



El Portal

Volume 80. Number 1. Spring 2022.

EL PORTAL

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Eastern New Mexico University's Literary Journal

Portales, New Mexico

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, non-fiction and flash works striving to transgress boundaries, straddle borders, and most importantly, move us. *El Portal* is accepting original, unpublished short stories, creative non-fiction (<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. "Buzzed," Emily Priddy

Poetry

1. "I'm Lost," Veronica Morgan
2. "Book Lover," Lucy Martinez
3. "Corrigible," Tenika Heidelberg

Photography/Artwork

1. "X-Ray," Taylor Baca
2. "Lumière de Lutétia," Veronica Morgan
3. "At A Glance," Tenika Heidelberg

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Daniel Píe

Stripped

My lower back balks as I try to straighten to full height. Hours driving New Mexico highways non-stop syphoned the elasticity from the lumbar muscles. All to put distance between her and me. It's been the pattern since we began living together about two years ago—argue, say insensitive things, and then one of us, usually me, drives off in a huff. The open road dilutes my anger. After a few hundred miles, I hardly remember what roiled me.

It feels like I'm still cruising in my partially restored '78 Bel-Air, the craggy vocals of Tom Waits rippling through the interior. The russet metallic Chevy sans trim mirrors the singer's voice—bare boned and weather beaten—with brush-nickel hubcaps off an Astro van the only adornment. I tinkle the dashboard keys in mock accompaniment as his "San Diego Serenade" turns my anguish into longing.

I never spoke "I love you" 'til I cursed you in vain

I never felt my heart strings until I nearly went insane

If only I could speak to her heart as she does to mine, maybe I could muster the will to turn back.

When the tavern took shape in the distance, a little west of Farmington, the burgeoning pressure in my bladder pleaded for attention. The sequencing blue neon lights came into sharper focus as dusk rapidly morphed into night. A slender woman in a bikini repeatedly hoisted an icy draft in a toast to approaching vehicles. Her chug finished, she leaned against a saguaro and gave a wink that transformed into a starburst.

As I approach from the Bel Air, I see a yellowed peeling mandate pasted on the tavern door.

"Firearms must be relinquished to the bartender." He gives my entrance a mere glance while he fidgets with a 13-inch black and white TV next to the liquor display. When I emerge from the unisex restroom, his eyes, deep set beneath thick and unruly salt and pepper eyebrows, follow me more closely. I shuffle past and stand next to the barstool farthest from him. The thought of sitting again so soon is off-putting.

An AC unit seemingly capable of making ice hangs precariously through cheap

paneling on a far wall. The hypothermic effect instantly dries the perspiration on my forearms, but my flowery Hawaiian shirt, left damp, causes a chill.

Two youngish men play 9-ball just below the behemoth unit, engaging in animated and boisterous banter. I gather they've just come off a shift at Four Corners Generating Station. The clinking of their Budweiser longnecks harmonizes with the thrum of the air-conditioner and the crack of the billiard balls to compose a blue-collar symphony.

"When's Brandi comin' on?" the shorter one yawns.

The bartender, still tinkering with the TV, makes a slow half-turn of his meaty body toward the two before responding.

"I told you, it's Lyda tonight. Brandi's off."

"We want Brandi. Brandi's got bigger titties," Shorty's pal blurts.

"Hey! Be nice, you two!"

"Aww, we're just joshin', Lloyd. Ain't that right, City Boy?" says the short one, a hand shading his eyes like a scout to exaggerate the distance between us. I wave back a little too eagerly and wonder about the image I project in khaki pants and open-toe brown sandals.

"Where's my manners? Yo, Lloyd, get City Slicker a beer on me."

The bartender is maneuvering the TV antenna, muttering something unintelligible. Giving up finally, he yanks a wash rag from the rear of his straining waistband and starts wiping down the bar, heading in my direction.

"What'll it be?"

It's one of those mysteries of the mind, but suddenly my desire for a beer changes to a delightful honeydew mojito. Christine urged me to try one at a party thrown by one of her co-workers the previous summer. We were bickering—our default mode—and I said, "No self-respecting male would drink such a thing." I knew with the first sip I was wrong but stuck to my premise. I can still see the resentment on her face. It's another moment I want to smooth over retroactively.

Lloyd strikes a wide straight-armed grip against his side of the bar. "Take your time, sweetheart. We got Bud, or we got Miller's."

I take the wraparound sunglasses from my rapidly thinning hair and tap them on the palm of my hand in contemplation. "Sorry. I was having a flashback for a moment. Been one of those days."

"We're all outta flashback. How 'bout a Bud or a Miller's?"

"Miller's."

"There ya go. You're gettin' the hang of it."

Shorty and his pal are amused by Lloyd's initiation, likely having been put through it themselves at some point. I pantomime a snort, acting as though the bartender's brusqueness is all in manly good fun. While steeling myself should the oral assault continue, a blast of unrecognizable music, an unexpected thunderclap, reverberates throughout the boxy tavern. Lloyd covers his ears, but the two plant workers stand their cues at their sides like soldiers ordered to "fall in."

Off in a corner, bent over a jukebox, a lanky female fiddles with the decibel level.

"Dammit! You said the repairman fixed this," she shouts over her shoulder at Lloyd, who doesn't respond. A brief silence between the two is ended by a piercing whistle over the PA system. I thought it had given up the ghost, but as my clenched shoulder blades begin to relax, I see that Lloyd, the plant workers, and the forty-something female are smiling like giddy kids.

"Well, all right!" Shorty proclaims. "Woo-hoo!" adds his breasts-loving pal. Even Lloyd lets a grin crease his mug. "You're on, Miss Lyda!"

I hear the jukebox queuing and then Sinatra's resonant baritone instructing his listeners to "Start spreading the news."

"Howdy, boys!" Lyda shouts over the music, strutting from empty table to empty table as if parading in front of a full house. "I'll be your hostess for the evening here at the Cactus Flower. That sorry-looking schlub behind the bar is Lloyd, and he'll be keeping your glasses filled tonight. So, relax. Sit back. Enjoy the entertainment we have planned for y'all. I'm gonna do a little schmoozing and change into my costume, but I'll be back before you know it to perform my first number." Obedient to the choreography, her spiel concludes just as The Chairman finishes his signature song staccato style.

It's ... Up ... To ... You ... New ... York ... New-ew Yorrrrrk!

I smile at the schmaltzy intro, but, taking another long gulp of Miller's, I conjure the image of Lyda performing her act and it excites me. Lloyd walks my way as he pops the cap on a second round. As I note the change in his attentiveness, a soft hand touches my bare elbow.

"Oh, my. Need a sweater, honey? You're freezing." Before I can respond, she continues. "Don't you worry. Lyda's gonna heat things up in a bit."

Referring to herself in the third person strikes me as old-timey, or maybe it's her taste in fashion I ponder at close range. The three-quarter-length sleeves of her raspberry tunic have a lacey flourish at her forearms that reminds me of the doilies my grandmother used to accent her end tables. Lyda is pretty in a statuesque way, maintaining a straight-backed, dignified presence with little variance in her facial expression.

"I'm gonna get 'em enlarged, ya know," she says, her knee brushing against my thigh as she moves onto the barstool next to mine. "Lloyd says he may chip in. Says it's good for business. They call it 'enhanced.' It's okay. I seen you lookin' like you can't believe I'm the featured dancer tonight."

She leans in slightly, allowing me to inhale an exotic-smelling musk. I'm a little unnerved by her bluntness and strain to keep from lowering my eyes to her chest.

"No-no," I say, chuckling as I look to the floor and fumble for words. "I didn't know this was even that kind of place. I was out for a drive—actually, I just had to get away from my significant other—and I came across this establishment and thought how much a cold beer would hit the spot. So, sorry, I wasn't looking. I mean, in that sense I wasn't looking. Just here for the beer."

She allows my meandering explanation to hang there for the other patrons to contemplate and, presumably, recognize for its weakness. She waits, slowly redirecting an unruly lock of hair that has flopped over her eye. The clearing exposes more thick mascara. All the while she maintains eye contact, until a drop of sweat emerges on my forehead. She smiles for the first time, highlighting a lengthy crescent dimple on her left cheek.

"You gotta name?" she asks.

"I'm sorry. Vincent. Vinny."

"Vincent Vinny. That's a funny name."

“What? No. It’s . . .”

“I’m teasing, Vinny.”

“Sorry. I’m known for lacking communication skills. I’m a salesman, so I better be able to communicate, right?”

“You’re cute, too, Vinny, the way you apologize for everything. Shy like. It’s refreshing. Wish there were more men like you.”

I take a long swig of my Miller’s, hoping to cool the blush I feel building.

“How significant can she be, Vinny, if you’re here and she’s there? Wherever there is.” I suppress a reflex answer, surprised by her change in tone.

“La Cienega, outside of Santa Fe,” I answer, wishing she will forget her first question. Instead, she decides to stay my execution.

“You just allow Lyda to get your mind off that situation,” she says, rising from the barstool, her flat chest moving to within inches of my nose. “Be a dear and have that daiquiri waiting.”

She is more youthful-looking walking away. In the dim lighting her silhouette is that of a model’s. Long silky black hair comes to a point between her shoulders, which she keeps back in perfect posture. Slender arms swing gently back and forth past alluring hips. Her gait is slow and poised. She doesn’t look back, but I’m certain she can feel my unbroken gaze.

I barely have a finger raised when Lloyd says, “I’m on it.” He has transformed from wise guy to Mr. Nice Guy. Makes me wonder if he and the dancers always work in tandem on strangers who wander in off Route 64.

A feeling of being manipulated registers. She disarmed me with the charm of a seasoned country lawyer, stripping away the platitude I deploy in my confrontations with Christine.

“How significant can she be?” indeed.

I have been referring to Christine as my significant other for a long time. I was smitten by her bubbly personality and curly cinnamon hair from the day her marketing firm sent her to make a motivational pitch to our all-male sales department. She deftly sidestepped all the overt flirting without hurting

anyone's feelings. To my delight, she accepted my invitation to dinner. It lasted well into the night, we discovered lots of mutual interests, and both of us laughed uncontrollably about the variety of come-ons men employ. At evening's end, I felt comfortable enough to kiss her cheek. "You're cute, Vinny," she responded, just like Lyda said.

Unlike Christine, Lyda immediately sensed my lack of commitment. She brought the premise of my relationship to Christine crumbling down in a few minutes. It isn't, after all, the same as a marriage vow. A person can walk away—in my case, drive away—from significant others anytime they want.

That realization is lingering when the jukebox jumpstarts again. The guitar riff at the start of "Jesse's Girl" triggers whoops from the plant workers. As Rick Springfield's rhythmic voice joins the plucking of the strings, the plant workers' excitement goes from zero to sixty in an elapsed time my Bel-Air couldn't do on its best day. Lyda rewards their enthusiasm by wiggling her inspired derriere in their direction.

I'm caught up in her teasing, too, until I notice she is staring at me, à la Springfield's lyrics.

And she's watching him with those eyes

And she's loving him with that body, I just know it

Yeah 'n' he's holding her in his arms . . .

And now my eyes are locked onto hers. How long that lasts, I'm not certain, but it takes all the willpower I can muster to break her psychological grip and turn away. Willpower and guilt. Hadn't I been fondly thinking of Christine only moments earlier? As Lyda dances elegantly through a couple of slow tunes—Shorty's pal impatiently boos—I feel the pull of two powerful forces.

"C'mon back, Miss Lyda," Shorty pleads. "He didn't mean it. He's ignorant, is all." As Lyda walks across the room, catching her breath, Shorty slaps the back of his co-worker's head.

She looks lustily at the daiquiri as she reclaims a seat next to me.

"Well?"

"Oh, you were great," I say, squirming on the barstool and wiping my sweating palms onto the knees of my khakis. "Quite the range of dancing talent. Wasn't

expecting that.”

“Well? I mean, what’s her name, this significant woman? Strange that she holds such an important place in your life and yet you didn’t even say what her name is. She does have a name, right?”

I was about to say it, if for no other reason than to escape the interrogation, but catch myself before I do. Two can play the game. “Why all the interest in this person you’ll never know and her relationship to a guy who stops in for a beer and will be on his way, never to be seen or heard from again?”

“I see. That’s why.”

“What?”

“She’s got a prissy name. Penny, short for Penelope. No, wait, a prissy nickname. Ladybug. That’s it, isn’t it? Real name Lucille. Known to all in her wealthy family in the Santa Fe suburbs as Ladybug. Debutant who’s ready to take her place in high society. I’m right, huh?” she says, playfully shoving my thigh in jest.

“No! I mean, no, you’re way off. Christine would never . . .”

She tilts her head, causing her earrings to jingle, and smiles at her victory. As she does, she takes a long, slow swallow from her drink.

I plea for mercy. “Aww, c’mon!”

“Chris-tee-eeen,” come her singsong next words. “Fits.”

I’m squarely on the defensive and irritated. Maybe this uncomfortable line of discussion will die for lack of oxygen, if only I can keep from adding fuel to it.

“Well?” she asks, finishing her drink in astonishing time.

“Well, here we go again. Look, I don’t want to talk about . . . Christine. Draw whatever conclusions you want to. I’m here for a quick beer and then I’m outta here.”

“I meant, ‘Well, are you ready to see what every man comes here to see?’”

Before I can answer, I’m watching the back of her in silhouette again. It affects me in the same way it did initially. Shorty and friend tamp their shouting, rest

the warped house cues against the table, and squirm nervously as they settle back at the bar. They're facing the platform that serves as a stage, clearly eager for what is to come, as Lyda reemerges in yet another costume and chooses a song.

Her back is to all of us, her head tipping downward. She appears to be gathering her thoughts. The first few dance steps are without accompaniment. More steps are added as the soft tapping of a snare becomes audible. The movements are confident and graceful as we hear the family of flutes join in. I wonder if Shorty and his friend recognize Belero. The bartender puts down the glass he is washing. His full attention is piqued. Something special is unfolding.

The transformation is startling. Lyda was a marginally attractive saloon worker who'd been at her job too long. Her questions were intrusive and chaffing. Now, her sophisticated, fluid movements, set to an intoxicating rhythm, turn her into something altogether different.

And this is before her clothes start coming off.

It isn't the quick transition to skimpy bra and thong one might expect at such a remote roadside locale. Nor is it an in-your-face lap dance to separate the patrons from their dollar bills. Lyda is deliberate, exhibiting exquisite ballet-like movements. As she begins the slow removal of her arm-length nylon gloves, Shorty and pal are already tamed puppies. I fear they may have to be resuscitated as she nears her finish.

Lloyd and I join them in emotional exhaustion as Lyda slowly descends into a full split as the music fades out. She is nude save for a vail of black lace—from where it emerged, I have no idea—draped across the length of her back, which faces us, down to the immaculate fold of her cheeks. We sit in silent adoration, we four members of her congregation, having worshiped at the altar of lust.

She is received enthusiastically when she comes out of her changing room in a bulky gray sweatshirt and jeans, her hair clipped back. Shorty and pal, gushing with gratitude, sidle to each side of her at the bar. Both men rummage their pockets for larger bills than what they carry and for bigger words than they know. Lloyd waits for her to accept the daiquiri from his hand instead of planting it, as he usually does, onto the glass bar top.

I feel happy for her as I watch the coronation. This exaltation must be an apex in her daily life, which I can't imagine is very glamorous outside of the Cactus Flower. I flick my wrist and see it's past 10:30. Unless I'm planning to hunker down for some serious drinking into the wee hours, it feels like the appropriate

moment to be on my way.

I wonder, too, if Christine is resigned to me not coming home tonight. Has she fallen asleep in a heap of blankets on the couch, the TV anchorman relaying the last news roundup of the day to her unconscious mind? I glance at my watch again and stir on the barstool.

"Not leaving so soon, are you?" Lyda asks, excusing herself from the others. "I hope you enjoyed the show."

"Lost track of time," I say, still in my seat with hands on my hips, but having turned the stool to face her as she stands beside me. "Drank one too many beers, and now I've got to decide whether to hit the road again or find a place to spend the night. But, hey, you were amazing."

Lyda smiles and looks away a little red-faced. "Thanks. Dancing has always been a part of my life. Even as a little girl in pigtails. Dancing my way to the dinner table. Dancing while I did my chores. Most people, especially Mom and Dad, thought I was a dancing fool."

I place a hand gently on her elbow but quickly let go as she brings her eyes back to mine. The two forces are pulling me in opposite directions again.

"Your kind of talent doesn't come around every day," I tell her.

She smiles again. "Now you sound like Mrs. Northum."

"She being?"

"Oh, a teacher I had in high school. The arts. You know, drama, singing, dance. She used to always tell me I had a gift and shouldn't waste it."

"She was right. Obviously, you took her advice."

"Almost. I almost did."

"How do you almost take advice?"

"Mrs. Northum, bless her, somehow got me an interview at Barnard and I was offered a scholarship. My parents couldn't imagine it, let alone pay for it. Besides, I never would have fit in."

"Wait! You studied dance at Barnard College?"

“Like I said, almost. There was a boyfriend. We were so in love like only teenagers can be. He begged me not to leave as hard as Mrs. Northum begged me to go.”

“Tell me you didn’t . . .”

“Silently, I was hoping for an engagement ring, something to prove the naysayers wrong. It would show them that me and the boyfriend were serious.”

“Shit! I think I know where this is going.”

“No engagement ring. Looking back, there’s no way he could have afforded one. But he did give me the next best thing.”

“Can’t imagine what that is.”

“He promised me I’d always be his significant other. And I was, for a good ten or eleven months. Turns out he wasn’t a one-girl kind of guy. I tried to fix him, like we ladies do, but that just drove him further way. Lost track of his whereabouts within a year after that. Couldn’t tell you if he’s dead or alive.”

I want to tell her something, anything that might make her feel like the center of attention again, but no words will come. All my sales training—never stop talking until the deal is done—fails me. Lyda takes a noticeably deep breath. She is either indifferent to the discomfort or, over time, has become immune to it.

“Well, it’s getting late,” I say.

Her eyes reveal her disappointment.

“Yes, well, Lyda has another set to get ready for,” she says. “The crowds come in late at the Cactus Flower. Probably cause that’s the only time you guys can sneak away.”

I get up from the barstool, brushing at imaginary crumbs on my pants, while Lyda adjusts her hair clip but doesn’t move away. An urge rises to wrap my arms around her and hold on until her pain and my guilt begin to melt. I lean in but hesitate, causing her to hesitate. We back away awkwardly. The intended embrace devolves into a handshake and nervous laughter.

I give a moment’s thought to asking Lloyd about nearby motels, then open the

door to a cool, breezy evening. How many times have I walked out of bars a little unsure of my balance, trying to convince myself I'm okay to drive? All to put distance between Christine and me for a perceived injustice I can't quite remember.

I decide to head home, where I'll apologize, and we'll talk about our feelings. I'll remind Christine of her significance. She will bury her face in my neck, and I'll feel the tear that sluices down her cheek.

I spin the Bel-Air's tires in the loose gravel, and I'm back out on Route 64. Tom Waits clears his throat. In the rearview mirror, a flickering beauty in blue neon toasts my good fortune.

Nathan Leslie

Gulgotay Soup

In one of the strangest rituals on Loaf Island, the Vurn, who resides on the Western side of the island, makes a complicated ingredient-rich soup once a year during the fifth week of the rainy season. Anthropologists do not know for sure exactly what inspired this exacting ritual, but many suspect that the soup is intended to relieve the onset of boredom. In addition, some suspect that the ingredients themselves are intended to mirror the sloppy weather and mock the integrity of the rain itself.

Each year, the Gulgotay Soup is prepared in a central location within the Vurn community—a meeting house or, most commonly, a temple. The base is created by slowly simmering many pounds of fish entrails until they liquefy—forming a thick, almost paste-like base. After the base simmers for approximately one day, Xan nuts, Hjun shoots, gray root, and a mix of yams, blue peppers, lard garlic, and herbs are added. Each member of the Vurn community is tasked with brining one portion of one ingredient if they are able. During the final day, five pounds of cattle fish are slowly stirred into the soup.

The Vurn, unlike any other islanders on our archipelago, like to drink soup with their hands, once it is cool enough—splashing it into their mouths and picking bits of warm fish and vegetables out one by one with their fingers. As a result, the Vurn must wait for the soup to cool to avoid burning their fingers. Mainlanders and even the Flegn on the Eastern side of the island view this habit of eating soup with their hands to be odd and, overall, rather barbaric. If one person is unclean, he sours the entire broth, or so the judgement goes. However, for the Vurn, this method part of the appeal—the soup consists of a community effort, so why not share in the spoils and the germs? It shall only strengthen. Share everything.

The previous governor, who was unsympathetic to the Vurn culture, did attempt to pass legislation against this practice, citing gastro-intestinal maladies that result from sharing such dishes in this manner. However, the law did not pass as a result of two vocal Vurn politicians who threatened reprisals if it became a reality.

Endangered

Taylor Baca



X-Ray

Taylor Baca



Buzzed

Emily Priddy

7 a.m. Aug. 20, 2018 ~ Tumbleweed Motel, Coldwater, N.M.

Morgan's head throbbed dully as she rolled over and shut off the alarm. Her sinuses ached, and her throat burned. So much for starting the new school year on a good note.

As if there were any good notes left, she thought, wincing as she sat up. All the good notes died with Daddy.

She shoved her feet into a pair of dollar-store clogs she'd bought at the beginning of summer. They didn't exactly fit, but they were less uncomfortable than anything else she owned at the moment. Grabbing the clothes she'd laid out the night before, she schlepped into the bathroom to get ready for school.

Morgan turned on the shower and inspected her face as she waited for the water to heat up. Her eyes were bloodshot, with dark rings under them that stood out against her pale skin, and her hair was a tangled mess. She looked like death. Felt like it, too. This would have to happen the night before school started back.

She felt a little guilty for grumbling, even if it was only to herself. Brother Jerry's wife didn't die last night just to inconvenience Morgan, and poor Brother Jerry had to get up this morning to face the day without her for the first time in fifty years. Morgan shouldn't stand here feeling sorry for herself just because she had a headache. She knew what it felt like to face her first day without someone she loved. She choked back a sob as she stepped under the water, dreading the sight of somebody else taking Daddy's place in the all-district assembly they'd have that morning.

By the time she finished her shower and padded into the kitchen, Morgan felt a little better.

"Good morning, Morgan," Grandma Sandy greeted her. "Are you ready for a new school year?"

Morgan shrugged as her grandmother dished pancakes onto her plate.

"You'll be OK," Mom said. "I know it's hard to be there without your dad, but you can handle it."

Morgan made a noncommittal sound and took a sip of tea from the cup her grandmother set in front of her. "May I have the syrup, please?"

Her mother passed her the bottle.

"What can we do to make this easier for you?" Grandma Sandy asked.

"Nothing," Morgan said. "I'm just tired."

"I'm sorry." Grandma Sandy sat down next to her. "It's hard being different."

"I'm not just different. 'Different' is having glasses or dyeing your hair blue or liking girls instead of boys. I'm not different. I'm a monster." Morgan speared a bite of pancake, wincing as her fork screeched against the plate. She put her fork in her mouth and willed herself to chew and swallow. "I really can't eat this, Grandma. I'm sorry. I just—you know how it is after I've cried."

Grandma Sandy nodded, her eyes sad. "I know, Sweetie. It's OK." She patted Morgan's shoulder. "Hang in there. Maybe today will be better than you think."

Half an hour later, Grandma Sandy's words proved to be less than prophetic.

Dr. Scherer had discovered some kind of problem with the new fourth-grade teacher's certificate and had sent her to Santa Fe to sort it out. Unable to find a substitute on such short notice, Dr. Scherer had asked Mrs. Bodine to cover Morgan's class for the day.

Morgan didn't know why Mrs. Bodine hated her. She always had—ever since Morgan was in kindergarten. The woman seemed to think Morgan cried on purpose, and nothing Daddy said had ever really convinced her otherwise.

Today, Morgan wasn't crying. Thank God for small favors. She got out her social studies textbook and turned to the page Mrs. Bodine had written on the board. The air conditioner had gone out again, and the maintenance man was waiting on somebody to come from Albuquerque to fix it. In the meantime, Mrs. Bodine had opened the windows and set a box fan in one of them with a damp T-shirt stretched over it to create a makeshift swamp cooler. Morgan had to admit that it was a clever solution, even if she was pretty sure the principal had deliberately placed the fan in the window farthest from Morgan's seat.

Everybody was quiet, reading the assignment, when Maria Moya let out a shriek.

"OhmygodohmygodohmygodohmygodWASP!" she squealed, jumping out of her seat and running across the room in terror.

"And she says I'm a crybaby," Morgan muttered. She made a mental note of the wasp's location near one of the light fixtures on the ceiling and went back to her reading. Unless it got too close and managed to get itself tangled up in her hair, it was unlikely to sting her.

Mrs. Bodine was unusually quiet, her eyes as big as saucers. "Somebody go get Mr. Meeks," she said. Her voice cracked, and her breath sounded uneven.

"You scared of wasps, Mrs. Bodine?" a boy behind Morgan asked. He'd just moved to Coldwater over the summer, and Morgan couldn't remember his name—Carl or Carlos or something like that.

"Allergic," Mrs. Bodine gasped.

"Wait. Like, swell up and itch allergic, or die if they sting you allergic?" Maria's friend Liz asked.

"Anaphylactic."

Well, that was a good reason to be scared.

"Ana-what?" Liz asked.

"Anaphylactic," Mrs. Bodine said, keeping her eyes on the wasp. "A bee stung me on the golf course a few years ago. My throat closed up and I couldn't breathe. If Dr. Guzman hadn't been on the course at the time, I would have died."

Maria's eyes widened. "Oh, no! That thing could kill you! Somebody do something!"

"Aw, I've got you, Mrs. Bodine," Carl-or-Carlos said. The wasp had flown back down toward the windows and was bobbing around near one of the blinds. Carl-or-Carlos started swatting at it.

"Stop it!" Morgan snapped. "You'll just make it mad, and then it really will sting somebody."

"And how would you know that, Crybaby?" Maria sneered. She was standing next to the door, ready to make a run for it.

“Because I’m a beekeeper, genius.”

Carl-or-Carlos was still swatting at the wasp. This fool was going to get the principal killed. Not that she didn’t deserve it, but still.

“Daddy taught me about pollinators,” Morgan said. She blinked away the tears that clouded her vision at the thought of her father. “That’s a paper wasp. Paper wasps only sting if they feel threatened. If you just sit still and quit provoking it, it won’t bother you.”

Mrs. Bodine took her eyes off the wasp long enough to glare at Morgan. “Easy for you to say. I don’t suppose you’re deathly allergic to the nasty things, are you, Miss Know-It-All?”

Morgan was running out of patience. “No,” she said, “but you are, and I am trying to keep it from killing you. If everybody will just sit down and leave it alone until it lands somewhere, I’ll get rid of it for you.”

Mrs. Bodine wavered, apparently torn between her need to win an argument with Morgan and her need to get through the day without going into anaphylactic shock. She stared at Morgan for a long moment. Morgan stared back, wondering whether the principal’s survival instincts would override her ego. It wasn’t often that Morgan felt confident around the woman, but she’d spent too much time tending her bees with Daddy to have any fear of pollinators—especially a species as docile as paper wasps.

The wasp flew toward the middle of the classroom, with Carl-or-Carlos in hot pursuit. It headed up toward the lights, then dropped down toward Mrs. Bodine’s desk. With a yelp, she ducked to avoid the insect. “Charles!” she shouted from under the desk. “Stop chasing that wasp and go get Mr. Meeks!”

Oh, right. Charles. Morgan knew it was something like that.

Charles shrugged and headed for the door. “Jeez, Mrs. Bodine. I was just trying to help.”

“You’ve been helpful enough,” Mrs. Bodine said. “Go. Now. Morgan, are you sure you know what you’re talking about?”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Morgan said. “If everybody will just sit still and wait for it to park itself somewhere, I’ll catch it and put it out.”

"Or kill it," Mrs. Bodine said, frowning. "I think we'd all be safer if you killed it."

Morgan ignored her. "I'm going to shut off the lights, so it'll go toward the windows. Anybody who's afraid of wasps can come over here," she said. She walked across the room and flipped the switch next to the door. The room didn't darken much, but Morgan figured removing the artificial light source would at least eliminate one source of confusion and encourage the little creature to come down from the ceiling.

Right on cue, the wasp flew toward the window nearest Morgan's seat and began bumping against the glass. Morgan picked up a sheet of construction paper from a worktable behind her, fished an empty Styrofoam cup out of the trash next to Mrs. Bodine's desk, and walked over to the window.

"Here, baby. Sh-sh-sh-sh-sh. I know. You're scared. I won't hurt you. Just settle down. That's it. Just sit still...there you go. I've got you." Moving quickly, she caught the wasp in the cup, covered it with the paper, and held the makeshift trap out the open window. With a firm shake, she released the wasp and shut the window behind it so it wouldn't come back in.

