Christmas stockings?”

“Well, we don’t have any little ones in the family anymore,” Paulette said, “except for William, of course. We’ll figure out a nice place for William’s stocking.”

Alan tousled his son’s hair. William ducked his head and blushed. He was fourteen with size fourteen shoes and bad acne. Everything embarrassed him.

“That’s really the only major change in the house, though,” Paulette said. “Rockaway, now, I’m sure Rockaway will have changed a lot.”

“You bet. We noticed that just driving in from the airport, didn’t we, honey?” Kevin said to Tonia, who raised two fingers toward her mouth as if there were a cigarette between them before dropping her hand and saying, “How the hell should I know?”

There was an awkward silence, which Kevin broke by saying, “Well, it’s good to be home.”

His mother said, “You’ve been away too long, too long,” and Kevin hung his head like the sweet little boy Alan could almost remember.

* * *

Everyone seemed to be walking on eggshells until lunch, which gave them something to talk about. Paulette put out big bowls of egg salad and tuna salad, a plate of cheeses, and a platter piled high with those delicious Rockaway bagels.

“Some things never change—egg salad and tuna salad on Friday. You have heard of Vatican II, haven’t you Ma?” Kevin said, and Paulette shook her finger at him but couldn’t help smiling as the others laughed.

The talk became more general, livelier, except for Tonia, who sat there like an idol, impervious, inscrutable.

They tried to include her in the conversation, but it was difficult, she being an outsider not just to the family but, as far as they could tell, to everything in their world.

She was from Kentucky, or so they assumed. At least, Kevin was living in Kentucky and had for many years now, and she had that god-awful accent.

“Notice she didn’t cross herself when you said grace?” Paulette said to Alan in the kitchen. “She’s not Catholic.”

“What, a Protestant!” Alan said in mock alarm. In fact, he could list the Protestants he knew on the fingers of one hand.

After lunch Meredith stayed in the kitchen with her mother-in-law to help clean up. William made himself scarce. Tonia, who looked like she had a headache, went up to her and Kevin’s bedroom. Kevin and Alan went out to the TV room at the front of the house.

They sat across from one another.

“You look good,” Kevin said to him.

“You, too.”

“Liar,” Kevin said.

It’d been twenty years almost exactly. Of course, Kevin wasn’t going to look like he had back then. But it was more than that. Unlike Alan, who had the thinning black hair and pasty complexion of his father, Kevin had always been sandy-haired and swarthy like the Porter side of the family. A good athlete, he’d exuded health and vigor. Now he looked sallow, the skin tight around his eyes and slack across his jowls. He looked like an alcoholic recently gone on the wagon and not enjoying the ride.

“How’s business?” Kevin asked, and Alan said, “Can’t complain,” and then because it was a dangerous topic hurried on, “And you? Something in physical therapy, right?”

“Right.”

“That’s where you met Tonia?”

“Yeah, she’s something in physical therapy, too.”

“She seems nice.”

Kevin looked away. “She’s a little rough around the edges. And obviously she doesn’t feel too comfortable here.”

“Give her time. It took Meredith years to feel like she fit in—if she ever has.”

“Meredith is better at hiding it. Tonia doesn’t even know how to try. She hasn’t had an easy life. But we’re good for each other. At least it’s working right now. Tomorrow, who knows?”

“You need to work at it to keep it working.”

“Thanks for the advice, Little Al.”

It doesn’t take long for a brother to find the sore spots. Alan hated “Little Al,” which he’d been called his whole life and continued to be by most of their acquaintances even though his father, Big Al Cork, had died earlier in the year, clearing the way for Kevin’s return home.

Whatever had happened twenty years ago was between Kevin and his father. It had something to do with the family business. You’d have thought that Alan would have known since he was vice president of Cork Modular Office Systems, but his father refused to say, and Kevin was gone—here one day and gone the next—before Alan could question him. Apparently, money had gone missing. Apparently, it was down to Kevin, who’d been in charge of the books ever since he’d gotten his business degree from Iona. It was hard to believe, and yet it wasn’t. There’d always been something about Kevin. His metabolism ran too fast. He made bad decisions, often funny when he was a child but more troubling as he grew older.

The only thing Big Al said specifically about the situation was that he’d forgiven Kevin. That’s probably what had done it, caused Kevin to flee, Alan figured. Being forgiven can be a heavier load to bear than blame.

Kevin turned on the TV, scrolled up and down the guide through the sports channels.

“The Knicks game should be on,” he said.

“Huh uh. You’re thinking about Christmas Day. You’ll have to wait a few days for that one.”

“Oh, right.”

Kevin returned to the guide, frowning as he scrolled through it like it was serious business. Then: “Eureka! Hoosiers! That beats the Knicks ten ways from Sunday.”

“‘Ten ways from Sunday.’ What’s that, some Kentucky redneck expression?”

“Save your Confederate dollars, the South shall rise again. This sucker’s halfway over. Jimmy Chitwood’s already rejoined the team.”

Alan didn’t know what he was talking about and didn’t ask. He didn’t much care for sports. He was already six-foot-three by well over two-hundred pounds as a sophomore at Xaverian when the football coach spotted him in the hall and browbeat him into coming out for the team. After one week of practices, though, the coach told him he was “soft” and to quit wasting their time. Alan was relieved.

Kevin, on the other hand, had been a top-notch athlete, on the golf and tennis teams, and a star in basketball as a tough six-one point guard who could penetrate and defend although his outside shot was only average—too flat an arc. He was good enough to earn a scholarship to Iona where he never started but for three straight years was the first sub off the bench. He didn’t look like an athlete now, though. He didn’t even look like an ex-athlete. Twenty years, twenty years. . .

They watched the movie or rather Kevin watched, nodding, grinning, sometimes calling out lines before the characters said them. Alan looked at the screen without seeing, his mind wandering. “That was beautiful. Man, that was beautiful,” Kevin said.

Alan thought he must be talking about some basketball play in the movie, but then Kevin asked, “What was that song, anyway?”

“What song?”

“The song that was just in that commercial. That beautiful song.”

Alan was just about to say that he hadn’t been paying attention, but then he could hear it, too, some woman singing a lovely, lilting melody. Funny how something can get in your head without your even realizing it.

“Yeah, that was pretty, but I don’t know what it was. Something from a Disney movie, maybe?”

Kevin snapped his fingers. “That’s it. ‘Once upon. . .Once. . .’”

“‘When You Wish Upon a Star.’ Cinderella.”

“No. Not ‘wish upon’ but ‘once upon.’ I can hear that quite clearly. Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs. I think that’s it.”

“No, no, no. Cinderella sings it when she’s thinking about the prince after the ball. Snow White never even saw the prince until the end when he woke her up with a kiss.”

Kevin was about to fire back when Tonia walked into the room, took one look at the TV, and said, “Holy Mother of Shit. Don’t tell me. Please don’t tell me.”

Kevin looked sheepish.

Tonia turned to Alan and said, “Do you know how many times he’s seen Hoosiers? Don’t even bother trying to guess. He bought a DVD of it and wore it out watching, and then he bought another one.”

“Apparently he likes Hoosiers,” Alan said, and Tonia said, “You think? I wish he liked me half as much as he likes that damn movie.”

“What? You know I love my snookycums, I love my honey pie,” Kevin said in a little boy voice, grabbing Tonia by the wrist and pulling her down beside him on the sofa and giving her a kiss on the cheek with an exaggerated smack. She shoved him away with a “yuck” and rubbed at her cheek. Alan couldn’t tell whether she was amused or irritated.

The doorbell rang. Alan started to get up but then heard Paulette’s voice at the door.

“Look who’s here,” she said, leading in a man who looked like Frodo from the Lord of the Rings movies, only middle-aged.

It was Stevie Chulak. The Chulaks used to live across the street from the Corks, and Stevie had had, from as early as Alan could remember, an enormous crush on Alan’s younger sister, Liz, currently in Florida recovering from back surgery.

Stevie came into the TV room and gave a rainbow wave.

“Ah. The prodigal son returns,” he said to Kevin.

Kevin smiled back, a bit sardonically. He and Stevie had been friends when they were little. Then something went wrong between them. Maybe they just grew in different directions. Things happen.

Kevin introduced him to Tonia. Stevie nodded and then sat down and looked at the TV.

“Hoosiers? Really?”

“That’s exactly what I said,” Tonia said.

“Quiet. We’re getting to the best part,” Kevin said, leaning forward in anticipation.

The Hoosier team was huddled around Gene Hackman, who was really letting them have it. “Maybe we don’t belong here,” he said to them.

The Hoosier boys started their comeback. Finally, they tied it up. Then: a commercial break.

“Are you kidding me? Right at the emotional peak of the movie, and they break for a frigging commercial. They’re killing the moment,” Kevin moaned.

“He’s not kidding,” Tonia said. “No, really, he’s serious. The jackass has watched this movie twelve-hundred times and he still gets nervous worrying about Jimmy Chitwood taking that last shot. Just look at him.”

Kevin said something under his breath, and Tonia heard him and hissed something in his ear, and Kevin said something again, and Tonia said, loud enough for everyone to hear, “Pathetic.” Kevin looked stricken.

Alan jumped up and turned off the TV.

“What the hell are you doing?” Kevin said.

“That’s enough of that. That’s enough,” Alan said.

“Oh, I guess big brother has spoken. I guess the man of the house has

spoken,” Kevin said.

Alan blushed at “the man of the house.” His mother still owned it. He and Meredith had lived there rent free since they got married—one of the “benes,” his father said, of working in the family business. Maybe so, but he was still a grown man living with his parents, wasn’t he?

Before Alan could think of a reply, William came into the room, took one look, and started to turn back, but Kevin called to him, “Hey, William, Willy Boy. Hey, do they still shoot baskets down at the PS?”

PS 114 was only a few blocks away. The Corks had all gone to parochial schools, but kids from the neighborhood would go to “the PS,” as they called it, to play stickball and basketball on weekends and during the summer.

William shrugged defensively. “I guess,” he said.

“Good! What say we go shoot some hoops? You, me, and your old man. I’ll bet you’ve been looking for an excuse to get out of the house.”

William shrugged again. “Well. . .OK,” he said. He looked miserable. He hated sports worse than Alan did.

“We don’t have a ball,” Alan said.

Paulette came into the room. It was like she’d been standing outside listening. Alan wouldn’t put it past her.

“I’m pretty sure we have an old ball in the basement. A pump, too. And Alan, there’s a box of old shoes up in the attic. Tennis shoes and stuff.” “I don’t need tennis shoes to run circles around this guy,” Kevin said. “You better go see if you can find a pair, though, Little Al. You need all the help you can get. Come on, Willy Boy, let’s get that ball. Your old man can join us once he gets his dancing shoes on.”

Looking like he was being led to the gallows, William followed Kevin out of the room.

Alan knew that Kevin was just punishing him for turning the movie off. He would have sat right where he was, but he didn’t want his son to have to face the humiliation of the basketball court alone.

He went upstairs where the master bedroom and his and Kevin's old rooms were. Between the two smaller bedrooms was a door opening onto a steep stairway leading up to what they called the attic although it had been remodeled into a large bedroom for Liz. It's where they'd put Kevin and Tonia.

On the far side of the attic was a little door you had to stoop to go through. Here was a storeroom with shelves crammed with cardboard boxes floor to ceiling.

It took him only a moment to find the one he was looking for. He opened it, wrinkling his nose at the smell of must thick and cloying.

Among cracked leather wingtips of his father's, old pumps and flats of his mother's or Liz's, and a few pairs of shoes he could vaguely remember wearing, Alan found one pair of tennis shoes, black canvas.

When he was a teenager, all the other guys were going to Nikes and Adidas, but Alan stubbornly held out for black canvas Cons because, he claimed, he was a Boston Celtic fan. In fact, he'd never given a damn for the Celtics or any other team. He recalled a sort of perverse satisfaction wearing the Cons. Now, they looked like clown shoes.

He heard someone coming up the stairs. Two sets of footsteps. He heard whispers, a woman and a man.

The door to the storeroom was ajar in such a way as to leave a half-inch gap between the hinge side of the door and the door frame. He could see them.

They didn't use the bed. Stevie pulled out the desk chair, dropped his pants, which puddle around his ankles, and sat down. Tonia kicked her panties off, hiked her cheap K-Mart-looking dress up, and straddled him. She went up and down like some mechanical device, then paused and kissed him, her mouth opened wide over his wide-open mouth, swallowing each other's tongues.

Alan looked away.

When he was younger, he'd seen people kissing like that in movies and had tried it a few times, thinking that's what he was supposed to do, but it almost made him gag. Fortunately, Meredith didn't get too charged up over things like that. She was content to keep things pretty low-key.

They were a perfect match.

* * *

After they'd finished and left, he waited a few minutes and then went downstairs and on outside without even taking his coat. He hurried toward the PS, ashamed of himself for abandoning his son.

The playground was empty. Maybe Kevin and William had walked on down to Beach Channel Drive to look at the skyline of Manhattan across Jamaica Bay.

He walked the one more block down 134th Street, and there across Beach Channel Drive were Kevin and William looking out over the rampart. As he was waiting for the traffic to clear so that he could join them, they turned and crossed over to him instead.

“Could you see much?” he asked.

Kevin said, “I saw enough.”

“Oh Jesus, I forgot. You haven't been back since 9/11, have you?”

“No. The last time I was here, the big worry was Y2K. And Willy Boy took me over to 116th Street where the engine fell, and then over to 131st Street where the plane hit.”

That's right. Kevin hadn't been here when the American Airlines plane nosedived onto the Rockaway peninsula, either.

“So, you're playing tour guide,” Alan said to William.

William shrugged but looked pleased with himself. Anything to stay off that basketball court.

“Hurricane Sandy hit Rockaway really hard, too,” Alan said.

“So that's it. I noticed the trees were different—smaller. The landscaping, a lot of it looks different.”

“The saltwater killed off a lot of vegetation. And a bunch of houses burned, too. Did you walk on up 131st Street and see all those houses

FEMA raised way up on six, eight-foot foundations in case of another flood? They look bizarre.”

“We didn’t see that.”

“We could walk back that way.”

“Nah,” Kevin said. “I’ve seen enough—too damn much.”

He seemed down, way down. And he didn’t know the half of it. Alan felt so sorry for him.

“Well, let’s go shoot some baskets,” Alan volunteered.

“Nah, I don’t have the right kind of shoes,” Kevin said.

They walked back toward the house, Kevin dejected and Alan unable to do anything about it. But William seemed happy.

* * *

Stevie was gone. Tonia sat just where she’d been when Alan went up to the attic. Kevin slumped down beside her, and Alan sat opposite them. William made his escape.

The TV was on, but Hoosiers was over. Some other movie was on, but Alan didn’t recognize it. Alan felt himself getting drowsy. Anymore he couldn’t sit for ten minutes without falling asleep.

He did drift off and then came awake with a start when Kevin exclaimed, “Will you look at that? That commercial was on again, the one with the beautiful song, the ‘once’ song, and I was daydreaming and didn’t even realize it until it was over, so I missed it, missed hearing the words.”

“It’ll be on again, probably,” Alan said.

Kevin put his head in his hands. “I can’t do anything right. Even a simple thing like that. Everything I touch I screw up.”
“That’s not true, that’s not true at all,” Tonia said, taking Kevin in her arms and pulling him to her. “You’re a good man, Kevvy. Everybody likes

you. You don't screw up anything. Look at me, Kevvy. Where would I be without you? You saved my life. You're my sweet baby. You're my lover boy."

She rocked him in her arms, murmuring in his ear, sweet nothings, probably. Then Alan realized she was singing, or rather humming. Yes, it was the song from the commercial.

Alan averted his eyes.

Meredith was standing in the door of the TV room. She turned and walked away. Alan stood and followed her into the kitchen.

"God, what do you make of that?" Alan said, and then added, "that song," although he was really thinking not just about the song but what he'd seen in the attic, too. But, of course, he wouldn't tell her about that.

"Once Upon a Dream," Meredith said. "From Disney's Sleeping Beauty, but they took the melody from Tchaikovsky's ballet."

"Jeez, how did you know that?" Alan said.

She stared at him a moment with a look he'd never seen before, and then she hurled it at him, an accusation, a lament: "I was a music major! A music major! I have a degree in it!" Then she sagged against the counter and began to sob.

Alan stood there, helpless, aghast. He was tormented by the thought that he didn't understand anything. But then he realized that he did. That was worse.

WHERE THE REST OF US LIVE

BRIAN C. FELDER

It is not yet noon here
and the thermometer says ninety degrees,
which means any effort expended this day
will bead you in slop sweat.