Mrs. Bodine was looking at Morgan with something like suspicion in her eyes. "You seemed awfully comfortable handling that thing."

There was an unspoken accusation in the principal's tone. What was she trying to say? Being competent was not, as far as Morgan knew, against the school rules.

She shrugged. "We had a nest next to our back door the summer before last," she said. "They kept coming in. Daddy usually took care of them, but—" Morgan faltered for a second. She took a deep breath. "Anyway. I learned by watching him." And then, because she couldn't resist, she added: "You're welcome. I know it's a big relief to have it out of here."

Mrs. Bodine didn't have anything to say to that. Morgan knew if Daddy could have seen the expression on her face, he would have said she looked as if she'd swallowed a turd.

Lumière de Lutétia

Veronica Morgan



Ring Pop

Veronica Morgan

plastic, sugar, perfect
sat on my finger
a kind of promise

you placed it on my hand
I never want to let you go
and told me
then don't

plastic, sugar, gone
candy doesn't last
plastic cracks,
breaks
and ends up in the trash

I'm Lost

Veronica Morgan

and as i breathe in the colored fall air
and think about the way
our fingers slipped
into place
locked with each other

i know
that someday that memory
will no longer be sweet like rose thorns
because soon
i will be free
from the last of your itching
mosquito bites

and with clear snow cool skin
i will welcome
winter
where i no longer wait
for your burning embers
and create a fire
of my
own

Corrigible

Tenika Heidelberg

Do you have an eraser?
I've made too many mistakes.
A scribble of life, a blotch
begging for a clean slate.

Can I borrow your eraser?
To adjust life regrets.
A shifting of choices,
to avoid subconscious frets.

Do you have a pen too?
Black or blue will do.
I'll write down happy,
knowing it means you.

How about a paper?
Untouched. Pure.
And appreciated.
Can I borrow that too?

I'm beginning to think
it's the only way... I can renew.
Can you just erase me?
It will be good for you.

At A Glance

Tenika Heidelberg



Boxed in Ambivalence

Lucy Martinez

Macchiato, caramel, white,
no matter the shade of color I continuously get called
there will be no real box that I check off.

Every time I get asked what race I am,
especially on the questionnaires at every new doctor's office or survey,
I stare at the fact that they tell me to only pick one.

The girls on the bus tell me to pick Caucasian
because my tint never matched the brown
that has put them into situations I will never experience.
No man, no woman will tell me to go back to my country,
nor will they call me red-skinned or just another native.

And yet, my mother tells me to check the Hispanic box
because her not so biological father wants us
to pride ourselves in what he realizes we are not.

My father tells me to check the native islander box,
to take pride of where my grandmother came from
to show off who I am.
But when you learn that in your blood there is always a colonizer,
you never get to run from their light-tainted blood.

And yet, here I am always having to pick one.

Book Lover

Lucy Martinez

Flipping me over like a reader
eager for the next page.

Tongue whispering to the crack of my binding.

He read me for pleasure and lacked in creating anything entertaining as a
writer.

He didn't really tell me a secret, but he explicitly told me not to tell anyone else.

That his performance in his penmanship lacked.

That he tries to make up for his feeble writing by caressing the sturdy spine of
the book,

showing gentle care

to hide the countless times that he split her open from ear to ear.

There he shredded her pages, the meat of the book.

And every time he was finished

back on his shelf she would go.

Boxed in,

arms reach away

ready for his convenience.

He liked reading.

He liked sharing what he read.

But he never comprehended that by wearing down each loose-leaf paper
comes with fading the voice embedded in the pages.

Making her worse than when he first got it.

Trapped in the shelf,

She becomes another used book.

Eyes

Cody Wilhelm

As rageful red eyes swell
and swerve between
us;
bruised knuckles
bleed into a
cracked mirror.
The radio hums
a song that

reminds us
that we'll die
before we have
the chance to
forget one another.
We forgot the words
so long ago

but we continue
to whisper
sacred sounds
spoken in silence.
We look for
God

in each other's eyes
and only find
more questions.
It is a burden
to breathe

under the weight
of your
obscure promises.
Hostage to

your pity,
your pride,
your petal-colored lips.

It's difficult to know you,
and harder still

to hang on to you.

Seattle's Spanish Skirts

Cody Wilhelm

You're from the cloudy shores
where the stink of the ocean
attaches itself to everything;
as misty gloom descends
into your streets
and blends in with your
warm breath.

I come from the skies
that move the earth.
The winds of the great plains
carry our soil and our souls,
brown horizons block out the sun
yet our cotton stays white.
Red-brown dry dirt and sand stretches
across the hot sunny sky
I wish I knew less of.

I don't want to be buried
in my ocean of layered arid rock.
I don't want to live
in your desert of flowing ocean salt.
The Plains don't have your
trees, mountains, and oceans
but there aren't any Spanish Skirts in Seattle.

The Seattle sun shimmers on the sea,
The Southern wind whispers words
in the rustlings of the cottonwood leaves.
It tells me I should chase you;
that I should not find my home in a place
but I should find my home within you.

Sweatsoaked Dreams

Alan Abrams

In sweatsoaked dreams, I return
to a sunbleached stretch of asphalt,
somewhere north of Ojo Sarco. There—
at the bottom of a barren gorge—
a silent Chevy pickup rusts away.
I, too, hold some secrets
I will carry to my grave.

In Praise of the Office Husband

Nancy Ford Dugan

"It's beginning to look like I'm never going to be described as swashbuckling."

Gary was standing in front of Polly's desk, holding his box of office and personal belongings.

Another office husband bites the dust.

He'd be fine. Or not.

But, as with the vast majority of Polly's office husbands, she'd most likely never see him again.

In Gary's case, that would be a particular shame. Polly would dearly miss:

- his surprisingly excellent advice in selecting eyeglass frames, wisely steering her away from the oversized shapes and vivid colors she yearned for, but that Gary insisted would "overwhelm her delicate features;"
- his constant replacement of the blue uni-ball caps back onto the fine-point pens she scattered across her desk;
- his daily clockwork swing by her office at ten minutes to noon to collect her and dash outside to grab an overpriced sandwich they'd grumble about all the way back to their respective individual offices, where they'd unwrap and gulp it down alone, chewing and waiting on mute for their 12:00 p.m. conference calls to start.

The office husbands, they come and go... not talking of Michelangelo, but rather sodium-rampant, overpriced, and over-mayonnaised Pret A Manger sandwiches.

* * *

Polly's first office husband, Trigg, was a screamer and a smoker.

"Jesus." He'd slam down the receiver of the black landline phone, grab his cigarette out of the filthy, full ashtray, and bray, "They need thirty in Dayton! How fast can we get 'em?" He'd yank at his shaggy bangs with one hand and take a long drag of his cigarette with the other, his potbelly slightly stretching against the fabric of his light blue Brooks Brothers shirt.

“Maybe we can shift some gals from Detroit?” Polly would ask, grabbing both the Magic Marker and the felt eraser as she moved closer to the color-coded scheduling wall.

Trigg and Polly constituted the “Scheduling Department,” situated in a small nook intentionally separated from the rest of the office by glass. The benefits of the glass were twofold: everyone could instantly see the up-to-date changes on the scheduling wall, and it somewhat muffled Trigg’s bellowing.

Polly and Trigg were good-naturedly combustible together. If he yelled at her, she spoke loudly and firmly back. The glass encouraged them to put on a show, despite the rest of the office frequently asking them in polite Midwestern fashion to please (pronounced “puh-leeze”) lower their voices. Instead, Polly and Trigg wrung as much drama as they could out of redeploying country-wide marketing research staff to handle unexpected changes in scheduling Day After Recall surveys.

Polly was on the company’s supposedly esteemed Rotational Training Program, getting schooled in “Scheduling” by the expert Trigg. She’d already completed Questionnaire Design, as well as the dreaded Supervisor/Management requirement: Weekly, she’d travel in wobbly planes and wintry weather to Midwestern cities, set up a recorder in a poorly lit hotel room near the dinky airport, and tape-record a TV commercial as it was shown “live” in the midst of some popular TV event (e.g., Monday Night Football). Then the next day, in whatever city she was in, she drove a stenchy rental car over unfamiliar, icy roads to the company’s local office. There, she would “supervise” a jam-packed room of poufy-haired ladies at least twenty years older than she was as they telemarketed the hell out of their community, calling to see if folks remembered the commercial and, if so, what they remembered.

At least in Scheduling, no travel was required. From Polly’s perspective, that was a plus.

After the adrenaline rush of solving the scheduling “crises” du jour, Trigg would slump happily in his swivel chair, in an almost self-satisfied, postcoital way, enjoying a new cigarette and praising Polly for her brilliant solutions and support.

Unbeknownst to Polly, and despite the company’s “no fraternization” policy, Trigg was secretly engaged to Maggie, a petite, deep-voiced, chain-smoking colleague who calmly dealt with Trigg’s outbursts. Polly lost touch with them after she moved to the east coast.

* * *

She met her next office husband at a New York City sales job where Polly made no use of any of the things she'd learned on the rotational program. Fred was an easygoing, slightly dim, prematurely balding, blond sportsaholic from upstate NY. He was new to the city and looked it. He wore a hockey cap when they tried and failed to get into Studio 54.

Since Fred was deferential and sports-loving, the (all) male executives loved hanging out with him, which kind of pissed Polly off. Yet, it was Polly who got a highly visible appointment, and that ended up pissing Fred off. Things smoothed over when he married Polly's best friend at work and then promptly got seriously ill. Hooked up to chemo in the hospital, he'd call Polly at her office and say, "Make me laugh." Polly would frantically scan her brain for material to keep him engaged, resorting to silly accents to "sell" her anecdotes and trying not to sound as scared as she truly was about his health situation. Fred survived and immediately moved to Texas, where he became a staunch conservative, a father, and a driven, hardworking employee.

* * *

At a new job with major changes in responsibilities, Polly was grateful to have smart, mild-mannered, Cinnabon-devouring, part-time pilot Keith as a colleague and eventual office husband. Not only could Keith coach her on the new functional area she was working in, but he also patiently listened to her personal woes, which seemed to be mounting.

At the time, Polly was accidently dating an inappropriate entrepreneur. He left filthy, explicit messages with their elegant receptionist, who painstakingly, conscientiously wrote them down, word for filthy word. Polly was mortified. Keith tried to stifle his chuckle as he read the offensive messages on the tiny, square-shaped "while you were out" slips of paper. He closed her office door and tried to calm her down. Finally, he asked her very quietly, "What do you want?" He repeated this phrase softly a couple of times. Polly never really had an answer. But she did get rid of the entrepreneur.

Keith's calmness was an oasis for her. Her career was blooming, and she could depend on him for advice and not to gossip. He had a charming mild sputter when he got excited about a new office system or a flight he took or something funny his parents said. Once in the lobby at Lincoln Center, Polly spotted a familiar-looking face on a stunning Black woman. She looked so much like Keith that Polly impulsively bolted over to the startled woman. Against all odds, she was Keith's mother, and she was understandably confused who Polly was.

So was Polly.

Keith ended up marrying a successful, high-strung white woman and living happily ever after in New Jersey. They had adorable kids Polly watched grow up via photos in their annual holiday cards. Keith knew what he wanted.

* * *

Interspersed between her “official” office husbands (she was monogamous—only one office husband at a time), Polly’s path was strewn with a slate of second-tier male colleagues who didn’t quite achieve full office-husband status but were nonetheless in the hunt.

Peter, for example, was a jolly extrovert who loudly called her “Doll,” praised the healing properties of turmeric long before anyone else did, and believed dressing properly was the secret to success. But his daily scrutiny of Polly’s work attire was so exhausting she moved her office to a different floor.

Sweet Miguel made her mixed tapes she never had time to listen to, a fact that haunted her after he died of AIDS at 36.

Eric offended everyone he met, questioned their IQs, and insisted he was often mistaken for a movie star. Yet he had an endearing “lost boy” quality Polly felt obligated to endure. This was later in her long career when office-husband candidates suddenly skewed much younger than she was. Technically, it was probably more appropriate to designate them as “office sons.” But she didn’t.

One-legged Dennis talked a lot about mulch and got fired only months after starting at Polly’s company. Yet despite the short duration of their time working together, Dennis turned out to be the only office mate to call Polly directly when her real husband unexpectedly died.

* * *

Polly had her office husbands only for the days, and sometimes lunch. After work, she’d wipe her hands of them and they of her. It was understood they’d act as sounding boards for each other, a distraction, and sometimes a support.

Someday soon, Polly expected she, too, would be dumping her stuff in a recycled box just like Gary’s.

The office husbands would all be fine. Would Polly?

Her long-standing skeletal doorman had recently informed her of his upcoming timeline to retire to Florida. This filled Polly with irrational panic. She was happy for Gus. But with a longtime tenant's self-absorbed magical thinking, she'd worked on the assumption that Gus would always be there for her. That at some point, whenever she stopped working, he'd informally and eternally become a sort of pseudo-office husband in a loose-fitting doorman's suit.

Maybe Gus's retirement was for the best. Did she want to become one of those unemployed city women who spent way too much time hanging out with (and boring) their doorman? And who never noticed the eye rolls or look of dread on the faces of the entire building maintenance team whenever she appeared in the lobby?

Did she want to become one of those dead-eyed, dry-haired women who spent their days wandering the city streets alone (or with a tiny dog whose leash they'd yank ferociously, giving them some sense of control over something in their lives)?

Would she be eternally stuck in her Flexall-fumed apartment watching the delicate, easy-to-tangle chain on her grandmother's gold locket swing back and forth on her bedroom doorknob? A locket she never wears. A locket Polly has no one she can bequeath it to.

In the meantime, here comes thoughtful Raoul from Accounting.

"I'm sure you're going to miss Gary," Raoul said. "Would you like to get some lunch?"

"Sure." Polly smiled and grabbed her purse. She'd never had an office husband from Accounting before. Maybe he would be the one to help her finally figure out what she wanted. Or at least come up with a game plan. Maybe a retirement package? But lucky Gus, definitely not in Florida.

Visually Protected Cacti

William C. Crawford



I Have Nothing

Wit lee

I have nothing
Except these two holes inserted into my body
(You mean eyes?)
A deserted battlefield
Created by a melancholy head.
(So tears escape?)

I discern, as I stroll
The moonlight pierces into my soul
Like a woodpecker
She is a doctor, yet could not cure my mind.

Now, pick up your pens, she says,
To make a portrait, see how the shadow imitates your foot
And walks like a real man: If the day
Be fainted by the darkness?

Yes, it's me who have stolen your face
And hide it in the shadow of the mundane
Now, it's time to recollect your face
Your lip, your nose, and your voice

A new man must be recreated

Beyond Alexis Levitin

The first strange thing I noticed was that when I clicked on Skype my entire chat list was online. Everyone was marked with a green light. “How delightful,” I thought. “Now I can talk to anyone I like.” So, I clicked on Nick and waited. But he never picked up. And the screen had no explanation. It didn’t say he was off-line; it didn’t say he had rejected my call. It said nothing at all.

So, I clicked on my faithful ex-girlfriend, Esmeralda, down in Brazil, hoping for a pleasant chat, filled with her usual good-will, daily minutia, and vast philosophical vacuity. I waited and waited. Nothing happened. But this was a good time to call. It was 11:05 P.M. in her hometown and her beloved soap opera about the life of our Redeemer would have ended five minutes ago. But nothing. Very strange indeed. Had tonight been the last segment? Had she been swept up in the Rapture?

I tried my son out in California. It was just the time when he was about to give his four-year-old daughter Felicity her evening bubble bath. That or dessert time were always the best. I enjoyed her slurping down her evening yogurt or spooning huge mouthfuls of strawberry ice cream into her flexibly wide mouth. I would lean forward, agape against the camera, begging for my own share, and she would giggle and pretend to spoon me some of what she was devouring. But I was ready to settle for the evening bath, her huge eyes, tiny slender body, all surrounded by fluffy white bubbles. But nothing. No response. No explanation. Just silence.

I was disappointed, but doggedly persevered. I clicked on my old pal with endless back problems up in Toronto. He was always at home, suffering. For him no position—standing, sitting or lying—was ever pain-free. Nothing. My writer friend in Minneapolis, with his high forehead, wire-rimmed glasses, and wild old-man’s beard, always working on some new problem in human relations, human perception, some new articulation of the human dilemma. He was working, I calculated, on his thirteenth novel. Surely, he was in need of a break. I waited. Nothing.

By now it was breakfast time in Portugal, so I tried my best friend over there, a woman of profound intelligence, effortlessly wrapped in numerous languages and pervasive good-will. Her green light was on; she was no doubt sipping a homemade cappuccino, munching on toast with a light coating of apricot marmalade. But to no avail, nothing happened.

Wondering if something had gone wrong with my Skype service, I turned to my black thirty-year old land line and dialed my brother. I waited for the ring back tone, but it never came. Nothing came. The line was dead. Then I dialed my oldest friend in town, retired, like me, from the college, after a meritorious forty-year career. She navigated, such as it was, with a walker. I could count on her being at home. I knew the number by heart and dialed as I always did. No answer tone, no nothing. I slammed down the phone, then picked it up again. No dial tone. Just an inert weight in my hand. Maybe the electricity had gone out in my rural community. I looked out the side window. My neighbor's house was dark by now, but, as usual, the front light was on. For that matter my own lights were on. A peculiar situation.

I turned back to my computer, turned it off, rebooted and waited. A lovely picture materialized of untouched mountains in Moldavia and, just below, the sign-in window waiting for my passcode. I typed it in, hit enter, and found myself at my desktop. Everything there seemed normal. I clicked on the Google Chrome icon and waited for my webmail account to show up. And there it was. But there was no new mail. The last messages, the usual political pleas for money from my party of choice, had registered the night before, around midnight. How could I get no mail all day? It didn't make sense. And where had the day gone? I had drifted in and out of sleep. First it had been dark, then light, then dark again. That was about all I could remember. I was beginning to think I might have to call up the Geeks at Best Buy. They couldn't do much about the day I seemed to have lost, but surely the computer malfunction was up their alley. It was pretty clear I needed a specialist, and they were the right folks to call. But then I remembered. I could call, but who would answer?

I turned back to my desktop and clicked on the Word icon. Sure enough, it opened up. I found my new collection of stories stored away, safe and sound. All thirty of them appeared in order and when I opened one up, there it was. "The Lady I Killed," still in progress, still only half complete. To escape my frustration, I turned to the unfinished story. Why not work on it now. So, I imagined the narrator returning to the imperious lady's main house, where she gloried in the wall-sized photo of herself as a little girl perched on Pablo Picasso's knee. I typed "It was time to return to the main house." Nothing happened. Nothing appeared on my screen. The story stood immutable, untouched, just as it had been the last time I had worked on it. Rage, impotence, dread. I had been deserted by the technology that all of us now relied upon.

I grabbed an old pencil and stuck it in the automatic electric pencil sharpener on the side of my desk. There was a hum and a buzz, and the pencil emerged

sharp as a pin. Now I could return to that story, cybernetics be damned. Eagerly, I clasped the pencil and, bending over a large yellow pad, I wrote: "It was time to return to the main house." I looked at the yellow sheet of legal sized paper. There was nothing on it. The lovely sharp point had snapped off as soon as it touched the paper. Nothing, not even a dot. Just the deep blue lines and the double margin lines in red. I hadn't been able to write a thing. I stuck a second pencil in the sharpener. Nothing happened. I checked the cord, but it was still plugged into the wall socket. The study was heavy with silence. The 19th century fair-haired aristocratic child in his frame on the wall stared out at me with his usual enigmatic gaze. My neighbor's front light still twinkled in the dark. Even my own lights were still on. No, it wasn't exactly a power outage. But something was wrong.

I strode to the kitchen and gulped down some nice cold apple cider. In fact, though it was pleasantly cool, it wasn't really cold. And that autumnal tang that I had always liked so much was a bit tainted by a heavy scent of fermentation, as if the season were already drifting away. I munched on one of those chocolate covered graham crackers that were my favorite snack. The crunch felt good, but the cracker had a hint of staleness, as if its life were already on the wane. I gazed out the window, but what could I expect to see on my rural country road at that time of night (Was it still night? What time was it? My digital clock said 11:30, in glowing red, but that's what it had said all evening, or was it all day?). Everything out there seemed paralyzed. There was no wind, no breeze. Of course, no car drove by. Utter silence. It was hard to imagine that anything outside that window would ever move again.

After the chocolate-coated graham cracker, I ate a second one, but it tasted a bit staler even than the first. Disappointed, but still munching, I thought it might be a good idea to step outside for a breath of crisp late autumn air. I put on a ski jacket and my usual red woolen cap and made my way to the front door. I turned the handle, but nothing happened. I squeezed hard and turned and still nothing happened. I couldn't open the door.

I will not bore you with the details of my slow discovery. But finally, after many more futile attempts on the phone, both the landline and the cell phone, after many more efforts to break through on Skype or email, after trying to tune in to BBC news at 2 A.M., at 3, at 4, at 5, or what I calculated to be 2, 3, 4, and 5, I finally stopped my efforts to connect. I sat in my most comfortable armchair, my only armchair, in fact, and tried to think.

It could not be denied that something had changed. That sometime between eleven and twelve at night (it was night, after all, wasn't it?) a rather uncanny

stillness had descended upon the house, that a certain stasis seemed to have possessed everything around me. That from that moment on my efforts at any form of connection had been in vain. Old emails from Save the Wolves and Save the Children were still there in my computer and all those green lights on my list of Skype friends suggested that they were all alive and well, all of them happily online, chatting away with one another, but not with me. Yes, they were all fine. They were not cut off. They were probably laughing over the President's latest gaff or bemoaning the recent typhoon in Indonesia or comparing vacation prices in Puerto Escondido and Puerto Vallarta. No, it slowly dawned on me, the only one cut off was me. And I pondered what it could mean.

Needless to say, I finally began to figure it out. When I went to the bathroom to relieve myself and leaned carefully over the toilet bowl so as not to stain my trousers with an errant old-man's trickle, the facts, such as they were, began to come together. A pattern was forming. There was no stream, no trickle. There was nothing. My most fundamental life processes seemed to be giving out. After that first jag of crying, my earliest activity in this world had been to urinate. It had come quite naturally. And now? I wracked my brain for a logical explanation, a reasonable solution to the strangeness of that endless night. And with a shudder, I began to scent the truth. I reached out to my side table and picked up a tiny pen knife that always lay there to help me open my mail, the pleas for contributions to Smile Train, CARE, Doctors Without Borders, Save the Chimps, the monthly bills for electric and gas, wi-fi, and credit card expenditures. I have always been a rather shamefully squeamish guy, but in this emergency, I steeled myself, so to speak. I opened the pen knife, held out my left thumb and, with an impressive show of courage, sliced across the surface with a tentative little slash. I looked and there, like a simple line in the Peruvian desert, was the slash. But no blood oozed forth. Nothing in fact had changed.

From that moment on I understood that what had been said had been said, what was written was written, what was done was done and what had been left undone would remain so forever. In a word, the consummation of my years had slipped upon me unnoticed sometime that day, that evening, that night. I would never finish "The Woman I Killed." I would never say goodbye to my long-time colleague, my lovely ex-girlfriend dripping with innocence and ignorance in her humid jungle city, my brother downstate, now truly estranged, my children, and my granddaughter, the final blessing of my life, my pussy-cat, my unicorn, my snowflake princess, covered in soap-suds and smiling with her enormous eyes, thousands of miles away, far back, and receding from me at the speed of light, disappearing with the world of time itself.

Coneflower

Benjamin Nash

I saw the blue passion flower with two bees on it, but it was the Ruby Star coneflower that I bought at the nursery with one bee that followed me out to my truck, the petals sticking out, pink, purple, pretty, planted in the pot with the orange coneflower, its petals bending down, unable to spin like I imagine a flying saucer would, orange, pink lights in the night.

I thought about the fireman that they brought in on the red fire engine, the men in yellow and black coats, buzzing around outside, bees stinging their friend, dying inside, the sadness on their faces, a husband, a father not coming home in a poor country. I hope that someone gave him their hand when he got to where he was going, that he will get the promises that Robert Penn Warren talked about, that I heard about in church, that he won't be angry with the bees for what they did, accept what they do for us, and I would like to have seen an orange sun the color of the flower with a little blue in the sky, yellow and white flying saucers like coneflowers up above me, something special in them, that someone could tell me for sure that the fireman is happy.

Quintessence of Dust

Nolo Segundo

[With a nod to the Bard]

We are the moving dust,
we are the breathing dust,
we are the seeing dust,
we are the living dust.

But how, you ask, and rightly
so, can dust fall asleep,
dreaming of places unknown
and lovers unmet—how can
dust imagine whole worlds
and love with one heart for
60 winters and 60 summers?

And do the notes that stir life
come also from dust, just a
little dust, and nothing more?
When the music is played
and dust dances with dust,
and dust laughs with dust,
and soon dust loves dust,
can dust ever understand
the paradox of its own
being, from dust to dust?

Not until the winds comes,
the warm winds of Eternity,
will dust be blown away,
leaving the unseen soul
alive, to walk and breathe
and dance and love, bathed
forever in the dustless Light.

At Dawn

Victor Basta

Because night knows me
better than anyone else,
sometimes, waking, a word
will come. Hesitant at first,
then insistent, delivering
a message like a gift.

Outside, the plane trees
pause their branches over the sidewalk.
The lights of the school windows
button their building to a brown sky.
Here and there dry air signs a dead language
that we call shadow.

There are days that begin
with wishing the dead farewell.
There are other days, like this,
that begin with foreboding
arriving like a gift.

Travelers

Heather Rutherford

Grace slowed to a stop and parked alongside the filthy, gray snowbank. Murray Street had been plowed, salted, and sanded, but Mr. Marino's steep driveway remained shiny-black after last night's refreeze. She slid open her van door, and bending her knees the way her doctor had advised, she dragged the white, plastic bag of salt on the van floor closer to her. After last year's fall, Grace kept salt in her vehicle. She scooped the salt with a battered metal measuring cup and tossed it up the slope of the driveway, then scattered more on the sidewalk. She got back in her van, dialed up the heat, and waited for her salt to melt the ice or at least to provide a bit of traction for her climb up Mr. Marino's driveway because climb it she would, despite the weather and its complications. He counted on her weekly visit, not just for her housekeeping and careful attention to his laundry but for her company as well.

The clock on her dashboard read 7 a.m., and the temperature was only eight degrees. In the dim light, Grace could see that Mr. Marino's inside lights had not yet been switched on. His nurse, or rather nursing assistant, should have been there by now, but no, of course she wasn't. It didn't matter which one the agency sent, they were all late and disrespectful—every last one of them. No one came or went into the homes on Murray Street this early in the morning anymore. The old homes with front stoops where neighbors used to talk had been quietly pirated and turned into housing for college students. Greedy landlords rented rooms to too many kids who smoked and drank all hours of all days—Sundays even. No one checked on Mr. Marino, not one of them, not once.

Grace eyed the slow-moving Buick as it rolled down Murray Street, the driver lobbing the occasional Times Union in the vague vicinity of a front stoop. Not many people on Mr. Marino's street subscribed to the local paper, and that was a shame because keeping up with the goings-on in the community was important. She lifted her hand in a wave as the Buick driver passed, but he did not return her greeting.

She wondered what had happened to paperboys. Mr. Marino's sons, at least two of them, had been paperboys. They'd pedaled their bikes, their skinny legs and bony knees in constant motion, their scrawny arms hurling the paper—it had been bigger then and called the Albany Times—and hitting their mark: the front stoop above its top step, each and every time. They were good boys, except for the one who got into the wrong crowd, running drugs up from the city. He landed himself in jail and ended up dead under suspicious

circumstances. But she didn't repeat that story out of respect for Mr. Marino and because one never knew who was listening.

Her clock read 7:12 a.m., and if she left her car now and her salt had done its job, she would be inside Mr. Marino's front hall at 7:15. Grace locked the van's door for obvious reasons. When the weather turned, she'd called Mr. Marino's daughter-in-law, the one married to the oldest, Jonathon. Jonathon's wife agreed—reluctantly—to allow Grace to leave her cleaning supplies in the spare bedroom closet, which was empty, completely empty, and Grace knew that woman couldn't come up with a single reason to deny her, especially after her fall last February. Grace had been prepared to remind Jonathon's wife that she'd kept house for Mr. Marino long before that woman was in the picture and that she'd brought Sunday dinner to him and his sons for months after Mrs. Marino passed. But it hadn't come to that. So, Grace didn't have a thing to carry into Mr. Marino's house except, of course, her pocketbook and her stack of freshly washed cleaning rags. She took those home with her after every visit and bleached them.

Her boots held firm on the sidewalk, and at the base of Mr. Marino's driveway, she turned her body sideways and inched herself up the slope. Her left foot slid a bit, and she reached for the frozen snow piled high on either side of the asphalt. Grace dug her gloved fingers in and regained her footing. She said a brief prayer to St. Christopher, who was known to protect travelers, and this journey up Mr. Marino's slippery, sheer driveway certainly merited the saint's intervention.

Grace was nearly to her employer's front stoop and began to worry that she was late, a minute or two past her always prompt 7:15 arrival time. She worried that Mr. Marino would fear she'd had an accident. He might pace the floor of his bedroom, though he'd been instructed to wait until one of the ever-tardy nursing assistants arrived to help him. Grace performed that task many times, and she would do it again today, she was sure. She was thinking about helping Mr. Marino with his walker, wrapping his plaid, flannel robe around his narrow shoulders, when her left foot began to slide again.

Grace lunged for the snowbank, but her gloved fingers only brushed the ice, and the downward motion of her hands threw her weight forward. Her foot skated out from under her. She hinged at the hips, and her face hit the hard snowbank, then scraped along the base of it until her head thudded against the driveway. Grace reached out, trying to catch hold of anything to slow her quickening skid down Mr. Marino's driveway. There was nothing to catch, though. She left a trail of cleaning rags behind her and then smashed, hip first, into the frozen curb. She heard and felt the stomach-churning crunch that forced her eyes closed.

After some time, she heard a man's voice growing closer and closer, shouting and cursing, and there was no need for such language this early in the morning. When she opened her eyes, a long-haired man with metal sticking out of his nose and eyebrow peered down at her.

"I called 911." He leaned in close. "Don't try to move. My roommate's getting you a blanket. Just hold still."

"Can you tell Mr. Marino? Can you tell him I'll be a few minutes late?"

He had a kind smile, the young man with the long hair and metal stuck through his face, and tattoos scrolled across the hand that patted her shoulder. Grace didn't appreciate the pat but kept her thoughts to herself. He turned to the approaching roommate, another young man but with shorter hair, though an odd color, too black to be black. He draped a musty blanket over her and tucked it around her sides.

The long-haired young man softened his voice and asked Grace, "Is that your husband?" To his black-haired friend he said, "She's asking about a Mr. Marino?"

"That's the old guy who died last week. Didn't you hear? He lived alone, right here, and his nurse found him." The black-haired man gestured up the steep driveway toward Mr. Marino's house. His hand shaded Grace's eyes from the sudden bright sun for just that brief moment. Both men gazed down at her, the sun behind them shadowed their faces, and she heard a siren in the distance.

"Mr. Marino couldn't possibly have died," she meant to say to them, but for some reason her mouth wouldn't form the words. She tried to reach out and pat their forearms, but nothing happened. She needed them to know, "Someone surely would have told me," but could not speak. Grace closed her eyes. The two young men—perhaps students from a nearby house on Murray Street—spoke to each other as if she wasn't there. She listened to the siren's wail; it was close now, and it would be here any minute.

Dissociation

Jeanette Steinman Shelburne

I have magic powers
like Wonder Woman.

I have a magic lasso
and it's invisible too.

I have silk threads that shoot out
and make cocoons
around

the

creeping hands
the grabbing hands
the smacking hands

I can make all those things
float around my body in magic pods.

I can make
 the sudden smell
 under the aftershave
 of snails and dead things
 from armpits and thighs

 the nice legs that turn into sudden snakes
 wrapping around me in a game
 that's not really funny—

I can make them

float around me
encased in their silk pods
with my magic powers.

I can let the villains know
I'm not mad and, of course,

I still love them.

I can weave a magical costume
white and silken
a beautiful dress I can step into
or it floats by my side
or a mask that looks just like me
but it's even more beautiful.

My life depends on it.

A Father's Son

Sandeep Kumar Mishra

The mourners were not plentiful the day of the funeral. Charvik Sharma had not been a popular man in this life, having dedicated very little time to cultivating and maintaining relationships. Sahil, his eldest, watched the people move about in respectful silence, occasionally stopping at one of his siblings or mother to offer quiet condolences while the chanters continued through their mantras. Some made their way over to him, but he had nothing to say to them in return. Everything was too fresh—Sahil wasn't sure how he felt about his father's death yet. He hadn't even seen his father for at least ten years before now, having gone off to live with his aunt while still a boy.

He looked over at his mother, his brother Ishaan, and his sister Shaleena. His mother looked sad at least, but Ishaan and Shaleena looked about as numb as he doubtless did. He wondered what the past ten years had been like for them. If their father had changed at all since failing Sahil.

He would never forget the first time his father struck him. It was a miserable, humid day, the air so wet that you could almost taste it. Charvik was home, classes having been let out, and was especially short of temper.

Sahil, still a small child at the time, refused to go outside to play. "It's too hot," he remembered protesting. "I'll melt!"

His mother had gently but firmly encouraged him to go outside anyway. "You won't melt, I promise. But you really should go outside. The sun is good for you."

"I don't want to!" His little voice rose in aggravation.

"Sahil, my darling, please go outside." His mother looked around, fear coloring her face. It was the first time Sahil could recall seeing his mother afraid, though it would not be the last.

Charvik appeared around the corner, his face an oncoming storm, and Sahil instinctively understood his mother's fear.

"What is the meaning of this noise?" It was less a question than a demand.

Sahil ventured a reply, "I don't want to go outside."

The baleful gaze Charvik leveled at his son burned into the young boy's soul. "I heard your mother tell you to go outside. Why do you stand there mewling?"

"I—" SLAP.

"Do as you're told! If I see you in the house again before supper you will get it twice as bad!"

Tears ran unchecked down Sahil's face, and he bolted through the door before his father could rebuke him for those, too. Oblivious to his surroundings he fled off into town and did not dare return home until well after dark.

"Sahil?"

Sahil glanced over to find his sister standing beside him, her previously numb expression now one of concern. "Yes, Shaleena?"

"I just...I wondered if you were alright. You've barely spoken a word since coming home."

Home. This was not his home anymore, hadn't been his home since he had been sent away. "I'm fine. Just a little impatient to be done with this."

Shaleena nodded. "You and father never did get along."

Sahil gave her a glance. "You say that as though I am unique in that respect."

She shrugged slightly. "He...tried, I think, to make some small amends. He never apologized, not in as many words, but he was...softer." She hesitated, as though weighing her words. "I think he missed you."

Sahil scoffed. "I find that unlikely."

Shaleena was quiet for a long moment after that. "Well, I missed you at least. And I'm glad you came back, even if it's just for this." She briefly touched his arm, then moved back towards their mother without further comment. He allowed his mind to wander again, passively listening to the chants and watching the dancing flames of a candle.

"I know your father was very cruel." Sahil shook his head and looked over to where his Aunt Shashi was addressing him. "Perhaps he will be kinder in his next life."

Sahil couldn't reply to that. He wasn't certain his father deserved another life.

"I am sorry you did not get to say goodbye," his aunt ventured again. She was a kind woman, almost a second mother to Sahil, but she was too forgiving.

"I am not." The first words Sahil had spoken since the funeral began. "We spent all our words to each other a long time ago."

A young Sahil stood nervously in his father's cramped office. Their small house afforded little enough space for their steadily growing family, yet Charvik refused to give up this room. Sahil had no idea what it was for, he just knew that his father's claims to it meant that he and his new brother Ishaan would be sharing a room.

"Your brother will be your responsibility," he remembered his father saying sternly, eyes intense and hard. "I expect you to take the responsibility."

Sahil didn't speak. He knew by then that discussions with his father were not truly discussions, they were just brief moments when his father bothered to remember he had a child long enough to impart specific instructions. Any words on Sahil's part would earn him a backhand, and that was if his father was in a decent mood.

"That means helping your mother feed and change him, teach him, and—"

"Keep him out of your way?"

The words were a mistake—Sahil knew that before he said them, but sometimes he couldn't help himself. He stood defiantly as the fury entered his father's eyes. He would feel the repercussions of that remark for a long time and remember them even longer.

Sahil wasted no time after the traditional ten-day mourning period to get back to his life. The fact that he even had to take ten whole days off irritated him, and he was unreasonably short with his family because of it. He wanted to leave this house and its memories, wanted to get back to his own wife and child and job, and wanted to burn the past away just as the body had been burned.

On the tenth day, his brother found him alone and sat beside him. Sahil looked over skeptically; he and his brother had never been close and disagreed often and had hardly spoken to each other these past days.

"I assume you plan to leave with the sun," Ishaan began, not looking over.

"Before the sun if I can manage it. I have a long ride home and the earlier I start

the earlier I am back where I belong.”

Ishaan shook his head. “You never cared for home.”

“You make it sound like I chose to leave in the first place,” Sahil countered, frowning.

“Perhaps not. But you did choose not to come back.”

“Father—”

“Damn it, Sahil, this isn’t about Father!” Ishaan stood suddenly with this outburst, spinning so he looked down at Sahil. “You left more than Father behind! You left Shaleena and Mother, too, or did you think being sent away to school freed you from your responsibilities as eldest?”

“I checked in when I could. Everything was under control, and Father didn’t want me back besides.”

Ishaan threw his arms in the air. “Typical Sahil. Always running from Father. If you only gave him the respect he deserved, perhaps—”

“You want to talk to me about respect?” Sahil was standing now. “You call abusing behaviors worthy of respect?”

“He was our father. He deserved your respect regardless.” Ishaan began to head back inside but paused in the doorway. “But I don’t see you’ll listen to me. You’ll just run, like you always have.”

By sunrise on the eleventh day, he was packed and ready to go, not even staying for breakfast. He had nothing more to say to his mother or siblings, and they had lived the past ten years without him; there was no reason to stay here any longer. So, he quickly and quietly slipped out of the home of his childhood to catch the first train of the day and refused to look back.

As he walked, his thoughts wandered. He looked forward to home, hoped the train was running on time, hoped his wife Viha had set aside some dinner for him, and a thousand other thoughts like these—anything to get his mind off where he was and what had just happened and get him moving forward. He was so focused on putting the past behind him that he didn’t notice the football until it was almost too late.

With a small yelp, he bobbed his head to the side, narrowly avoiding a head-

on collision with the flying ball. He shook his head, startled and confused, and looked around for the ball's owner. He spotted them easily enough, a young boy—who was smiling apologetically—and his father—who was laughing—just down the road. The father jogged towards Sahil.

"My apologies," he began, still laughing a little. "My son and I like to come out for a little game before I have to go to work, and we are unaccustomed to sharing the road so early."

Sahil took a moment to gather his wits before answering. "Ah...it is alright. I was not hit, so no harm." His eyes drifted back to the boy. "You two do this... often?"

The father nodded. "Most mornings. I work long hours, so I cherish the moments I can. Surely you can understand this?"

Sahil looked back at the father. Such genuine happiness, speaking about his son, was something Sahil did not understand at all.

"Sahil, why does father never come out to play with us?"

Sahil didn't turn to look at his little sister. Shaleena was barely five, but already she was noticing that their house was not like the houses of some of her friends. Her father was practically a stranger to her, only seen at meals and on holidays. No great loss there, Sahil thought with no small measure of distaste.

"Because he is too busy," Ishaan said when it was obvious that Sahil had nothing to say.

"Busy with what?"

Ishaan paused. "Work, I guess."

Shaleena clearly didn't understand but filed the information away nonetheless and pressed on to her next question. "And why is he so sad?"

This got Sahil to speak. "You think he's sad?" Shaleena nodded and Sahil scoffed. "Why do you think this?"

"Because he never smiles. Sad people don't smile."

It made sense, in a little kid logic sort of way, but Sahil had trouble picturing his father's constantly dour expression as anything but angry.

"He isn't sad," Sahil said finally, frowning at the football by his feet. "I don't know

what he is, but he isn't sad."

This confused the little girl more, but Sahil chose that moment to kick the ball and she took off after it, screaming with joy. Ishaan looked at Sahil and frowned. "Don't speak of our father like that."

Sahil rolled his eyes and watched Shaleena run. "Why not? It isn't like he's around to hear us, and even if he was, he never listens to anything we say."

"But—"

"I don't want to hear it, Ishaal. Come on, let's catch up to Shaleena."

Given the early hour, the train station was thankfully quiet, and Sahil managed to purchase his ticket and board with minimal wait. He also had his choice of seats for the long ride ahead of him. Settling his luggage above him, he sat heavily and sighed, thankful to be on the way home at last. The rest of his day promised to be an easy one, as it was nothing more tedious than waiting until he reached his stop that evening, then getting a cab to take him home. Comforted by these thoughts, he drifted into a light nap as the train began to move.

When he stirred a few hours later, he noticed the car was significantly more crowded than it had been, with nearly all the seats outside of the one directly beside him taken. He also noticed a lone man who, noticing that Sahil was awake, headed his way.

"A thousand apologies, sir, but is that seat taken?" He indicated the seat beside Sahil.

"No. Please, sit." The man nodded his thanks and situated his own luggage, pulling out a well-worn book before stashing the bags, and settled into the seat. Sahil's eyes were instantly drawn to the cover.

The man noticed Sahil's attention and held the book up for better inspection. "I take it you are familiar with 'Songs of Kabir?'"

Sahil startled at the man's question as though shocked. "Oh, ah, not as such. Or, rather, I have not taken the time to read that particular collection myself. Someone...I knew, they did. Spoke of it very highly."

The man nodded understandingly and began flipping through the pages. "It is a good book. If you have any love of poetry, I highly recommend it."

"I... shall keep that in mind."

"Are you a student of poetry?"

"I teach a high school literature class and occasionally write my own pieces. Nothing worth publishing, but..."

The man nodded, "It's nice to put thought to paper?"

"Exactly. And poetry has always been special to my family."

"What are you reading?"

Sahil looked up from his own perch across the room from the conversation, watching where Shaleena had approached their father's armchair and interrupted his reading with her question. He instinctively tensed, waiting for the cold dismissal or fiery rage at being disturbed; the first would cause Shaleena to run away hurt and Sahil to follow so he could calm her down; the second would be directed at Sahil for not keeping her distracted in the first place. Either way it was about to become Sahil's problem.

Yet, Charvik did neither. Instead, he looked up slowly and studied his daughter for a moment, as though trying to remember who she was and how he should react. Then he closed—actually closed—his book in order to show her the cover. "This is a book of poems. Can you read the title?"

Shaleena squinted at the letters. "'Songs of Kabir?'" She spoke slowly, careful to get every word correct. Sahil couldn't help but be a little impressed. He hadn't realized her reading skills had progressed so far.

Charvik smiled at her, and Sahil frowned in confusion. "That's right," their father said, sounding pleased. "Would you like to read some poems with me?"

Sahil looked back down to his own book, but he couldn't focus on the words anymore. That was the kindest he'd ever seen his father behave towards anyone outside of their mother. He watched and listened as Charvik read to Shaleena, poem after poem after poem. He didn't seem to grow tired, or annoyed, but rather he seemed almost...happy.

"Are any of these by you, dad?"

Charvik paused at that question. "No. I have written poems, but I have not been so blessed as to have them published."

"Maybe someday?"

"Yes," he said, a wistful look in his eyes. "Maybe someday."

Hailing a taxi to take him from the train station to his home didn't take long, thankfully. It was already much later than Sahil had hoped to arrive home, as a scheduling mix-up with a different train had caused a delay of nearly two hours, and he was now more anxious than ever for the comfort of his wife and bed. As he was driven across the city, the driver made occasional attempts at small talk, most of which Sahil answered with polite but short replies, doing his best to avoid a protracted conversation. One comment, however, caused him to pay attention.

"Are you excited for the start of Onam tomorrow?"

Sahil blinked. "That's tomorrow?"

The driver nodded. "I love Onam, personally. Well, specifically the Onasadya Feast, but the entire festival is fun." Sahil glanced at the driver's bulky figure and guessed that the man did not save feasting for the festival alone. "Do you participate?"

"Hurry, Sahil! Father wants us to be among the first visitors to the temple!"

Sahil groaned, stretched, and tried to rub the sleep from his eyes. "The... temple?"

"Yes, the temple!" Shaleena was entirely too excited and loud for this early hour. "It's the first day of Onam!"

Sahil shook himself more fully awake and swung his legs over the side of his bed. Onam...he smiled a little as Shaleena scampered off, her mission accomplished. Father was always in high spirits during religious festivals and holy days; his usual dour expression lightened and stormy mood calmed. He might even be persuaded to give his children treats, so long as all the proper observances are met. "It is a holy day first and a festival second," he would solemnly intone. "Be respectful of that."

And they were. They were quiet and respectful, said the correct chants to the best of their abilities, and answered every question Charvik had for them about the origin of Onam. Then, finally, the religious observances were finished, and it was time to decorate.

Their house was never so clean as it was during Onam. Everything practically

sparkled with the effort put into cleaning. And between Shaleena and Charvik it was harder to find a house more thoroughly decorated, either. A veritable hillside's worth of flowers were braided together and hung on every door frame and window. Sahil looked at the flowers and frowned. What was it about flowers and a stupid festival that suddenly made his father so cheerful? Why couldn't he always be like this?

He wanted to tear all the flowers down.

Sahil slipped quietly into his home, unsure if his wife was still awake and knowing their infant son was not. He paused just inside, seeing the flower decorations all prepared for Onam. A frown tugged briefly at his lips, but he shook it away; the holiday had never done him any harm. Setting his luggage down in the entryway and taking off his shoes to make as little noise as possible, he made a quick walk of the house.

Everything was spotless. His wife had done an excellent job keeping up with the cleaning, even with the added responsibility of their newborn. He smiled slightly as he paused by the dining room table, laying a hand on their son's highchair. She is a good woman. I hope I am a good husband to her. He wondered briefly if his father ever had the same concern.

He moved into his office and saw everything was just as he had left it. It was, by agreement, the only room she didn't routinely clean, as Sahil had his own method to the seeming madness. He knew where everything was and that was the important part. He looked over his papers, his bookshelf, the grading pens, and the half-finished poems, and he frowned. It looked remarkably like how he remembered his father's office being laid out. How had he never noticed that before?

"Am I becoming my father...?" The question was asked quietly, barely even whispered, as though Sahil was afraid of the answer. In a way he was—were not all men their fathers' sons? What hope did he have to build a better life for himself when he mirrored his father in even this tiny detail? In what other ways had he shaped himself after a man he...he what?

He missed. Here, in the darkness and the silence, he could admit it. He missed his father. Or, perhaps put better, he missed the idea of his father. He missed the connection he saw so often, even just coming home from the funeral. Someone he could talk to, someone he could play ball with, someone who led by example and listened to the worries of his children. Charvik had never been any of those things for Sahil, but he'd seen glimpses of that man in the way Shaleena interacted with him and wondered if he had changed at all after Sahil

had left. If he really had missed his son as much as his son now missed him, as Shaleena had suggested.

"It's too late for regrets," Sahil told his ghosts, trying to push them away. "He's dead. Whatever that may mean for him, it means to me that he is beyond reach." Forgiveness and healing were beyond Sahil's reach; there was no saving Charvik's memory or salvaging the relationship. The abuse, the neglect, and the fear were all Sahil had to remember his father by—were Charvik's only legacy to his son. But Sahil was more than his father's legacy, more than the abuse and neglect and regret. He would prove that to himself and to his family.

Sahil left his office and its ghosts and headed up the stairs. He paused midway up to look at the pictures hanging from the wall—him and his wife on vacation, on their wedding day, on the day they brought their son home for the first time. They were happy in those pictures. Sahil knew true joy in every moment captured and it showed. He thought back to pictures of his father; Charvik had rarely smiled in person and never for the camera. Even in the oldest photos, he looked serious and stoic, never expressing joy in his life. "I am not you," he whispered, wondering if Charvik's spirit could hear him from wherever it had gone. "I will not be you."

He finished climbing the stairs, bypassing his own bedroom to check on his son. The child was sleeping soundly, completely oblivious to the presence of his father, and Sahil smiled down at the small bundle. Resting a hand on the side of the crib and nearly crying for reasons he couldn't explain, he made his son a promise. "I'll do better. I swear, I will do better."

The floor creaked softly, and Sahil looked over his shoulder to see his wife, wrapped in her dressing robe, squinting sleepily at him. "Sahil?" Her voice was barely audible, and he quietly crept over to her after a final look at his son. "I didn't hear you come in." She squinted at him again, then reached out and touched his face, concern taking over her expression. "You're crying! What's wrong?"

Death Valley Valentine

Elisa Stancil

The Valentine's Day trip, our last vacation before our wedding, was my idea. Now we're back, and as Chuck finishes downloading photos from Death Valley, I climb the spiral stairs to his office and study the dry, empty vistas filling his computer screen. A sudden jolt of color, my puffy red vest, leaps from the neutral landscape of the Panamint Mountains. A mouse clicks, and boom, there's his crazy shot through a tiny opening in a knee-high salt cave—sparkling miniature crystals frame the distant horizon. Next, reflections of heart-shaped clouds float in the wet brine and blue striations of Salt Creek. All these pictures Chuck titles and files while I stand there blinking, reorienting.

For days we hiked through canyons and up dry washes, marching to our separate iPod beats, unplugging from time to time to compare notes. Mostly we just gestured and poked each other, agreeing some stupendous natural form up ahead was "pretty." Every few hundred steps were punctuated by a loud, staccato cough, some snuffling, and then Chuck would spit. I practiced relaxing my face, trying to melt my pinch-y, judgmental wince, but I seemed threaded to him like a marionette, and each episode of hacking scrunched me up.

I watched his shadow as he traversed a big, flat rock, his head bobbing to the blues. Chuck's corporate nickname is "the Sphinx," and for twenty years I have studied him from every angle, searching for fissures in his façade. Using female sonar, I conducted soundings at depth, charting my findings, generating comparisons. Now it is second nature, and instead of drifting free like a tumbleweed, mentally cartwheeling over the immense desert, I find myself trudging along, connecting dots from earlier conversations, wondering if he is happy to be here, despite his pesky head cold.

Oh, I could ask him, but he would give his flat non-response that offers no grip, something like "I'm happy if you're happy." He might flex his eyebrows like Groucho or waggle his head, glorying in his unshaven, un-groomed "outdoor" look. At lunchtime, sitting outside the limited menu park café, we seem to have little to say. Damn, when we met twenty years ago, I thought this would never happen. Then, everything glinted with the knife-edge of newness—every moment cut both ways. Then, silent ripples in the breeze flowed between us. From thousands of miles away I would feel him think of me, warm air softening my cheek. Really. Now he's up close, twenty-four/seven, and I tap and clatter around his perimeter, wielding the white cane of blind familiarity.

It turns out he is legally blind, but no one noticed until he was twelve. This explains his marginal facial recognition skills and alarming independence. When he sees, through thick lenses, the world is data rich, maybe too rich. He captures information, labels and files it, then retreats to his land of internal musings, fuzzy outlines. We communicate best by Braille, his calm hand over mine: no words; no worries. My decades of monthly dissertations on intimacy, usually delivered during the full moon, never defined us near as much as his hand, quiet, on mine.

When at last I run out of words and stand still beside him, I feel the smoothness, the sameness of his hand resting on mine. I look again into the screen and see what he saw that day: a broad, uninterrupted desert under a high blue sky; a heart-shaped cloud barely outlined in the salty current; and me, in the center of the silence, warm in my red puffy vest.

I see the Sphinx loves me.

Panasonic Pantheism

Eleanore Lee

Follow me back into that quiet empty room
At least it seems quiet and empty.
But...those mute glass rectangles lying around on tables and desks
Dark, silent seeming, still.
But we know, don't we, that
all those electronics are internally thinking, spinning, planning.
Look at that one lying there
Just push a button and it will start softly, then
more. And more
And likely it will soon go roaring through your head.

They do
Rattle, prattle, and chatter
Rising up in clouds
Surrounding us
Omnivorous tinnitus

Turn it on—for just a minute—to find out what's up
inputs and outputs
(Silent screams)
Inputs: Tell me tell me what we all need to know!
Current address? Password?
Outputs: This, you need to know. Needs, your needs.

Scroll down a bit
Social media.
Social?
Wait, let me google that

How can we hear each other
over all the racket?

Flash drives, boosters, and routers, AI

Can you believe? Our small prattling, chattering, twittering earth
with all our fights, sects, warring clans.
In the huge universe.
All this shrieking coming from this most minute pinprick.
Invisible in the vastness.

Bubbles

Raistlin Skelley

Out of a sense of duty, I numbly bought a plane ticket to go back to Nebraska. I tried to finish my assignment on the plane but really just took stock of all the necessities I forgot to pack in my detached, emotionless haze. The thing that bugged me the most was only some of it was due to my trip. I was still looking down the barrel of a seven-thousand-word assignment due in less than a week. The altitude creeped me out, and I kept fighting the feeling that I had the first rising symptoms of a massive stroke. I put my laptop away and tried to sleep, but the fabric cleaner they used on the seat upholstery reminded me too much of Grandma's House. My nerves started to get the better of me the deeper I got into the flight. I tried to focus but, with nothing to focus on, all I could do was remember.

Twenty-four hours earlier, I had been on the precipice of another deadline induced depressive nightmare when I received a call from someone I had been convinced I would never hear from again. It was an out of state number from back home in Wayne. I didn't have any particular emotion at all when, for some reason, I picked it up. It wouldn't have mattered if I had.

"Hey, Derek."

A million questions shot through my mind, but I couldn't manage to nail down a single one long enough to put it into words, so my answer was rather pedestrian. "Hey...M-Mallory."

She hesitated for a moment. I could tell there was something she needed to tell me but didn't want to say it. Strange, the things you can remember about a person after years. "How've you been?"

I stood up from my desk and walked away from the ticking cursor on my screen. "What's going on?"

That was all it took. There was a long pause, but I knew she was crying. She hadn't cried in front of me in ten years, the last time we spoke. So, really, we just picked up where we left off. "Derek, it's Sam."

Names from my past that I had long since buried and tried to forget. I can still remember talking to his sister that day in the hallway as she pulled a bottle of laundry detergent from the closet. "Talk to me." I was trying to sound calm, but I knew it wasn't working.

She was still crying, and I couldn't touch her. I had no idea where she even was. "He's dead. But there isn't going to be a funeral. They can't bring him back."

The news wasn't all that shocking after Mallory's wind up. And while she did have a tendency to be overwhelmingly emotional when average emotions would do, she never did exaggerate. "Where is he, the sea?" I had remembered a chemically inebriated conversation we had once in high school where Sam considered joining the Navy.

"No." She gulped and cleared her throat. "Everest."

"The...the mountain?"

Before becoming yet another shade in the Rainbow Valley, the already adventurous Sammy Deutch apparently caught the hiking bug during a mandatory "field fun" outing while attending rehab. Clean and sober of household chemicals, he moved to Colorado and joined The Adventure League organization, which allowed him to push the limits of sane and rational terrestrial exploration for seven years before ultimately succumbing to cerebral edema while trying to summit without assisted oxygen, just above Camp Three on the North Ridge Route.

"Brain bubbles," Jake gave me a half grin, but sad eyes as he cracked the joke over dinner at Hanrahan's. He was the only one that thought it was funny. "It's just kind of ironic when you think about it."

"How?" Laurel glared at him from her corner of the booth.

Jake leaned back in his seat and turned toward her. "Just with everything, you know. He fought so hard to get away from it, but that's still what took him out in the end."

"It's not funny, Jake." Mallory's voice was flat and monotone. She had always been the voice of reason in the group. Except when she wasn't. "It's not funny at all."

"Smell this." Laurel had a glazed, dreamy expression as she pushed the jug of laundry detergent in my face.

If I'd had the social skills then that I have now, I would have pushed the bottle back and asked why, in that sarcastic, accusatory tone that has gained me so many friends in the intervening years. I might have been able to put an end to everything that afternoon. Sam would still be alive, none of us would be here

and I wouldn't be painfully aware of the wedding ring on Mallory's finger as she's kneading my thigh under the table like a stress ball.

"Okay." I leaned forward as she held the bottle and took a quick sniff of the crisp scent of Shine. It smelled like soap.

"Isn't it fantastic?" Laurel held the bottle up to her face and took a long pull through her nostrils.

Mallory trotted around the corner into the dark of the hallway. Her face lit up when she saw me. But it wasn't merely my presence that excited her. "Did you try it?" She gave me that crooked grin that has never failed to get my attention.

"Yeah," I smiled and leaned in to smell it again. Laurel held the bottle close to her chest and we awkwardly shared an inhale.

"Isn't it amazing?" Mallory stepped in close and edged the bottle toward her with the tips of her fingers.

I was nowhere near as impressed as they were, but I went along with it. I don't know why. I guess I was a kid. "Yeah. Is that new?" I remember thinking at the time that this was a conversation that we shouldn't be having for at least fifteen years, but here in the grey dark of an early spring afternoon, three teenagers were fawning over the scent of a newly purchased bottle of laundry detergent.

"I thought I heard you come up." Sam towered over all of us as he strode into the small suburban hallway. "Oh, are you showing it to him?"