It is not my kind of weather
but it is what it is,
for we are not rich enough
for a chalet in the mountains
or a villa at the beach.

There's no swimming pool to dive into either,
our backyard being but a lawn in need of cutting,
for we are normal, everyday people,
what's left of the middle class.

We are, however, on the lucky end of that
being wealthy enough to afford central air,
which I'm about to turn on
because the thermometer says ninety degrees
and it is not yet noon here.

BAR NONE

HARVEY SILVERMAN

Seeing the old bar, a relic of a younger man's life, suddenly produced a bunch of rapid memories flashing from one to the next, loose associations passing through consciousness too rapidly at first for individual contemplation. I wonder why that is; of course, in my seventieth year there are more years with their associated memories but I have long seen that bar standing there near the basement wall. Perhaps the reaction was simply a function of an ageing brain, some circuit for whatever reason activated to rapidly loop through memories; a need for filing and sorting by a mind that seeks to create a summary in some kind of order.

In the summer of 1966, I first encountered the bar, a dull brown homemade affair perhaps five feet in length with a front made of cheap wooden paneling, a long dowel attached near the bottom as a bar rail, a rough cut shelf in the back with a rougher cut opening to accept a metal receptacle for ice or whatever. The bar's top had a piece of thick glass that sat atop a covering of thin green felt that was glued to the wooden surface. All in all, a simple piece without noteworthy qualities but in its way perfect for college-aged living.

It sat in the living room of a home in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where a perky nineteen-year-old girl was living with some classmates; the home was the girls' summer sublet. I was an occasional visitor; that young lady had been occupying a fair amount of my time for several months.

I paid considerably more attention to that sweet young lady than to the bar even though I wished it were mine. It was not to be—at summer's end the girls returned to their dormitory, the students from whom they had sublet the house went on their own ways as the year's lease ended; the bar was purchased from its tenant owner by my best friend for \$25, far more discretionary cash than I had.

Three years later, I owned the bar. My friend moved to a smaller apartment and sold it to me for that same \$25 cash plus forgiveness of a debt of \$5, the details of which neither of us could quite recall. The bar was not only reunited, as it were, with me but with that now twenty-two-year-old lovely young lady to whom I was newly married.

It stood close to a wall in our first apartment along with the two bar stools that were a part of the original package. The stools were four-legged wooden pieces, the same color as the bar, but perhaps not originally homemade as they were a bit sturdier than the bar and each had a woven reed seat.

Upon the bar, we placed our first Christmas tree, a small evergreen that was more branch than tree which we decorated with tiny paper American flags and strings of popcorn and cranberries that we made one evening when, with just a smile, she persuaded me how much fun it would be. Within several days, the cranberries softened and fell from the threads onto bar and floor.

By 1970, we and the bar had moved to the living quarters for residents and interns at a hospital in Worcester, forty miles to the west of where the bar and I had first made acquaintance. At a party one night the following year, an intern had far too much to drink and fell into the bar, knocking it over and spilling the contents of its shelf onto the floor with resulting destruction of some fancy crystal that had been a wedding gift. Several months later the same intern, again having had far too much to drink elsewhere, ran his automobile into a tree and broke his arm.

The bar went with us wherever we went, to the coast of Massachusetts during a tour of duty in the Navy, to Philadelphia for two years while becoming trained in Emergency Medicine, and then to Putney, Vermont, where for a year we rented the home of a relatively unknown author who in a few years would become celebrated and famous.

We enjoyed soaking the labels off of wine bottles, writing on the back the details of the occasion at which the wine was enjoyed, and placing the labels display side up under the glass top of the bar. We had collected quite a few when something spilled, got under the glass top, and soaked the green felt covering which slowly began to mold and fall apart. Finally, we stripped away the felt leaving the bar's top plain brown wood and placed the labels in an envelope now long lost.

Somewhere along the way, two rungs on one of the bar stools had broken which resulted in the stool being too wobbly for safe use. In May 1977, we were living in a rented house in Gladwyne, a Philadelphia suburb.

I had no idea how to repair the stool to return it to usefulness. My

sweetheart's folks came for a weekend visit and her dad, knowing about our bar stool's damage and well aware of my ineptness at manual skills, brought along the necessities for repair.

My father-in-law was a very interesting and wonderful fellow—warm and embracing, a PhD in chemistry from Harvard, and a man who was without doubt in charge of his family. He and I had a very good relationship, never having exchanged a cross word nor having any disagreements save one time when he tried to repay a student loan his daughter had taken out before we were married. I told him that as a married couple we were now responsible for our debts and he, after some hesitation, stepped aside.

Not only was he a brilliant chemist with some patents to his name but he was skilled at carpentry, constructing things in a solid and utilitarian fashion. He took me down to the basement of the house and there he and I, using a method that I found ingenious, repaired the broken rungs. He led me along step-by-step, having me do all the actual work, so patient and kind in his manner that all these years later I consider it a very sweet memory indeed.

It was the last time I saw him. A few months later without warning he suddenly died, a tragedy that still resonates.

The bar next moved along with us in 1978 to rural Frankestown, New Hampshire, where it sat comfortably but little used; the appeal of items from college years had faded. In 1984, the bar moved again to Manchester, New Hampshire, where it never had a chance to be a part of the house's living space; it was sent to exile in the basement.

In 1998, our older son was a college sophomore moving into a dormitory suite with some classmates. He thought the bar would be a pleasing accessory, a happy addition to the usual furnishings. However, there was again a bar stool problem. The woven reed top of one had unraveled and deteriorated, thereby becoming unusable.

It happened that my dad had a number of years earlier taken up the hobby of chair caning. He became quite skilled at it to the point that people would bring him chairs to be caned. He ignored my mom's instructions to charge these folks for the service, asking only for the cost of materials. The enjoyment he derived from the caning exercise was payment enough for him. So, he was the obvious person to ask to repair

the seat.

By then, though, my dad was near eighty years old, and his body and mind were beginning to fail. I had thought the simple repair of the seat would be a rewarding task for him but a couple of months after obtaining the necessary reeds he confessed that he just could no longer figure out how to complete the repair. My attempt to give him joy had instead brought him disappointment and embarrassment.

I went to the library, took out a book that instructed me how to weave the reeds and repaired the seat. The job was sloppy and amateurish, but it was functional. My son took the bar and stools to college where it presumably did whatever it should have. I called my friend who had bought and sold it so many years earlier to inform him of the bar's return to college life. He was pleased. "That's what it's for."

At the end of the school year, the bar returned to Manchester, back to the basement where it sits now, the experiences of its existence in a certain measure paralleling my own. I think of its relationship to two men of the preceding generation and of the resulting two memories, one sweet, one sour. The bar remains in its basement crypt while I return upstairs to daylight and carry on with a very fortunate life.

WHAT THE STREET REMEMBERS (44)
CHRISTOPHER BARNES

You've got it
Andrew wrote that
P-chow-mm
What's on your nose?
*

Sissy Spacek kneads a wolfhound.
*

Skinny top
It's so cheap
Lovely arms
*

Robert Redford snuffles by the river.
*

For the kids like
B-blap ch
Bungalow
Clonk bla tat
Do baloop.

RIVER OF THE PAST

JEVIN LEE ALBUQUERQUE

Mile three, six-mile-hike, Mojave Desert, one tree, I'm seeing Buddha in the shade; keep going, or collapse lotus, let vultures release my spirit, one eye peck at a time. Look for ghosts. Edward Abbey would be nice, nothing nice about dehydration, few sips of water, vast fading desert. Dry throat. No smell of rain. Keep going, old athlete echoes, short steps, a purple cactus, few hours, back to camp. Cough up dust. Splash water on face, shed sticky-skin. Write. Whiskey. Wake-up, faint-train-whistle, Desert Sky Trail, Laberinto, New Mexico.

Bar recovery. Water, beer, repeat. Vision blur, skin burned, no air conditioned, drive, seventeen hours, memories of packing, leaving, always leaving the girl, California; I'm 46 years-of-age now, stay with the girl, change pattern—no, bags-packed, hit the road, fly-fish, write your life away. Sigh. Cough up dust. Music pulse outside, hippies, groovin', old school, ponytails, touch of grey, tunes, it can't be, a train. Up with beer to observe, outside. An old mining town, desert, haunted by sulfur and trains, a labyrinth of cavernous walkways, music to soften the blow, people doing blow, I think I hear train whistles, rub train skin, expect black soot, everything so alive, in motion, I see blurry clips from Mojave hike, perhaps take a seat at the bar.

"You're alright, traveler," whisper, dark skinned woman, rubbing ice cubes on my cheeks, sting. "Are you coming out of there? Get on the train. Your face is so red. Here. . ." she unbuttons two of my shirt buttons; laughing evil, dumps entire cup of ice down my chest!

"Come on," she says, taking my hand, pulling us away. . .our steps pound wood floor as we wind through caverns, emerge, second music venue: Charlie Parker Jazz-zzz, leads us hours into the night—saxophone player, chasing Bird.

"Who tries to chase Bird?" I say, caught in brown eyes, full lips, twitch, body, take me to the Other.

"We are there," she says, Native American fire, my fingers burn.

"Another drink?" I ask. She nods, we sip, breathe, deep, listen to the Bird chase, bodies close, our lips touch, so soon, why wait? "Your angels, in your hair, they. . ." She stops my lips, silence, kisses,

tongues, swirl to the sax-sssssss, the Bird within reach, but so far out, the desert snickering, spitting puffs of sand in our direction.

Her hand raises, protection. "I'm out here for a month, taking a buddy fly fishing, a six-fingered cellist by the name of Nicholas Flynn." She smiles, knows his legend, all who've been moved, by Red. She shouts to Bird crescendo; I see doves leave her mouth, fly in practiced patterns, finally resting on a note from the sax, suspended just below the roof.

"Come back here," she says, rubbing my ears, hands slide to neck, lips to cheek, blows into my ear, smile, laughter, "Let's go," up, beers spill, barstool down, more laughter, saxophone player gasping for air.

"He did it," I tell her, snaking through the caves, so many turns, the train whistling.

"We'll be late," she says. "Turn here." We skid to a stop, too late.

Out of breath, "I know a better place," she says, but I can't be bothered, stars have pierced black sky, planets reverberate alien drums, the desert still. I remove a cactus thorn from my ass, from sitting in the desert, too much time in the desert, "Will alter your mind," she says.

I look to her, hold her, breasts pressed to my chest, cushioned life together, "Do you have a name?" I ask.

"Not necessary," she tells me, caresses me into movement, away from the cavern, hesitates at rickety door, leads to somewhere, crooked the door, only sky, stars, behind it, door-creaks-open. She clicks on flashlight, ten red seats, black scuffed stage, a few broken lights above, we sit down, awaiting kisses, hear drums, stop to catch our breath. "Where are you staying?" she asks.

"Old bus down the way," I tell her, "perimeter walls, cement, dotted with wine bottles."

"I know the place," she tells me, sweet kiss. "Now watch, listen. . ." flamenco music from phone, deep in front pocket surrounded by hips, to the stage. Castanets click, wood-stage-shredded, guitars gush to arched neck, a flurry of feet moved, hands weave dream catchers, lights above the stage, flicker, regain power, she motions for me to join her. "I only write and fish," I tell her, her fingers claw my shirt, pull me to

the stage, the light dying as we exit theatre to the stars with my French poems in her free hand, reading in perfect French. “But you’re Native American, Spanish, what the hell are you not?”

“Yours,” she says. “I belong to the people who cling to you.”

“I’m not falling into that trap again, been through it on the Rez. I’m at peace with that world.”

“You know nothing of the Other, only that you have been touched by a witch.” She tears the French poems, continues: “How do you know I’m not a witch, perched up high on a church bell, in Las Brujas?”

“I don’t,” I tell her, but in the stillness of the warm air, I laugh evil in her face, tell her I’m not interested.

“I will not be denied, and I’m not a witch,” she tells me, caressing my hand, reading lines, painted black nails scratch skin.

With half-filled beer glasses in our hands, walking to bus, “Be quiet,” I whisper.

“Nobody cares here, trust me,” she says, “this is an interesting set-up, very Laberinto.” To the laughter of doves, tapping on roof, we tangle, moan, witch’s light from the moon through bus windows, a flood of culture, energy through veins, eyes a thousand coyotes howl, black snakes hiss bus tires, fire-warriors in ceremony, cynical eyes of ravens on hood, claw-scratch-metal, bellies swollen with dove meat; in the Other, we stop, sweat drip, embrace; walk with her to gypsy home, bonfire backyard, chanting, returning solo, dogs chase, bark, 6am, lights click-on, my reputation on the line, fish-on tomorrow, Rio del Pasado.

In high desert, canyon, river gliding through us, a dirty raven balancing on rock at river’s edge, occasionally dipping his beak. “Did you get her name?” asks Nicholas, the fly line cradled in his sixth finger, sharp nail threatening to cut the line, red hair flowing over his shoulders, freckles lifted by a childish smile.

“I love the water,” he says, trying to employ the casting techniques I’ve just taught him.

“Just there,” I tell him, to the rise of a 24-inch trout. “You got ‘em, set the hook,” but the line is tangled around the reel, cigarette

drip ash into waders.

“Oh, brother,” I say, “you didn’t see that?”

“See what,” he says. “What did you see down there in Laberinto, you sound a little off? Not like you. What happened to the fit athlete I once knew? Back in our early Spain, you look a little disheveled, like our late Spain, I must say.” He coughs.

“Who says disheveled?” He starts his false cast, avoiding tangle, and I back away to give him space, find the perfect balance of teaching, getting the hell out of the way.

“There you go,” I say as he hooks a second, jumping, spitting the fly. “Small hooks,” I say. He nods.

“Look, there’s a town called Las Brujas you should visit on your way down to San Ramon, maybe she lives there, or maybe,” he continues, whisking back the line, “she’s still in Spain.” The line tangles around the tip of the fishing pole.

“Maybe she does, maybe she is, maybe the Other. . .”

“Lots of Other around here, brother. Check out Las Brujas, might do you some good, find peace with these things, find a healer, take the medicine.”

“You have a knot in the line, again,” I tell him.

“Let me get that,” he says, blowing smoke, hooking the line with his sixth nail, the frail tippet sliced, black midge, gently floating, air to water, disappearing in current, raven taking flight.

My walking stick, a poem, and a town I’ve never heard of, been to, or really know what to expect, is Las Brujas, taking first step into walk. I’m told no gas station, no bar, but Aspens in bloom toward the high peaks, art galleries scattered about in peoples’ homes, and enough Spanish echoes, to let the streets flow in blood. I step, plant walking stick, step, into the flow of nothing in particular, but everything around me, obeying, the beauty of Aspens. Steps grow heavy, until I finally reach the church, see metal cross above church bell, raven stomping in the grass, a dove suffering below his claws, yellow-eye, glint in the sunlight.

I study the church for minutes, half hour passing, perhaps more; my eyes jerk to the left side, pulling me toward the Águila Valley below, but back to the cross, always back to the church. I leave, return, walk in circles for a spell, look through windows of abandoned buildings, speak with a gentleman wearing a plaid coat, black and red, a writer-type, with scars on his face, rosary beads in hand, suggesting a tough spell. Church bell rang, or did it? My ears still ringing, cross shaking, the bell, toppling down to the street, shattering into metal pieces. The raven flies off, leaving pecked carcass of dove on grass. Eyeing the cross, I pick up dove, walk around church, finally spotting a purse hanging from steel bars, rattle. The purse is made of fresh deer hair, wild, out of place. I remove poem from pocket, wrap words around dove, place it into the purse with relief. Walking away, I feel bell shards below my feet, knowing it is over.

AMERICA! AMERICA! AMERICA!

JORY POMERANZ

Guns are mightier than the pen,
Me, patriot, I served when
A government panned for oil
Far off on a foreign soil
Killing those who'd interject
While lying to the public.

Half the food goes to waste,
Many of the children cannot taste it;
Homelessness is quite a complaint,
In states that want their beaches safe.
They're combing sand for pharma pills,
While children live under the hills,
And the bridges, and the alleyways,
Praying when it snows on days
They don't freeze to death.

Can you buy this medicine?
You cannot because your husband,
Who brought you to the hospital,
Hits you on your hair,
So others can't see bruises
From when he throws a chair,
He has no job, no education,
Taxes went to political procrastination.

Politicians represent the truth!
Or do they just point fingers to
The ones we, the me, you didn't elect,
While the other side doesn't suspect
Their poli-tics a biting game,
Sucking blood out of the same word
So the public can hear, he too said—
The others heard, in his head,
He feels the same as Texas Ted:
Obamacare! Osamacare!
The blood on his red shirt was bled,
By people, everyday Americans.

While passing nothing is germane,
One senator, he passes a toot,
The other party raises a holler—hoot!
Senator, you cannot fart in this parlor!
We must all give first consent, vote,
Be careful next time! This whole place,
It could have gone up in smoke.

Branding is a ubiquitous game,
Enterprises have hungry eyes,
They're analyzing all your files,
Clicks, bits, favorite flicks,
Convincing people of morals
That don't actually exist:
This beer company truly cares,
For 1% of profits go to this!
"Hold my beer, bro," take a piss.

Disposable people! Disposable plates!
White denialism of Black hate!
Increase the incarceration rate,
Let's all go to jail, we're all to blame;
No, go home, shut your door,
Turn on a show, and do the same
As you did yesterday.

The groceries, packages, take-out,
And people come to my door;
Don't dare go walk outside,
That's what living life is for—
Stay in the system! Connected!
Entranced in video clips, photos
Reflecting on high school days,
Techno-social digital daze,
Dopa-mula-opiate-crazed
Inside your studio, building shelf,
Siting still while being sold,
The product is yourself.

AT THE PRECIPICE OF SPRING

CAROL GRASER

On either side of this frozen mud path
are sculptured monuments to winter

Each storm's snow
that fell distinct
melded by
surface thaw and drip
that wended its way
as water to the ground
chanting through the
layers, the bright trickle
compressing time and

now this frigid air has snapped the softness
back into rigid place, soot-studded and drawn

Today is routine. We cause harm to each
other and exist harmed. To survive, I

commute. I begin here in the dim light
in the hum of the dominant conversation

of trees, my brain balanced precariously
my fingernails cracking.

VALLE GRANDE, NEW MEXICO

STEPHEN LEFEBURE

Open spaces. . . why do they call to us?
Spirit burgeons every time we find
A meadow in the forest. We hike to it
As if to a lifelong friend who knew us
In our need. Spaces are as if a troubled mind
Full of random clutter poured into it
Suddenly were clean. As if wind blew us
Out of all the worlds that we designed.
What is open space? We never knew it
Until this enormous valley drew us.
Until we could see this unconfined
Caldera where the stars above can view it.

Sweeping everything we know aside,
What each trail presents and we contend
With, silent predators whom we beware,
Spaces help our spirit open wide.
Arriving at a meadow is the end
Of a journey. We feel we are where
We should be, and the part inside
That pursues the sacred, to transcend
Life, attempts to say a prayer.
We are inarticulate, denied
Language that would do what we intend,
And yet one by one the words are there.

What is spirit but the self we tried
To be, but could not ever understand?
Silent, but with languages that say
More than any words our tongue supplied.
What is spirit but the foreign land
That we never enter, mean someday
To travel, but have waited for a guide
To lead us into, hiking into sand?
Spirit is what lasts, the only way
Part of us survives when we have died.
You will not be there, you understand,
When heart and head and body all decay.

A PLACE OF REFUGE

MARY SENTER

“You should smile more,” the clerk said, and I realized I was smiling. I had been smiling since I walked in the door, having seen the table version of the 1980s Ms. Pac Man game living incongruously in the breezeway of the convenience store in the remote Spanish colonial village in Northern New Mexico.

I thought of afternoons at Alfy’s Pizza in the gritty Pacific Northwest mill town where I grew up—my twelve-year-old self at the table version of the game, a cute boy across from me, red plastic glasses of Dr. Pepper bubbling next to me on the glass top, the golden flickering glow of the nearby gas fireplace practically the only lighting in the restaurant, a lingering design trend of the 1970s.

In the windowless restaurant, you couldn’t see the gloomy gray skies or the pouring rain. Seated at the huge round table with the vigorous fire burning in the center, your damp hair would dry, and eventually, your soggy Converse, as well. Every face seated around that fire was familiar. Alfy’s Hawaiian Supreme pizza and Dr. Pepper were my favorite foods. The Stray Cats, DEVO, and The Clash played on the jukebox like my personal new wave soundtrack. The restaurant was a refuge. All of my favorite things were there, and I felt safe and warm and protected—very much the way I felt when I was in New Mexico.

It was strange to see a relic from the 80s in a little store in the middle of nowhere. “It’s for sale,” the clerk said, his conversation returning me to the present. My eyes went wide, and my mouth fell open for a moment and then he named the price and reality set in. 1) I was on vacation and didn’t have a way to get it home, 2) I lived in tiny cabin and didn’t have room for it, and 3) the price was way more than I ever would have considered paying.

“I’d love it,” I said, “but. . .” I shrugged. Maybe he was just fucking with me. Damn tourists. Some rich, nostalgic gringo will meet his price one day. But it won’t be me.

“What are you looking for?” the man asked, stopping what he was doing to help me. He was short-ish and brown skinned. Middle-aged like me with a little extra around the middle. He wore glasses that were probably readers, the skin above his kind, dark eyes wrinkling as he peered over

them.

I was a little annoyed. How hard could it be for me to find what I needed in a tiny store? “Just some milk, I think.” I was in northern New Mexico doing some research for a novel I was writing and was staying at an Airbnb nearby. I needed more milk for my morning lattes and for hot cocoa by the fire.

Even though it was December and had snowed earlier in the day, I’d been hiking at Villanueva State Park, which had been my happy place in the years that I lived in Albuquerque in my twenties. Turns out, it still was. I’d camped and hiked in that bucolic spot on the Pecos River many times. It was a quiet place to get away to think and make sense of things. It was a refuge then. It was a refuge now.

I was glowing with delight: the clean air, the exercise, the vistas, and the memories of the place. It wasn’t warm, but the marvelous New Mexico sun warmed my cold Northwest soul. I’d been alternating between crying and laughing since I’d returned a few days before. I was overwhelmed with love for the place I’d abandoned twenty years earlier. I never wanted to leave.

“It smells delicious in here,” I said, as I brought my milk to the front of the store, looking around to see if there was anything else I wanted. Maybe a bite to eat?

“It’s my chili,” he said. “I’m making it for a celebration at the church tomorrow. Have a taste.”

I assumed he meant chile with an “e,” as in “green or red,” a New Mexican dietary staple. When he opened the pot and spooned out beans and meat, I was surprised. I couldn’t quite understand why a convenience store worker was cooking personal food while on duty in the little store deli and why he would offer something to me that wasn’t for sale.

“Is it spicy? I’m a total wimp.”

“Not too bad,” he said.

I tasted it, even though I wasn’t a fan of chili, and my instinct was to decline. It was delicious. Smooth. It had a secret ingredient that made

it unlike any chili I'd ever tasted. I forget now, what it was. I'll ask him some day.

He asked me what brought me in, where I was from, what I was out doing. I'm usually put off by store workers who attempt to engage me in small talk—it's none of their damn business what I'm out doing. I just want to buy my shit and get on with it. But I was in such a rare joyful mood, and he was such a delight, that I couldn't help talking to him.

We talked about the town. I told him I was looking at a foreclosed property on the river. I asked him if the townspeople would accept a gringa like me moving in.

He paused a little too long.

"Sure," he said, unconvincingly. "I mean, I would."

He was probably just trying to be polite.

I chuckled and smiled.

"You have a beautiful smile," he said. "You should smile more often."

"I know I should!" I said. "That's why I came to New Mexico: to get my smile back!"

I should have been offended by his comment, but I knew he wasn't flirting. He wasn't being sexist or condescending. He was just making an observation. And he was right. I'd been told that many times over the years. I didn't smile very often. Couldn't actually remember the last time I felt happy.

But in that place—the warm tones of the earth, the gorgeous geological formations, the gently waving cottonwoods, the soothing babble of the river, the adorable little adobe dwellings, the brilliant sunshine—I was happy. I couldn't help smiling. I loved that little stretch of State Route 3 that was inhabited by dilapidated ruins of old adobe homesteads dating from the 1700s when Spanish families colonized the area. I wanted to make it home, but it seemed impossible. I didn't believe I would ever truly belong in that place, even though it's the only place where I've really felt at home.

It was so rural. I wondered how people survived there. I asked the man how people supported themselves. How they got groceries, medical care. “We look out for each other,” he said. “If you ever need anything that we don’t carry in the store, just tell me. I go to Las Vegas a couple times a week, or Santa Fe. I’ll pick it up for you.”

He was talking to me as if I’d already bought the place. “You should come to the celebration tomorrow, if you can. Meet some people.”

He was inviting me, a total stranger who was really just passing through, to attend a community gathering? Is that what people did there? He may have been the friendliest person I’ve even met. I enjoyed him so much. I felt as though I’d known him forever.

We talked for a long time, as it was winter and there were no tourists to interrupt. We talked about our kids, about how hard it is for them these days. How all the young people were moving away for opportunity, jobs that pay.

“I did,” he said. “Went away to college, got married, but I came back. My parents still live here, and they’re getting old.”

I nodded. My parents still lived in Washington, which is the main reason I moved back and the only reason I still lived there. I told myself that I would remain in that place until they were all gone, but when I’d returned to New Mexico for the first time that prior March, I knew I wouldn’t be able to do it. New Mexico was in my heart. It was the only place where I felt like myself.

I’ve always been a loner, a recluse. I’d be happy living in a little cabin on the Pecos an hour from Santa Fe, as long as I could visit, since I’m a city girl at heart. It’s hard for a loner to have friendships, to feel a sense of belonging, when we distance ourselves from everyone. It’s rare to have a connection with someone we enjoy being with as much as we enjoy being alone. I mainly only socialize within my family circle.

I’ve been this way since I was born. There was only a brief period when I was social and popular and everything was easy. It was middle school and afternoons at Alfy’s with friends. As much as I enjoy my solitude, I sometimes miss comfortable connections with people that don’t involve feelings of insecurity or inadequacy.

The thing that scares me about living in that place even more than not being accepted by the families who'd lived there for hundreds of years, was the thought of being accepted by them. Of being folded into the arms of the community like a precious child. What if they did let me in and I knew the name of every soul in town and they knew everything about me? What if everyone were as kind and friendly as this store worker?

Could I find a community that felt like family in this place that made me feel like me?

I put my milk and a bottle of water on the counter and saw the plastic to-go containers filled with homemade cookies. "Oh, wow," I said. "Those look wonderful."

"Recognize them?"

"Sure," I said. "Bizcochitos. Love them! I haven't had any since I lived here."

"I made them for Christmas," he said.

I would have bought them, but there were like two-dozen cookies; I'd been losing weight and I sure didn't need to eat them all by myself and wreck it.

He handed me his card and told me to call him if I had any questions or needed help looking for a place. He owned the store, I finally realized. Now it made sense.

I left the store, and a few days later, I left New Mexico.

I didn't make an offer on the foreclosed cabin on the river, and it sold to someone else. I search the real estate ads every single day looking for the place that will be mine someday. I keep the man's card in my desk drawer so I can call him when I get there and invite him and his wife to dinner.

This is something I would never do in my current life, but when you're in a place where you feel at ease and feel like yourself; you can do things like that. You can play video games with boys you have a crush on, and you can invite a nice couple over for dinner because you're in a place

of refuge from the uncomfortable and the awkward, and you can just be yourself.

ODE TO AN ITALIAN DINNER

CHRISTA KING

Thick, bubbling
Bolognese.
Firm, creamy
Pasta.
Fat, brown sausages,
stuffed with spices,
bursting from their casings.
Steam escaping.

Bold, red
Chianti.
White, starched
Linen.
Chattering server.
Carmen and candles.
Roses and lilies.
Crisp romaine and anchovies.
Flavors billowing.

Roasted peppers.
Laughter and
tears sweet as kisses.
Garlic
tangy as love.

WHEN THE LAST EMBER FADES

JACOB HAAGEN JENSEN

As Daniel opened his eyes, he was greeted by a dark-lit room filled with cigarette butts and half-open trash bags. A knife lay bare in his quivering hand. He felt the chills fester through his body, from his aching neck to his frozen feet. His muscles began to tremor, his teeth chattering wildly. He looked at his phone. It had been about two hours now. He knew what would come next. This wasn't his first time dealing with withdrawal symptoms. . .yet the air in the room lingered with a certain dread, whispering that this time would be his last.

"Almost looks like your old room," his dad said, coming in from the kitchen, crashing next to Daniel. "Always a mess, no matter how hard we tried."

"Perhaps you never tried hard enough, Dad," Daniel murmured.

His dad sighed. "Perhaps not."

Daniel never cared for a clean room. He would do the dishes when he had run out, he would clean the place when he couldn't find what he was looking for, and the bathroom was a shitshow no matter who you visited.

"I still remember the first time I drove you to—"

"Please don't," Daniel interrupted.

"What?" His dad grinned. "Just trying to picture a different time."

Daniel couldn't picture a different time. Except for the first day at school, everything was a blur. He only remembered that he used to be happy. The sense of joy that sparked at every corner of the day. All occasions were those of celebration rather than gloom. When the misery became the default setting of his life, he couldn't remember. A single memory stood out as the first one, despite the fact that it probably wasn't.

"In pairs of two," Daniel said.

"Soccer practice?" his dad asked.

Daniel scoffed. “Here we call it football, Dad. You never got hold of that.”

“Old dog.” His dad smiled.

All right, everyone, let’s practice some returns. Pair up in twos. Daniel immediately looked to Sean, but he had paired up with Thomas. Then Chris? No, he was with Eddie. Noah? Mark? Tony? But no matter where he looked, another had been chosen instead of him. He became accustomed to the nagging feeling of being the outsider. The teacher made a joke about it. The kids took it differently. . .they looked at him differently from that day. From that day forward, he was the one without a partner to pair up with. A random event turning to rumor, turning to truth, spreading like wildfire until everyone at school knew he was the lonely freak.

“Every time,” Daniel said. “Every damn minute of the day, I was left outside alone. Pretending to seek solace in solitude when, in fact, I was suffering. . .and the only ones who ever noticed me were the bullies who needed an easy target. Who would ever come to aid the freak when the freak had no friends?”

“You are not a freak, Daniel,” his dad said. “Despite what those vile kids made you believe.”

“Their words mattered over yours,” Daniel said. “Yet you never got that either. Neither did Mom nor the teachers.”

Ever since that one time at football, Daniel had always been the odd one out. He had never understood why, but he had accepted it. It had been the only way to deal with it. Secondary school had been the same, but while the kids he had spectated his entire life had grown up and grown fond of each other in more intimate ways, he had been stuck in the ditch with no one willing to reach out to him. The curse of living in a small town was the inability to escape it.

“School never treated you well,” his dad said.

“Life never treated me well,” Daniel corrected. “Life never—”

Daniel began coughing violently, as if his lungs were about to explode upward and splatter onto the ceiling of his dark, dark room. He had to stand up just to get enough air into his lungs to keep coughing without

dying. At least that's what he felt like. As the coughing slowly died out, the tingling sensation in his back faded and he plummeted back into the couch too exhausted to breathe or recognize how the symptoms had gotten worse.

"Your cough could wake up the entire town." His dad laughed. "You and your mother always shared that."

"My house. . .my rules," Daniel wheezed aggressively. "I might be a freak. . .but I will not be compared to that witch."

"Hey, hey!" his dad raised a finger. "You're talking about my wife."

"And my mother!" Daniel exclaimed back right into his dad's face, his lungs now back in full force. "She had one job. One job! To love me regardless of how much of a freak I was. One job, Dad!"

His dad took a deep breath, nodding his head down in a sense of shame. His hands were folded, his posture relaxed. . .as if he was contemplating what to say next. Daniel already knew what he would say next.

"Your mom is brainwashed," his dad said. "She believes some crazy things."

"You know that's why you should never marry religious people," Daniel said. "If their sect calls upon you to do acts of immorality. . .you do them because somehow, in the grand context of the universe, it is apparently okay. Even if it makes no fucking sense."

His dad shrugged. "You love those you love."

"Tell that to Mom. . ."

His dad merely waved his hands up and down against his body. Daniel wasn't amused. It was sad, really. How could someone simply discard their kid when he needed you the most? When he realized his desires didn't fit the norm, he didn't know whom he could reach out to. His mom had always been to the more screwed-up side of religion, but up until then, she had always cared for him.