"Yeah," Laurel gave me a smile that Jake would have killed to receive, but she always looked too much like Sam for me to be interested. "Isn't it amazing?"

We spent that night sitting around in the basement living room of the Deutch's, hanging out, watching movies, and just being obnoxious teenagers. But instead of raiding the parents liquor cabinet or passing around suspiciously pilfered narcotics, we kept a full bottle of Shine laundry detergent in the middle of the room and would occasionally take long, comedic hits off it. At the time, it seemed like more of a joke than anything. Some stupid afternoon of joking around, each person trying to one up the other with testimonials of how good it smelled. But things quickly went off the rails.

"Are Chad and Beth having a service?" Mallory stood close to me outside the sliding doors of the Doyle Inn.

"Did I not tell you?" She looked up at me and knitted her eyebrows.

"Our call was very, brief, let's say."

"There will be a service tomorrow. They're burying an empty casket."

"Do they know we're coming?"

"They called me." Mallory leaned in close and wrapped her arms around my ribs, rocking gently. I was immediately back in high school. "That's how I got the news to call you."

"Do they know I'm coming?"

"I told them I'd tell you. I was the only one that knew you were in Connecticut." She pulled away from my chest and looked up at me with the same sad smile Jake gave me at the restaurant. "I've kept up with your pieces."

The diamond on her ring finger had twisted palm side down and was digging into my skin through my shirt, like a constant nagging of how bad an idea this was. "How soon do you have to be back?"

"You haven't even asked his name." Her crooked smile struck again.

"Isn't this adorable?" Once more, Laurel was there to introduce me to a bottle of Shine, only this time it was in the hallways of Wayne High School. She ripped open Mallory's locker and took down a small Bubble Jug sized bottle of detergent.

"The hell?" I turned to Mallory who gave me a sheepish but playful expression.

"I found it at the store," she shook her head. "I don't know. It reminded me of us all hanging out the other day. And plus, I can just smell it a little bit every once and a while. I wish Victoria's Secret made a scent like this."

Laurel made a sound like she was doing a line of coke and put the lid back on the miniscule bottle. "Oh my god, that's so good!"

"Maybe it will inspire you to wash your own damn clothes." Laurel never hated me, but she was never too fond of me, either. I guess now I understand why.

We fell asleep before dark and woke up a little after ten. I sat on the edge of the bed with the tv off wondering what the hell I was doing and what all of this

meant. Mallory kept the bathroom door open while she showered, and we talked via our reflections in the hall mirror when she got out.

“So, what now?”

“I go home. And tomorrow we go to the service,” Any and all emotion connected to Sam’s death had been stripped from our voices. We talked about it as if it was an oil change or jury duty, “then we’ll probably have dinner again. And you can drive me home...” The mirror image of her crooked smile looked up at me in the yellow light of the hotel bathroom. She hadn’t answered my question. Not entirely. But I had a feeling I knew where it was all going to go.

“Forty-five minutes!” Sam held his finger to his mouth and motioned toward the door with his head, eyes wide and begging for me to shut up.

“It wasn’t that bad, man. It was just something to do.”

I leaned in close so I could yell at him in a whisper. “There are a lot of things you can do for no money that don’t involve huffing laundry detergent for forty-five minutes at a whack in the grocery store!”

“It’s not like we hung out there,” Jake chimed in. He’s always had a knack for sounding stupid while he’s trying to make you look like the idiot. “There are a lot of different brands. Do you know how many different brands there are of laundry soap?”

“And since I knew you’d be all you about it, I took the liberty of buying some for you to try.” Sam opened his closet and pulled out three plastic grocery bags, his fingers red and straining to support the weight of six gallons of detergent.

“Dude, what the hell are you doing?”

“Will you shut up?” Sam gave me his shut-up face again and motioned toward his closed bedroom door.

“Are you opening a laundromat? How are you going to explain why you have this much soap?”

Sam pulled one of the bottles out of the bags and placed it on his lap. He stared at me with his all-knowing, All-American good looks and unscrewed the cap of a bright green jug. He presented it to me like a Tibetan gift from a foreign land. “Try this.”

The nozzle didn't make it eight inches past my nose. I could not stop from screaming the first thought the caustic chemical smell brought to mind: "Brain cancer!"

Sam and Jake turned to me, holding their fingers to their lips and motioning at their throats for me to cut it out. Sam gave me his disapproving glare and took back the bottle. "You don't have to scream it."

Jake took the bottle from him as if it were a puppy and looked down at it, crestfallen. "That's my favorite one, too."

"Well, don't let me stop you. I can see you've already become very attached. And what's your favorite, Intervention?"

"Grandma's House."

"What?" In time, I was able to process the words themselves, but right then I was dumbstruck that Mallory had an answer at all.

She stopped on the sidewalk, turning around to look at me. She gave me that smile and shook her head with a laugh. "What?"

I didn't move. "He's got you wrapped up in this, too?"

"It's not as bad as it sounds. I think you'd like it, honestly."

"I don't know, it seems like everyone starting huffing laundry detergent overnight. That doesn't sound too good."

She walked the few paces back to me and reached into her jacket pocket. "It's not laundry detergent. And it's not huffing. It's just smelling something nice and pleasant for a change. It peeps up your day."

Mallory has always been a few inches shorter than me. She was standing so close. I closed my eyes and breathed in the smell of her shampoo. Suddenly there was a different smell, like something carried on the wind from the past.

"See? It's not that bad." I opened my eyes again to a small spray bottle of milky blue liquid wrapped inside Mallory's fingers. "Doesn't it remind you of grandma's house?"

"It's just really hard to feel bad about it, you know?" Jake was sitting on the front steps of the funeral home, looking out onto the cobble stone street and

the Presbyterian Church beyond. To our backs about four blocks away, was the high school track where Sam had set the state record for the mile. I slowly turned my head to look down at Jake from where I was leaning against the porch railing. I just had to hear the rest of this thought. "I mean, I feel worse about Chad and Beth, and for us for that matter, than I do for Sam. I mean, I don't think anyone wants to die on Everest? But that's pretty easy to avoid. No one wants their kid to die on Everest, though. And that's a little harder to prevent. Especially when you have a kid like Sam." In his infinite stupidity, Jake had managed to verbalize what I had been thinking for the past three days but had no idea how to put into words. There was a moment's pause between us before Jake found a stray woodchip on the stair next to him and threw it into the yard. "Brain bubbles, man."

"What the hell is that?"

Sam was sitting on the couch above me where I was sitting on the floor. He was cradling an open bottle of laundry detergent under his right arm, staring at the television screen. "That's what I call them. I figured you were right. It was going to be weird to talk about it in front of our parents and at school. This is called Brain Bubbles," he squeezed the bottle with his elbow, "Jake's is Brain Cancer." I looked up at him from the floor in furious disbelief. Sam shrugged, "I thought it had a ring to it. And Mallory's is Grandma's House."

I turned back to the television, no longer paying attention to the movie. But it was probably the seven hundredth time we had watched *Scream*, so I could afford to talk over it. "What the hell is Grandma's House anyway?"

"Fabric softener." Sam took a long, coke-snort off the bottle, followed by a sigh worthy of a Coke commercial. "I picked it up by accident when I bought the other stuff. But she seems to like it."

I stared straight ahead with my arms folded. His snorts had become so loud and obnoxious they angered and terrified me simultaneously. "I don't think that stuff is good for you, man."

He coughed a few times then cleared his throat, "Yeah, but what is? At least I don't smoke. I can do this in the house."

Laurel looked over at me from where she had her feet curled up underneath of her, rocking back and forth in her big, oatmeal recliner. "Yeah, this costs hardly anything. Lasts a long time, and parents can't smell it on your breath. And it's not like we're drinking it. There's nothing in it that can kill you," she said, before taking a deep breath, inhaling a small Monsanto plant. "You wash your clothes

in it and you sweat in your clothes all the time. No one dies.”

“It’s called catching the bends.” I held my face in my hands and didn’t say anything. Mallory tried to pull them away to no avail. “Hey.” I slowly shook my head, palms cemented to my face.

“It’s not that bad. And it’s not like I do it all the time. Like I said, it’s just like a little pick me up every once in a while.”

I dropped my hands suddenly and looked her in the eyes, my own blurry from the pressure of my fingers. “Do you know how crazy you sound?”

“Have you tried it?” It’s how slow her grin forms, too.

“Huffing fabric softener? No.”

Mallory stood up and walked around the kitchen table. She stopped in front of me, for once forcing me to look up at her, and pulled the small spray bottle from her back pocket, holding it under my nose. “Try it.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Try it.”

Stalemate. I wasn’t going to. And she was going to make me. Like a magician’s misdirection, I watched her left hand, still holding the screw top of the bottle, slowly raise to the collar of her girl rugby shirt and gently slide along the edge, hooking a finger inside the lapel. “There was something I wanted to try, anyway. For science.”

In the end, when Chad and Beth found the stash, Sam took the fall for all of us. He missed graduation because of his first rehab stay. It left the rest of us to ween ourselves and suffer in silence. Difficult as it was, it beat the alternative. Luckily for us, though, news spread through our parents, and we were banned from doing laundry altogether. So, there were some upsides. Similar cases to ours started popping up across the country and a class-action lawsuit was filed against Specter Company for the chemicals and perfumes used in their detergents, forcing them to change their formula. The scent changed shortly thereafter. It didn’t break my heart. I was more embarrassed than anything. Even though I was never formally charged, it was still guilt by association. It was hard for us to look each other in the face after a while. Except for that grin.

“I guess you’re going back east tomorrow?”

She said her husband was out of town. She told me once what his name was, but I forced myself to forget it. "Yeah, I guess so."

She propped her head up on her hand and looked down at me, that grin working like a mystic charm from the farthest depths of a Himalayan mountain pass. "You know, you could always stay."

I adjusted my thumb inside of her palm and stroked her wedding band. A dark wave of sadness fell across her face like a theater curtain. I had given her my answer. But she already knew it. Mallory looked at her ring with a heartbroken disgust. In the light from the television, her eyes told the story of a lifetime of regret and bad decisions. Missed opportunities and the things that can't be undone. She pulled her hateful stare away from the sparkling diamond on her finger and turned back to me, tears welling up in her eyes. "Nothing lasts forever, does it?"

"Only the crisp scent of Shine."

Another Tuesday Morning Poem

Ron Meiners

I have looked in the Manual of How
Things Should Be, and apparently
It is still possible to feel better
Than you have ever felt before. I might
Have skipped some pages to get there,
I believe it's so we always might
Have something new to discover.

Well, you say, how about this morning bliss?
Right, how perceptive and thoughtful of you
To ask. Well, to start with it's a fine morning,
And I'm here with my love, and for all
The ills of the world, I seem to have found
A place, or it has found me.
And how are you today? Is your morning
Going so well you just might break into song?
We could do that together, if I were there.

How it is, you could be anywhere now, at any
Time of day or night -- maybe it is
Even your favorite time, and you could tell me
About it, and why you like it best. I would
Be very grateful to hear that, and perhaps
To be there, of a quiet morning or out
In an electric night, whatever it is.
Perhaps we could go to breakfast together,
After the pandemic, we've always liked that.

In Loving Memory of Love Love Love, an Obituary

after Victoria Chang's Obit & Neel Burton, MD

Ron L. Dowell

Love Love Love is the deceased full name
first, middle, and last—the same—easily remembered,
and Love preferred the pronouns “they” and “them.”
Love was old, as old as humans were
but not as old as earth, or the moon, or sun.
Maybe as old as cockroaches or pterodactyls.
We can't be certain how old Love was.
Love lived in a city called Compton
or any place in the blank _____(your choice).
Love died inside, in 2016, from loneliness, despair, neglect
and from a rope on a Wednesday, mid-work week,
somewhere down south, maybe South Carolina,
Mississippi, or Newport Beach, at the end of a rope necklace.
Love died, and no one noticed Love's illness since 1968,
not Love's mother, father, sister, or brother.

Love once had many friends, but they allowed
their relationship with Love to wither,
like a dangling sycamore leaf, brown and dry.
Love never married and had no children
but Love was well educated and taught school.
Love was patient. Love was also kind.
Love taught that early people were completely round,
each with four arms and four legs, and two
identical faces on opposite sides of a head with four
ears that all matched. They walked both forward
and backward and turned cartwheels on their eight
limbs to run moving in circles until the Beatles sang
“All You Need is Love,” and Love is all you need,
at which point Zeus, the godfather, cut them
into two like a sorb apple halved for pickling.
Male and female parts descended from the moon.
Apollo, the light god, turned their heads to make them
face their wound and pulled their skin to cover
the scars, tied at the navel like a purse.

Love did not envy, nor did Love boast, and
Love hated pride and never dishonored others
and kept no record of wrongs.
Love told their followers to love one another
as Love loved them. Love commanded
their followers to be not angered easily.
Love was Love's hobby and Love's charity,
but Love's commandments pissed off some.
And they challenged Love's teachings,
thinking they need not love anymore,
that Love was old-fashioned in the new technology,
and they didn't need Love because Hate
whispered into ears and entered minds
and leapt from shouting mouths. They turned on Love,
and they sought the rope with which to hang Love,
stretching Love's neck until they shouted, "I can't breathe,"
and murderers rejoiced, satisfied, in witness of their death,
but Love never dies.

Love waits like a soldier for a new commandment.

McCauley's Reprieve

Stephen Sossaman

There are many worse places to be hanged than at the southwest corner of Main Street and Second Street in Napa, what with the pleasant view of the oak-covered hills, the nice climate, and the mostly friendly townspeople.

I am thinking of Jeremiah McCauley, who started life in Illinois in 1820, lived life badly in Nevada, and ended life abruptly in Napa. Bad as he was, by all accounts, McCauley still had a few friends when he was shown the rope in 1851 in a second story storeroom over Kilburn's blacksmithy.

Jeremiah McCauley was convicted, without the nuisance of a defense lawyer, of killing a Napa farrier named Sellers. But McCauley was granted a reprieve by the governor. That right there shows that McCauley had friends. Not just drinking companions, but friends with influence in the new capital in Vallejo, and friends with some spare bribing money.

Whether being hanged illegally is better or worse than being hanged legally is a distinction best left to saloon philosophers. When a godly farm community like ours considers what is proper or improper about a hanging, it thinks about how well the hanging itself proceeds, not whether the trial was rigged.

You are doubtless wondering why McCauley got hanged if he got a reprieve. Turns out that in addition to having friends, McCauley had enemies, mostly friends of the murdered man Sellers. They prevented the governor's agent from delivering the reprieve and used a young boy to get it done.

Even then, Napa had a good newspaper and plenty of gossips, so everyone in Napa knew that the governor was sending one of his idle relatives on horseback to present the reprieve officially. While McCauley's friends were enjoying cigars at a Napa saloon, Seller's friends gathered at the First Street ferry landing on the east side of the Napa River by the Oxbow, waiting for the rider.

That ferry landing was little more than a gentle slope that had been roughly leveled to accommodate wagons. The ferry itself was just a wooden platform attached to both riverbanks by ropes.

The messenger was a Mr. C. W. Knox, but he was so shifty and shrinking that no one ever really called him "Mister" Knox without a satiric twinkle in his eye. The governor figured that he had fulfilled his part of the bribe by issuing the

reprieve. He also figured that the modest size of the bribe did not entitle the petitioners to the governor's very best man and fastest horse.

Whether Mr. C. W. Knox got the reprieve delivered in time was of little interest to the governor, and of no interest to the horse. It did matter a great deal to Mr. C. W. Knox, who wanted to show the governor that he was a capable employee, never mind mistakes in the past.

Now, when C. W. Knox and his old horse ambled up to the ferry landing, he had no idea that the half dozen men he saw gathered there were Seller's friends. They just looked like country idlers and vagabonds.

Knox asked the ferryman's boy how much the fare was.

"Mister, your horse gets across dry for fifty cents."

"And my own passage, boy? Is that included for the fifty cents?"

"Nope."

"And what is the fare for me?"

"I can't take you across. Just your horse."

"Boy, I am here on official government business. The governor himself entrusted me with a special document vital to the wellbeing of this whole community."

"Mister, this ain't my ferry. It's my daddy's ferry. My daddy sets the rates for his ferry."

And the boy started reciting the price list that he had carefully memorized. His father had not yet posted the prices, on the sign he had not yet built.

"Wagon and four animals, \$1.50. Wagon and three animals, \$1.25. Wagon and..."

Knox interrupted. He had looked across the river and seen a small crowd gathering outside the two-story frame building where McCauley had been confined, convicted, and condemned. Where, on the second floor, he waited to be hanged.

"Listen, boy. The governor himself demands that you ferry me across the river, and quickly, so as not to be delinquent in your civic obligations. Time is of the

essence.”

The boy did not reply immediately. He was mentally going through the prices he had memorized in case he had missed something. Then he looked up.

“Mister, my daddy never set a price for a man from the governor.”

This boy had the single-mindedness of a hay rake.

“How much for an ordinary man, and that man’s ordinary horse, boy?”

Knox asked that with just enough uppity rudeness to get Sellers’ friends stirring. One of them, a man whose name I do not know, and so cannot tell, answered.

“You shall not pass here, mister. If you want to pass to the west bank, you will have to do so at the trancas, up river. Many an ordinary man has crossed there, and I reckon it’s good enough for you and that old horse.”

“How far is the trancas?”

“Not far.”

“How far?”

“About three miles, maybe. Depends on whether you are riding north to it, or south from it.”

A second man added, “Depends on how fast you’re riding.”

“That is too far! I’ll just ride across the river right here. It looks shallow enough for a horse.”

“Yes, mister,” the first man said, “But you will not cross here. That would be interfering with this boy’s business and rightful commerce. You will go up to the trancas and cross there or turn around and leave Napa Valley.”

Mr. C.W. Knox considered several possible responses to this refusal, but he hesitated. He had experience searching a bad poker hand for even one good card. Backing down when confronted by one man can make a fellow feel timid but backing down when confronted by six men and a boy can make that same fellow feel real smart. So, he said nothing, at least not out loud, and began riding north to the trancas crossing.

You have already figured out that Mr. C. W. Knox was the first person ever known who could not get to where he wanted to go in Napa without a bothersome delay.

All the time it took to ride north, to cross, and then to ride back south might mean that McCauley was being hanged in the meantime, but at least Mr. C.W. Knox could honestly report that he had done his duty and earned his day's pay.

So, he rode to the trancas crossing, across the river, and into the town. He was just in time, not to deliver the reprieve, but in time to see McCauley's body hoisted onto a small cart. Sellers' friends were there watching. They had taken the ferry back, of course, well in time to witness the hanging.

The cart with McCauley's body was loaded onto the wobbly ferry barge for his short trip to the Tulocay cemetery. Knox and his horse crowded on, too. Nobody got in his way this time, and the boy let him ride for nothing.

Dropped Card

Jane VanCantfort

Niall headed out to the hardware store to get a carbon monoxide alarm for Gladys, housebound with a broken hip. Gladys was Mom's oldest friend and helped him when Mom passed. There was no way he'd invoice her, even if he was going broke as a handyman.

As a reward for his good deed, he was getting lunch at the Old Thyme Diner. The distinct pinch of his belt buckle as he sat in the pickup reminded him not to get the pie; he just hoped they didn't have the strawberry rhubarb with crumb topping. He absently rubbed his belly as he barreled down the road, going forty-five in a thirty-five zone.

He rode with all the windows down, deeply breathing in the coolness of the air. Did he smell rain coming? His dad used to say only country people could smell rain. He missed Dad so much. The beauty of the mighty bruised clouds building from the northern mountains blew him away—so much majesty and power.

Niall parked and barely had time to cross Main Street before being battered by huge drops of warm summer rain. The drops even created the crown shape that he'd read about in *Scientific American* thirty years ago. He'd remember an article he read at fourteen at the dentist, but then he'd forget his hat. His nose began to run the second his boots hit the sidewalk, and his glasses fogged up too.

He ducked under the limp and faded burgundy awning of the closed Granite Times newspaper. He wiped off his glasses on his T-shirt. When he put his glasses back on, he noticed a business card lying face down on the sidewalk. It was a tapestry of embroidered red-and-orange roses on a glossy black background. He bent and saved it from the rain puddle. It read:

The Essence of Enchantment
Bear River Community Library
Thursday, 7:00 p.m.

Niall put the card in his jeans back pocket. He liked the artwork on one side and the cool flowery font on the other. Then he pulled his flannel overshirt over his head and ran through the deluge to the hardware store, quickly popping inside.

"Hey, Tim, how's it going?" Niall said to Tim behind the counter, then walked

briskly to the back of the store where the alarms were. Tim didn't look up from his phone. Tim had tormented Niall in seventh grade, succeeding in making that year the worst in Niall's life. Or maybe that was last year when both Mom and Dad passed.

Niall put the alarm and the batteries on the counter without looking at Tim.

"Thirty-eight, forty-four," Tim said. Niall pulled out his wallet, and the card fell out onto the counter.

"Still coming down out there?" Tim asked, handing him the dropped card after glancing at it.

Niall wanted to say, "Can't you see for yourself?" or some such comeuppance, but just like in middle school, he didn't.

"Yup," Niall said and accepted the receipt and bag. Tim probably didn't even remember the bullying. Mom always said Niall had a memory like an elephant. Did elephants forgive and forget? No doubt; they were better than humans.

The rain was still coming down. He hurried down the street to the diner and managed to get even wetter. He hoped his shirt didn't smell like the dog. He pushed open the door, and the tinkling of the bells caused Melody to look up and wave with a smile. He smiled back and walked to his usual booth.

The diner wasn't busy, even though it was high noon on Saturday. The hardware store had been empty, too. The economy hadn't bounced back from the latest crisis. Niall was glad he'd inherited the property free and clear. Mom and Dad were still helping him out, like they always had.

"What are you craving today, hon?" Melody asked, holding a slightly greasy laminated menu just in case. Niall noticed that her curly dark hair was starting to go gray.

"I'm going for the veggie burger with guacamole and a side of sweet potato fries," Niall said, salivating when he spoke. "And a fresh squeezed lemonade."

"You sure you don't want to try something new? We have a yummy albacore tuna melt on whole wheat; the cheese is English cheddar, and we have chipotle onion rings or basil-batter zucchini sticks now too."

"No, I want to stick to the tired and true," Niall said.

“Don’t you mean the tried and true?” Melody said, smiling.

Melody walked away and tapped the bell to give the order to the cook. She’d gained a lot of weight, and the pink uniform didn’t help. Not that he should talk. Melody was the prettiest girl in their class, but she had gotten pregnant in high school. She had a baby boy, who was at least thirty now; he’d moved away years ago.

The diner could use an upgrade. The booth seat was duct-taped where it had torn. Even though the jukebox was long gone, they’d left the old flip title directory with the red light on top on the tables. The Formica table was permanently sticky too. It wasn’t like that back in the day when his dad would take him after Little League.

He looked out at the main street through the plate-glass windows. The shrubs were battered, and Melody’s hanging flower baskets had taken a beating too. And it looked like the rain was just getting started. Across the street, he saw that the fabric store had closed. Two doors down was the shuttered bookstore. Mom would hate that; those were her two favorite stores. But now everybody bought online. No doubt the alarm would have been cheaper if he’d ordered it. He heard the crinkle of the receipt in his back pocket when he stretched. He pulled it out, and the card he’d found fell on the table again, just slightly damp.

Melody brought his food; it was way too much to eat, but he wouldn’t let that stop him. The grilled onions smelled so good, and they’d piled the fries so high, and they’d used the flaky salt he loved. The black bean veggie patty, the luscious soft bun, and the dill pickle were all homemade by Melody. He closed his eyes with joy at the melded flavors; oh, the comfort of food, so satisfying.

Melody came by to see if everything was all right and picked up the card. That glossy black side with the tapestry photo was eye-catching.

“What is the Essence of Enchantment?” she asked.

“No idea. I thought I knew everyone and everything in this town, but I don’t know about that.”

“How come you have this card then?” she asked.

Niall didn’t want to say he picked it up on the street; that was dorky. The bells rang and she turned to greet a customer, saving him.

He returned to his perfect burger, this time savoring the garden greens, the

luscious tomato, and the intensely rich guacamole. He closed his eyes in utter bliss.

“Niall...” Melody said, and he opened his eyes, embarrassed not only that his eyes were closed but also that his mouth was full. She smiled kindly while he held up a finger. She had such pretty skin and dimples, and her lashes were so long.

“Niall, let’s go to this meeting.” Melody picked up the card and waved it at him. “It’d be something new to do around here. I don’t get out much, but I can swing a meeting at the library.” She smiled again and put his check down on the table crisply.

Niall avidly nodded his head.

“Okay, I will meet you on the library steps a little before seven, okay?”

Niall nodded vigorously again, unable to speak.

“Do you want some of today’s pie for dessert?”

“No, no, I’m good today,” Niall answered virtuously. He finished lunch and left Melody a huge tip. Melody, the queen of high school, was going somewhere with him, and it was her idea. The dog and cat would be impressed.

It poured all the way home, and his tomato plants were bendy and battered. Niall napped for a few hours, and then ate all the leftover spaghetti for dinner with the rest of the Parmigiano-Reggiano. Then he watched two-and-a-half recorded Law & Order episodes—his favorite, the old ones with Lenny.

It was raining again when he came into town on Thursday for the meeting, but this time he had remembered his rain hat. Melody was already on the library steps. She was wearing a lime-green poncho and rain boots. Niall remembered her wearing a lime-green bikini at the swimming hole a zillion years ago when she dove off that rock. Niall jogged up to her, but stumbled and tripped, and she reached out an arm to steady him. Clumsy oaf.

They both turned to walk up the stairs. There was a flyer on the door directing them to Room #6. The door was slightly ajar, and the room was lit with lavender-scented candles. The chairs were arranged in a circle. Niall had a start when he saw Tim there, as well as three older women he’d never seen before.

“Welcome!” said one of the women, who rose to greet them. She wore a midnight-blue caftan, and her white, sparse hair was uneven and patchy. Chemo, Niall figured.

“I’m Gita, and I’ll be guiding the meeting tonight.” Gita grasped his hand in both of hers and held on for just a touch too long. Gita’s dark eyes were large and luminous, especially with her pallor. He wasn’t sure if her eyes were deep blue or black.

“These are my sisters, Bea and Melba, and I think you both know Tim. Please have a seat.”

Niall thought it was weird that he’d never seen the three sisters before, but Melody didn’t react. Maybe they’d come into the diner. How did Gita know he knew Tim? Niall told himself not to overthink, like usual, just live in the moment and see what it brings, like the therapist advised.

Melody took the seat next to Tim. That bugged Niall, so he went to the other side of the circle. He was conscious of his size on the rickety, folding metal chair. There was soft music playing, sitar maybe, like they play before yoga class. Or they did the one and only time Niall had gone to yoga.

“Would the newcomers like a cup of tea?” Melba asked. She gestured to the hot water and cups set up on the table. Tim already had a cup, which he was sipping.

“Sure thing!” Melody said, so Niall got up to get them both some. He tried not to look at the cookies, but noticed they were thick shortbread with lemon zest and baker’s sugar on top. The tea smelled of burned sage and had floaters in it. Melody cautiously took a sip, so Niall did too. It was awful.

Once they were all seated, Gita glided over to the door and shut it firmly and dimmed the lights.

“Then let’s join hands and begin.” They did so, but Niall had to scrape his chair closer to Bea, and it made a sound and he cringed. No one seemed to notice. Gita and her sisters began to sway slightly. Niall was surprised to see Tim swaying too. The sisters were softly chanting something Niall couldn’t catch, even though he was holding Bea’s hand.

“What is the essence of enchantment?” Gita intoned, her eyes closed. There was a silence, and Niall wondered if they were supposed to answer. He opened

one eye, but everyone else had theirs closed. He quickly closed his eyes again.

“We are a mirror of the universe, and there are universes that mirror us as well. But we see through that mirror darkly.”

Gita paused, right when Niall was thinking this was insane. He flushed, hoping she hadn’t sensed his skepticism.

“Please close your eyes and concentrate. All the outcomes that are possible can happen, but only one outcome can come to us at a time.” Gita paused again, and then continued, louder.

“Bring forth another outcome! Infinite outcomes, we beseech you to choose our best path! Let us live the way we are meant to live! We who are the righteous deserve to live rightly! Let us live in the best universe consciously and powerfully!” Gita was shrieking at the end. Then she began to chant something under her breath that he couldn’t hear, and so did her sisters and Tim. Niall was dying to see if Melody had her eyes open but was too afraid to peek.

Niall shut his eyes even tighter. He saw a purple orb in the middle of the darkness; it must have been a reflection of the overhead light he’d seen before. He was conscious of the tea in his hand and gulped some with his eyes closed, hoping he wouldn’t spill it. The taste was growing on him. He began to sway too; it was hard not to with Bea moving so gracefully next to him.