The kitchen was especially gloomy that day. It felt like an omen, but

it had taken months to build up his courage and his mind was set. Mom. . .I have something to tell you. And I am not sure you will like it, but. . .please do. I—I like. . .boys. Not girls. His mom hadn't even tried to understand him. At first, she had been pale as ice, shocked and paralyzed. As if she had seen the Devil himself. Perhaps, in her mind, she had. Then she dared utter the words that made him realize that in the eyes of his own mother, he was a freak.

No worries, my dear. Your issues are merely a test from God. You have to fight the urges to prove to both Him and I that you are blessed of heart and worthy of our love. Daniel had been confused at first. What do you even say to that sort of thing? He was fifteen at the time. He couldn't help that he thought the boys at school were cuter than the girls. Despite neither group giving two fucks about him.

"I believed her at first, you know," Daniel said. "When Mom told me I was being tested by God. And I didn't even believe in God."

"Parents have that power over their children," his dad said.

"Had it not been for you," Daniel said, looking at his dad, "I would probably have thought I was the one in the wrong and not Mom. Imagine that. . .imagine how fucked up that is, Dad."

"I tried, you know," his dad said. "With all my heart I tried. . .I even asked your mom to come to the parade once. Don't know if I ever told you."

Daniel frowned. "Obviously, you told me."

"Right." He laughed. "Of course."

That fucking Pride parade.

"A parade that celebrates my difference." Daniel scoffed. "How am I supposed to take pride in that difference if I do not want to celebrate it? I don't want it to be seen, I never even wanted to be different in the first place! I never wanted everyone around me to act like I was different!"

Daniel tossed the sofa table half across the room until it smashed into his stereo on the other side. His anger didn't subside, so he let out a scream that could be heard in the hallway and on the streets outside.

The scream lasted until his lungs were empty of air and he could do nothing but gasp for more, collapsing once again into the couch. Dotted black spots appeared before his eyes, and his muscles could barely hold his back anymore, so he felt a need to lie down flat on his back while flinging his shoes up on the beanbag at the end of his feet.

“You never got me,” Daniel said, burying his face in the joint of his elbow.

His dad sighed. “I’m. . .sorry, Daniel. With all my heart.”

The ineptitude of his father brought him back to the later years of his teenage life. His grades had told him he would never amount to anything, his mother had chosen to ignore him completely until the test had been completed, and the only pleasure he had in life was the pain inflicted upon him at the hours after bed when strangers would come and go, leaving nothing but scars, blood, and semen in their wake. One day, a look in the mirror had made him realize his freakiness was taking his body to new freakish heights. His sides were getting bigger. A quick step on the scale made him realize he wasn’t as slim as he wanted to be. I can do better than this, he remembered. I can prove to myself that I can do better than this.

“Do you even know what anorexia is?” Daniel asked, removing the arm from his head, looking straight at his old man.

“Of course I do,” his dad said. “I just. . .I don’t think I ever truly understood yours.”

Daniel once again buried his face in his elbow. “You didn’t.”

At first, it was working. The kilos drizzled off like sweat, and the hungry body was merely an asterisk. But the body can only handle so much before it cracks. His lips dried out, numb half the time, bleeding out the other. As his stomach shrank in between his ribs, so shrank his eyes into his skull. His legs would shudder with every move, his bones would rattle at every turn, and the layer of fat between skin and skeleton would thin every day until he was a walking corpse, fueled only by water and drugs.

“Mom thought it was punishment,” Daniel said. “For disobeying her. . .and God.”

His dad said nothing. There was nothing to say. His dad had tried what some dads try. Encouragement. Kind words. Weird diets. A psychologist who did nothing but make him even more aware about the fact that he was fucked.

“I—I cried.” His dad stuttered. “Every night.”

“I know,” Daniel said, pushing his chest up with his elbows so he could see where his dad was sitting. “Heard it every night while I was staring at the ceiling.”

“It is hard,” his dad said, looking into his eyes. “Seeing your child suffer. . .even more so when you can do nothing about it.”

“None of you understood,” Daniel said. “Only André did.”

Daniel closed his eyes. He was back in the circle. Surrounded by people who, just like him, had succumbed to a life where even the prospect of eating was considered rancid. Everyone around him looked old and alien. Their life force had been sucked out by their sickness. Among them was one young man: André. His smile could make Daniel laugh even among the most dreadful of days. Despite his deprived state, he shone above the rest. Together, they clawed their way out of the spiral that had merged their paths.

“It was never about being slim or beautiful,” Daniel said. “It was about being in control. Everything in my life has always been out of my power to change. . .but this one thing. . .this one thing I could control. I could see the results! The hunger felt good because it confirmed that I was in charge. My body, my rules. That it could end up ultimately killing me. . .that was simply the price tag for control.”

“Some people paid that price,” his dad said lowly.

André. For a brief moment in his dim life, Daniel was happy. André was his light. For the first time, he was not merely discarded after use. For the first time, he had someone to talk to in the night. For the first time. . .he felt as if he belonged somewhere—with someone. Yet André never truly recovered, and one day, his heart just couldn’t take it anymore. His first. . .and probably last heartbreak. Just like that, Daniel had lost control again and the hunger came creeping back into his life.

“You haven’t eaten today,” his dad said.

“Three days,” Daniel corrected. His hunger was overshadowed by the intense pain he was in, but he was too exhausted to even give it a thought. In his state, he could feel how he was slowly slipping into something he might not awaken from.

“Do not follow in the footsteps of André,” his dad begged. “He wouldn’t want that.”

“Nobody wanted anything to do with me before André,” Daniel said. “I was just the next dump for a load. It made me feel. . .wanted. . .for a time at least. Until whoever came would close the door after he was done and leave me alone in the dark. André was the exception in a sea of uniformity. Realistically. . .I will never find someone like him again.”

The pain in his neck was so intense now, he could barely move it. His head ached just by thinking. His thoughts darkened. The knife in his hand suddenly made him aware that leaving this stage for the next wouldn’t be so bad. . .even if what came afterward was mere emptiness. No more pain. No more hunger.

Daniel groaned. “I. . .I cannot remember what it feels like. To feel pleasure. Not even in the smallest things. The sound of pouring rain, the smell of freshly brewed coffee. . .the feel of joy. Those feelings are all foreign to me now, no matter how hard I try. Tell me, Dad. . .what is life worth living without those things?”

“Nothing, I reckon,” his dad said, his hands still folded. “Which is why you must regain them, Daniel.”

“I’ve tried, Dad!” Daniel yelled. The apartment trembled in the echo of his voice. “I’ve tried and tried. . .and I can’t do it anymore, I just can’t. It’s over now.”

“Why?” his dad asked.

“Why? You know why!” Daniel rose to his feet and jolted the knife into his dad’s stomach. Yet it had hit nothing. There was no one there except a living shadow of a memory Daniel had held onto ever since the funeral. A shadow which had now manifested itself as a ghost fueled by his addiction withdrawals.

Daniel cried, collapsing back on the couch. “Y-you left me.”

“It was hardly by choice,” his dad said. “Cancer is. . .well, you were there. After all, I am just a figment of your imagination. My life was cut short. . .but it was my time nonetheless.”

“Don’t you see it?” Daniel asked, a tear rolling down his chin. “You kept my time at bay. You were the only one who ever cared about me. The only one who gave a shit when my life turned on me. Of course you didn’t understand. You never did. But you sure as hell gave it your best shot. Even if you failed, you did what you could. I saw that, Dad. It’s what kept me going. . .because I knew how sad you would be if I left you too soon. You were the pillar that held up this broken house that is my life. Without you. . .the whole thing will just come crumbling down. . .”

Daniel looked down at his knife. Teardrops rolled down his chins. “There’s nothing to live for anymore. The last ember has faded.”

He could feel a comforting hand on his shoulder. He knew it was his brain playing tricks, but it felt so real. Daniel wanted to take it, squeeze it, and hold it tight and never let go, but the hand faded as soon as he had been made aware.

“I wish. . .I wish you could be here.” Daniel sobbed. “I—I need you.”

“No,” his dad said, shaking his head. He was back in the couch on the other end. “Life has treated you like garbage, but you kept fighting. When school taught you that you were nothing, you kept going. When your mind fought your body, you overcame it. When love taught you that you would never find it. . .you found it! My death. . .is just another obstacle to overcome. A. . .test, if you will.”

Daniel laughed half-heartedly. “You’re dead. You are not allowed to make jokes.”

“I am not dead,” his dad said. “I am you. You are alive and just like your dad, I plan to keep you alive and help you fight through this.”

“Nobody wants me alive,” Daniel said. “Not even myself.”

“Mom is—”

“Mom doesn’t give two shits about me!” Daniel exclaimed, getting up from the couch, now threatening his imaginary father with the knife in his hand. His legs could barely handle him standing, and his stretched-out arm rattled from the tremors in his body.

“Look at my walls, Dad,” Daniel said, pointing at the empty gray walls with his knife.

“I know what is on your walls,” his dad said calmly.

“Look at them!” Daniel yelled. “There is nothing there! No family, no friends. You know why? Because I have never had either of them!”

“You lie to yourself,” his dad said. “The walls are empty because you never had a second to breathe in your life and get those pictures up on the walls. Think, Daniel. Think hard! There are people in this life who want you alive. All you need to do is seek them out!”

The words turned to tunes that played on the strings in his mind. It made something vibrate inside of him. His dad. Daniel took to his heart, then his head. He never expected to come out of this day alive, yet now some part of him wanted to make it through the night. Yet he was so far gone, he knew there would be no way he could get back. The point of no return had already been crossed. The dwindling inner light was fading. . .with very little spirit to keep it lit.

“I can’t. . .” Daniel cried. “I don’t. . .I don’t know how.”

His dad got up from the couch and placed himself right next to him. There was no smell nor scent. . .nothing to suggest he was actually there. Yet, somehow, he felt as alive as he could ever be to him. His arms were around him in a warm hug that braced through the hunger and pain. Daniel wrapped his arms around his old man, and for a second, he could feel a sense of warmth in his core. Something so foreign, no words could capture it. His eyes began to water again, and he squeezed him tighter. Then his father let go of him and the coldness returned.

“You know what to do,” his dad said, nodding at the phone. “You know the number.”

“Please. . .” Daniel sobbed. “Please don’t leave me here.”

“Never.” His dad smiled, patting at his heart. “I’ll always be here.”

Daniel chuckled. “That’s horseshit, Dad.”

“Perhaps.” His dad smiled before slowly vanishing into the air, his last words lingering in the air like a ghostly echo. “But you know what I mean.”

His room was now empty. The lingering presence gone. To his surprise, his phone was in his left hand, while the knife was still clutched tight in his right.

“Fuck it,” Daniel said, wiping the tears off with the blade. Meanwhile, he dotted in the number he had kept in the back of his mind for as long as he could remember yet had never actually called.

Eight-four-five-seven-nine-zero-nine-zero-nine-zero. A few seconds passed until a female voice answered on the other end.

“He-hello.” Daniel stuttered. “M-my name is D-Daniel and I-I—”

As his voice broke, so did his spirit. He dropped the phone and tears streamed down his cheeks uncontrollably, his sobbing drowning the words he was so desperately trying to speak. The voice on the other end desperately tried to reach him, but her voice merged itself with the background clutter of his existence. The world became darker, his vision blurred, and his other hand started turning the knife toward his stomach. Until suddenly, a hand on his shoulder dragged him out of the trance and into the room. Daniel looked around but saw nobody there.

“Dad?”

Nobody answered. Daniel looked at the phone, the call still active. He nodded to himself and picked up the phone. With a shivering voice, he managed to muster out the word.

“Help. . .”

Volume 79

MORI

J.C. HAWLEY

The dead live
more delicate,
And
lately it is
fashionable.

IN THE WAKE
JULIA CHIAPPELLA

I've gone fallow. My ears ring.
There's a rush of rubber across
road. Cars drive by. My eyes
pick up drivers, dog walkers,
last lane of sun edging eaves.
Something whirs in my head.
No bang. Only a whimper.
I watched my mother die
this year. I am not merely
strung out. Could she be
missed? She trod heavily.
Goodbye, Sweetheart, her
honeyed words, never mind
the in-between. I flip on
the porch light, wait
for the buzz to stop.

WILTED
TRENTON CROOKSHANKS



Volume 79

BREATHING FIRE
TRENTON CROOKSHANKS



PINKY

MIKE MATTHEWS

Maybe I'm just an old dog,
like Pinky,
too old to learn new tricks,
but when it involves words,
my ears perk up.

Some words make my tail
wag with delight.
Others make my mouth
drool in ravenous
anticipation of how
an author is playing with words,
like a chew toy during a game of fetch.

The word is thrown out on a page,
and not long after readers
sink their teeth into it,
the author pulls it back,
and throws it again.
Sometimes, in the same place,
with the same meaning.

Sometimes,
they throw it in a different direction,
just to keep us dogs on alert.
Then, there are those
(and I trust you have seen this happen before)
who tease us,
by pretending to throw it,
—even perhaps laughing,
as they watch us prance
around the dog park,
sniffing hither and thither.

I'M NOT YOUR MARY SUE

EMILY PRIDDY

Tags: Crossover, 1990s, AU, OC, OFC, Het, Pining, RPF, Whump, Happy Ending

Warnings: Squick, Awkwardness, Major Character Death; mentions of Non-Con, Underage

A/N: Unbetaed. All mistakes are my own

Disclaimer: I don't own any of these fandoms; I'm just playing in the sandbox!

Captain's Log, stardate -304928.9944824961:

The conflict began with a pacifist.

I'd mentioned on Facebook that I planned to boycott an upcoming Peter Dinklage concert after learning that the grandfatherly little folksinger with the soothing voice had done prison time for taking "improper liberties" with a 14-year-old girl in 1970.

My then-friend (we'll call him "Andy"), who is a world-class star-fucker, took great exception to this.

Andy used to do celebrity interviews for a little alt-weekly newspaper. Apparently, he had interviewed Dinklage at some point and found him charming and gracious. As everyone knows, sex offenders are incapable of being charming and gracious. They definitely don't know how to lie with a straight face, and the Official Predatory Asshole Code of Ethics™ would never allow them to treat a grown man with a press pass differently than they treat their underage victims.

The Naïve is strong with this one.

As Dinklage's self-appointed defender, Andy treated me to a litany of gaslighting classics: He served his sentence, it was decades ago, times were different, he's done a lot of humanitarian work, you supported him for years before you knew about this so what difference does it make now?, Jesus forgave him so why won't you?, etc., etc., ad nauseam.

I reminded Andy that I teach, and I wasn't about to take money I'd earned in the classroom and put it in the pocket of a man who'd molested a girl the same age as my students.

That last bit was key; my mama-bear streak is the stuff of legend.

“I don’t give a damn about your students,” Andy said.

“You are dead to me,” I shot back, and meant it.

* * * * * **FLASHBACK* * * * *

Captain’s Log, stardate -327371.0036149164:

A long time ago, at a university far, far away, Andy convinced himself he was in love with me— or, more accurately, with an original character he’d created based on my name and general appearance. Every time I saw him, he’d shower me with more or less flattering adjectives that bore zero resemblance to me. Beautiful. Classy. Ladylike. Endearingly vulnerable. Everything I proudly wasn’t. I began to suspect he’d seen my face, written some fanfiction about it, and then conflated me with the Mary Sue he’d created in his mind.

It was awkward, and I was never quite sure how to respond—especially when he followed his incongruous compliments with remarks about how unattractive he was. Back then, that looked like insecurity. Now, I recognize it as manipulation: The more self-deprecating you are, the more fragile people will think you are, and the more they’ll coddle you.

Despite the awkwardness, I tolerated his presence, and he fawned over the beautiful, classy Mary Sue he’d built around my face. I’m not sure that constitutes friendship, but I guess it was a reasonable facsimile; I got a reliable designated driver, and Andy got an imaginary friend with a corporeal presence. Close enough.

At one point, Andy went so far as to write literal fanfic in the form of a play about a character he’d supposedly based on me. I saw the play once. The protagonist is a battered wife who dies in a bus accident while fleeing her abuser. I’ve been happily married for 21 years to a good man who understands that if he ever raises a hand to me, the only accident will be the one I arrange for him. Not sure how Andy thought he could reconcile those discrepancies, but I get that AUs are tricky, and it’s easy to slip OOC; just ask all the Hogwarts professors who have inadvertently Apparated onto the TARDIS or Jedi masters who have stumbled into Regency romances over the years.

* * * * * *TIME SKIP* * * * *

Captain's Log, stardate -305089.3826103502:

About 20 years into our strange little symbiotic relationship, Andy picked up this weird habit of stanning for celebrities accused of sexual misconduct—whereupon he discovered that I was not a fictional character he could control, but a living, breathing, thinking woman whose views did not conform to his headcanon.

* * * * * *TIME SKIP* * * * *

Captain's Log, stardate -304928.9944824961:

When I said I was skipping the Peter Dinklage concert, Andy accused me of hypocrisy and asserted that if Hillary Clinton or Dianne Feinstein had pulled a similar stunt, I'd tie myself in knots to defend her. (Yeah, I don't know what they have to do with any of this, either. The analogy probably works better if you're drunk.)

When I pressed Andy on whether he honestly believed I'd give somebody a pass just because I agreed with her politics, he doubled down:

“i (sic) do believe that about you. . . I think your politics ranks (sic) above all, because I DO know you.”

And that, dear reader, was the moment it clicked: Andy does NOT know me. He has NEVER known me. He knows a fictional character he created with my name. When he finally came face-to-face with the reality that I am not that character, he said the first thing he could think of to alienate me, thus obviating the necessity of reconciling the fictional Emily, in all her ladylike vulnerability, with the real-life Mama Bear fiercely protecting her cubs.

I didn't appreciate being manipulated into playing the bad guy. But I don't need anyone in my life who prefers a fictional version of me to reality, and if Andy insists on dreaming up ridiculous fanfic about me—well, let's just say that I am much more comfortable as a villain than as a Mary-Sue.

HEADED NORTH

MARY WARREN FOULK

Once I dared a happiness.
He was from Worcester,
far from the Mason-Dixon,
dark-haired, like factory soot,
with shy dimples. He smoked
Marlboros and enjoyed dancing
between couches in our friends'
dimly lit basements. We moved so
well together, a fluid match I see
even now in the creased
photographs. Our frozen smiles,
how we laughed, and the way
I looked up at him as if at a silver
moon, a newly discovered star.

Despite his mother's small diamond
and an earnest promise,
Father denied the marriage.
Mother whispered sternly—
"Geese fly North. You don't."
These words, the broken
refrain I hear myself repeating
to my own daughter
as she describes her new
girlfriend from Toronto, the one
with auburn hair and curious eyes,
how they blaze through urban
hum, hand in hand, defiant
parade of happiness,
a dared rebuke.

IN HIS FINAL DAYS

CAROLINE MAUN

My father tried to show me
how to pay the bills, the ledger
a private document between my
parents until then. They had each
made a record of every check,
every deposit, of their marriage.

The dorm's pay phone at the end
of the hallway rang, my name
called. He said, I want to change
my will. I saw for a moment
what the world would be
without him in it.

No. I'll live with my mother
the rest of her life, I said.

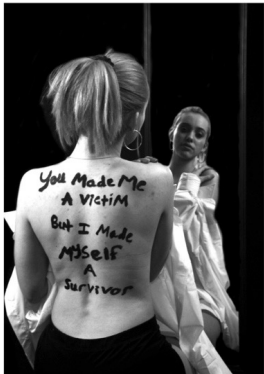
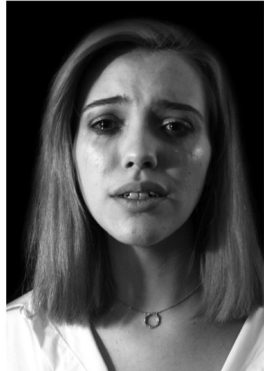
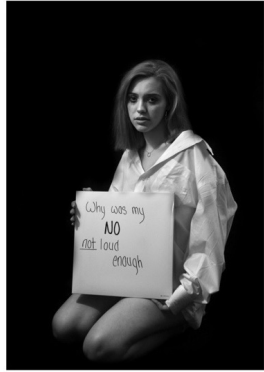
Before he went back to the hospital
for good, for that brief while,
he brought a pistol to bed with him.
She told me she woke with it
pressing her ribcage.

I saw him the morning before he died
in the hospital, with my mother nearby.
They were controlling the pain.
He had something to say to me,
but my mother quieted him.

A SURVIVOR'S JOURNEY

IRENE MARTINEZ

Disclaimer: The model is depicting instances of sexual assault and trauma, and there is no direct correlation between the model and the events being depicted. It is a dramatization of traumatic events, and the photographs are meant to shed light on the occurrence of sexual assault on college campuses and is not personally related to the model or photographer.



THEY WENT SEARCHING

ROCHELLE JEWEL SHAPIRO

in stairwells, toilet stalls, storage closets,
in every bed, then past the maternity ward
to rooms of post-op men, even the cancer ward.
The woman in the bed next to my mother's had disappeared.

"Didn't you see Mrs. Maxwell leave?" the nurse demanded.

"I was trying to get some sleep, for crying out loud,"
my mother said. "I have to go home to two other girls
and a husband who only wanted a son."

"What kind of woman would run off
and leave her baby?" the nurse grumbled.

As I suckled from my mother's cracked nipple,
I heard her whisper,
"Run, Mrs. Maxwell, run."

WINGED WORDS

BETSY MARTIN

They had a landline freshman year
for the group of four young women
from *good families*.

If someone got a call while out,
you'd scrawl the gist on a post-it
and stick it on her door.

So she did,
and the messages she wrote
were embedded with passion:

your *fuck* mother called!
your sister, *shit*, wants to know if you got the chocolate *crap*
your photos are ready *piss*
prick cunt Sam wants to have dinner

the winged words exploding
like bats from their cave
in the hundreds of thousands
and swooping about,
masters of midnight.

A revolt against the patriarchy,
breaking the chains
of ladylike behavior.

On behalf of herself,
on behalf of her mother
and centuries of grandmothers.

Volume 79

**UNA FLOR HASTA EL CIELO, PARA MI
ABUELITO RAMÓN**
CARLA RUIZ



BOTTOM OF THE MINE

ANDREW HUGHES

Little Jimmy Haggie stumbled out of the mouth of the Lancaster Mine. Clouds of dirt rose as his weathered boots smacked the earth. A black duffle bag bounced precariously on his back. He came to a halt, panicked and exhausted. The white van was not on the outskirts of the fence.

“No,” he muttered. “Don’t leave me.”

Footsteps sounded behind him and he slipped into the shadows of the ancient mining equipment. The duffle bag on his back rustled as he slammed against the metal of an industrial loader. He held his breath and withdrew into himself. The steps grew closer, no more than ten feet. Jimmy stopped his inhalations.

“I know you’re out there,” said a gruff voice.

Jimmy felt like whimpering.

“I’m going to find you. What you stole belongs to my employer. It is very valuable.”

In silence, Jimmy reached into his right boot. He’d dropped his primary piece inside, when the man first fired, but he still had his backup, a seven shot nine-millimeter. Suddenly, a phone rang.

The mysterious man answered it. “Hello?”

Jimmy held his breath and strained his ear.

“No,” said the man. “Mr. Windstrom, there is nothing for you to worry about. I’m handling this right now.”

There was another pause and Jimmy pulled back the pistol’s slide, easing a round into the chamber. With one hand holding the strap above his head, Jimmy slipped out of the duffle bag’s embrace.

“Sir, I’m telling you. . . Please sir, hear me out.”

Boots shuffled and Jimmy grinned. The man was getting scolded. He

was flustered, off guard. Maybe, even facing the other way. Jimmy tip-toed alongside the industrial loader and rounded the cab. Around the corner and he'd have the fucker's back. The man was distracted, begging for his employer's forgiveness.

Smiling, Jimmy took the corner, and fired. The first shot went wide, ricocheting off the loader, and spinning into the dust. The next two hit true.

"Don't you move!" Jimmy squinted through the night. There was something in the dirt, something black and deflated. He took two steps forward and stopped dead, recognizing the shape. It was the bundle of the man's jacket.

"Hello there," said the man's voice.

Jimmy spun but didn't make it. Two shots struck him in the side and blew through his chest. Little Jimmy Haggie died gasping.

The man stepped forward, ejecting the two spent shells from his Colt .44.

"That makes three," he said, spitting into the dirt. His phone was back in his pocket. If he had service out here, he might have called Alexander Windstrom, but whatever reception he had was nonexistent by the mine. The man picked up his jacket and Jimmy's fallen pistol then retrieved the duffle bag.

* * *

A mile down the road, Mark Watson watched the entire exchange through a pair of Svenson night vision binoculars. When Jimmy had fallen and the package had been retrieved, he lowered the goggles and shook his head. He didn't like sending men to their death, even if it was the plan. When the man disappeared back inside the mine, Mark started the van and pulled off. As he drove, he thought about the current predicament.

It had started four months ago when production mogul Hamond Davis approached him at a gala meet and greet. The guests were there for drinks and frivolity, Mark was there for wallets and watches, and Davis was there for him. Davis had handed him two hundred dollars and a note that requested his appearance in the upstairs bathroom. Curious, Mark had attended.

“I know all about you,” Davis said, penny loafers dangling off the marble countertop, black shirt unbuttoned, revealing a tuft of red chest hair. “So, before you go denying it, would you like a list of your deeds? The Gillago in Burbank, the Stratosphere in Las Vegas, the Odyssey in Tampa. For fuck’s sake man you’re like Danny Ocean.”

Mark denied it and pulled open the door.

“Wait, wait wait, hold on just a second. Hear me out.” The producer walked towards him. “You’re not Mark Watson the crusader, I know, I know. Here me out anyways though? I gave you two hundred dollars, guess what, here’s a thousand. Fuck it, here’s two.” He stuffed the bundle into Mark’s hands.

Mark nodded and pocketed them.

“Now.” Davis took a sip of his sink side Martini. “What do you know about film reel?”

Mark shrugged.

“I didn’t think you’d know much. Well, the ideal place to store film, due to temperature and humidity reasons is in a cave. A mine preferably, in a locked box.” Davis smiled. “America knows me, you know me, I’m a bit of a collector. Every great film known to man has a place in my vault. From Gone With the Wind to Leaving Las Vegas to The Avengers.” He took another drink. “I quite like the new superhero flicks. Lots of classic swagger and flare. But you know what my favorite movie is?”

Mark shook his head.

“The fucking Godfather. Good Jesus, it’s brilliant. The pinnacle achievement of filmmaking. Our industry’s Sistine Chapel. And you know what? The original cut has an extra two hours of footage. Two hours!” Davis clapped his hands. “And even better, I know where it’s going to be.”

It took four additional meetings and seven more bundles of loose bills, but Mark was in. Now, as he drove through the Arizona desert, he wished he’d never set foot in that bathroom.

He took out his phone and called Davis.

“Hello?” Davis sounded flustered.

“It’s me.”

“Well, how’d it go? Spit it out.”

Mark sighed. “It went exactly how we thought it would. Windstrom’s man, this Calhoun, he’s good. Picked them all off.”

“That’s bloody brilliant. I’ll go ahead and make the call.”

“No,” said Mark. “Don’t.”

“What?” Davis sounded dejected. “Why not?”

Mark rubbed his face. “Because something’s up. While Jimmy and the gang were in the mine, I put a transponder in the cabin. I want you to use the portable. Extension 347.”

“What do you mean something’s up? What’s up?”

“Just do it.”

“Okay,” said Davis.

Mark hung up the phone.

* * *

When he arrived back at Davis’s RV, the producer was pacing nervously, a radio headset pressed to his ear and a yellow legal pad in hand. The driver, George Deluco, was laying back on the leather couch.

“About time you got here,” Davis said. “This isn’t good.”

Mark walked to the kitchen and poured a glass of water. “What happened?”

“It’s Windstrom. He’s not doing what we wanted, he’s not tossing the bodies like you said. Instead, he’s sending a fixer named Sal Neeson and if anybody else shows up Calhoun’s supposed to destroy the bloody film.”

The filtered water tasted unnatural, like chemicals and chime. Mark

dumped the rest down the sink. “Neeson, huh?”

Davis nodded.

“Well, then you’re right, we can’t call the cops.”

Davis shook his head.

“Did it sound like Calhoun knows Neeson?”

Davis shook his head. “I don’t think so.”

Mark rubbed his eyes. It could work.

* * *

Two hours later, a red Corvette glided down the mountain highway, a stone-faced man at the wheel. He was dressed in a black suit and listening to AC/DC’s “Thunderstruck.” His high beams cut through the night like a fog light on the ocean, and he was smelling the dry desert air when he noticed the gyrating shape in the road a mile away. He slowed to a halt and retrieved the night vision goggles from his glove compartment.

He lowered them and squinted. In the center of the road, there was a little red-haired man doing jumping jacks in the nude.

“What in the fuck?”

“Hey there, Neeson.”

Neeson spun but not quick enough to avoid the dart now protruding from his neck. A moment of struggle and he collapsed against the steering wheel.

* * *

Twenty minutes later the red Corvette was parked behind the RV. Mark adjusted the cuffs on his new black suit.

“That was really liberating.” Davis zipped his slacks. “I might have to do naked calisthenics more often.”

“I’m sure you will,” said Mark.

Five minutes later, his hair was combed and his face was shaved. A .45 caliber Kimber was tucked in his side holster. The unconscious Neeson

lay bound and gagged in the back bedroom.

“You’ll meet me back here in an hour?” Davis asked.

Mark opened the door to the Corvette. “Yes, as I told you before.”

“Okay. Good luck.” Davis turned away then looked back. “Real quick, I heard a story. Did you really steal Kevin Spacey’s wallet outside the Oscar’s three years ago?”

“It was Kevin Hart’s,” Mark said. “I couldn’t resist”

He shut the door and drove away.

* * *

Ten minutes later, he arrived outside the front gate that now hung open. Calhoun stood with his back against the industrial loader spinning the chamber of his revolver. As Mark drove through, he holstered the weapon and walked to the car.

“Hello there.” His voice was sweet southern honey. “You’re Neeson?”

“Expecting anyone else?” Mark said. He got out and walked towards the mouth of the mine. Calhoun fell in behind him and introduced himself. “Yeah, I’ve heard about you. Windstrom’s night manager on pet project.”

“Little more than a pet project,” said Calhoun. “And I’m here daily as well.”

“Regardless. Show me where I’m looking.”

They descended into the mine three hundred yards before arriving at a large well-lit room. There was a pile of bodies in the center, bloody and pale.

“Three of them?”

“Yessir.”

Mark grunted. “Okay. Where’s the Carbonic?”

“Right this way.”

Calhoun pointed him towards a long metal table in the corner of the

room abreast three oil drums. A line of chemicals sat on the tabletop and on the floor was the black duffle bag.

“That what they were trying to steal?”

“Yessir.”

Mark stepped to the table and lifted up one of the bottles. “Isn’t it supposed to be in special quarantine?”

“It is.” Calhoun leaned against the wall between Mark and the bag. “But I was instructed not to let it out of my sight until you ship out of here with it.”

Mark moved to the oil drum and donned a pair of thick yellow gloves. “A very cautious man, our employer.”

“That he is.” Calhoun smiled. “Which is why he hired me.”

“I see that. Well, let’s get started with it. Is there a room that isn’t frequently used?”

Calhoun smirked. “Pick one.”

“Just show me. I want to sleep in my bed tonight.”

Calhoun went to pick up the bag and Mark scoffed.

“You think I’m going to carry the bodies myself? Find a dolly.”

“Sure thing, mind stepping out with me?”

Mark checked the lividity on Jimmy’s back. “Why? I’m taking the movie anyways.”

“Sure.” Calhoun smiled. “But humor me.”

They left the room and went up the steps to the loading bay where they found a dolly to hoist the oil drum. Over the next hour, they broke down the bodies.

* * *

Calhoun wiped sweat from his brow. “So, what happens next?”

“What happens next? You dump these in the bottom of this mine. After about twelve hours of decay there’ll be no human matter left.”

“That’s mighty agreeable.”

“Sure.”

Mark crossed the room, picked up the duffle bag, and slung it over his shoulder.

“I appreciate all your help,” Calhoun said. His hand went to his holster and he withdrew the Colt .44.

“What the hell are you doing?”

“I can’t let you have that.” Calhoun pointed the revolver at Mark’s chest and cocked the hammer.

“Stop messing around.” Mark took a step towards the door. “It’s a very long drive.”

“No.” Calhoun smiled. “I don’t believe I can. You see, I’ve known Mr. Neeson for the better part of a decade. We’ve worked together many times.”

Mark’s hands began to sweat.

“What are you talking about? I’m Salvador Neeson, and I’m leaving.”

Calhoun fired. The bullet cracked into the stonework behind Mark’s head.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Mark shouted, hands claspings his ears.

“Please drop the bag, sir. I won’t ask again.”

Mark lowered the bag and took two steps back.

“And your gun.”