“The moon has awoken. The light has been broken. The spell has begun. By tomorrow’s dawn it will be done,” Gita said, clearly this time. Melody and Tim repeated it after her, and Niall finally joined them. Then Niall felt like he had nodded off. Suddenly the overhead light was back on. And the candles were out, wispily smoking.

They all sat there in a circle, rapidly blinking. Gita smiled broadly at them all.

“You can leave donations in the straw basket on the table, whatever you feel is right. Thanks so much for coming to our meeting!” The three old women smiled, and Niall imagined that Bea winked at him. He put a twenty in the basket to impress Melody, and Tim did too. Melody just put in a five. They walked out together.

“Hey, Niall, can I talk to you for a second?” Tim asked, lightly touching his arm. Niall stopped unwillingly. Melody walked on and waved at the two men; she had a very attractive wave, he noticed. And then she was gone. It looked like it wasn’t really a date.

Tim swallowed deeply and looked directly at Niall. "I just wanted to let you know I'm sorry I bullied you in middle school. That was wrong of me, and I'm ashamed. I hope that one day you can find it in your heart to forgive me." Tim visibly blushed. His speech sounded rehearsed.

"Wow, Tim, thanks for saying that." Niall managed to choke his words. Then Tim pulled Niall in for a hug. Niall pulled away and awkwardly patted Tim's shoulder.

"No worries, Tim! I'll see you around," Niall said and hurried out down the short flight of stairs, passing the official portraits of Bush, Obama, and Hillary, and the list of the winners of the summer reading contest.

When he got out on the street, Melody was long gone, but the clouds had cleared, and he saw the sliver of the moon. He thought he saw a purple glow all around the edges of the crescent. He felt dazed, and he ended up at home without remembering taking the turnoff.

At dawn, Niall was dimly aware that the room was growing light. The cat jumped on the bed. He tapped his chest, and the cat sat on him, sniffing his beard and purring while he rubbed behind her ears. Then he opened his eyes. Even without his glasses, he could see himself in the dresser mirror, but he didn't remember moving the dresser across from the bed. He threw back the sheet, startling the cat who jumped quickly off. He didn't have flowered sheets.

Niall walked over to the window and pulled back the sheer orange curtain Mom had made. Mom wanted the morning light to make them glow in the morning. Squinting, he saw his cattle dog, Jet, sleeping on the front porch. His truck was in the driveway. It was going to be a beautiful day. He noticed a gold ring on his finger when he dropped the curtain.

The bedroom door creaked open. He turned to see Melody with a cup of coffee and a mini scone on a little plate. He didn't have flowered plates. He wished he had grabbed his glasses.

"Hi, hon! I brought you some of that Nicaraguan you like, with the frothy oat milk. And I made some mini scones too." She set them on the broad windowsill, and then gave him a huge hug, nuzzling his neck. An inadvertent groan came out of him.

"I've got to run into the café and help Tim with the breakfast. Before you come in, can you pick some of the pattypan, and maybe some oyster mushrooms? Oh, and more basil? I want to use them for the lunch menu!"

"Okay," Niall managed to say.

“Great, see you soon, babe!” Melody said, and then she grabbed his ass and laughed. “Love you!”

The room smelled of daisies and vanilla now. He heard her sandals lightly hit the steps, and the door shut. She stopped to pet Jet, and he wagged his tail. Jet wasn't friendly to strangers.

He went down the hallway to look out the back window, and his garden was three times the size it had been, and lush. He went to the bathroom and found his glasses on the back of the toilet. He was trimmer, and his beard wasn't as long. He still looked like a nerd. His toothbrush was still turquoise.

The landline rang, and without thinking, he went back down the hall and answered.

“Hi, Niall! It's Gladys. Sorry to call so early, but I know you get up at dawn! Do you have time to put in my alarm today? I know Melody needs you at the restaurant, but maybe you could stop by on the way? I have the flower bouquets Melody wanted for the lunch tables.”

“Oh, okay, sure. No problem,” Niall said. He hoped the alarm was still on the kitchen counter. He hoped he still had a kitchen counter. And how had Gladys returned to her garden, with her hip just healing?

He returned to the bedroom, noticing the art was different, and saw the coffee steaming on the sill. It was delicious, and so was the scone; he tasted cardamom and almond extract along with the vanilla. He opened the closet door and saw he had some new jeans and shirts. There were a ton of women's clothes in there. His underwear was in the same place. He got dressed and cautiously peered into his parents' bedroom. The boxes he stored in there were gone, and his mom's hairbrush wasn't on the dresser anymore. It looked more like a guest room now.

Niall nervously went downstairs. The living room looked spiffy, a new couch and pillows, and the floor had been refinished. His parents' wedding photo was still there, but now there was one of Melody and him. He gaped at it until Jet scratched at the screen door. Jet headed for the kitchen to his bowl, and Niall followed him.

The refrigerator was stainless steel now, and they had a Wolfe stove. There was a big bowl of fruit on the table and flowers on the counter. The alarm and batteries were right where he had left them. The pet food was in the same place, and he filled their bowls.

He decided he better go pick the pattypan and mushrooms she wanted. He went around the house to the garden, and Jet came with him, just like always. The irrigation system was real spiffy now.

When he got to town, after dropping by Gladys', he saw that the old newspaper office was an art gallery. There was a microbrewery in the old fabric store. The city had put flags for a fall festival on all the streetlights for the first time in years. He walked to the back of the truck to grab the veggies and flowers and saw a business card on the sidewalk. He deliberately stepped on it with his boot, like grinding out a cigarette, leaving a dirty footprint. He pushed it to the gutter, though he didn't usually litter.

The diner looked amazing; they'd built a brick patio, and it was filled with tables and bright umbrellas, and a banner that said The Backyard Café. He grabbed the basket of veggies and the bucket of bouquets and walked across the street. He edged around three older ladies having coffee on the patio and imagined that one winked at him. The bells on the door tinkled when he went in, and Melody turned to smile at him. He smiled back.

A Rock

Adam Todd

There is a rock resting on my friend's windowsill;
it is shaped like the Expo Hall at the fairgrounds.
Or it reminds me of the Expo Hall
so much
that it has begun to look like it
to cut its hair like she did
dress in her style
wear her perfume.

Jose, Central America, 1977

Paul Rousseau

I am a medical student working in a rural clinic in Central America.

Jose is a seventeen-year-old refugee from El Salvador. He is homeless and sleeps in the local cemetery. He begs on the street for food and money. He hobbles to the clinic's metal chair with a one arm crutch and plops down.

Jose has suffered tremendously during eight failed attempts to reach the United States. He was beaten and robbed, enduring a fracture to his right arm and the bone surrounding his right eye. He subsequently lost vision in the eye. On another attempt, a gang approached when he was riding the train through Mexico, slicing his left calf with a machete before tossing him from the top of a boxcar. He laid in a gully beside the train tracks for two days before he was found by immigration authorities. On his final attempt, he lost the lower part of his left leg. He was running beside a train trying to board. He grabbed a ladder but was too weak to pull himself up. The suction from beneath the train yanked his leg under, amputating his limb below the knee.

Jose rips a soiled cloth from a wound on his stump. He does not have a prosthesis; when he tires of the crutch, he scoots along the ground with his hands and drags the stump. I cleanse the wound and place a clean bandage. I provide him with an antibiotic and request he return in one week.

It has been one month; Jose has not returned. It is unusual, as he visits the clinic for snacks and shelter from inclement weather. I inquire around town of his whereabouts. No one knows. I visit the cemetery; he is not there. Then, a week later, a man relates Jose told him he was attempting one final trip to the United States. I am concerned. Success is uncertain for an able-bodied man, let alone a one-legged man. If he were caught and deported, he would have returned by now. I fear he has forever disappeared into the untamed backcountry of Mexico, kidnapped, killed, or trafficked. Sadly, I will never know.

Backstory: Undocumented immigrants from Central America travel to the United States through Mexico. It is a dangerous undertaking, the journey

besieged with thieves, gangs, traffickers, kidnappers, rapists, and murderers. Many succumb to the grueling and perilous trek and return home. Others are detained by immigration and deported. Still others simply disappear, never to be seen again.

Of Wolves and Stars

Kyle Brandon Lee

Her howl reached for him like cold fingers, sending shivers through his body with just barely a touch. Despite hearing the sound many times over the course of many years, he could recall no other person, man or woman, who could create such an unnerving tone. To hear it, however, was to know that she now partook in a chase. And like the beast from which she took her name, the Wolf would hunt.

And he would run.

The low hum given off by the tunnel pipes echoed endlessly throughout the labyrinth which functioned as the city's heart. All who lived near the center had grown so accustomed to the constant whirl, tuning the sound out to continue with their daily lives became a natural habit. Those who lived in the outer rings of the city would pay greater notice as they moved inward, but they too would acclimate to the hum. But when traveling within the tunnels, little could silence the monotonous tone as it reverberated against metal floors and walls.

But his footsteps echoed louder.

He had learned the paths in his early youth, venturing further and further within the multi-leveled maze each day, often against the wishes of his parents. But his nature always pressed him to seek a new turn or a new expanse he had never explored before. He imagined the tunnels as a dense forest and the hum as its woodland creatures singing in unison. With most every avenue burned into his memory, the constant hum became a song with different notes and movements, changing with every twist and climb he took. The labyrinth was the city's heart, and the hum was the beating of its chambers.

But above the song, above his footsteps, he heard her howl.

"I hear you," she laughed, her voice bouncing off the walls and pipes with frightening clarity. "I can hear where you're running!"

The Wolf wanted what he had taken from her, a silver bag tied with a silver string. Inside it sat the true object of her desire, round and red. But he had no time to reflect upon his newly gained possession. Instead, he continued his way down the hall at a maddened pace. He had not traveled this particular hall often and though something about its tune was off, it bore similarities to those

above and below it, like a melody he once heard in a lullaby.

Panic struck as he realized why the song had been so discordant. He came upon a junction that led into four different directions, each bearing a different tune, all too jumbled to immediately make clear. Worse yet, he could not settle his own heartbeat to hear the distinct differences between the tunnels' songs. He could only hope his choice was correct.

Again, came her howl.

Blindly, he charged down a pathway, not caring which, confidence in the song guiding him. The hum still a jumble, the halls all looked similar. His footsteps all sounded the same. The musty smell carried throughout the labyrinth like what he thought the scent of moss in a forest or the breeze coming off the ocean to be. Yet, he would find a way.

He would have to in order to escape the Wolf.

He came upon a set of stairs to his right, a tarnished center pole running straight up and down. The stairwell sang its own unique song, just as the other structures of the maze did. Though the hum of the path directly ahead rang more familiar, his instinct urged him to take the risk. It urged him to forgo his path, above or below.

"I can smell you," came the Wolf's cry, toying with him. "Sweating quite a bit, I see. You're wearing that red hooded shirt, aren't you? I can pick you out above the stench in here!"

Petty, he thought, but accurate suddenly very aware of the elevated temperature within the city heart. Just then, a new scent caught his attention, not of sweat or mildew but of cooking meats. He listened to the hum closer, and familiarity came into focus. The market was near, situated in the adjacent ring of the city. There, out in the open, he could be one of a hundred, maybe a thousand. That all depended on the time of day and in his running, he lost all track. Unsure of which way to go, he glanced at the stairs, biting his tongue in debate.

Down he ran.

He had no time to take this descent a single step at a time, two he would skip, sometimes three. With each landing in reach, he'd jump four or five, even if the impact sent aches through his body. But as many flights as he would run, he could hear her howl rapidly approaching.

“The stairs?” she laughed, closer now than she had ever been before and clearly enjoying the whimsy of her hunt. “I’m faster than you!”

A moment’s cold fear brought him pause. Her steps had suddenly gone silent. No longer could he hear her howl. Somewhere, she stood back, ready to strike. The Wolf had closed the gap. Before he could move, she swung around the center poll that ran through the stairwell and leaped onto the landing above.

“So, so much faster,” she smiled, her teeth in full display. For a moment he swore her long black locks were but the beginning of a midnight hued coat to hide the Wolf from her prey until it was too late. Though her true features were human, this hunter bore the spirit of a predator.

Jolted, he began his run again, flying down several more steps before leaping for the next landing. Before him lay a tunnel exit with a sign reading “Market Level” hanging above it. Beyond that lay the next ring of the city and with it, hope. With a spring, he tore down the pathway, following pipes to where they ended at an archway, all turning outward into the perimeter of the open space.

The sound of the Wolf’s footsteps became lost amidst the chatter of vendors, visitors, and shoppers. He glanced to the chameleon sky to see it had gone orange. Day was fading and so would the traffic. His time to shake the Wolf from his path continued to grow thin.

He blended into the crowd, pushing his way past mothers with children at their sides, fathers with heavy burdens about their backs, and elder children not quite ready for a life’s occupation. They ignored him, consumed by their own business. Likely they would ignore the Wolf as well, not seeing her for the hunter she was. Fortunately, if pushing through the assorted masses slowed him down, the Wolf would be slowed as well.

He reached the main street, now keenly aware of where he was in relation to everywhere else on the level. His goal not far, he pushed to his right, seeing the large silver archway and the double doors that lay beneath it. Within, there was safety. But in the crowd standing near his destination, he saw her.

The Wolf.

Sighing, he knew getting past her at the archway would be near impossible. But he also knew the Wolf to have razor thin patience. She would stand guard hoping to catch him in a moment of overconfidence. She would pounce upon him and take what was hers—the silver bag with the silver string. However, this would not last. Her need to move, her very need to hunt would pull her away

in pursuit, no doubt in hopes of catching a glimpse or scent. He would wait her out as long as he could, and if she suddenly became able to fight against her nature, he would take his chances.

A pleasant scent, the same that came across him earlier, caught his attention. A few feet off the street, a small stand with a haphazard bar and row of stools stood ready to serve a variety of cooked meats and baked goods to many a weary traveler. A grandmotherly old woman toiled at the grill, cobbling together what smelled so glorious while keeping a careful eye on a nearby oven.

"Come," the cook said, spotting him on the street and waving to him with an oven mitt on one hand and a rag in the other. "Sit and eat. You look in need of something to settle yourself."

Though her smile seemed genuine enough, he surmised the spot atop the stool to be much more inviting and important. Though far from the archway, the perch would provide a perfect view of the Wolf. So, he sat, eyes never leaving his predator.

"What can I get you?" the old woman asked as she slung the rag over her shoulder.

"Just water," he replied. "I don't have much time to eat."

Without so much a second thought, the old woman did as asked, placing a glass of water before him. Yet, he did not drink. Though her cooking occupied much of her attention, the grandmotherly old woman was far too keen not to see his distraction. Her eyes followed his.

"My, that one's a looker. And such pretty eyes," the cook smirked. "Better to see you with I bet. Does she have great ears? To hear you?"

He didn't say a word, but he was only half listening anyway.

"She chases you," the cook continued. "I've seen many a hunter with that same glare, many of whom chased me in my youth. If I were to guess, she wants more than that silver bag in your hand."

"Thank you for the water," he could only say, hopping up from the stool and leaving the glass untouched.

"My, what manners you have!" she cursed as he ran. But the cook shook her

head, dismissing his rudeness to both anxiety and lack of maturity.

Absent from her post, the Wolf left the archway open. He did not rule out the possibility of her lying in wait nearby but no greater opportunity presented itself. Once more, he joined the crowd, now a river of humanity flowing in opposing currents. The changing sky slipped from its orange to a fading purple, signaling to those under its purview the market was closing. The archway and the double doors within inched closer. The throngs of market goers only cared for their own destinations, rarely letting anyone pass or anyone enter. This impeded the pursuit of his goal greatly. After much fighting against momentum, he could only stop and look for a new current to jump into. But men and women alike bumped into him, carrying him back into the flow of the stream.

There, within the current, fought the Wolf, struggling to catch her with her silver bag. Her teeth displayed in full, she smiled knowing that he stood trapped within the crowd just as she was and there could be no escape. Determination set within her grey eyes, he watched as she reached for him. His heart skipped another beat at the thought that the chase had finally come to an end. She would have what she came for and more. But the tips of her fingers only brushed his coat, the stream keeping him just out of grasp. His heart pounded in rapid succession as he watched the flow of humanity pull his predator away.

As the Wolf attempted to paw and swim her way out of the undertow, his own path opened before him when market goers inexplicably dissipated. Providence, he thought at first. Extreme luck, he thought second. He did not run with his predator occupied but he kept his pace brisk. Soon he came upon the archway, cold and metal. He followed the hall until coming to the set of double doors. Tucking the silver bag into his pocket, he placed his palms upon either side and with a mighty shove, opened them to the outer ring of the city.

Beyond the doors, a garden hosting every color in the spectrum stretched across multiple levels, bearing the flora of countless worlds. Brought together in necessity, its beauty remained a reminder of what once was and what could be. He walked along the observation level, smelling the mingling scents of a thousand trees and a thousand flowers. Above it all, a transparent canopy held back the vacuum of space. Outside, a different beauty beckoned him.

Before him lay the stars.

Stars of brilliant color radiated in the cloud of a luminous nebula, stretching out as a magnificent contrast to the emptiness of the universe in between.

A nearby planet, its atmosphere swirling with turbulent gasses, fell under the shadow of its icy rings. The other massive city ships of the fleet flew nearby, looming as star faring monoliths for the smaller guardian ships to patrol, their pilots swimming in the expanse of the unknown.

He walked to the rail overlooking both the lower levels and expanse of space and sat cross legged. He pulled from his pocket the silver bag and untied its matching string. Turning it over, a red apple rolled into his hand. Content to be under the stars, he took a bite.

"We were supposed to share that," the Wolf said, moving behind him in silent approach.

"I only took a bite from my half," he said, holding up the fruit to her. He could then hear her tapping a foot impatiently, expecting a better answer. Eventually, she took the apple, biting into it on the other side as she sat next to him. Her own legs dangled over the edge of the deck, soon rocking in an alternating pattern. She crossed her arms over the middle rail and smiled at her prey.

"I won you know," she laughed.

"How's that?"

"The goal wasn't just the garden," she answered. "The safe spot was the apple tree on the bottom level."

"Was it?"

For all the excitement, he could not remember.

"The same tree we picked the apple from yesterday. The same tree you joked had forbidden knowledge."

"I guess you won," he shrugged. Silence came between the two as they ate their apple and watched as patrols flew in formations that reminded him of insects dancing on water. He had never seen such a thing except in pictures and videos from his science texts. But he imagined that to see such a thing in person would be just as thrilling as what he watched from where he now sat. "And now that we've bitten into the forbidden fruit, we won't be coming back to these gardens."

"Not for a while at least," she mused. But looking to her friend, she could see his melancholic expression. "Will you miss our games of chase?"

He nodded.

“Once I enter the academy tomorrow, I’ll only be chasing my time to fly out there.”

She saw him point to a guardian ship, zooming past a cluster of stars as it shifted formation with the other crafts in its group. She knew his dream was to fly but she recognized the apprehension he felt while standing upon its threshold. Wishing to comfort him, she placed a hand on his shoulder.

“You’ll be there soon. I know it. And I’ll be...” she paused—her own future just as close to realization. “I don’t know.”

“Oh, you know,” he answered without even a moment’s thought. “Wolves do what they do best.”

“Perhaps.”

Again, came the silence.

“Are you ready to grow up?” the Wolf finally asked.

He looked at the last apple they would share for a time unknown, much of it left to eat.

“Not yet,” he smiled, jumping to his feet with the fruit still in his hand. “Growing up can wait till tomorrow.”

And he who would fly among the stars ran.

And the Wolf took chase.

Ataxia

John Zedolik

I miss you
I love you

graces the brick and concrete
of a few city walls open to the streets

though without the link
of hypotaxis, I cannot discern

which one cause, which one effect.

But the first stands above the second

(So implying its precedence in the chain?)

yet possibly may only be proximate—just a row
of bricks the difference—

so jointed all the same even if
in confusion of a tagger's straitened

heart that pumped the trigger and spray,

whose composition may crumble to shards,
subordination sloughed off, unnecessary skin,

the flat bones of loss atomized
upon the private surface, even coordination

would be more than—so less than—enough

Nature

Sharon Kennedy-Nolle

Cruising out of Kruger, I chew
my plane pretzels like a giraffe's cud.
The greens below of the Drakensberg range burn,
scraggly shielding the simplified life of prey and prowl,
the slink and stop, belly-through the sawtooth love grass
as African dogs nip at the heels
of the worried wildebeest,
where dropped impala jawbones bleach blissfully clean,
and your six-month-old death is crowded out gristly
by another and another.
This morning, I passed
a new springbok, alert, curled, alone
under dawn bush shade;
flies covered its eyes; and there was some milky cowl...
His rifle slung over his khakied back,
the ranger mumbled, "Oh, that's too bad...
nature's a bad mother..."

The Nature of a Front Porch

Scott Price

Fall signals its coming in the sky and a few foreshadowing leaves,
but it hasn't convinced anyone yet.

Wooded gunshots ring in the distance as cars round the corner
past my meditative porch.

A single spider, webbed in silhouette against the evening sky,
mesmerizes a mind in a body broken.

A grasshopper can cling for hours to a single stalk of flora,
yet the spider retreats at my approach.

The spider, though, convinces by its presence alone.

It convinces me to keep my distance, to let it be; that I never
want to touch its web, its world.
That webbed world wiggles slightly in the breeze,

and those I see trapped inside are
smaller, yes, less aware, but I'm sure by now
they regret what led them there.

The garden weed I see is less convincing, though.
Life always finds a way, I suppose,
but some things simply have to go.

The Land Who Raised Me

Melissa Harris

I am the girl who was raised
by the plains, the fields, and the sky.

I was fostered by wide-open spaces.
I am most myself when I can see
a horizon that goes on unhindered.

I have climbed trees since I was small
to see even farther than forever.

I breathe most freely
when I inhale from e v e r y w h e r e
and my exhale goes on for eternity.

In our culture we are not taught to be free
yet I have always been free.

I forgot for a while
but I am remembering now.

The world told me and trained me
to fit into a space.
But I never fit.

I run free
when nothing is in my way
when everything around me is the way
and I am all of it.

Naptime®

Ann Harper Reed

You say hello as the dry of your eyes blink hard under the sterile, fluorescent lighting. The line extends down the stairs behind you. One couple has taken to dry-humping against the wall. You feel grateful they've kept their pants on. You've been waiting in this line for an eternity of twenty minutes or two hours. These days it's difficult to discern the difference between the two. Since the start of the Reckoning or the lack (or whatever they're calling it these days), time has adjusted to have no meaning. Or that's what you decide is true. It's difficult to tell what other people think. It was always difficult to understand other people's thoughts, but now it seems impossible. Everyone, with their temper tantrums and general whack-a-doodle, makes it difficult to know what is real. You cannot decide if this has to do with getting no sleep or because everything changed when people started being awake 24/7.

"Yes. Hello. I'll be with you in a sec. So busy..." says the woman with oily, blonde hair and a large, puffy wart tucked under her right nostril.

You watch her lean into her seat and tilt her head toward her coworker. He is a skinny dude with a weak chin and a nervous, sniggering laugh. There seems to be volumes of paperwork surrounding them. An impossible amount of paper, you think. Again, you aren't sure this is true, but without sleep and dreams everything feels impossible and true.

Why is there paperwork? you start to ponder. But, as is typical, you lose track of the question.

"And he said aren't we allowed to...you know? I'm like just the multiplexes. And they won't, you know, work here cause like, right..."

The woman shuffles the stacks of papers in a generally overwhelmed fashion while you try not to stare at her wart. You wonder if her laughing coworker has understood. To you it sounded a bit like Greek. The tale of the notion chases itself out her mouth and through your brain. Yes, she might as well have spoken Greek. Your thoughts fall to Phoebe. They often do. Sometimes when you brush your teeth after your sleepless night, you catch yourself wondering how she's doing. The same is true for the time spent in front of the refrigerator or staring at the television while you're supposedly re-watching Ken Burns' Baseball or ESPN reruns. You only watch the reruns because the players fed by other people's dreams aren't enjoyable to watch. You wish this woman with the wart knew Phoebe so she could blather on about her. Then you would

understand the woman's gibberish, even if it still sounded like Greek.

This Naptime® is not like the commercials you remember before the lack. Back then everyone at work had laughed and nodded that while they were busy, no one was that busy. The images from the commercial had been a combination of an Apple Store and a campy 1960s sci-fi movie projecting the future year 2007. There were clear tubes and what looked like plastic pods and neon lights, all understated and branded by a cheery yellow color. A calming voice (which sounded slightly foreign, like the narrator of a Mentos commercial) had ended the images with their tagline written in yellow across a white screen—Naptime®: Have yourself a good sleep. You had wondered back then if it sounded better in the original language. This place where you stand now looks like an abandoned office building. Here and there the work appears not to have been completed. This disarray is not uncommon now. The world over it is difficult for workers to complete tasks, and the most functional laborers work exclusively for the others.

“Okay,” says the woman.

A sudden distaste comes into your mouth. You realize you probably haven't brushed your teeth in days. This makes you feel self-conscious and disgusting. You draw your hand to your mouth and try to test your breath. It is terrible. You want to apologize to the woman with the wart, but she won't look up at you while she goes searching for something in the stacks of paperwork. For a long time, you have felt somehow repulsive. At last, the woman pulls out a form and hands it to you.

I can. You know. I can wait. I've got...time, you say.

“Oh, okay. Sure. I don't know. Maybe we should get at it,” she says. “It never stops...”

Oh. Okay. Okay. I'd. You know. I'd like to sleep.

“Umm-hmmm. Wouldn't everybody. I thought...” she says.

When you look into her eyes, you think she might be crying.

You say, I know. I know the risks. It's okay.

“Nice. Okay. Um...ahh. What was I saying?”

Is there a way to buy back my own dreams?

"No," she says. "People, you know...they wanna know...about that. No. You gotta. It's not for sale on this end."

Okay. That's fine, you say.

"So, you're a...ah...um...you're a multiplex then?"

Nah. No. I've never done it before, you say. You tell her about the 7 Eleven guy, Jack—you think that was his name—and how he's a multiplexor. They made a deal with him. He's got a nice house. They milk him. That guy, though. He's about as interesting as a log. Just makes you wonder how it all works, you say.

"Hmmm," the woman says, a heavy glaze of distraction seeping over her exhausted eyes. "What? You were saying?"

I haven't done this before, you say.

You want to tell her all your feelings on the matter. But your admission shocks her so much she laughs like an elephant. Others gather around her and you. You don't fill out the paperwork. You simply stand there while they all gather around you like you're an animal at the zoo.

"He's a virgin," she screams. "I've never seen one. Not in years."

You know this cannot be true because it has only been six months (give or take six months) since the lack started. The woman points to the exposed, half-spackled plywood of an unused teller's window. You look in that direction.

"You gotta sign up there. It's for you virgins," she says and laughs.

You stand in front of the teller's window. You feel like a seventy-year-old sexual virgin living in an aching thirty-six-year-old's body. No one is there so you wait for someone to come for you. Waiting is normal. Everyone is in the same boat, they say. Except that's not true and everyone knows it. At the start, some people felt chemicals in products were the culprit. Some pledged it was from a diet of glutens and GMO corn. Ultimately no paleo, vegan, herbivore, seaweed diets, or anything offered any relief. Some people swore a diet high in pasta helped to increase the length of micro naps. Pundits on NPR felt the lack was a years-long cultivated plot of a nefarious corporation, one that had ultimately created Naptime®. Fox News and MSNBC believed there had been some sort of terrorist plot and a new sonar technology that left the entire population of Earth sleepless; they each blamed each other. But no one knew for sure. You decide to lean against the teller's window. It groans against your weight.

You watch an elderly woman move her walker past the couple dry-humping. You're pretty sure it is happening and not a hallucination. Several people are sitting on the floor and simply scoot forward in the line on their bottoms. You are surprised to finally be there in person. In the early weeks of lack, Naptime® enjoyed raves. Vegans, pastafarians, and fast-food carnivores alike all stood in line for their chance, but you and Phoebe were still skeptical. Even after environmentalists certified that the pods were made from recycled plastics dredged out of the Mediterranean, something felt unsafe to you. And three weeks after people began climbing into the clear plastic sleep-pods and getting their first REM sleep in what felt like eons, it was revealed that the corporation behind Naptime® was extracting the dreams of its sleepers and selling them to the others for consumption and a rest-like experience. What was most unfortunate was the way certain people dried up to a half-functional version of comatose and were discarded for fertilizers.

A bearded man with bulging eyes arrives beside you. He holds an entire ream of paperwork. The bottom page has been pushed forward. You look at the dashed line awaiting your signature.

"You can't. Lean on the wall. No, no. No."

Okay, sure. Sorry. I. I didn't know, you say.

"Okay. Sign this."

The man goes behind the teller's window and shoves the paper under the window. You sign your life away. This isn't explained but you understand that is what you've accomplished. Something in the act feels like a liberation. You wonder if this is really how you feel about things.

"Forty bucks for first-timers."