Mark withdrew the Kimber and placed it on the ground.

“Now we’re at a bit of an impasse, you see. There’s you to dispose of,

Neeson to find, and this bag here to get to Windstrom all in one night. What do you think about that?" Calhoun crossed the floor and picked up the bag.

"Why didn't you shoot me on sight?"

Calhoun smirked. "Do I look like I know anything breaking down about bodies? Shit no. That's not how I learned. I'm more corpse in a slurry pond kinda guy."

"Okay," said Mark. "So, what now?"

"Now I've gotta get your corpse in a barrel. But first, you're going to tell me where I can find Mr. Neeson."

"And if I don't?"

"I think Mr. Windstrom will find Neeson an acceptable loss. But I don't much like the idea of it. You see, I don't like sacrificing the men I work with."

"Well, how about this," said Mark. "Let's trade, my life for Neeson. You keep the bag but I walk?"

Calhoun scratched his chin. "I could be convinced."

"C'mon. Do it like this and you go back to Windstrom a hero. I bet he hires you to hunt me down."

"I think you're right." Calhoun motioned to the door with his gun. "After you."

Mark drove through the night with Calhoun's revolver pressed to his temple. He stopped two hundred yards from the RV. The driver, George met them outside. He held a rifle.

"What's this shit?"

"Can it." Mark stepped out with his hands raised. "Just go get Neeson."

The exchange didn't take long. Neeson was led out in a pair of Mark's sweats. When they passed each other, Mark asked if they wanted to switch clothes. The fixer spat in his face and took the keys from

Calhoun.

“Pleasure doing business with y’all,” Calhoun said, flashing his winner’s smile. He got into the passenger’s seat, and they gunned it up the hill.

The door to the RV opened and Davis stepped out. “Are they gone?”

“Yes. Did you get it?”

“Hopped out of that trunk as soon as you guys went into the mine,” said George. He motioned into the RV where a black duffle bag lay on the couch. “Swapped it with the blank reel before you got back from the first body. Mr. Davis picked me up ten minutes later.”

“Good man.”

“What the hell are you guys waiting for?” Davis exclaimed. “There’s work to be done! Planes to catch, a movie to watch!”

Mark turned away from the Corvette’s fading taillights and got into the RV.

GLASS JAIL CELL/SKELETON OF SALT

JOHN MAURER

The chains on your wrists
and ankles aren't there
Your artistic restraints
only exist in your mind

Depression is the opposite;
the chains are there
but no one else can see them
No one else can ever feel their weight

Took enough valium to kill a baby elephant
and I shoot myself in both legs
then take a walk down the street sobbing
Not a soul can see me, or choose not to

Took enough lithium that last time I split my skin
I bled salt, it rubs itself into the wound automatically
Every injury to self is an insult to self
but what will kill you

That's guilt, that's the inescapability
of where you've been that will prevent you
from ever getting to where you could

PORTRAIT OF MY ARTIST

PETER OBOURN

“[He was like] a gifted pianist who habitually forgets in the middle of performing a canonical sonata that he has not composed it himself.”

—Art critic Robert Stone, quoted by Peter Schjeldahl,
New Yorker, 2009

As most everyone knows, Argyle Vetna is one of the great abstract impressionists of the first half of the twentieth century. Second tier, perhaps, but justly famous.

I was his first lover, nineteen years old. I’m not sure how old he was, probably at least ten years older. There was no seduction. I guess you would say it was chemistry. I loved him. I believe he loved me.

My father was an instructor at the Farnsworth Sawyer School of Design. Argyle was his favorite student, on scholarship, a poor Russian immigrant, but of intellectual bloodline. Argyle spent a lot of time at our home. He and my father worked over our garage in my father’s studio. He’d stay for dinner. My mother said it was the only decent food he had, which wasn’t true, but he played the starving artist role convincingly. I was studying the liberal arts at the community college and, being the daughter of a painter, I painted. I was encouraged to join the two of them in the studio and to create my own art. I was a terrible artist, but I loved art. I was also a writer, and at least then I thought a good writer, and I worked hard at it.

The year was 1921. Argyle was a Russian émigré fleeing the revolution, descended, as he said, from the famous eighteenth-century Russian writer Maxim Vetna.

He told us he lived in a single room. I asked Argyle if I could see it. We both knew better than to tell my father about my visit. Argyle actually had a very attractive three-room loft apartment with a skylight. We ended up in his bed—on the second visit, not the first.

We bought sausage and cheese and wine from the deli and lay in his bed to eat and drink and make love. He rose up on his elbow and popped a chocolate in my mouth. “I am thinking of Cazzim, our confectioner, who made us sweets almost as sweet as your lips.”

He kissed my nose.

He traced his finger along my collarbone. “The painter goes directly to the emotion through the eye,” he said with his thick accent, “without language, without words, using only one tool, light. Painting speaks the universal language. Light awakens the senses. With our eye, we feel the flesh is warm,” he spoke as he stroked my body under the duvet, “the fabric soft, or smooth. The sky real. We see it. We see the truth in a painting. That is what I shall do. Paint truth.”

When we made love, he did not say, “You are beautiful.” He said, “You are beauty.”

“What is painting?” he said. “Line and form and color made by brushing some colored paste on a flat surface? No. It is not that. A painting is light. Light and nothing else. And most of the light is wasted, absorbed by the paint. We see only the little bit that is reflected. So painting is a mirror of light.”

He talked a lot and I listened. He said all this to me before he had painted anything worthwhile, so at the time he said it, it was nonsense. But then, he did it. It took years, but he did it.

“Am I a realist, an impressionist, an abstract expressionist, a surrealist, a pointillist? Yes, I am all of those. I am none of those. Those are meaningless words. I am a painter and I paint the truth. That’s what I am going to do.

“How am I going to paint truth? Am I going to paint a landscape or a portrait or a still life? No, none of those. I paint emotion. I paint feeling. Do I paint with my hand holding a brush dipped in paint? No. Do I paint with an idea? No. I paint with pure emotion, pure feeling, pure truth, and that equals beauty.”

Even at nineteen with stars in my eyes, I had heard about enough. I had watched him copy Picasso, brushstroke by brushstroke. “No, Argyle,” I said, as I ran my fingers through the crinkly hair on his chest, “you don’t paint with pure emotion. Look at that pile of books on your windowsill—Picasso, Matisse, Cezanne. I watch you. You copy them.”

He took my hand in his and kissed the tips of my fingers. “Maybe a little, for now,” he said softly. “I do not know as yet who I can be. Picasso?”

Sure, I can be him. I study the masters. When I paint, I channel them through myself, and I create true art. You can say I copy. I don't copy. I steal. I steal Picasso's essence. First, I steal. Then I create. I stand on his shoulders. All artists do that. How else do you learn?"

He had painted a portrait of his parents. "I paint them from memory," he said. "There are no photographs. My memory is hazy. I was so young." His mother is seated. His father is standing with his hand on her shoulder—a soft, gentle, but strong hand. It's somewhat an impressionist work. The hand is primitive. But this hand draws the viewer's attention. "Look at this piece of shit," he said. "It is terrible. I cannot paint the love and the caring."

But he had painted it. I could see it, feel it. In the painting, his parents come alive—alive and sad. The sadness is disturbing. "Look at this hand," he said. "I cannot draw a hand—to me, impossible. I cannot make the hand come to life. In the future, I will draw a circle with five sticks coming out. This hand is not alive."

He changed the way I look at everything. He even changed the way I think about life. "Don't think," he said. "Feel." Who are we? Who am I? He made me realize that we are not ruled by judgment or by the mind. We are ruled by our emotions. We are emotion.

He made my writing work. I gave him one of my stories to read and asked, "Well, what do you think?"

He read it. "So," he said, "your character, this young man, has a long talk with his wise old aunt about how a woman he loves is cheating on him and has stolen some money from him, not a lot, but some, and he and his aunt reason it out and make a wise decision that he must leave her, and he does it beautifully and kindly. A sad ending. It's a nice story. He's a nice boy."

"So, you like the story," I said.

"No," he shouted, and the air was filled with my precious pages as he hurled them across the room. "The story is crap. No one in love would do that. He would kill her. At least he would go wild."

"So, you're saying the aunt is wrong."

“No, you fool, the aunt is fine. She can see the situation. The boy cannot. He cannot. Look at us, you and me. I am ten years your senior, an older man from a foreign country with no money. What are you doing with me in my bed? What am I doing with you? You are a young girl. You don’t know what your future is. You have ten years to catch up with me, and in ten years I will be famous. How can I get famous and still keep you? You have led a protected life. You know your parents will not approve. I have struggled, just to survive, just to be alive. You have never struggled. What has brought us together? It is not our minds, our reason.”

The next morning, when he was at my father’s studio, I went alone to the loft. I sat on the bed where we made love. I noticed the portrait of his parents, a half-inch thin board leaning against the wall in the corner. I looked at it again and thought. It was not even on canvas. Argyle could not afford canvas, so it was on board, not even wood—just paint on a thin piece of Masonite. His father’s hand was crudely rendered. I had to admit, to be honest, Argyle was not good at hands, not yet.

Then I looked at the image of the man and woman with my eye, without analysis. Now I could see the strong hand and the love and the sadness and the desperation of these old lovers, parents, lost, hopeless, real—and I wept at the harsh beauty he had created.

I knew so little about this beautiful genius I had fallen in love with, only what he had told me. His parents were intellectuals, aristocrats, with a huge estate, thousands of hectares, he said, more than ten kilometers from the village and the next nearest estate. He had one sister, two years older. There were twelve servants, including Cazzim, the confectioner, and another, Baba Osarka, their baker and pastry chef, all in their twenty-room house filled with paintings from Paris and carpets from Persia. The family traveled in a carriage with beveled glass windows and silk curtains drawn by six horses, all lost in the revolution. Where were they now?

That was his rough biography as I knew it then. As one art critic wrote, when the truth was known, “What good is a biography if it’s all made up?” That is an intriguing question, because, as it turned out, it was made up. It was all a lie.

How did I discover Argyle’s biography was a fantasy? After a year, he took me to meet his sister in a town near Boston. We went to a

neighborhood bar and sat in a booth. Argyle went to the men's room. "You are in love?" she asked me.

"We are in love," I said, "because we both seek the truth."

She looked at me, then looked away and thought for a minute. She held up her beer bottle and tipped it toward me. "The truth?" she said. "I like you, Marcia, so I must tell you something. You may not want to hear this. He may be seeking the truth, but he has not found it. Do you know why my name is different from my brother's? Because it is my real name. His name is not Argyle Vetna. There is no Argyle Vetna. If you don't believe me, look at his papers. They are in his apartment, in his bottom drawer underneath his underwear. We are from Armenia. We escaped. Our father left before us to escape the draft from the Turkish Army. Then I escaped a few years later. Then our mother got my brother out. She stayed behind. She must be dead because we know the Turks murdered the Armenians who stayed. We don't know where our father is."

I told her that Argyle was a genius, and she shrugged and said, "Maybe a genius and maybe crazy. You love him. I love him too. I wish you luck." She took my hands in hers. "We can try, but I think we cannot help him. He is too weak, or maybe, too strong. I'm not sure which, but he is on his own path, and neither you nor I can alter it. I have survived. I'm not sure he has."

That night, back in his apartment, I padded in my bare feet over to his dresser and pulled out his papers. It was as she said. He was in fact Armenian, named Andre Vadain, born in Armenia to Armenian parents, as was accurately stamped on his passport and driver's license, among other paperwork.

I dropped them on his chest.

"I can't believe she betrayed me," he said.

"Your sister loves you," I said.

Also in the drawer, I found a book at the bottom of the pile—a memoir illustrated with watercolors by a woman who really was a Russian aristocrat intellectual who, as a child escaped the revolution. In our bed, with the book in my lap, I said to him, "I see where you get the confectioner and the pastry chef and the carriage with six horses and

the twenty-room house, but your painting of your own parents, they look like peasants, not aristocrats.”

“I paint the truth,” he said.

Knowing he had lied to me about who he was changed my love for him. It was an exciting secret. I wished it had been our secret, but I could not accept the fact that he kept it from me, and I believe he sensed that. There was now a wall of lies between us, a wall he had built.

One day, soon after that, he left without telling me or my father.

Not everyone had been completely fooled. “Well, I’m not surprised,” said my father. “Maxim Vetna is a pen name, so he’s claiming to be descended from a fictitious person. A Russian intellectual would know that.”

His choice of being Russian was also ill-advised because he could neither read, write, nor speak Russian. For only a while he fooled the art world. It’s impossible to know how many he actually fooled, because many of those who knew the truth played along with the lie.

What is true is that paintings by a Russian artist who escaped from the Russian oppression of intellectuals sell better and for more than by someone who escaped from Armenia, even though Armenia is a lot worse. In the art world, he was not only an artistic genius, but a smart businessman.

Essentially, he got away with it.

I never saw or heard from him again. After he became world famous, his Picasso-esque paintings in museums, I was able to keep track of him in the national press.

His wife left him. That was news, but, to me, not a surprise.

After that, he was in a car accident and injured his left hand, the hand that holds the brush.

Then, I read in the New York Times, he hanged himself. The year was 1948.

For the first few months after I read his obituary, I would burst into

spontaneous tears and depression. My husband and my friends would ask what my problem was, and I could not tell them.

I decided I had to tell the story to someone to share my grief. I went to a therapist and spilled it all out. She listened and started to say the right things. I was feeling better and then I sensed the insincere tone in her sympathetic reaction. I began to suspect that she thought I was making it up, that I must be some crazy menopausal woman with an unhappy sex life needing to share her repressed fantasies. I wanted to say, as I sat across from this primly attired licensed clinical psychologist, "And, by the way, in case you are wondering, I am far from menopausal. I have an excellent sex life," but thought better of it. So, I had only one therapy session.

As it turned out I actually felt better because of how ridiculous the episode was. It added a note of farce to my whole life experience. That if I told the world the true story of my love affair with Argyle Vetna, no one would believe it.

It would serve me right.

I believe his tragedy was that he did not know who he was. Argyle Vetna kept his made-up Russian name even after his fraudulent biography was publicly exposed. He continued to live the lie, although he never denied it was a lie, so I guess he was sort of like his namesake Maxim Vetna. It's been said that morality is something that the poor cannot afford. Maybe that applies to this situation except that Argyle was, ultimately, not a poor man.

I think that it's a much deeper issue than truth or lie. It's about the essence of an individual. An artist should be known by his or her work, his or her creations. The biography matters not at all in that respect. But it matters in life. It did end our affair, or whatever it was, and it changed him in my eyes. And I think my eyes were right.

GIRL ON THE BALCONY

ROBERT GRANADER

I watched her die.

Even from my hotel balcony five blocks away, I could tell. Even as the fading sun of the day dipped, its sharp angle blinding me as it hit off the casino's mirrored facade. I saw her put a leg over the rail and then the other and then she was gone.

I couldn't do anything from my perch or in my condition.

Even if she did jump, it wasn't much of a jump, more like a step over the edge, and then I heard people yelling.

I did get up from my chair, squinting to get a better view. But I soon sat down and was back at my newspaper. What could I do but wonder why?

During business trips like this, I don't get to the newspaper until late in the day. The nights are long and the mornings slow.

I asked the guys at the hotel whether they had heard about the jumper.

"Did you see her jump?" one of them asked.

"No."

"Did you hear her fall?" another said. "It's a horrible sound."

"How many bodies have you seen fall?" someone asked my interrogator.

"Well, none," he admitted.

"Great story, you saw nothing and heard nothing," another said.

"It's not up for debate," I told these drunk idiots. "It's like going to bed with a clean driveway and waking up with a snow-covered lawn. I can assume it snowed, even though I didn't see the flakes coming down."

"I didn't see nothing on the news," Gretna chimed in from behind the bar. "Maybe they waitin' on tellin' the family."

“Why did she do it?” Bobby, the most sentimental of the men at the bar that night, asked. “I mean how bad was it?”

It’s impossible to know what’s in somebody’s head, of course, but I told them when I saw her standing just beyond the railing, I could tell by the angle of her face that she was going over.

“What the hell does that mean?”

“She paused,” I said, “and just looked down, resigned to her fate. As if she had no choice. It was like somebody was sticking a gun in her back. But there wasn’t anybody there, nobody giving her a push. Just the demons in her head that must have followed her around every day of her life.”

“And I suppose you saw those demons from your balcony?”

“No, but they’re there,” I fought back.

It was after two in the morning, and the bar was closing by the time we began fighting about this.

There will be time to fight about it again, or something else, the following night.

I couldn’t stop thinking about the girl when I got back up to my room after another night in another hotel bar with these men I’ve known for fifty years. Guys I grew up with and whom I see when I come back to town three times a year. I say I’m here for business, but I just miss the bar. Drinking alone at home is hard.

I couldn’t tell them this, but I could see her demons; they were all over her. And some of them were mine. I know they were there. An old drunk once told me about his demons. And I recognized them too. Like the ones I tried to outrun by leaving town. But they followed me to all those jobs in all those towns and into all those bars. They crash into my head without knocking. The ones who spend their time flying around my thoughts.

“You can’t deny them,” he said. “Not with drink, not with nothing.”

But then he told me how to just live with them: “Since they are gonna be there, you might as well make friends with them,” he said. “Bring out

some tea and enjoy their company.”

I told him I'd bring out the gin.

But not everybody can. Not everybody has tea or can afford gin. Not everybody can afford the advice of a man in a bar at 3 a.m. And so, the demons float around our heads, and we don't know that we can do something with them other than be tormented by them. We don't realize there is another way. And finally, after so much time, the demons dominate our heads, and we wind up dead.

We no longer recognize ourselves. We look in the mirror and see only demons, and that's what happened to the poor girl on the roof.

At night, when she turned off the lights or looked up to the stars or her dark ceiling, and all she saw were demons looking back at her.

“Did a girl die here last night?” I asked a short, balding man at the front desk of the building where I think it happened. Earlier in the day I stood, bloody-eyed, on my balcony with my toast and jam and counted the buildings and the streets.

The clerk looked around and nodded to a group of young people in their twenties, crying and consoling each other in the corner.

“I saw her,” I told him before settling into the quiet so we could hear the chatter of the others.

“Why didn't you do anything?” one of the twenty-something men/boys asked another one.

“What did you say to her?” one of the girls/women said to one of the men.

“I wanted to help,” another said.

“You were the last to see her,” another said.

I was the last to see her, I thought.

“I wanted to see how I could help,” I told the front desk man. But I knew there was nothing to do.

“Maybe you could have helped yesterday,” he said.

I retreated to a café just off the lobby behind the front desk and sat with a coffee I didn’t want.

Why did she do it? How bad was it? They all kept asking each other as if they didn’t know her.

No one ever taught her how to deal with the demons, how to talk to them, how to distinguish between what the demons say and what they are telling you. These demons speak a different language.

The young group continued chatting and laying blame. They talked about someone and something about a fight. They asked why he couldn’t have waited to break up with her. “You knew she was vulnerable.”

When it got quiet, I left my coffee cold, with more questions than answers, and sidled back up to the front desk clerk.

“Who’s that?” I asked, nodding toward two sets of crying adults.

“Her parents,” he said.

In one love seat was a middle-aged couple holding each other. The man’s head was shiny and bald; the woman, more hair but a slightly more up-to-date outfit. In the other chair a man with salt-and-pepper hair and a woman about the same age. The inside positions were occupied by people who I later learned were the parents. Each engaged with their new spouse, their knees touching the person with whom they had made a child.

“Always about the food, you had to talk about food,” the man said.

“She wanted to talk about it,” the wife said, wiping her nose. “But she struggled, she just struggled.”

They think it was their fault? They think it was the other one’s fault.

“Humans are built to see the future,” the front desk man said when the lobby cleared.

“What?” I asked, startled by this sudden utterance. Until then it was mostly nods and grunts.

“We are built to see the future and fear it,” he went on. “There was a time when if we didn’t learn how to see the future, we wouldn’t recognize the danger, and we’d be eaten by dinosaurs. Slaughtered by the thing we would have recognized had we learned the language, recognized the signs, separated the animals from the plants.”

There was a picture of a woman tacked up in the lobby. It was the woman. The jumper. The daughter. The friend. Seeing her up close now for the first time, she looked like my cousin Molly. My cousin was so pretty when we were growing up. Only a few years older than I, I had a mad crush on her. In the way that one could as the younger one but with the recognition that it would never lead to anything, never be returned because, in her eyes, I was just a punk. There was safety in that.

When you are kids, younger is younger; it’s a subgrouping, it’s the kids’ table, it’s like being in a separate fishbowl. You can’t get there from here.

But that was before life made her face puffy, her stomach bulge, and her back hunch. Her first husband caused the lines because he was mean when he drank, which was a lot. And her second husband caused the bulge because he was just mean all the time. And the kids. Oh, the kids, they caused the hunch as they carried them through life. She tried to reverse it with the meds, and then the shots and the Botox and the makeup, until finally her face was an unrecognizable yin and yang.

Age pulled her eyes down, and the shots pushed them up.

Age puffed her cheeks out, and the medicine sucked them back in.

And so, this woman whose picture now hangs on the lobby wall reminded me of Molly before the fall. This girl’s face was pretty. It would never be deformed by age. And for that fleeting moment, when I watched her from afar, I wondered how she got there. Logistically.

Usually, the rooftop of an apartment building is hard to get to, except in movies.

Turns out she didn’t live there, which makes her escape to the roof even more improbable, impressive. I heard one of the earlier lobby gatherings

talking, and their theory was that she was a guest at a party, and she wandered up there looking for the bathroom.

But the guy at the front desk shook his head. He'd heard there was shouting. She was embarrassed or someone broke up with her, and she'd had enough and decided she needed some air, and then, once up there, she took the opportunity.

"She regretted it," he said.

"How do you know?"

"Suicide survivors, you know, the ones who try but don't die. Almost one hundred percent of them say as soon as they step off the bridge, they regret it. Falling through the air, they all wished it were a bungee cord that would pull them back up."

But was this woman being chased by her demons or was it more opportunistic?

Like getting divorced. Everybody thinks about it at some point. As one longtime couple said,

"We both wanted a divorce but, thankfully, never at the same time."

Never that moment where opportunity meets the moment. Maybe she never wanted to kill herself, but after a bad night, had the opportunity opened up?

As the sun sank into Lake Pontchartrain, she found herself on that rooftop with this demon on her shoulder, or the boy who broke up with her, or the father who picked on her, or the friend who didn't stick up for her. It wasn't one thing. It wasn't one of them now crying in the lobby. It was all of them. And so, she took that small step over the rail and left it all behind.

She was silent as she turned her body, midair, from feetfirst to headfirst, as if she was completing a hands-free dive into a warm infinity pool. But instead of waiting for the warm water to welcome her in, it was the cold, hard cement that crushed her skull and broke her neck, I imagine.

But there was no body.

People said they saw a body going down.

I saw a body stepping over the side.

My new front desk friend said he spoke to the papers, and there were others like me who said they saw a woman on the roof of the sixteen-story building.

But when the reporters dug deeper and asked if they saw her jump, no one could say for sure.

When they checked with the hospital, there was no patient with a crushed everything.

When witnesses were rounded up, they said, "She must have." And I said, she must have.

The sign over the picture in the lobby just said MISSING.

In the evenings I go down to the hotel bar to drink with my friends until I feel I am ready for sleep. Sometimes it takes longer than others. They say alcohol is the wrong way to do it, but I don't know of any other way to quiet the world in a way that lets me rest.

When I feel the demons have all flown away or at least had a drink with me, I go out on my balcony and watch the lights through the cigarette smoke, and I look for the girl they never found.

Each night I'm out there, I watch for her and hope maybe this time I can stop her. The pretty girl who climbed over the railing, the girl who did not jump but disappeared from her life and her family and her problems without ever having to endure the pain. I look for her on streets and in the bars; I long to see the face I never met. I want to teach her how to talk to demons, not just drown them out with gin or crush them from sixteen stories up.

I want to tell her it will be okay.

TENNIS IN THE BUBBLE

HANNAH JANE WEBER

An errant shot streaks into the web of overhead beams,
a startling neon Slazenger that does not come back.
My competitor and I look up, briefly united.
Metallic clouds declare victory but it is not ours.

The sky's belly is heavy with faults and impossible returns,
its dome pockmarked with fuzzy celestial Penns and Wilsons—
fading constellations rubbed smooth by time
and undying rays of florescent light,
yellow just a memory of the softly rotting stars.

Today's shooting star is forever suspended in flight,
potential energy on the verge of dropping at any time,
or maybe ten years from this moment,
its bounce exploding with ancient dust and sweat.

But for now it's just another star,
another tightly woven war
whispering its unfortunate encounter with the edge of the earth,
reckless power that only the bubble could control.

NOTES ON THE CLOSING YEAR

GAYLORD BREWER

The rain that hammered the house through the night suited and accommodated my mood. I sat outside in the dark, listening to the assault, thinking deeply of nothing. This morning, the porch I scrubbed clean last week is a map of muddy paw prints, an abstract artwork scoffing human effort. White December sunlight, as if the storm had cleansed the system. I wouldn't say its clarity admonishes, but it doesn't enlighten, either, and my mood remains unchanged. Restive. Impatient. Something whispers to me. Whispers that it doesn't matter. A lucky year even by extravagant standards: health, wealth, travel, folks ailing but alive, Lucy showing her age only by an economy of movement of which I approve. I look down past my newly scarred left hand. What will the next year bring? My suspicions trouble me. Throw down the bones and heed their warning. For the moment, perhaps best to surrender to the sunlight and winter air, a country walk. The passing terrain, what's been lost or discarded roadside. Count the paces between mailboxes. Keep the head empty. Incredible, the things I find when not looking.

BUTTERFLIES

RICHARD T. RAUCH

On a random-walk trajectory,
they flit along capriciously, sun-churned,
iridescent in their own little world

with all the colors of a preteen girl,
emergent, yet unburdened by peer pressure,
resplendent in short-lived whimsy,

alighting here and there,
self-absorbed among favorite flowers,
then off to god knows where.

CONTRIBUTOR BIOGRAPHIES

JORDAN DARKIS

Jordan Darkis is a fiction writer from Kansas who writes short stories about the darker side of small towns. Jordan has recently graduated from Fort Hays State University with his MA in English. His future plans include spending the next year perfecting his craft by studying and writing the art of short stories.

DANIEL BAILEY

From Walla Walla, WA, Daniel Bailey is a semi-retired educator who taught English for 19 years at a university inside a gathering Venezuelan dictatorship. Fourteen of his writings in three genres have seen publication. A past chess magazine editor, he remains an enthusiastic player. He now resides in Mexico City.

CODY WILHELM

Cody Wilhelm is an English major attending ENMU. Cody enjoys writing poems in his free time; his pieces attempt to capture universal human experiences and express intense emotional reactions to various interpersonal relationships. Cody is from Lubbock, Texas.

HAILEY GORE

Hailey Gore received her bachelor's degrees in psychology and criminal justice from ENMU. She is now a graduate student obtaining her master's degree in counseling. After Eastern, Hailey hopes to obtain a doctoral degree in psychology and a law degree. Hailey has no formal training in poetic writing, but she finds that poetry is a way of personifying feeling. Hailey's passion and interest in the field of psychology is what created her love for poetry and writing.

VERONICA MORGAN

Veronica Morgan is a current ENMU graduate student with too little time and too many words to tell. The words mostly get thrown out the window like the plants she can't keep alive, but every once in a while, some of them stick and a poem or story is created. Her current motivators are tea, horror podcasts, and her orange tabby.

JOSLIN HUSKIN

Joslin Huskin has lived in Portales, NM for four years and is originally from Tampa, FL. Joslin is majoring in University Studies with a concentration in Social Work and Communication Disorders and is set to graduate in December of 2021.

ELLIS BLACKSTONE

Ellis Blackstone is a first-year student attending ENMU. She is currently majoring in anthropology with an emphasis in archaeology. She hopes to one day work as an underwater archaeologist. Ellis likes to spend her free time travelling, taking pictures, and watching movies. She is originally from Westerville, OH, where her family still resides. She has two supportive parents and three adventurous siblings, as well as a zoo's worth of pets! Ellis looks forward to her time at ENMU and can't wait to see what life has to offer.

LUCY MARTINEZ

Lucy Martinez is a fourth-year student at ENMU. As a poet and woman, she hopes to connect to people through culture and emotion so that they can feel less alone in the world. She is from Gallup, NM and comes from a large family. Her ultimate career goal is to produce a popularly studied poetry book and to add to the academic sphere of literature and English.

DIANE WEBSTER

Diane Webster's goal is to remain open to poetry ideas in everyday life, nature, or an overheard phrase and to write. Diane enjoys the challenge of transforming images into words to fit her poems. Her work has appeared in *Home Planet News Online*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Talking River Review* and other literary magazines.

G.H. MOSSON

G.H. Mosson is the author of five books and chapbooks of poetry, including *Family Snapshot as a Poem in Time* (Finishing Line, 2019), and coauthor of *Simultaneous Revolutions* (PM Press, 2021). His poetry and literary commentary have appeared in the *Evening Street Review*, the *Tampa Review*, *Smartish Pace*, *Rattle*, and received four Pushcart Prize nominations. An attorney and writer, Mr. Mosson enjoys raising his children, hiking, and literary endeavors. For more, go to ghmosson.com.

JIM BEANE

Jim Beane's writing has appeared in numerous literary journals. His story "Jeanette" saw print in Akashic Book's anthology by DC Noir. His short story collection, *By the Sea*, was published by Wordrunners eChapbooks in 2018. In 2019, the *Baltimore Review* published Jim's short story "Close to Her Heart" in their issue spotlighting Maryland authors. He is a mentor for the Veterans Writing Project and a part-time instructor at the Writers Center in Bethesda, MD. He lives west of Baltimore with his wife of 42 years and their dog Lily. See more at jimbeane.com.

LYNN HOGGARD

Lynn Hoggard taught at Midwestern State University, where she was professor of English and French and Coordinator of Humanities. In 2003, the Texas Institute of Letters awarded her the Soeurette Diehl Fraser award for best translation. Her poem “Love in the Desert” was nominated for a 2017 Pushcart Prize by Word Fountain, and her latest book, *Bushwhacking Home* (TTU Press, 2017), won the 2018 Press Women of Texas award for best book of poetry.

CHARLES TAYLOR

Charles Taylor served as CETA poet of Salt Lake City and worked in the Poet-In-the-Schools Program of the NEA. Retired now, he lives on the Texas Hill County. He has published novels, memoirs, and 10 books of poetry.

ALISE VERSELLA

Alise Versella is a Pushcart nominated contributing writer for Rebelle Society who has been published widely in various journals such as *Evening Street Review*, *Vistant Lit*, and *Poydras*. Her full-length collection *When Wolves Become Birds* is available now and you can find her at aliseversella.com.

YVONNE HIGGINS LEACH

Yvonne Higgins Leach is the author of *Another Autumn* (2014). Her poems have appeared in many journals and anthologies including the *South Carolina Review*, *South Dakota Review*, *Spoon River Review*, and *POEM*. She spent decades balancing a career in communications and public relations, raising a family, and pursuing her love of writing poetry. Her latest passion is working with shelter dogs. She splits her time living on Vashon Island and in Spokane, WA. For more information, visit yvonnehigginsleach.com.

JENNIFER FERNANDEZ

Jennifer Fernandez is a Cuban-American writer. Her short stories have appeared in several literary journals. Her creative nonfiction piece, “The Cuban Brown Rabbit,” was nominated for the Pushcart Prize in 2021. She lives outside Seattle, Washington with her husband Michael and their pony-sized dog Hanx.

D. SETH HORTON

D. Seth Horton’s work has appeared in around forty publications, including the *Michigan Quarterly Review* and *Glimmer Train*. Two of his stories have been nominated for the Pushcart Prize. His latest book was an anthology, *Road to Nowhere and Other New Stories* from the Southwest, which was published by the University of New Mexico Press

in 2018. He currently teaches creative writing and American literature at the University of Virginia.

GINA WILLNER-PARDO

Gina Willner-Pardo has been published in *South Carolina Review*, the *Berkeley Fiction Review*, *Louisiana Literature*, *Pleiades*, *Crack the Spine*, and other journals. She has also written seventeen books for children, all published by Clarion or Albert Whitman. Her book *Figuring Out Frances* won the Josette Frank Award, presented by the Bank Street College of Education, to honor a book of “outstanding literary merit.” Gina has a BA from Bryn Mawr College and an MBA from the University of California, Berkeley. She has studied with James Frey. When not writing, she enjoys running and hiking near her home on the California coast.