Oh, okay, you say and push your credit card into the chip reader.

"This way," says the man.

He walks all of seven feet to a yellow door and ushers you forward. You push open the door. When you cross the threshold, you stand alone. The world around you looks basically gray and haphazard except the neon yellow filling the plastic orbital pods. Slumbering people glow under the neon yellow. One sleeper catches your eye. You see a strange device suctioned from the top of the orb to her forehead, cheeks, ears, chest, belly, and groin. A purple smoke emits into the forehead suction. You watch as the purple smoke is sucked into

a glass cartridge. You think it must be a dream extraction. Before you move ahead a brilliant, electric green comes out of the woman's chest. You watch the green get sucked into another cartridge.

She's a multiplexor, you say aloud, accidentally.

You take a step forward. No one else is around except the happy people sleeping. You are alone. This is a metaphor for your life, you think. You start to cry. This happens sometimes. You're having a meltdown and it cannot be stopped. Early on with Phoebe these meltdowns had turned into fights. That was why she kicked you out and how you ended up (not) sleeping on Ferdinand's couch. You miss her so much. You want her to know. A feeling of terror fills you.

A man finds you. He picks you up off the floor. He smells clean. You want to nestle into him, but he won't let you.

"Buddy. Come on now. Keep it together."

This man is rational. You haven't been near someone like him in a long time. You recognize the fresh pressed of his white laboratory suit. You can smell it on him. Not a sour smell at all but rather like clean oxygen or dry-cleaned clothes.

You say: What? Are you? Did you sleep?

He puts a finger to his lips. You think of your plan. You had hoped somehow to find a way into Phoebe's new home. Early on you tried to get a job as a servant, but by then they were only accepting high functioners. You are not a high functioner, so you had made this new plan: your dreams of her would enter her mouth. You are certain the dream extraction will kill you, but it seems poetic. You are a romantic. You do not know how the others consume the dreams for sure, but you believe there's a choice between breakfast cereal topping or yogurt parfait. You've read that they dribble the dream, pre-scanned for dangerous content, and allow the nectar to reveal itself over the next few hours. Some wealthy people enjoy three to four syrups at a meal. You remember in the beginning an uproar had come due to the coffee restrictions. Several billionaires had claimed their personal freedoms were being restricted when coffee wasn't allowed until after 2 p.m. Eventually people gave up on protests after drinking coffee with breakfast. The cancellation of the dreams via the caffeine made afternoon coffee obvious enough.

"Shut your pie hole, dude."

Sorry, you say.

You want to tell the man your intentions. You want this clearheaded guy to help you give your dying love dream to your beloved Phoebe. You imagine her longing for you as your tenderness infuses the inner lining of her gums, straddling her perfect teeth. You remember her fern smell. It crosses your mind that she is one of those who ingests multiple dreams at a serving. But you assure yourself Pheeb would never be so vulgar. Even if leaving you to join that wealthy bastard Brad was vulgar, you know she was simply surviving. But you need to have this technician help you hatch the rest of the plan. You had wanted to figure it out. You had even written ideas down. But none of them had been a complete thought. You couldn't get clear how your dream would find its way to her parfait.

"I got a low dream count," the man says. "They don't want me using their shit. But they can't stop me, right? Makes me better at my job, what I'm saying. Let me get the Diazoxoninon levels ready. It only takes a few seconds. Climb in."

You've stopped crying. He pushes you in front of a footstool. You have so much to ask of him but he's not listening. The man is pushing a hundred different buttons, and the area around your pod looks like the computers at NASA in the late 1960s. The chasm between what you'd like to say and what you can say stretches in front of you.

As you climb up the steps and leap toward the pod, you hope you have a low dream count too. You know this isn't true, though. As your body dangles half in and half out of the pod, you know that within you exists a distinct and lucid poetry. You know that your soul is locked into your dreams. You know that you have only your virgin dream.

You think of the local multiplexors you met before they moved away into nicer neighborhoods. You think again about the guy at the 7 Eleven. These were people who gave vacuous, bland stares. They were not people who dreamed actively before the Reckoning. They were people who had simple wants: a clean floor, a monthly pedicure, dessert, a mute button for commercials, Suave shampoo. They were not so different from you, except they were entirely different from you. You yourself have always been miserable. A hot fudge sundae still leaves you yearning for more. Your appetite long ago wove itself deep within your seeking soul.

You struggle your body inside the pod, and the signature yellow light comes on. The automated pod lid settles down over your body, and you hear the airtight lock snap together. The suction attaches itself to your various orifices.

It isn't as painful as you'd feared. A smell comes for you now. It is delectable. But there's also a panic as you believe this is your final rational moment. You know it is unlikely your love dream will find Phoebe. You pray your dream will not be nightmarish enough to be screened and dumped out. You hope your dream will elicit in its recipient such a clarity and longing that perhaps her own existence will feel feeble. You hope he or she will taste the sorrow and longing you feel for Phoebe. You cannot help yourself as you imagine the eater will feel a gnawing of the heart as it weeps for such sweetness and tenderness in her or his own life. But as the narrowing of your vision comes and you begin to give way to REM, you wonder, What do I know of clarity and longing? And as the tunnel of your vision warps into oblivion, you realize you've yet to ask yourself, What taste of love have I ever truly known?

Bella Giovanni's Cul-De-Sac

Kathleen Zamboni McCormick

Coming home, you almost miss your bus stop, thinking about Bella Giovanni's cul-de-sac. It's 1975 and Bella's family moves to Belmont, a rather affluent western suburb of Boston and, most important to your family, home to your lace curtain Irish aunt Alice and the scene of too many arguments between Father and his la-di-da Lady Clairol sister.

"Oh David, when on earth are you ever planning to move out of that complete and utter dump in Cambridge? Surely you must make enough now at that, that—you know I can never remember the name—company you work for to finally afford at least the outskirts of Belmont? Then you could join our country club."

Foaming at the mouth, chanting, "Club Schwub, I'll give you a GD club," Father drags you and Mother out of Alice's split-level and out of her Belmont world for at least six months.

Bella is supposed to go to another school, but something happens, and she ends up in your junior class at St. Michael's Catholic Parish High for Girls, located in one of the then many working-class parts of Cambridge a little over a mile away from trendy Harvard Square.

"Really, we live just a stone's throw from millionaires," Mother declares to Alice one day, defending Father.

"Stone's throw? More like a damn big boulder if you ask me," Alice replies. Right away, you can tell the new girl's family has money by the way she carries herself—so nonchalantly erect, with perfectly straight blonde hair. A certain fidgetiness arises in the classroom that suggests every Irish pupil in your class despises her on sight. But not you. As the designated and derisively labeled smart one, you aren't at all popular yourself, so you feel drawn to this new student since she won't know anything about you. Plus, your best friend Agnes transferred this year, and you're feeling lonely.

Bella invites you to her house Saturday, and Mother seems happy you're finally making friends with an Italian girl. "It only took about ten years. Even if she does actually live outside the parish."

You duly note Mother's aggravation though refrain from commenting since you handle conflict poorly. Bad luck for you, given the way your parents carry

on. Just last night, they enacted one of their him-with-his-head-out-the-window yelling at her-at-the-lamppost-across-the-street fights where she threatens him—and, in essence, the whole neighborhood—that she’s “walking out for good this time.” Which she never does. You’re still feeling hollowed out at the thought of Mother actually leaving, but they both seem fine. The counselor at school says their constant arguing is what makes you feel you’re evaporating, just fading away, some of the time.

“Emotionally disappearing is a coping mechanism,” she tells you, though definitely not one she advocates.

“It’s the first time you’ve had a full-blooded Italian friend, isn’t it?” Mother asks. When you don’t respond, she suggests giving you some of her homemade cannoli to bring over. You’re relieved she’s pleased but wince at “full-blooded.” After all, you secretly attend protest marches against Vietnam and in support of racial and gender equality that are always happening in Cambridge. You also read as many used books on these subjects as you can afford to buy and smuggle into your bedroom. You just finished Nella Larsen’s *Passing*, now safely lodged in that old toybox in the back of your closet and are learning how unacceptable the concept of “racialized blood” is.

“The older generation,” you mumble, shaking your head at Mother behind her back. Listening to the speakers at the marches convinces you that all racial inequality, sexism, war, and social class divides will be overcome once young people grow up and are in control.

But cannoli? There’s nothing worse for a new relationship than looking overly keen. Poor Mother. Living under Irish control at home and in the neighborhood. Isolated and kind of paranoid because of how Father treats her, not to mention the parish. You turn to her and smile. “What an incredibly kind idea, Mom. But no point wasting your baking skills on someone I hardly know,” you say, choosing, as usual, to maintain equilibrium. You kiss her and go off to catch your bus.

And then you’re there. In Belmont Center. In only twelve minutes on the bus. You’re shocked Belmont’s this close. It always takes at least a half hour when Father drives to Alice’s because “the GD curving suburban roads are like a GD maze.” And he seems to get caught in a different one on every trip to his sister. You don’t suspect that his sudden absence of any geographical sense upon entering Belmont could be a kind of unconscious delay tactic.

Bella gives you a little hug when you get off the bus and leads you to the Corner Deli & Soda Shop, where you both have a frappe and a cheeseburger. Then the

two of you slip into some stores that turn out to be posh boutiques. You never shop or go to restaurants in Belmont with your aunt or cousin, but you now sense why Aunt Alice acts so superior.

Here in Belmont, you have the impression of being transported to another world, miles away, where everything is bigger, cleaner, and more relaxed. Not to mention definitely more blonde. No wonder Alice bleaches her hair. There's more than one way of passing, and you almost think that maybe Alice is passing too—performing wealthiness—not that you have such explicit ideas back then. For all your beliefs in racial and social equality, you're just not at a stage where you can theorize either whiteness or social class. Not that many people really could in the seventies. Hell, not that many can today.

Everything in the shops, including the racks of "SALE" items glistening outside in the sun, is over one hundred dollars. You touch the clothes gingerly, feeling vaguely unworthy, but not sure why. Bella's perfectly comfortable. She even tries on a peasant blouse from inside the store, where nothing's on sale. You worry if people can tell that some of your clothes are homemade. But Bella doesn't appear to notice, taking your arm when meeting you outside and laughing that the blouse is way too big and makes her look pregnant. She hasn't been in St. Michael's long enough to know that some of the girls are pregnant. That a few already have babies.

Eventually you and Bella walk to her house, which turns out to be a sort-of-mansion, much bigger even than Alice's house. It stands right at the end of the road. A road that's like a dead end, but not. The street makes a full circle around a little island of grass with a gorgeous autumn cherry tree blooming on it. Mother always hints that Father should buy her "just a small autumn cherry" for Mother's Day, which is how you know what the tree is. He never does.

So, Bella's road technically doesn't end.

She gasps when she notices you staring at the island. "Oh no. Can you see that patch of dirt on the grass?" You haven't noticed any patches. It's pristine and extraordinarily green. You're about to admire the cherry when she blurts out, "My mother and I planted crocuses for next spring, so it'll be beautiful biking around the—" She calls the road around the island something you don't quite hear. When you ask, she repeats the word, "cul-de-sac."

You take a couple of deep breaths and ask what colors the crocuses are. As Bella explains in detail the many different bulbs she and her mother have ordered and where they're planting each of them this fall, you contemplate cul-de-sacs. You're in driving school and learning many new terms and

rules about roads and car maneuvering, but you've never heard that word mentioned. Practicing three-point turns (another new expression) is the bane of your driving lessons since the old family car doesn't have power steering and needs many more points to turn around. The necessity for three-pointers could clearly be eradicated by installing cul-de-sacs on all dead ends. But that can't happen very often, or your driving instructor would surely have taken you around some. Perhaps cul-de-sacs are only for wealthy suburbs, and driving tests are different in Belmont from Cambridge, particularly your side of the tracks, where there are lots of dead ends and you definitely need to know how to turn around and clear out.

Once inside, you and Bella drink Cokes right from the can sitting on barstools at one of their many kitchen counters. Half your family's apartment'd fit in this kitchen. Bella maintains her erect posture, and you find yourself sitting up straighter, too. The counters are marble. You know about marble from the altar at church. There's some marble on the wall behind the stove as well. Odd, but you kind of like the grandeur because there you are, Bridget Flaherty of Cambridge, surrounded by this heavenly stone, talking and laughing with Bella Giovanni of Belmont about how as little girls you were both in love with the Beatles, and particularly with George. And, in the interest of full disclosure and though you would have denied it, you're flattered that a girl so wealthy is having such a great time with you.

A click-clicking on the floor reveals Bella's mother in high-heel shoes and a rather fancy dress for a Saturday afternoon. Her flawless pageboy hair is perfectly highlighted. She makes Aunt Alice seem frumpy the way Alice does with your mother. "Bella, would you like to show your new friend—Colleen, is it?—your dance studio in the basement?"

Bella slumps for the first time in the two weeks you've known her. "Her name is Bridget. And not particularly." Bella's eyes retract so deeply that you consider whether it could be possible, even though her family's wealthy, that she's prone to disengaging, disappearing, even evaporating, from time to time. Same as you are. Particularly with a mother like that. But surely not in a house like this. Funny how all the ideas about equality you get from the protest marches and the books you read don't seem powerful enough to ward off the insidious but tempting assumption lurking in the Belmont air that there's a link between wealth and happiness. Once in Belmont with Bella, you somehow take it as a given. Still, you grab her hand, encouraging her to hold on, to not fade away, whatever the reason.

Bella's hand is sweaty. Her mother prevails. And soon you two are darting downstairs after her. How can Mrs. Giovanni move so fast in those heels? "Do

you like the house, Bridget?" she asks. "Bella's father designed it, including..." And she opens a door to a huge, dazzlingly lit up, nearly empty room with an endless, polished wooden floor. There are some bars of different heights, a few benches, and huge, framed posters of dancers, some of which seem to have writing on them. You think about the mess of junk in your family's cellar, which doesn't even have electricity, and speculate whether that's the difference between a basement and a cellar. Let alone a "studio." But you know it's got to be more. Maybe rich people don't have junk. Just like how you don't have cul-de-sacs.

"Bella's danced since she was three," her mother just perceptibly sneers, having taken off her high heels to walk across the floor. "Why don't you two spend some time dancing," she suggests, waving her hand at the expanse of floor—as if dancing were a perfectly normal thing to do while visiting a new friend. She'd definitely give Aunt Alice a run for her money. Out of nowhere Mrs. Giovanni produces some dance slippers for Bella. A tear runs down Bella's cheek, and her nose turns bright red. "Oh, stop overreacting," her mother snaps, then switches on classical music and waltzes out a different door from the one you'd entered through.

"That woman always succeeds in making me feel lesser," Bella says, wiping her nose. "I was never the dancer she wanted. Not straight enough. Not fast enough. Never lithe enough. She said I had no hang time! But now that I'm not dancing, you'd think I was destined to become the next Margot Fonteyn." You don't know who Margot Fonteyn is but are pretty sure you understand Bella's meaning. She explains that they moved here from "down the East Coast" for her to attend the prestigious Cambridge International Academy of Dance. Which you haven't heard of. Even though you've lived in Cambridge all your life. The Dance Academy is probably full of studios just like this. Not to mention surrounded by cul-de-sacs.

But Bella decided unexpectedly to give up dancing, after having practiced at least five hours a day for most of her life. "My mother still won't accept that I just want a normal life," she sobs, "like you." You laugh at that one, but Bella doesn't notice. You can't imagine what she'd think if she'd heard the screams of Mother-at-the-lamppost and Father-out-the-window last night. "She wants to take my whole life away from me. I've already lost years. Lost friendships. I couldn't even have eaten that lunch we had if I was still dancing. Too many calories." You're shocked to imagine that someone with so much money could feel so out of control. Aunt Alice and your cousin Ali are always on top of everything. Ali seems permanently happy.

You cheer Bella up by telling her all about Harvard Square, where it turns out

she's never been. You two decide to go there together next weekend. Since Bella's originally from elsewhere, she keeps asking you to repeat words like "Haah-vad" or "paahk" because, she says beaming at you, "you sound just like a Kennedy," and then she enunciates the words slowly, trying to imitate you. Soon you're both laughing hysterically at each other's ways of talking. You think her accent is slightly Southern but can't be sure. Before Bella, you didn't even know you had an accent.

To satisfy her mother even though she's not in the room and would never know, Bella eventually shows you a few basic dance moves, which you find almost impossible to do. "I always wanted to take dancing lessons," you say, "but Father wouldn't let me."

"Consider yourself lucky," says Bella, though she looks so limber and graceful as she springs across the floor.

When you're about ten you beg Mother to change your Saturday morning convent piano lessons with Sister Respica—who spends most of the hour swigging Maalox and burping—for Irish stepping lessons at the Tip, Tap, Toe Dance School, only five minutes from Harvard Square. It would have been nothing like Bella's Academy. As an Italian, Mother isn't wild about Irish stepping. Typically, Father puts a stop to it all, upsetting Mother even more than you.

"Dancing of any kind by a young girl can always be misconstrued," he rails, as if you and Mother are talking about pole dancing, not that you know what that is then. Needless to say, you don't reveal any of this to Bella.

Eventually it's time for you to catch your bus out of Belmont Center to your stop at Concord and Huron, which you might have missed—since you're replaying every detail of your visit over and over in your mind—if your father weren't standing in the street waving both arms at the bus and looking, truth be told, a bit of a nutter.

You rush off the bus. "What's the matter, Dad? Why're you here?"

"Waiting for you since this is your first trip to your new friend." He laughs and seems unusually pleasant. Ridiculously overprotective, but pleasant.

"You didn't need to meet me. I'm a junior in high school. Have you forgotten? Been taking busses by myself for a lot of years."

He looks quizzical, as if the spectacle of his daughter traveling alone on a bus

is impossible for him to comprehend. You stare kind of defiantly into his dark blue Irish eyes and they sink back, a little hurt. "You have?" he stammers. And you're about to evaporate in response to the disappointment you've once again apparently caused him. It's one of his tactics that usually diminishes you instantly. You think how often you change yourself to please Father.

But then you hold on to Bella and her almost-mansion. Her posture. Her kitchen altars. Her cul-de-sac. You hold on to yourself. "Stop overreacting," you hear in Mrs. Giovanni's voice. Whether or not Father knows you take the bus is just too trivial to get upset about. Especially since he's likely faking it. You remember how Bella's mother "always succeeds in making her feel lesser." He does the same to you. You're always less innocent than he expects. Less intelligent than you are. Less resilient than you could be.

"Yes, Dad, I've taken the bus alone for years." You swallow hard, willing yourself not to feel guilty at letting him down. "And often two busses to swimming lessons or the dentist. A bus and a train to Filene's Basement or anywhere in town," you continue. You're on quite the roll. "And I've been walking to school since first grade. Remember the nuns said parents couldn't come with their kids after the second week of school? I was only six then!"

"I don't recall any of this," Father says, shaking his head. "I guess I was at work and Mother didn't tell me." Then he smiles and gives you a rough one-armed hug. "Don't mind me being a little overprotective of my girl. But admit it. It's not like you're walking in the best neighborhood."

What's he talking about? You're walking in your own neighborhood.

"Dad, this is where we live. I pass the bus stop on my way to school every day."

"Well, um, we aren't used to you having friends who aren't local," he stumbles. "Though I'm happy you're associating with someone other than that Agnes, who's so low class." It's hard to understand how your father, who grew up in the worst slums of East Cambridge, could go on and on, which he always does, about other people being low class. You've had the Agnes discussion a million times.

"Don't be ridiculous, Dad. She's my best friend." You laugh, refusing to engage, though pondering whether Bella might become your best friend soon.

"You know your mother and I don't like where Agnes lives."

"What are you talking about?" you ask, amazed at how impossible he can be.

"In case you've forgotten, Agnes lives in a three-family house, just like ours, four doors down!" You think of Bella's almost-mansion.

"That's where you're so wrong, Missy," and he stops on the sidewalk outside your house where you can just glimpse Agnes's.

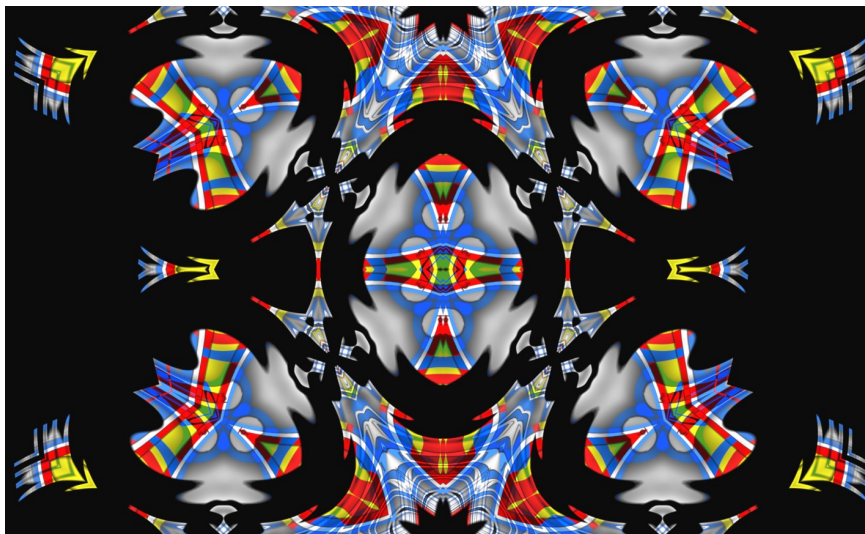
"They rent. We own. We're miles apart. It's a matter of social class, don't you see that?"

You picture Bella's cul-de-sac as you look down your dead-end road.

"Yes, Dad," you say. "Maybe I do."

Egomania

Edward Michael Supranowicz



Open Water

Kristin LaFollette

I used to hate the smell of her
father's SUV, damp towels &
spilled gasoline, like something
decaying in the undercurrent
of a lake—

The days we spent on the water
were treated with a caution
that could only mean there
were water lilies & duckweed
& rooted plants that could
cover our faces and noses,
grab our ankles, pull us under—

It turned out that the moss was
more dangerous than the open
water and once she had taken it
in through sinus & warm tissue
it traveled through plasma and
thorax to nestle in the soft
outer layer of brain—

The brain, encased in bone &
thin layer of muscle, is not
immune to the quietly growing
underbelly of moss—

Over time, its fingers
reached and reached,
pulling her under
until she
drowned.

A Good Coat of Paint

Patrick Theron Erickson

Her house
could have used
a good scraping
and a good coat
of paint

She could have used
a good scraping
and a good coat
of paint

in her tattered
housecoat

in the inside pocket
of which
she carried next to her

a dog-eared
rumpled old black and white photo

a group portrait

From the tattered houses
and the tattered housecoats
of these rumpled housewives

they could have all used
a good scraping
and a good coat of paint

The moral of this story

and I'll give it to you straight
in black and white

Sometimes

and we all

reach this point

whether tattered or rumpled

we can all use
a good scraping
and a good coat of paint.

Locked Gates

Emma Laurent

shackled grief
shackled stares
 begets
dubious moans
and lost anticipation

bruises black
bruises blue
 begets
straightedge fury
and soiled hearts

fickle marriage
fickle prayers
 begets
ungrateful breaths
and broken children

scheduled tears
scheduled spite
 begets
shattered jealousy
and untrustworthy delights

stillborn sadness
stillborn resentment
 begets
mirrored arrogance
and locked gates

Covid Days #25

Magnus One

Lying on a bed, he stared at the yellow ceiling, almost ethereal with designs, and with a strange zigzag his heart accelerated every minute that passed. He was cold and sick—his breathing had become heavy. His son, James, had been on the phone for two hours; it was late at night. He could hear ambulance sirens passing in the nearby streets with their load of pain, fast with their high-pitched noise bouncing among the closed houses with their secrets and their fears.

The village was deserted and cold. Humans were holed up in their homes like laboratory animals, stared at large color screens, or slept having dreams of being lost in inhospitable places or in bottomless lunar pits. Sometimes it was hard to sleep, resigned to a new life far from what was presented by years of propaganda. We wondered about the future to come without finding a rational explanation. Fear of Covid kept people awake.

Karl was afraid too, not of the disease—he already had it—but of death, which slowly approached, inexorable, indifferent.

“So, James?” He asked with the little oxygen he had left.

“I’m sorry, dad, but I can’t contact the ER,” His son came over and pulled the thermometer out of the parent’s armpit. “40 degrees.” He read with dismay.

The father started to add something different, but began to cough sharply—once, twice, many times.

A tear fell from the son’s cheek. He had to hurry, time passed quickly and inexorably.

He looked at his elderly parent and wished it didn’t have to end like this. It seemed unfair, almost meaningless considering the life he had led.

As James was about to tell him something, he heard a voice on the phone. “Thank you for calling the emergency room. My name is Robert, how can I help you?”

His heart started beating fast. “My name is Lucas—James Lucas. I am located at 5 Poker Street. My father is very ill. His temperature is 40 degrees. We need an ambulance as soon as possible.”

“Look, we just got a call from a nearby residence. As soon as we have picked up the patient, we will contact you.”

“But is there not another ambulance available?” He squeezed the phone tightly. “My father is dying.”

“I’m sorry, but they are all busy. We will contact you as soon as something is available.” James heard a click.

It felt like a stab of treachery.

“Damn bastards, my father doesn’t have to end like this!”

He feels anger coming from every part of his body until a strong pressure reached his right temple. In the past, it happened him when he was fighting, when under pressure the adrenaline pumped to the max. He had to decide quickly.

He picked up the phone and hurled it into an armchair, and then he swung around and hits the solid wood door with his fist. It caused a rumble that spread throughout the room. The pain brought him back to reality.

He sat down for a moment and began to think. James saw a photo of himself when he was a soldier on the shelf of the library. He remembered his special forces training, remembered what his colonel always told him.

“If there is no chance, invent tricks, don’t give up. Invent, invent!”

At that moment, the ambulance arrived at the neighbor’s house. He looked out the window. Instinctively, something snapped in him, a result of past military experience. James went to his room, took a bundle from a drawer, and headed toward the ambulance while they were charging his neighbor.

“Stop everyone! When you have finished helping this person, come and get my father.” James said while pulling out something.

The first responder was petrified; his Beretta 92 was aimed at her forehead, and James was ready to do what he needed.



Grit Bliss

King Grossman

Grit is the word
For what was needed most,
The chip pressed between fingers
To imbue grit,

Not able to be crushed
Even if smashed down
Underfoot the mangled
And forgotten soul child;

The boy in the basement,
Famished in every way,
Alive like mushrooms grow,
Fungi not to be denied

Even in the darkest regions,
So long down here the craziness
Shifts between his little open hand
And closed fist,

A lift up onto feet
Or hard blow knockdown;
Destruction or Creation
On the whim of beasts and angels.

The lone window greasy
With sweat and tears and oil
Of my little gritty face pressed
Against it, me looking outside

At chaos and cruelty,
Love so sweet it could give you diabetes,
All of it a gristmill for making grit,
All of it shifting

On the whim of beasts and angels!
To walk down the stairs
And be met with knives or tears,
To bring a good meal and another,

To dodge the blade for grit love,
To wait and wait and wait
Until we can walk outside
Under the cover of darkness

And favorably dim moonbeams
To swing on a rusty old swing set,
To return again and again,
NO, to never leave this boy

Alone for as much as a moment again.
To taste the grit, to become grit
Together, then turn for the window
To gaze out on two red-tailed hawks.

Do you suppose
They need
Each other
To know bliss?

What a Thing to Say

Tamara Adelman

"You sit next to your father," Louise said. I'd chosen a seat next to her at the table for five, mostly so I could focus on Harry and Lisa when they got there.

"I'm starving," Louise said, grabbing two pieces of bread out of the basket between us just as Harry and Lisa arrived.

"I made you a cheese plate," I said, but that was up at the house. She'd just breezed in moments before we left for the restaurant. They say love your enemy, so I tried to be nice to her. Louise's father, Harry, was 100 years old, and Lisa, his caretaker, was thinner than a fashion model with her movie-star sunglasses, but she'd had a hard life and an unidentifiable illness that left her looking haggard and scrawny. She smoked, even though she talked a pretty good holistic game and took herbs. They took their seats, and we were all lucky that Louise arranged our seating since we couldn't have possibly found a place to sit without her being there.

Louise, in thinking herself indispensable, tried to save me from myself perhaps—sitting next to her the last time I visited had been torture. It was my dad's birthday. At least she apologized. Louise spent the whole time asking me about my mother, who used to be her best friend. She wasn't asking because she cared about my mother's well-being. Their friendship had long been over. It'd probably been thirty years. She was asking because she was nosy.

"So why do you keep going to see your mother and expecting it to be different?" She had a habit of asking questions but losing interest in the answers.

"Um, I go to see her because she's my mother. I know how she is," I said, unflappable. What I really wanted to say was, why is it any of your business? But that would have required some perspective.