SUZANNE STE. THERESE

Suzanne Ste. Therese holds a BA in English literature from Loyola Marymount University and a BS in urban landscape architecture from City University of New York. For 25 years Suzanne was a landscape designer and architect. She was a Master Gardener and was part of an international team that helped erect Christo's "The Gates" in Central Park. Suzanne attended the To Taste Life Twice Writing Workshop, the CARVE Short Story Writing Technique classes, and is a student at the Sarah Lawrence Writing Institute.

DAVID ROMANDA

David Romanda lives in Kawasaki City, Japan. His work has appeared in places such as *Gargoyle Magazine*, the *Louisville Review*, the *Main Street Rag*, *PANK*, and *Puerto del Sol*. Romanda is the author of one chapbook, *I'm Sick of Pale Blue Skies* (Ethel Press, 2021). His first poetry collection, *the broken bird feeder*, is slated for publication the Fall of 2022.

ZEBULON HUSET

Zebulon Huset is a teacher, writer, and photographer. He won the Gulf Stream 2020 Summer Poetry Contest, and his writing has appeared (or is forthcoming) in *Best New Poets*, *Meridian*, the *Southern Review*, *Fence*, *Atlanta Review*, *Texas Review*, and many others. He publishes the writing blog *Notebooking Daily* (with new prompts every day), edits the journals *Coastal Shelf* and *Sparked*, and recommends literary magazines at TheSubmissionWizard.com.

CASSONDRA WINDWALKER

Cassandra Windwalker is a poet, essayist, and novelist presently writing full-time from the southern Alaskan coast. She keeps company mostly with ghosts, literary characters, unwary wild animals, and her tolerant

husband. Her novels and full-length poetry collections are available in bookstores and online. She enjoys engaging with readers on Twitter @WindwalkerWrite.

JOHN BALLANTINE

An economics/finance professor at Brandeis University, John Ballantine took his bachelor's degree in English at Harvard, with an MA from the University of Chicago and a PhD in Economics from NYU Stern. He has published economic commentary in *Salon*, the *Boston Globe* and the *Conversation*. His literary work has appeared in *Adelaide Literary Magazine*, *Apricity Magazine*, *Arkansas Review*, *Bluestem*, *Carbon Culture Review*, *Caveat Lector*, *Cobalt*, *Existere Journal*, *Forge*, *Green Hills Literary Lantern*, *Hawaii Pacific Review*, *Manhattanville Review*, the *Meadow*, the *Penmen Review*, *Oracle Fine*, *Saint Ann's Review*, *Santa Fe Literary Review*, *Santa Clara Review*, the *Smart Set*, *SNReview*, *Slippery Elm*, *Streetlight Magazine*, and many others. He writes to understand the world we walk in and touch our complicated lives. Writing grounds him in our swirling lives and calms his mind.

DANIEL BARBARE

Danny P. Barbare resides in the Upstate of the Carolinas. His poetry has appeared locally and abroad. He is kind of a homebody, not travelling far from his native Greenville, SC. In October, he loves traveling the Blue Ridge and the lowlands of Charleston, SC. Most of all, his poetry is about this region and his menial job as a janitor at a local medical clinic. He attended Greenville Technical College where he studied veterinary medicine. Poetry has always been his favorite subject. He has a deep southern accent and lives with his wife; family; and dog, Miley, in Greenville, SC.

JOE SONNENBLICK

Joe Sonnenblick has been featured in print and electronic publications such as *Fleas on the Dog*, *Impspired*, *Aji*, the *Beatnik Cowboy*, *SCAB Literary Arts Journal*, *Citizen Brooklyn*, and the *Broadkill Review* as well as in *Spectra Poets* for their inaugural issue, *In Parenthesis*. Joe has also been featured in Stella Samuel's 2021 anthology of American poetry through Arzono Press. Joe has been a featured reader up and down the east coast including the Poets House in Tribeca.

JASON SIBERT

Jason Sibert worked as an ad copywriter/salesman, sports reporter, and news reporter for the Suburban Journals in St. Louis for a decade. He's worked as a freelance journalist for OpEdNews.com, the *St. Louis Beacon*, and *Progressive Populist*. His short fiction has appeared in

publications like *Fallow Ground* and *Downstate Story*.

M.A. ISTVAN JR.

M.A. Istvan Jr., PhD, is a hunk of jade who has been abraded (but into an arrowhead) by the circumambient assaults on academic and artistic freedom. Istvan is drawn to poetry—especially aphoristic poetry—more than to fiction because he lacks the patience for the respectable craft of baiting readers with illusionist techniques (like opening with a pet in peril or having the narrator say things the reader knows to be false). Instead of using tricks to keep readers hooked, he emphasizes the content itself at great risk—especially when coupled with his refusal to truckle to an ideology just because it is politically correct—of alienating mass audiences.

LINA WONG

Lina Wong is a graduate nursing student at ENMU. She grew up in New Jersey next to the Hudson River, but now lives in Rio Rancho where she loves the skies, sunshine, mountains, and snow of New Mexico. Her other favorite place is Mount Desert Island, ME. In her free time, she likes to play the piano, grow flowers, and hike up the La Luz Trail.

AMANDA OWENS

Amanda Owens, currently 27 years old, works full-time while completing school online through ENMU. She is working toward a degree in Social Work and raising her daughter. She likes to write and paint when she can. In May of 2020, her fiancé passed away and her reintroduction to writing helped her through her grieving process. She loves to read poetry, one of her favorites being Rupi Kaur, who is credited with being the inspiration behind her submitted pieces.

CAITLIN KREIDER

Amateur photographer Caitlin Kreider, from Danville, KY, is a student at ENMU working toward her bachelor's degree in the hopes of pursuing a career as a chiropractor. Caitlin is on the rodeo team at ENMU and enjoys capturing photographs of the various places that rodeoing takes her. Each photograph she takes holds a memory captured in time.

DENNIS VANNATTA

Dennis Vannatta is a Pushcart and Porter Prize winner, with stories published in many magazines and anthologies, including *River Styx*, *Chariton Review*, *Boulevard*, and *Antioch Review*. His sixth collection of stories, *The Only World You Get*, was published by Et Alia Press.

BRIAN C. FELDER

Brian C. Felder has seen 417 of his published—many more than once—

in 349 separate issues of 146 different magazines in the fifty-plus years that he has been plying the poets' trade and will soon see 100 of his favorite works appear in his collection, *Plain Big Words*, published by Wild Shore Press. In addition, copies of his publishing credits and the supporting correspondence related to his career as a working poet are now preserved in the Special Collections Department of the University of Delaware Library in the "Brian C. Felder Small Press Poetry Archive."

HARVEY SILVERMAN

Harvey Silverman is a retired physician who writes nonfiction primarily for his own enjoyment. His nonfiction stories have appeared in *Queen's Quarterly*, *Avalon Literary Review*, *Evening Street Review*, and elsewhere.

CHRISTOPHER BARNES

In the Christmas season of 2001, the Northern Cultural Skills Partnership sponsored Christopher Barnes to be mentored by Andy Croft in conjunction with New Writing North. He made a radio programme for Web FM community radio about his writing group.

JEVIN LEE ALBUQUERQUE

Jevin Lee Albuquerque grew up in California on the local pier in Santa Cruz, fishing for striped bass. He evolved into a fly fisherman, obsessed with trout and steelhead. In a former life, he was a professional soccer player. He has a degree in Latin American Studies from UCLA. Recent publications include *Confrontation Magazine*, *Monterey Poetry Review*, and *Phenomenal Literature* (Authorspress, India, 2021).

JORY POMERANZ

Jory Pomeranz is a writer, screenwriter, poet, and 50-word bio author. He lives in Cincinnati, OH with his partner and two dogs. This bio isn't his strongest work, but the poem is wonderful.

CAROL GRASER

Carol Graser hosts a monthly poetry series at Saratoga Spring's legendary Caffe Lena that she initiated in 2003. She has taught poetry workshops to teens and at-risk youth. Her work has been published in many literary journals, most recently *I-70 Review*, *Midwest Quarterly*, and *BigCityLit*. She is the author of the poetry collection, *The Wild Twist of Their Stems* (Foothills Publishing 2007).

STEPHEN LEFEBURE

Poetry by Stephen Lefebure may be found in his own volume, *Rocks Full of Sky*, and in *Wild Song—Poems of the Natural World* and *Going Down Grand: Poems from the Canyon*, two anthologies of nature poetry. His

work may also be found in journals like *Wilderness*, *Chicago Studies*, *Bombay Review*, and *Bangalore Review*. He lives in Evergreen, CO, USA.

MARY SENTER

Mary Senter writes in a cabin in the woods on the shores of Puget Sound. She earned certificates in literary fiction writing from the University of Washington and an MA in strategic communication from WSU. Her work can be found or is forthcoming in *North American Review*, *Sheepshead Review*, *Ponder Review*, *Cleaver*, and elsewhere. She is the graphic designer for *Crab Creek Review* and the founder of Milltown Press. Visit her at marysenter.com.

CHRISTA KING

Christa King has always lived in the West. The landscapes, experiences, and people of Colorado, New Mexico, Arizona, and Idaho inspire and inform her writing. She received a BA in Creative Writing at the age of 51, and a master's degree in Library Sciences in 2012, both from the University of Arizona. She is working on a poetry collection and a novel.

JACOB HAAGEN JENSEN

Jacob Haagen Jensen grew up in the countryside of Denmark, enjoying a cozy and sometimes solitary childhood. Stories fed his imagination, fueling a passion to write his own tales of fascinating people and their struggles to overcome whatever challenge they faced ahead. Twenty years later, Jacob has now moved to Copenhagen and is working with sustainable business, performing comedy improv, exploring the world of beer-tasting, and enjoying the life he has been given. In between his sips of beer, the stories around him keep shaping his imagination—and with a pen in his hand, these stories have now come alive.

J.C. HAWLEY

J.C. Hawley hails from Mid-Michigan and is 31 years old. He is a philosopher, poet, and human.

JULIA CHIAPPELLA

Julia Chiapella's poetry has appeared in *Avatar Review*, *Edison Literary Review*, *I-70 Review*, the *MacGuffin*, *Midwest Quarterly*, *OPEN: Journal of Arts & Letters*, the *Opiate Magazine*, *Pirene's Fountain*, and the *Wax Paper* among others. She co-founded Santa Cruz Writes to enhance literary opportunities for Santa Cruz County, California, residents. She is the retired director of the Young Writers Program, which she established in 2012. Julia received the Gail Rich Award in 2017 for creative contributions to Santa Cruz County.

TRENTON CROOKSHANKS

Trenton Crookshanks is a senior at ENMU majoring in Forensic Chemistry before pursuing his Master's in Chemistry. To give himself a break from back-to-back laboratories, he enrolled in a total of four art studio courses which allowed him to show his creativity in a tangible way. The two featured pieces were both submissions for his ARTS 314 Photography Projects course.

MIKE MATTHEWS

A Chicago native, Mike Matthews is known for weaving the intricacies of tragic love and desperate hope into a kaleidoscope of adult literature. Mike believes there are two types of writers in the world—those who plan out every page and those who hear voices. He is the latter. For 30-years, Mike has memorialized the real events of people he has encountered in his many travels. He is the last surviving founding member of the Windy City Writers Club formed in 1984 and the president of North Avenue Publishing.

EMILY PRIDDY

Emily Priddy is a graduate student pursuing an MA in English at ENMU. She lives in Tucumcari and teaches English and journalism at House High School. She is currently writing her second novel.

MARY WARREN FOULK

Mary Warren Foulk has been published in *VoiceCatcher*, *Cathexis Northwest Press*, *Yes Poetry*, *Pine Hills Review*, *Palette Poetry*, *Silkworm*, and *Steam Ticket* among other publications. Her chapbook, *If I Could Write You a Happier Ending*, is forthcoming from Dancing Girl Press (2021). Her manuscript *Erasures of My Coming Out* (Letter) won first place in the Poetry Box's 2021 chapbook contest. Her poem "portrait of a queer as a young boy" has been nominated for the 2021 Best of the Net Anthology. A graduate of the MFA Writing program at VCFA, Mary lives in western Massachusetts with her wife and two children.

CAROLINE MAUN

Caroline Maun is the Chair of English at Wayne State University in Detroit. Her poetry publications include the volumes *The Sleeping* (Maverick Press, 2006), *What Remains* (Main Street Rag, 2013), and three chapbooks, *Cures and Poisons* and *Greatest Hits*, both published by Puddinghouse Press, and *Accident*, published in 2019 by Alice Greene & Co.

IRENE MARTINEZ

Irene Martinez is a senior in the BSW program at ENMU. She is hoping

to begin her career working with victims of domestic violence. She currently resides in Albuquerque, NM where she spends her free time reading, playing with her cat, and creating new works of art with her camera.

ROCHELLE JEWEL SHAPIRO

Rochelle Jewel Shapiro's novel, *Miriam the Medium*, has been reissued by Simon & Schuster. Shapiro has published essays in the *New York Times*, *Newsweek*, as well as many anthologies. Her poetry has been nominated for a Pushcart and for Best of the Net. She teaches writing at UCLA Extension. For more, go to rochellejshapiro.com.

BETSY MARTIN

Betsy Martin is the author of the poetry chapbook, *Whale's Eye* (Presa Press, 2019). Her poetry has appeared in *Atlanta Review*, the *Briar Cliff Review*, the *Cape Rock*, *Cloudbank*, *Crack the Spine*, the *Green Hills Literary Lantern*, *Juked*, the *Louisville Review*, the *Penmen Review*, *Pennsylvania English*, *Typehouse Literary Magazine*, and many others. She has advanced degrees in Russian language and literature. She is also a visual artist. Visit her at betsymartinpoet.com.

CARLA RUIZ

Carla Lenette Ruiz is a digital content creator. She enjoys being outdoors, travelling, and spending time with her family. Creating content on social media allows her to showcase her creative skills. She is loving, silly, kind, and a charming individual. She can be found waving at strangers or talking up a storm because she is anything but shy. Carla is a ray of sunshine, always sharing her light with those around her; she is truly one of a kind.

ANDREW HUGHES

Andrew Hughes has been writing and publishing short stories for the past decade. His have appeared in *Cholla Needles*, *Better Off Dead Anthologies*, and *Brilliant Flash Fiction*. His chapbook, *Between Music and The Sun*, is available on Amazon. He currently lives in Arizona, working as a teacher, and taking care of the world's most adorable white husky.

JOHN MAURER

John Maurer is a 26-year-old writer from Pittsburgh who writes fiction, poetry, and everything in-between, but his work always strives to portray that what is true is beautiful. He has been previously published in *Claudius Speaks*, *the Bitchin' Kitsch*, *Thought Catalog*, and more than seventy others. For more, visit johnpmaurer.com.

PETER OBOURN

Peter Obourn lives in upstate New York. His critically acclaimed short story collection, *Women Are Hard to Figure*, was published this year. His first novel, *Holcomb's Potato Song*, is scheduled for publication in 2022. He can be reached at peterobourn.com.

ROBERT GRANANDER

Robert Granander's work has been featured in the *Washington Post*, *Washingtonian Magazine*, the *New York Times*, *borrowed solace*, *Doubly Mad: A Journal of Arts and Ideas*, and mariashriver.com. He has won writing awards from *Bethesda Magazine* and *Writer's Digest*. He has attended various workshops at the Writer's Center in Bethesda, MD, as well as the Key West Literary Seminar and Writer's Digest Conference in Los Angeles. Robert has a BA in English from the University of Michigan and a JD from The George Washington University. He has published more than 350 short stories, articles, and essays in over 50 publications.

HANNAH JANE WEBER

Hannah Jane Weber's poetry has been published in *I-70 Review*, *Kansas City Voices*, the *Poeming Pigeon*, the *Seattle Star*, and *Wrath-Bearing Tree*. She is also the recipient of the Dylan Thomas American Poet Prize. Hannah Jane is a children's librarian and tennis enthusiast. She lives with her husband and their golden retrievers.

GAYLORD BREWER

Gaylord Brewer is a professor at Middle Tennessee State University, where he founded and for 20+ years edited the journal *Poems & Plays*. The most recent of his 16 books of poetry, fiction, criticism, and cookery are two collections of poems, *The Feral Condition* (Negative Capability, 2018) and *Worship the Pig* (Red Hen, 2020).

RICHARD T. RAUCH

Richard T. Rauch was born and raised in the New Orleans area and lives along Bayou Lacombe in southeast Louisiana. He currently manages rocket propulsion test projects at NASA's Stennis Space Center in Mississippi. Recent poetry credits include *Bindweed Magazine*, *Plainsongs*, *Edison Literary Review*, *Scarlet Leaf Review*, *Steam Ticket*, and *Valparaiso Poetry Review*.

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