The next day I sat on the ottoman of the master suite she'd taken over. "Don't say anything." She waved up her hands a little as if surrendering the next day as she apologized, mentioning something about having had too much to drink, having lost her filters, said she'd pay for me to see my therapist if I needed a session. Even the way she apologized was controlling.

When my grandmother died about two and a half years ago, my dad just let Louise take over his life. I've heard that men do this, that even if they

are capable of running a company, they often let a woman run them. One advantage was that when my dad had surgery, Louise and her family helped him through it.

Different night, different trip, I reminded myself. I didn't mind sitting next to my dad, although we didn't have much left to say—I talked to him before we left for dinner, told him how in the future I would be staying elsewhere. It was his business if he wanted to live with Louise, but I tried it twice now and it was not for me.

Last night she'd bullied me again.

"You can't come here anytime in March," she said. Her sister was coming for her sixty-fifth birthday, and it wouldn't be for a few days; it would be for the month, but she was reluctant to admit it. Her sister would be bringing her boyfriend, Dick, who nobody liked. Her daughter would be coming again the last week of the month. Louise had had exclusive use of the house all Christmas when the rest of her family had been there from New York. There'd been a mangled king-size pretzel left behind under the television cabinet from one of the kids.

"So, Louise, is there any time you're not going to be here?" I asked, not intending to be as obvious as I was. My dad, who'd been sitting at the counter in the kitchen while I paged through my calendar, retreated to the casita where he stayed. He and Louise were not romantically involved. He said it was more like brother and sister, but I never ate dinner with my brother every night, and I considered us close.

"No," she said definitively, and with that she went to the master suite she occupied alone and shut the door. It was just like the last visit—sleepless in my bed with Louise on my mind, trying to fall asleep.

Well, I told myself, this is a good opportunity to be less of a mamby-pamby, get some tougher skin. Or stop talking to her at night, avoid her.

I would have been more comfortable if I had been able to stay in the casita as a guest. There was a TV, a closet, a bathroom. Self-contained. The room where I stayed was right next to Louise's; the closet was half full of my dad's clothes and the rest full of Joan's clothes. Louise's sister had already been out once and had felt comfortable enough to leave some sandals in between my dad's shoes. Stacks of sweaters were on the shelves, and blouses hung next to my dad's striped shirts. I had my clothes in bags and utilized only a chair for some hanging space.

“So, how’s it going living with Louise?” I’d asked my dad when they first started renting the house. It was in Palm Springs, the desert, where Harry spent the winter. My dad said he liked being in the casita since he could open the windows, whereas in the master there were only doors, which weren’t safe to leave open at night due to desert critters.

“We do our own thing,” he said abruptly, and I made a note to myself to avoid such questions as it just felt like I was rubbing it in since they were living together by default and a sort of denial was part of it. To bring light to the situation was against the unspoken rules.

A long time ago we used to take trips together—my family, after my parents were divorced, and Louise’s family. She had two children, who were the same age as me and my brother. Now that we were grown, her daughters had children and so did my brother.

Still, he chose to shower in the master since he didn’t like the shower in the casita, which was the same as mine in the guest room. Fine, people have their preferences, but I hated to watch my dad, who liked a great view—and this house had one better. Nothing was ever even with Louise. My dad slept next to the street while Louise hogged the master.

“Hi, Harry, how are you?” I asked Harry, who was so rotund, he sat down like a pregnant lady.

“Not until we’ve ordered,” Louise said.

The waiter came to our table, and we managed to order without Louise doing it for us.

“So, Harry,” I attempted to talk to him again, “what’s new?”

“Ah, not much,” he said. “I’ve got a lot of old parts.”

My salad arrived. It contained old lettuce. The rest of the dinner was okay. Louise thought it was good, but I don’t think her palate is developed much beyond supper club venues. Not that I know everything. I reminded myself to appreciate things more, complain less.

After dinner, as we waited for the valet to bring our cars up, Harry wrapped his hand around my waist, relishing touching someone who was not family or a caretaker: somebody new. Last year he’d touched my face in a lingering way with his hand, and this wasn’t as creepy, but still, I’d noticed. I found being

around Harry calming but being around Louise just the opposite.

At the place she'd rented with my dad, I asked her, "Where would I find some Windex?" I was worried about leaving an extra trace of bacon in the microwave that she used to heat her milk for her coffee in the morning. I wanted to keep it clean.

"Just go down the hill and get some yourself," she said. "Thanks for emptying the dishwasher. I hate that job." Louise had never actually had a job, so I could see how emptying the dishwasher could seem like a big deal. Louise had grown up with housekeepers, but I suppose living with two girls and her then husband could have burnt her out on certain tasks. Most of Louise's experience was in managing other people: help, her daughters, their children, and when my grandmother died, my father.

My father had bought her parents' old house down the street from his parents. It had two master bedrooms because Louise's parents never shared a bedroom, at least once her mother came back after taking off with a boyfriend she'd had before she'd married Harry. I remember when I was a kid that Louise and her husband had twin beds in their room. I was friends with her daughter, and even though my parents were the first to get divorced, I always thought it was peculiar. I also thought it was weird how Louise's youngest daughter Mia had scribbled all over the bedroom walls and was allowed to keep her room a mess. It would have never occurred to me to do these things. The worst thing I ever did as a child was to pull all the letter tabs from a big dictionary and to cut the erasers off new pencils, affixing them to a piece of cardboard for use as a garage door opener. I was never destructive, and I was never messy. I was also never wasteful, while Mia never cared how much of something she used or threw away.

I admired the view through the automatic sliding doors. There was a dead mouse in the pool. A bulldozer appeared on the horizon of an empty lot down below.

When Harry died, my dad became "Coo Coo," the grandpa name that Harry'd used. Louise and my dad bought a place together in New York City. I saw the place once. Louise hogged it as per usual and let her friend stay there for a long time. Her grown kids used the place when they wanted to visit the city.

Back in the California desert, she signed up as a "constant companion" under my dad's membership at a country club. When her kids came out to visit, they charged up a bill. She said she would pay my dad back.

I had a boyfriend and my own place in Santa Monica. What my dad wanted to do was his business, and Louise was all up in his business. I still saw my father, but he was usually late because he had shared a ride to the beach with Louise, whose kids had moved to Los Angeles. Dad told me Louise wanted out of the New York place. He said she never did anything in New York like go to plays like he did. He said he was sick of her. Over time, he did disentangle himself from her.

Louise had never been a dog person, but one day I saw her at the park down the street from where I now live in Rancho Mirage. She was with a little dog whose name was "Chew chew." Louise had been territorial when I became a member at what had been her father's club even though my dad still belonged. I was often asked if Harry, Louise's father, had been my grandfather. Louise had known me since I was a little girl, but everything seemed of little consequence now. Her dog was friendly and so was she. The next time I saw her, she just waved.

Why I Travel

Sue Allison

I am wide awake at ridiculous-o'clock in the morning, my husband sound asleep in the overly pillowed bed beside me. I get up. I lie on the floor. I stretch. I do a child's pose, a cat pose. I get bored. I get up and go to the window and part the long diaphanous curtains and look out. It is St. Petersburg. I am on the second floor of our hotel. I see a couple walking briskly as one: two black puffy coats, four skinny legs. A car goes by slowly. I peer as far to the right and then to the left as I can to see why someone would be slowly driving down this side street in the middle of the night but see nothing that anyone might be looking for. They don't stop. Now I notice there is a black sedan on the other side of the street, just opposite me, with its rear red lights on. A door opens. The driver's. He is smoking. He bends down to knock ash from his cigarette, then stands, closes the door, and leans against the car. He has on a white shirt that is very bright in the night, black pants, and has closely cropped hair. He doesn't wear a jacket even though it is cold outside—cold enough for some people to be wearing parkas. He casually throws back his head and blows smoke into the air. Suddenly I think: *He's Russian! I'm in Russia watching someone smoke!*

Chrysalis

Irene O'Garden

Within this budding paper kite,

the dawn drawn substance quivers

on the verge of sight.

Oscillation rivers

into shapes for flight

and appetite. Light slivers.

Still too dim to see

what the pierce and crumple

are to free.

Curated

Laura King

The way an audience member coughs
in a recording of Mahler's Fourth

the smell of weed on my street

a siren before dawn, perfume in the elevator
barbecue in the park

someone else's music from someone else's car

jets over quiet wine.

Today, when even trees turn away
and new-to-town tulips don't know my name,

imposed imprints like a playlist
let me know I'm not alone.

Across the Lake

Scott Hughes

From your movements
I can see you never recovered:
I saw you across the lake turn and face
me, not particularly sad
although I had betrayed
you. I was with her on my
side and she did not notice
you.
When I took a photo of her on the end of
the dock you were in the background.

That night at a crowded
party you walk in with
someone else. I stay across
the room.
When a certain song comes on
for five seconds our eyes lock.

Kids are lighting off fireworks
on the docks across the
lake.
Your face is out there in the dark,
somewhere. Else.
I go to bed not drunk
and with the wrong person,
transformed.

The Daughter She Wanted

Marte Carlock

I was not the daughter she wanted
she was not the mother I needed
Much later when I was a parent myself
she called to say I'm sorry
I wasn't a better mother

I wanted to say
What brought this on

we had never had heart-to-heart talks
instead I said oh mother
nobody knows how
to do this
We all just do the best we can

It never occurred to me to say I love you anyway

I never heard the word love in that house
Jesus loves you the song said
your parents maybe not so much.

Playing with Soldiers

Jeff Richards

We are in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, and Owen Bedford invites me to lunch at a restaurant in Takoma Park, the left-leaning town we live in that borders the District line. My wife doesn't want me to risk my health for that windbag. I tell her that he's traveling all the way from Scottsdale, Arizona, where he and his wife are retired. They're golfers.

"It's not for you that he's coming," says Cindy. "The Kiwanis club is throwing a party for him and all their other past presidents."

That's true. He said so in an email he sent me. He also said in that email that "life has flown by, and it's not just Billy and Owen playing with soldiers anymore."

I guessed what he meant by that, since he's a die-hard Christian conservative. He once told me that Donald Trump is not perfect. "But he is a patriot. He is a warrior. He is a capitalist. He is the right man, at the right time. Yes, he's a bit rude and crude and offensive. But that may make him the perfect warrior to save America, American exceptionalism, capitalism, and Judeo-Christian values. The choice should be easy for Christians. It's Trump...or it's the end of the American dream."

Jeez, funny, the way I look at it is if Trump is reelected, it could be the end of the American dream. Cindy and I think more than ever it's time to keep the communication lines open with the other side, but we don't know if it's possible. We have my cousin Babs who traveled to the motorcycle rally in Sturgis, SD, attended by 250,000 mask-less partygoers. Her sister is a Trump supporter as well. She's pro-life. Cindy's brother, the Vietnam veteran, friends from Utah, and one from Toronto who married a Canadian and complains about the inferior quality of the free medical care, though Canadian doctors implanted five stents to unclog his blood vessels. In the US, he'd be either dead or poverty-stricken. I mean, how can you deal with that? But I'm getting too political here. Cindy finally agreed that it is alright if I go to lunch with Owen because, you know, even though he's a windbag, he's an old friend I don't often see.

I park in the lot behind the trendy stores on the main street of Takoma Park and round a corner to the patio behind Republics Restaurant, where I see Owen sitting at a table under a heat lamp, even though it's a moderately warm October day. Mid-forties. He's wearing a red bandanna and cowboy hat. He

looks like one of the outlaws we watched on TV as kids. Owen extends his hand, but I don't take it. We bump elbows. He looks miserable. "They won't let us inside, and they insist I wear a mask. How am I going to eat?"

"Lift the mask and shovel it down."

"Yeah. Sure," he says. He leans forward on his elbows. "I have a joke to tell you about God and how he talks to us." Owen grew up on Macomb Street in Washington, three houses down from me. He was the neighborhood cutup. He planted a lollipop patch and told all the kids they could do the same. They tried but the lollipops wouldn't grow. He had a big laugh. He could speak like Donald Duck. Light farts with a Zippo. His family moved to Midland, Texas, when he was fourteen, and I felt downtrodden. My best friend, the funniest guy I knew. He used to imitate all our teachers in school and keep us rolling on the floor. I thought he was going to grow up to be a comedian. But twenty years later, when he returned to DC to work for the Petroleum Institute, he was a deadly serious born-again Christian blowhard.

"Okay, here's the joke," he says in his gravelly voice. "A deeply faithful Christian man is stuck on a roof at home with massive flooding up to the second floor. Rowboat comes. He says, 'No, I'm waiting for God. I prayed and I know he's coming.' Second rowboat. 'No, I'm waiting for God.' Third rowboat. 'No, I'm waiting for God.' Water rises. The man drowns. Now he's meeting God in heaven. The religious man says, 'Where were you, God? I prayed. I was faithful. I asked you to save me. Why would you abandon me?' God says, 'Hey, I sent you three rowboats.'"

"Great joke," I say, but I don't laugh. I know the joke comes with a caveat.

"Did you ever consider that Donald Trump was our rowboat?"

"No, I never considered that." I try not to confront Owen because I know how strongly he feels. He knows where I stand, but he is oblivious to my feelings.

"I want you to understand why I feel this way. Most lib-tards I'd dismiss, but you're my old buddy."

"Thanks," I say in an exaggerated tone, rolling my eyes so that he can see that I'm not thankful at all and wondering to myself: Am I a masochist?

"I want you to see where I'm coming from because it may be a matter of life and death to you and your family if Trump doesn't win."

On that point, we agree.

The waitress comes up, her pencil poised on her notebook.

"I'll take the Oyster Po'Boy with fries," says Owen, running his finger down the menu to the drinks, "and, ha...ha, you funny snowflakes, the Fascist Killer and a cup of coffee, black."

I order the hamburger without cheese—I'm lactose intolerant—the salad, and hot tea. When the waitress leaves, I turn to Owen. "Don't you have to drive to the airport after this?" I ask.

"I have plenty of time. The plane leaves at six. Besides," he pats his substantial girth—he's not fat, he's big, six foot four like a grizzly bear, "I think I can handle one drink."

When the drink arrives, he lifts his bandanna and takes a sip. "Tasty," he says, and continues his harangue. "You know why Trump must win. It's because God is trying to tell us something important—that now is not the time for a nice Christian guy or a gentleman or a typical Democrat powder puff like Biden. Now is the time for a natural born killer, a ruthless fighter, a warrior. Because right now we need a miracle, or America is finished. Maybe the rules of gentlemen don't apply here. Maybe a gentleman and all-around nice Christian would lead us to slaughter.

"I mean, could you imagine Mitt Romney, Bob Dole, John McCain, Gerald Ford, or Paul Ryan? Did any of them have any fight? Did they lead the GOP to 'the promised land'? Did they change the direction of America? They're all-around nice Christians. But Paul Ryan couldn't even deliver his own state, Wisconsin!"

"Trump won't either," I predict, thinking perhaps I should keep my mouth shut. Perhaps humor him or something though, you know, you can only take so much of this.

"Trump will win Wisconsin by a landslide. Maybe not New York but Michigan and Pennsylvania. That will seal the election like it did the last time," posits Owen, as the waitress delivers our lunch. He sips the coffee and demolishes the Oyster Po'Boy. "I guess I'm famished, all this talk."

He orders another Fascist Killer. "Ha ha," he snickers, wipes his fingers on his napkin, and dips his fries, one at a time in the ketchup, lifts his bandanna and sticks the fry in his mouth. Between bites, he continues his tirade.

"I think you underestimate our fearless leader," he kids, shaking a fry at me. "I think you underestimate how the other side hates him."

"I don't underestimate that," I rejoin.

He frowns at me and continues. "I think you don't understand that God is knocking on your door loudly. He is trying to make you understand that we need a war leader at this moment in time. God ordains that we win this election because if we don't, America is dead. It's over. The greatest nation in world history will be gone. Finished. Kaput. Adios. And this is what I'm saying to you. We need someone different. Someone you haven't ever experienced before—because you weren't raised in rough-and-tumble New York where nothing good gets accomplished unless you're combative, aggressive, outrageous, on offense at all times, and maybe just a tad arrogant, too. Someone with a personality you've never seen in politics before. Maybe, just maybe, we are lucky that POTUS is not a nice gentlemanly Christian who will bow down to Biden and his billion dollars, and his best friends in the media who unleash the dogs of hell upon the GOP nominee.

"I guess you think God is only nice and gentlemanly. Really? Then you've missed the whole point of the Bible. When necessary, God is pretty tough. When necessary, God strikes with pain, death, and destruction. When necessary, God inflicts vengeance.

"When we won WWII, was God nice? Were we gentlemanly when defeating Hitler? Were we gentlemanly when firebombing Germany? Were we gentlemanly when dropping atomic bombs on Japan? Is God ever nice on the battlefield? Or does he send us vicious SOB's like General George S. Patton so the good guys can defeat evil?

"'Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall, but those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles. They shall run and not be weary. They shall walk and not faint.' That's Isaiah 40:30-31. God is about miracles. We don't need a nice guy or a gentleman right now. It's the fourth quarter and we're losing 14-0. We need a miracle," says Owen. He pounds his fists on the table. A group of four young ladies in the back of the patio look up. They stare at us and then the waitress. The waitress stares at me as if I can tame this big galoot.

"So, what do you think?" Owen asks, his eyes flashing at me above the bandanna in a smug, self-satisfied way that sets my teeth on edge. "I mean, can't you see that Trump is our miracle? Trump is our rowboat. Except he's more like a battleship! Come on, what do you think?"

He bangs his fists on the table again, and this time the waitress puts her finger to her lips. He glares back at her.

"I think you're full of shit," I say, not mincing words.

The smugness clears out of his eyes, replaced by I don't know what—surprise, anger, hurt. I sense that it might come to blows like it did sometimes when we were kids. "That wasn't a very nice thing to say, Billy, and I'm not going to take it." He stands up and leans against the table. The dishes slide down in his direction. The half-full glass of Fascist Killer tips over. "I'm not a cream puff or a snowflake or a lib-tard like you guys."

He backs up. His chair clatters on the cement patio floor. He hitches up his pants and ambles over to my side of the table. He grabs me by the jacket, lifts me up, and slams me against the wall. Owen was a klutzy kid. That was part of his act. He'd trip on his shoelaces and fall on his face. Everybody would laugh.

He is now a klutzy man, it seems, because he throws a slow roundhouse punch, and I move my head aside. His fist slams against the brick. He screams. Jumps up and down like he's in extreme pain. I can see the grimace on his face as the bandanna falls.

"I think I broke my hand," he cries.

The waitress, a local girl, the daughter of one of our friends in town, sidles up. She pulls the bandanna over his nose. Checks his hand. She's studying to be a doctor like her mom. "I think you're right," she says. "It's broken."

I call my doctor. He agrees to see my wounded, blowhard friend. It takes about two hours of waiting for an orthopedic surgeon my doc sent us to, but finally he sets Owen's hand and gives him some pills for the pain. He advises him to see his own doctor when he returns home, and I drive him to Reagan National airport.

"I'll take care of your rental car."

"Thanks, Billy," Owen says in a subdued tone, "I know I shouldn't have taken a swing at you."

"Yeah," I say, "it's dangerous to your health."

"I know," he says, grinning. He seems relieved that his ordeal is over with. "Why the other day, I teed off on the front nine at our golf course. The ball ricocheted off a culvert about twenty yards out, flew back, and conked me in the noggin."

Marge thought it was the funniest thing she ever saw. I always keep her in stitches.”

We spend the next few minutes cataloguing his childhood mishaps, like the time we were on the basketball court at the playground and I threw the ball in his direction. It slipped through his hands and hit him in the face, breaking his nose. Or the time he pretended to be Superman. Jumped off the garage roof and sprained his ankle. Or the time we were riding bikes and he was going to jump a curb onto a sidewalk, only his tire got caught and he flew off the bike face-first into a wrought-iron fence.

“I chipped my tooth, and I could whistle better. You could hear all the way down the block,” he says, poking me in the shoulder.

I give him a dirty look.

“Sorry, don’t mean to invade your territory.” He snickers. “But I got one on you. Remember we were sitting on the side of a hill at the playground waiting to go to bat at a baseball game. You were talking to me about something or another when I yelled out, ‘Watch out,’ and pointed toward the batter’s box. You turned your head, and a baseball hit you in the eye. You were mad at me for a couple of days until I explained to you that if you hadn’t turned your head, you would’ve been hit in the temple and instantly died.”

“You saved my life.” We both laugh.

We cross Memorial Bridge, and Owen points at the bronze art deco statue. “When we were little, your mom was driving your dad to the airport for a business trip, you pointed toward the lady pressed against the flanks of the horse in the statue and said, ‘Hey, Dad, that lady doesn’t have any clothes on.’”

“I don’t remember that.” But we both laugh.

We are quiet on the drive down G.W. Parkway until we come to the park at the end of the runway. “Remember your dad used to drive us here, and we’d lie on the hood of the car and watch the planes take off.”

“Yeah,” I say, remembering the roar of the planes and how low they flew. My dad almost got as much kick out of it as we did.

We pull up to the terminal. It’s not crowded. Plenty of time for his flight. We sit in the car, the engine idling.

"Remember in that email I sent you, I said life has flown by, and it's not just Billy and Owen playing with soldiers anymore."

"Yeah," I say, still in a reminiscent mood. "We'd line our soldiers up on the furniture. I'd shoot your soldiers with a rubber band. You'd shoot my soldiers with a rubber band. And sometimes we'd shoot each other."

"That's not what I mean," he says, leaning closer to me. I roll down the window. A breath of cold air blows in. "I mean something more serious, and I want to tell you what it is."

Here we go again, I think.

"I had a revelation at the doc's office today that God was sending a message to me when I punched the wall and broke my hand. Sort of like the message God sent to the deeply faithful Christian man surrounded by flood waters, only I'll pay attention."

"And what was that message?" I ask Owen, not wanting to know.

"Well, it goes like this. Jesus says in the Bible, do not cast your pearls before swine. Pigs don't value pearls, and some people do not value what God has in mind for them. What you must do, if you are not valued, is 'shake off the dust' and travel to the next town where you will be. You can't stay. You can't soil yourself because 'a sow that is washed goes back to wallowing in the mud.' That is what God revealed to me."

I stare at him, aghast. Unable to respond.

"Got to go," he says. His eyes gleam in smug merriment that reminds me of when he was young.

"Adios. Bonsoir. Hasta la vista, baby." We bump elbows, and I watch him disappear through the sliding glass doors to the terminal, wheeling his suitcase behind him.

You Alive

Murray Silverstein

You must change the past, you alive,
make it other, without so much suffering.

Impossible, you say?
But think, you alive, what else

is language for? Name the river
running through your thirsty self.

A telescope at the South Pole
can see to the beginning of time,

and the milliseconds after. Write it
with your living hand, who are alive,

soothe us with the solace of eternity.

Orgasm

Virginia Schnurr

In the winter rain
in the morning
glories climbed
as you promised.

Departures

Glenn Entis

Once, in the old days, I saw a poem in an airport.
It was called "Departures" and it went like this:

- Rome
- Berlin
- Istanbul
- Boston

With all that poetry, who needs an airplane?

We Watch Them Take Her

Emily Hyland

cat sits guard
i pry him
off her
breastbone
concave
dad stands
with me
watching,
careful
don't
drop
her
don't
drop
her

Work Lessons

John Murray

Living on the west side of L.A. as the father of a high school and a college student, I've seen many parents curate their children's lives. Their education, extracurriculars, internships, social, and work lives are all subject to strategic manipulation in the quest for the ultimate prize of admission to an elite university culminating in entry into some highly revered and well-paying profession. There's a side to me that's tempted to follow that trend because the world is fiercely competitive and achieving traditional definitions of success can bring opportunities and satisfaction.

But there's a side of me that doesn't want to buy in to that notion, because maybe it's time to reconsider what constitutes a worthwhile path and a valuable life. After all, Walden might not exist if Thoreau wanted a guarantee that his time in that cabin would lead to a professional payoff, never mind cement his immortality. Still, his was a high-minded and well-considered pursuit and not a dabbling in the mundane work that so many people perform throughout their lives. But mundane work can offer valuable lessons and its own type of education and empowerment, something I say with great conviction because I've had plenty of those jobs.

Some were more memorable than others, and as I write this, more of them pop into mind. I'd almost forgotten about the job sanding off multiple coats of paint—inside and out—of an old wooden motorboat. It was every day after school for three weeks, and the tough old Yankee, Meredith, who owned it, paid upon completion of the job the stingy sum of twenty-five dollars, the equivalent of less than fifty cents an hour. She flipped up the sunshades hinged on to the top of her eyeglasses, peeled off two bills from a wad of cash, shoved it back into the pocket of her khakis, and strolled back into the kitchen door of her enormous, three-story colonial house.

I grew up in a town of about 35,000 people, and in the spring of my senior year of high school, my politician father called around to his friends and landed me one of the summer jobs the city offered. The pay was better than minimum wage, and the stint lasted a total of eight weeks, giving me just enough time to chill for a couple of weeks before moving a hundred miles away to start college in Boston. I knew other people from my high school class who were working for the city that summer. Because they'd applied the previous year, most of them were working at "Rec Field," where they offered free, fun-filled day camps for local kids. But my father's connection wasn't at the Recreation Department; it was at the Gas Department, and that's where I spent my summer.

Arriving at the “shop” every morning by 8:00 a.m., I couldn’t wait for the day to end. The smell of the place—a combination of exhaust and gasoline and burning plastic and random chemicals—was an olfactory assault as soon as I crossed the threshold into the garage to punch the time clock and put my lunch in the refrigerator. A corner of that huge garage had been sectioned off to make a “lunchroom.” It looked like the dayroom of a prison in a country notorious for human rights abuses: chipped concrete walls, a filthy wire-glass window you couldn’t see out of; long, gray, beat-up benches arranged in a rectangle, and a wall of dented lockers. The crew of about twelve gathered there every morning while the “chief”—the surly and perpetually irritated Moe Brogno who was past retirement age, wore thick glasses, and always squinted to a point of showing most of his teeth—went to get the orders for the day. He was humorless and bossy and a serial abuser of the English language—and everyone hated him. With orders in hand, we piled into the various trucks, headed out to the site, and unloaded everything we’d need: cones, signs, jackhammers, hoses, compressors, shovels, pickaxes, crowbars, pipes, and various things I never saw before and haven’t seen since. Once that was done, one of the full-time guys who was low on the totem pole walked around to get a coffee order for the mandatory fifteen-minute break. After a few hours of toiling in the brutal summer heat and humidity, often in a wreaking ditch in the middle of a road, we returned to the shop for “dinner” at noon, followed by a brief rest where crew members lay down by balancing themselves on benches for a “nap” before piling back into the truck and returning to the site.

There was one other summer hire—an unfriendly, obese guy in his early twenties who claimed he was in the seminary, even though he, like ninety percent of the guys on that crew, swore more than anyone I’d ever known. The entire summer, he wore the same trucker’s hat and tan, button-up work shirt with sloppily cut-off sleeves. He sweated profusely and kept a bandanna in his pocket to mop his face and neck throughout the day. No doubt to compensate for his hyperactive sweat glands, he arrived every morning doused in some cologne with a potency that never diminished. I often had to sit next to him in a truck, so I squeezed myself into as small of a space as possible to avoid touching him.

Most of the guys on the crew just ignored the summer help, but there were a handful who seemed grateful for some fresh blood and who made a genuine effort to connect. Smitty, a gentle guy in his late twenties, had gone to college but dropped out when his girlfriend got pregnant. He looked me in the eye, asked me questions about school and family. He spent his entire lunch break reading. The other guys seemed to respect his calm, thoughtful persona.

Ed, with his shaved head and body like an Olympic javelin thrower, was a

powerhouse. At sixty, he was still the hardest worker on the crew with a reputation for being able to tackle any problem at the job. He'd grab a pickax or a shovel or a jackhammer and go at a resistant section of rocks like a man deranged. It was clear he loved it. He'd step away for a minute, walk over to a coworker, tell a dirty joke, and immediately get back to work. All the guys loved and respected Ed.

In the lunchroom one day, someone said, "You've got the seniority, Ed; when Brogno retires, you're up for crew chief."

"Not me," Ed responded. "I don't wanna be nothin'."

The more time I spent around Ed, the more I respected him. One day, we were working in a hilly neighborhood of modest, cookie-cutter, shoebox houses with a front door in the middle and a window on each side. Ed pulled up in front of an immaculate, brown shingle house without telling me why, trotted up to the front door, knocked, and turned the doorknob, which was obviously locked. The door opened a few seconds later, and a short, chubby woman with short, gray, curly hair wearing a housedress and an apron stepped onto the concrete stoop and threw her arms around him. They kissed longer than I'd ever seen a couple that age kiss, then he said something to her and ran back to the truck, where all he said was, "The wife." I asked about kids, to which he responded, "Nah, we wanted 'em, but she couldn't have no kids." Until that point, I'd pictured Ed with a brassy, buxom blonde who wore too much makeup and snapped her gum. I'd also pictured him having a posse of children and grandchildren.

The work itself was tedious—that was the lot of the summer help. At one point, I spent two weeks in the middle of a busy, multilane intersection in the heart of downtown, holding a Slow sign with my back to the enormous pit in the road where the crew was working. State law required a flagman and a hard hat, so I stood there all day in full sun, tortured by the heat and humidity, seeing if I could guess what time it was by watching the length of my shadow and seeing how long I could go without looking at my watch. It might've been better if I actually got to do some traffic control, but there was a complex menagerie of working traffic lights above me, and I never once got to flip that sign from Slow to Stop.

But even being a human signpost didn't free me from the occasional wrath of Moe Brogno. One afternoon, standing there covered in sweat and absorbed in my own thoughts, I heard a, "Murray, get over here!" I turned around to see the seminarian walking toward me, grouchy Moe in the background, hands on hips, looking in my direction, teeth flashing in full irritation mode.

“Give me the sign. Moe wants you over there.”

“Murray, fetch me those borrels!” Moe barked. He was already exasperated with me for no apparent reason.

“The what?” Maybe it was the noise from the traffic, but I didn’t understand what he was saying.

“The borrels! The borrels, dammit!”

“I don’t know what that is!” I’d never heard the word in my life.

“You stupid—the borrels! The borrels!” With frenzied anger, he pointed multiple times in rapid succession at two empty barrels next to me.

“Ooohh,” I said, “the barrels?”

“That’s what I said, goddammit!”

Moe Brogno didn’t really bother me because he treated everyone the same, and everyone hated him equally. He was the boss of a brotherhood of Moe Brogno haters.

Ray Moore, the backhoe driver, was different.

Ray was a crown jewel of bullies. He was in his early forties with thick red hair parted down the middle, a close-cropped beard, and a perpetual cigarette hanging from the corner of his mouth. He was tall and muscular and only wore tank tops and jeans. His every other word was “fuck” or “fuckin’.” As the backhoe driver, he arrived at the work site separately but rode back and forth to the shop in one of the trucks. The first time he ever saw me, when we were working a job on a quiet street, he pulled the backhoe right up next to me, looked me over, and bellowed to no one in particular, “What the fuck is THIS?!” That initial proclamation would portend the rest of my summer. Beginning the next morning, he renamed me “The Youth of America,” which he pronounced with absolute disgust. It didn’t catch on with anyone else on the crew, so he made it his job to sharpen his attacks. He always made sure he had an audience, and even if no one really paid attention, it added to the humiliation.

If someone told a joke and I laughed along, Ray would cut the laughter short and glare in my direction.

“Wait one minute! What the fuck do you think you’re laughin’ at?!” At seventeen, I was relatively shy and generally incapable of any sort of a

comeback, so his classic bully's approach of catching the victim off guard only caused me to blush, which elicited more badgering. "Aw, look at that red face! You gonna start cryin', you fuckin' pussy?"

He had another bully's habit of saying things that left the victim downright confused as to what he meant. For example, because of inaccurate utility maps, the backhoe frequently broke other pipes while digging, and clay sewage pipes seemed to be especially vulnerable. The result would be raw but usually indecipherable sewage pouring into the ditch, but one day, corn kernels tumbled into the ditch, causing one of the guys to ask, "Why is it always corn?"

That inspired Ray to start. "Youth of America, I bet you like corn, don't you? You want that corn?" It made no sense to me or anyone else—maybe it was just a way to link me to human waste in front of the crew. As always, no one laughed, and I ignored him, not that I felt I had any sort of an upper hand.

I tried to get through the days while remaining invisible, which included trying to blend in with the rest of the crew. One muggy afternoon during the "nap" in the lunchroom, as I lay there balanced on a bench with the others, I felt a subtle loss of equilibrium. The second I opened my eyes, Ray, who'd slowly and gently raised one end of my bench off the floor, gave it a quick jolt, causing the back of my head to slam into the bench. I sat up and glared at Ray, unafraid of what he might do, when Smitty, in an uncharacteristically curt tone, said, "Cut it out, Ray." Ray didn't say anything, but he skulked off into the garage.

I dreaded Ray, and I relished days when he and his backhoe were assigned to another job, but then he'd show up, like a stalker in a scary movie. On one particularly muggy, white-skied day, we were doing a job on a busy road near the mall. I was on flag duty, so I was spacing out, in my own thoughts as usual, when one of the Gas Department trucks edged up in the traffic. As it neared me, Ray leaned his head and shoulders out the passenger-side window, curled his hands one on top of the other, opened his mouth wide, and started bobbing his head up and down above his hands in mock fellatio.

As the truck got even with me, he yelled, "That's what you want, isn't it?! Sucking cock!" As the truck continued down the road, he pointed at me menacingly, seeming to suggest, "I'm gonna get you one day." It didn't matter that I wasn't gay—being subjected to that spectacle on a main thoroughfare in a homophobic small town left me feeling vulnerable and humiliated.

Unfortunately, I lacked the sophistication to question why a middle-aged, supposedly straight tough guy would be so obsessed with the potential sexual proclivities of a seventeen-year-old boy.

Ray's bullying had a versatility about it that would deserve space in a handbook for bullies, if such a thing existed. He didn't latch on to one reason to hate me; he had several, and which one he might conjure up on any particular day was anyone's guess. Lazy, dumb, arrogant, clueless, deluded, undeserving, spaced-out, gay—I never knew how he'd cast me. I always wore the same jeans, plain T-shirts, and work boots, along with the required red hard hat and orange safety vest, so I know my clothing didn't trigger him. His versatility was also evident in types of aggression—gestured, verbal, physical—for large or small audiences. He was a marvel.

It was the longest summer of my life. Nothing I did freed me from the feeling that I shouldn't let down my guard. Weeknight jaunts to Friendly's for a milkshake with my sister (our father had gotten her a summer secretarial job in the sewer assessment office), weekends with friends at a lake or beach, even the lush beauty of summer in Connecticut couldn't erase Ray. It got to a point where if I felt carefree and happy, I'd have to remind myself why I shouldn't—"Oh, yeah...Ray."

I finished my sentence in that job and moved to Boston for college, where I all but forgot Ray.

Until two years later.

Pausing my education for a year to reassess my path and earn some money, I landed a well-paying union job as an aide at the nearby state psychiatric hospital (an education in itself that convinced me sex, religion, or family were the causes of everyone's troubles). After an extensive training period, I was assigned to work third shift with a staff of three or four people on a male ward of "police holds," most of whom were heavily medicated and slept through the night. Working nights allowed me to read for several hours a shift, and I liked the patients and my coworkers. I'd become much more outgoing since starting college, and I had a little posse of fellow aides who'd become friends, including a moonlighting cop with an endless supply of sordid details from police work, a Vietnam veteran who smoked too much pot, and a young widow who did phone sex on the side for extra cash. They welcomed me and treated me like a peer, which made me feel very grown-up and very far from college.

For some reason, Doti, my boss' boss who supervised every ward on our hospital wing, had an immediate fondness for me, and it was reciprocal. We knew a few of the same people around town, always had something to talk about, and liked to laugh. She'd do her rounds every night, stopping by each ward for ten minutes or so to sign paperwork, check medications (she was

also an RN), and read the shift logs. Since I didn't sleep, it was my job to make sure to wake my frequently dozing coworkers as soon as I heard her keys unlocking the door to the ward. I knew she was married, and she often spoke of her husband, who I thought she'd said worked for the state. One night, she mentioned him by name.

I made the connection.

"Wait," I said, "your husband is Ray? He doesn't work for the state? He works for the city?" I'd never really considered her last name before.

"Why? You know him?" She looked pleasantly surprised.

"Ray Moore, who drives a backhoe for the Utilities Department?" She could tell that my recollection of him wasn't a happy one.

"Uh oh, what did he do?"

"I can't believe that's your husband. I don't hate anyone, but I hate that guy. I worked for the Gas Department one summer, and he was the worst bully I've ever known. He picked on me nonstop all summer, made it hell." Two years of brain development, life experience, and college education had made me much bolder than I was as the humiliated and blushing summer help.

Doti claimed she was shocked and appalled, but I had my suspicions since Ray's whole persona—his facial expressions, the way he walked, the way he squinted his eyes as he took a pull off one of his cigarettes—all exuded bully. She apologized to me immediately and said she was going to give him a good talking to when she got home. My coworkers were surprised I'd been so blunt with a supervisor, but I didn't care; I felt I deserved to be.

When she entered the ward the next night, Doti made a beeline to me.

"I talked to Ray. He said he's very sorry. He has no memory of you."

"Yeah, right. You're kidding me."

"He said that's how he treats all of the summer help, so you shouldn't take it personally."

"Seriously?" It was my turn to be incredulous.

“Don’t worry; I told him I was mad at him, and I gave him a good scolding. I told him you were one of my favorites, so he feels terrible about it.” She periodically repeated those same sentiments for the rest of my time at the hospital, but we were never again quite as comfortable with each other.

That was that. I was just a prop for Ray, and he was sorry, no malice intended. Forgive and forget? Time to move on? My memory of him had been steadily dwindling since that summer, but this whole episode had rekindled my loathing for him, even though I knew it was pointless. It was the equivalent of a punching bag holding a grudge for a boxer. And Ray had a great wife who was a strong, intelligent woman, so maybe he had some redeeming qualities after all. And there was that alleged apology.

I’d just finished college when someone told me that Ray had died of a massive heart attack, still in his forties.

“Good,” I said. It wasn’t my nature, but I couldn’t restrain myself. “The world’s better off without him.” I wish I could’ve conjured up a more high-minded response, but it was impossible. That summer may have enhanced my empathy for the vulnerable, but it only made me numb to the pains of people who victimize. Yes, bullies are often created by being the victims of bullying and abuse, but unapologetic, serial bullies cause too much unnecessary pain and suffering.

So, fuck ‘em.

I’m working on it.

When my daughter comes home from her summer restaurant job with stories of unnecessarily snarky customers, I tell her that’s one of the lifelong lessons she’ll derive from that job, that that’s just how some people go through the world, and that it has little to do with her.

I’m still learning to feel sorry for Ray and thank him for being a “teacher.”

But I still think he had it coming.

Like I said, I’m working on it.

Light in the Cathedral

Andrey Gritsman

Light from nowhere to nowhere.
Wreck of statues on the tiled floor.
Dark crypt is empty.
Judas silent in the corner.
And He is invisible in the chapel,
there is cold and echo of emptiness.
There is nobody to wait for.
Crosses deserted in the dusk.
Still light fell on the floor reveals
the fragments of the marble dream.
Cathedral under repair.
Shadows. And you and I
are alone there.

Translated from Russian by the author.

Attica

Vicki Nyman

I have often visited homes governed by an unspoken rule: remove your shoes before entering. Your presence is requested, even desired, but you must be unshod. Sans the high heels that lengthen your frame, make of your legs “real nice ones,” as your husband used to say. But I can’t cope with shoeless-ness; can’t abide dirt and cat dander—or, worse, fluids—forming a second layer of skin over my own. I am convinced this debris will prove deadly if absorbed into my bloodstream, rising through my bare soles up and into the brain pressed hard against my skull, like the body of a prisoner against the bars of his cell.

Needless to say, when confronted by a cacophony of shoes strewn across a foyer, I close my ears (and conscience) to the demand that I shed my own. I don’t understand how anyone would benefit from being exposed to the odor of my sweating toes, sour as vomit. In any case, I prefer to leave my shoes on, my body parts clothed and hidden from sight and other sensory organs. Then perhaps no one will see through my skin to my soul: twisted, bruised by the prison biceps of those convicts in my head accusing me of killing them with my indifference. The victims of Attica, 1971. I had explained to my psychiatrist then that I knew I was responsible for the riots. I had been vain, I confessed. I should be in prison too. He inhaled, blew smoke into my face, then replied (and for this lost teen, his words had the weight of prophecy), “You better not feel...” Inhaled, blew. “...guilty. I had another patient who felt...” Inhaled, blew. “...guilty she was...” He paused for effect. “...attractive. She took a razor blade and...her face...” He shrugged.

Fortunately, he was a false god. A devil, actually, having been fired from his position as director of two mental institutions in two different states just prior to opening his private practice specializing in disturbed adolescents like me.

Every Night

Rand Cardwell

night brings a hollow
kind of loneliness
even if I'm in arms of a lover
or company of an old friend
it has a quality of emptiness
that can't be fully explained
leaving me searching my heart
and wringing my thoughts
with unanswerable questions
every night

night is a dagger
in the hands of an unseen assassin
who slowly slips up from behind
and plunges the cold steel
deep into the soft tissue of your neck
so fast that there is no time to react
or even cry out
and you die that death
every night

your rational mind
grasps that it is part
of the cycle of life
without hard
you can't have soft
without dark
you can't have light
but you still cringe
at the evening's setting sun
for it ushers the darkness
and the darkness takes your soul
every night

Piano and Song

Alita Pirkopf

Mr. Morrison played,
almost until
my mother died,
while people grew vacant
and lived to line the walls.
Then he forgot, grew vacant,
was moved to the sidelines.
His music slipped out of sight.
Not entirely out of mind.
Not mine.

This year, in a different kind
of lockdown, I work at home.
Remembering, I learn to play piano
and sing, fortunate in isolation.

Poetry for the Dumb

Celia Meade

First, plant your tree.
You have to go deep
into the forest, where giant
trees loom over you,
where you despair
of ever finding your way out.

Look for small pools of light.
You need darkness—
black humus soil
full of crawling decay—
but the seed also needs light
or it won't want to grow.

On your way you'll see fall,
trees that went before you
broken, splayed over each other
roots tingling in the cool
evening air.
Come to think of it—

who's got time for all that?
Toss the stupid seed,
pick up a wormy log
that's already half mulch,
take it home and beat it—
beat it to a

pulp.
The mash,
the once green sapling,
must become
unrecognizable.
This requires effort,

even chemicals.
You might falter
or lose faith.
Don't.

The blank page
must submit.

After many sickening
hours, pour
the pulp on a screen,
and let it dry out.
This is your page.
Don't

defile it,
don't distract
us from looking
at the words, don't illuminate
the edges to make it
more than it is.

For the ink, you need black walnut
or sumac, or iris petal, or jicama,
wild grape, or goldenrod,
and lots of salt and vinegar,
all in a large vat
of nearly boiling water.

Your poem needs cooking
or it will be
insipid, but wait!
You slacker,
you corner cutter.
You dummy!

You've used the battered
log of someone else's tree
instead of waiting for your own
seed to grow. Go back,
quit acting like it's not your fault,
find it and start again.

Find the bright green tendril

pushing out of the soil,
the first pair of leaves
then another, and another.

See how the wood hardens
from the tender beginning,

how the bark is bendy, then
gray and deeply
grooved after years,
how storms snap the
branches and leave scars
from fallen limbs.

All this time your ink cooks.
Fuel the fire by adding the time
that girl slapped you
again and again on the bus,
or when they tied that
boy to a post and you

stood in the crowd,
saying nothing.
Dip your hand in the pot
to gauge the depth of stain—
is it strong enough to touch
your liver, your heart?

Add wintergreen oil
as a preserve
and pour into
a widemouthed jar.
Mix tears with the ink
to draw words on your page,

golden words, russet-brown words,
black words, or raspberry red.
Wrap up in blankets
while it dries, and sleep for
a hundred years.
Drink jiggers of brandy.

Accept that
in order to grow

first you had to break open.
You took the raw ingredients

from living
among the living

and even though
the grief and beauty
struck you dumb
—out came poetry
and the cost of it
becomes the worth of it.

Thunderbird

Stephen A. Geller

Marty lost the first love of his life to the son of the borough president of Brooklyn. At first the family chauffeur, driving a long, high-finned, brightly simonized black Cadillac limousine, brought Jere to pick Karen up at her apartment building for their dates. After his eighteenth birthday Jere drove one of the first Ford Thunderbird cars in Flatbush.

You can get the official history of the Thunderbird from the Ford Company. Just write to Dearborn or find it online. Unfortunately, their homogenized data sheets won't help you capture the excitement of the first sexy car made in the United States you could buy with a middle-class pocketbook and could aspire to even if you were economically lower class.

Which Marty definitely was.

Shinier and slicker than an MG or a Triumph, the Thunderbird was unabashedly American in those mildly retrogressive Eisenhower years. The Corvette came out in a limited production run two years before, and General Motors might well have discontinued that proudly and unequivocally upper-class sports car if not for the unexpected clamor for the Thunderbird. Jere's Thunderbird was the first Marty saw on the streets, although he saw one months before at the annual automobile show at the new Columbus Circle convention center.

He and his best friends, Josh and Benny, were at the auto show for the second year in a row, ecstatic to wander around the increasingly curved, chromed, and brightly colored new cars. At the same time, they could also gape at the bathing-suit beauties extolling the glorious virtues of the gleaming DeSoto, the streamlined Studebaker, and the stubby Rambler. Marty used the whole roll of film in his Brownie camera, all twelve black-and-white shots, to capture some of the new super-duper-mobiles, but only if a tall, carefully coiffed blond was standing in front, a shiny white Ipana smile on her face, lips glistening fire-engine red, and long, smooth legs stretching up to what Marty suspected, but certainly did not know, might well be heaven. Only one-piece swimsuits then, definitely no bikinis, and not much to see of what Marty thought he could imagine. But even the white chest above which the fullness of the breasts began and the soft-butter look of the thighs were more than enough excitement for a teenage Brooklyn boy. Who, with his pals, had gone to an all-male math and sciences high school with Marty graduating at the too-young age of sixteen years and two months. The second year they went to the auto show—when he saw the Thunderbird—Marty brought an extra roll of film.

When Marty called Karen, as he had the last seven Wednesdays, to ask her to go to the movies with him Saturday evening, she chatted for a while before saying, "I'm going to be Jere's girlfriend from now on. I can't date you anymore." She was decidedly unsentimental, but Marty knew she didn't want to deliberately hurt him. He wasn't that surprised since he had a dream anticipating the breakup after Karen took him to a party at Jere's house two weeks before. Jere was so many of the things Marty wasn't—slim, virile, erratic.

Wealthy.

Karen, a high school senior, a year behind Marty, enthralled him. She was the Mildred Rogers for his Philip Carey. Her dark hair and slightly slanted dark eyes, top lids more than a little full, gave her a distinctly Asian look, very much like her mother, although her parents were both first-generation Americans born of Russian immigrants. Years later Marty thought about her and wondered if a little Mongol DNA from the Great Steppe was in Karen's gene pool. Perhaps, generations ago, some deliciously illicit Russian love affair sent an exotic gift to the America of the middle of the twentieth century.

He met Karen when he was invited to a party in her apartment by one of her girlfriends. When Karen took his hand to dance, he experienced one of those unexpected erections that plague teenage males, usually at the most unexpected and embarrassing moment. He stepped back a little to widen the space between them, struggling to keep the one-two-three-four foxtrot steps in mind, but she just pulled him closer, her impenetrably black pupils looking right into his pale and, for the moment, slightly alarmed blue eyes. Then, as the dimple in her cheek deepened, he understood she was having fun.

And that she had danced this particular step before.

Her eyes locked to his, their noses almost touching, the corners of her mouth upturned, she said, "Do you always carry a pencil case in your pocket when you go to a party?"

He gasped as the blush exploded, the heat rushing to his cheeks, his ears, and then to the top of his head—Vesuvius poised to erupt—but there was that warm and generous grin on her face along with that deep, decidedly lusty laugh.

Marty understood then he would love her until the end of his days.

Marty lived with his parents and his eleven-year-old brother, Charlie, in a

cramped Brooklyn apartment on a maple-tree-canopied street of drab brick buildings with neighborhood shops around the corner. Jere, only a half-mile away, was in a different world. His was a big Victorian house with wicker furniture on the sprawling porch, in a neighborhood of similarly large, staid homes with similar sprawling porches. His was the street where Styron had the fictional Wingo and Sophie meet. Other homes looking like his were around the corner. The closest stores were four blocks away.

Renowned guests came to dinner at the D.A.'s house. Mayor Wagner. Governor Harriman. Adlai Stevenson accompanying Eleanor Roosevelt. Marty heard that Gregory Peck had been there.

Jere had more than just a zephyr-blue-and-white Thunderbird and a big, gabled house. He played Rachmaninoff preludes on the concert Steinway in a corner of the three-sofa living room where Roman heads silently stood watch from ebony pedestals. Jere carried a thick wad of five- and ten-dollar bills, even some twenties. Jere's black hair was over his ears and down to his shirt collar, years before everybody else tried to copy Mick Jagger. There was no part, just an unkempt jungle above a sun-free face pierced by two dark and restless eyes. A half-smoked cigarette spasmodically jumped up and down at the edge of his full lips as he sotto voce talked about Locke and the economic forces helping China and India dominate the world, about Camus and Algeria and Indochina, about Beckett and Behan and J. Alfred Prufrock. A crowd of similarly bright, similarly literate, similarly well-to-do friends surrounded Jere.

Marty didn't know anything about Behan or Prufrock at that stage of his life, but he recognized Beckett as the author of the Broadway play starring the cowardly lion.

Someone was shouting about a resolution in the U.N. about the Suez Canal, and Marty was sure he was the only one in the room interested in the future of the Dodgers. He imagined Jere as someone who nonchalantly emerged from some arty film noir with the requisite five o'clock shadow.

Belmondo of Brooklyn.

Walking home from that party, Marty realized something he couldn't understand before: he was a space-holder. Karen hadn't been in love with him and never would be.

The movie-less, date-less Saturday evening came as one of those mean, bone-chilling, late-October days with a heavy and incessant rainfall. Marty found himself drawn toward Karen's apartment. The raindrops were as big as

a Flatbush Avenue bus and flickering through the downpour were streetlights with van Gogh coronas. Sewers couldn't keep up with the deluge, and when he slipped on a clump of wet leaves, he stepped into the center of a developing lake almost as high as the sidewalk curb. Feet completely soaked, he clomped his way up and down Lenox Avenue.

Each step made a new sloshing sound, barely heard against the constant, sharp tat-tat-tat of the torrent slapping the streets. A penetrating, whining howl of wind, accented by crashes of thunder and the smell of electricity, made Marty gird himself for some incoming bolt of lightning poised, he fervently hoped, to strike him dead.

Shivering, he stopped in front of Karen's building and squinted up to her fourth-floor living room window. Sheila, her mother, was probably reading the latest Michener, and Phil, Sheila's second husband, was likely watching the Perry Como show. Marty paced back and forth, chanting, "I have often walked down this street before..." from the new Broadway show *My Fair Lady*. Barely loud enough to hear his own hoarse voice through the moans of the storm, he didn't care that he couldn't carry the melody.

Finally, his voice scratchy and tiring of the steady stream of water running down his neck and back, he accepted that the great romance was over. He dreaded having to explain to his mother why he was drenched. By the time he was home, past 10:00, the time he would return from a date if there had been one, a feeble explanation was ready. But his parents were already asleep.

One evening three months later, Karen called. She and Jere had fought. "We're through."

Weeping and sobbing, she said, "I need you to take me somewhere to talk." More sobbing. "Please." The anger he had carefully and steadily nursed now vaporized, replaced by joy—Karen might be his again.

It was almost half-past eight and Charlie was fast asleep. Their parents, and the car, were in the Bronx, visiting relatives. Marty left a note on the foyer table and went up two flights to the Martellos'. "My best friend is very sick and needs my help. Can I borrow your car for just an hour?" He was astounded when Tony said, "Sure, kid. Give me the keys in the morning."

Tony's new Buick was so much slicker than his father's second-hand Packard, and Marty periodically leaned forward to admire the wraparound windshield, driving especially carefully to protect what was not his.

Karen, standing under the harsh light of the streetlamp at her corner, was

crying and blowing her nose. She yanked the door open and sank into the lush front seat, smaller and more fragile than he had ever seen her.

“Take me somewhere so I won’t see anyone.”

Marty had less than three dollars in his pocket. No twenties.

“Of course. Where? Tell me.”

“What about your fraternity house? Does your fraternity have one?”

The basement apartment in a Crown Heights brownstone that served the small, local fraternity he had joined seemed even shabbier than usual as he turned on the bare ceiling light. The second-hand furniture—dull greens and scuffed browns, donated from relatives or picked up on sidewalks—sagged. Holes and poorly sewn patches vied for attention. Happily, no one was there.

The refrigerator was as empty as the rest of the house, and as usual, the trash overflowed with empty beer and Coke bottles. He brought her a glass of water and his handkerchief. The crying slowly and steadily subsided. Then she abruptly stood up and held out her hand, looking all around.

“Where’s a bed? I want you to make love to me.”

He held his breath and looked up at her.

“Let’s talk.” He gently pulled her back onto the sofa, one hand around her wrist and the other at her elbow, trying to avoid glancing at the closed but beckoning French doors ten strides in front of them.

His arm around her shoulder, desperately wanting to kiss her, he told her things really weren’t that bad. She and Jere fought before. He couldn’t take advantage of her when she was so unhappy. It wouldn’t be fair when she was so vulnerable. It wouldn’t be right. She would only be sorry later. Jere would call her. She would get over it.

When he was sixty-five, considering the things he regretted in his life, things he would change if he had the chance, always at the top of the list, far above anything else, was the fact he would not, could not, did not have sex with Karen that night. He hadn’t thought about the almost unbelievably uninformed and unworldly person he was then until a writer friend posted the comment, “Naïve is pig Latin for stupid.”

Marty was a successful Los Angeles attorney now, more than forty years after Karen, and a continent away, discussing his growing attraction to a young colleague with Morton Ewing, his Beverly Hills therapist. The young woman, Tonya, was urging Marty to meet her at a hotel. He had never cheated on his wife, but they were bickering more than ever.

Ewing said, "What would you do if it were Karen? The young woman we once discussed from back when you were in college?" It seemed to Marty like a revelation. He instantly understood he hadn't changed. If Karen called today, he would do the same thing. He was in the twenty-first century, but he was that same boy he was fifty years ago.

Honor still mattered.

All That's Left

Surendriya Rao

This is all that's left:

glass bracelets / worn saris / old lipstick // address books /
album stamps / Nikon camera / photographs // pruning shears / aster flowers /
ash vibhuti / kumkum powder // frayed skeins of yarn / torn greeting cards / Dev
Anand films / Asha Bhosle songs // dosa recipes / sewing needle threads /
blocks of jaggery / King's Hawaiian bread // calla lilies blooming / Lord & Taylor
jackets / silver puja vessels / Maggi noodle packets // Davanam store earrings
/ grade school dioramas / Thyagaraja krithis / daily suprabhatham // Super
Bowl pass by Aikman / ornaments in the attic / miniature house you painted
/ Kannada that we practiced // sabudana khichdi / textbooks on neurology
/ one dismantled Christmas tree / idlis that we eat with ghee // stories by
R.K. Narayan / deepa wicks set next to matches / jasmine flowers thread
in garlands / furnace of cremation ashes // jars of lime and mango pickles /
yellow rose bush that you planted / abhishekam at the temple / and the death
rites we have chanted.

This is all that's left to me,
all that you have left to me.

CONTRIBUTOR BIOGRAPHIES

DANIEL PÍE

Daniel Píe, 70, is a retiree. He was a daily newspaper journalist for 44-plus years, the final 30 as a copy editor at the *Arizona Republic*, in Phoenix. His stories have been published in *Adelaide Literary Magazine* and *Clackamas Literary Review*. He was the winner of the *New Yorker Magazine* cartoon caption contest on November 21, 2016.

NATHAN LESLIE

Nathan Leslie won the 2019 Washington Writers' Publishing House prize for fiction for his satirical collection of short stories, *Hurry Up and Relax*. Nathan's nine previous books of fiction include *Three Men, Root and Shoot, Sibs*, and *The Tall Tale of Tommy Twice*. He is also the author of a collection of poems, *Night Sweat*. His fiction and poetry have been published in hundreds of literary magazines such as *Shenandoah*, *North American Review*, *Boulevard*, *Hotel Amerika*, and *Cimarron Review*. Nathan's nonfiction has been published in the *Washington Post*, *Kansas City Star*, and *Orlando Sentinel*. He is the series editor of *Best Small Fictions* and the editor of *Maryland Literary Review*. Nathan lives in Northern Virginia.

TAYLOR BACA

Taylor Baca is a senior at ENMU graduating with a bachelor's in fine arts with an emphasis in Graphic Design. She loves taking pictures in her free time, transferring them into Photoshop, and editing them. The skull image was all done on camera with no external editing. She is always busy working two jobs as a barista and a daycare teacher. She cannot wait to see where her career and life take her after graduation in May.

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.

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.

TENIKA HEIDELBERG

Having received her bachelor's, Tenika Heidelberg now studies in the ENMU graduate program for English. Working as a GA, this is her second time being published within *El Portal*. She aspires to become a teacher like the ones who have helped her along the way—the amazing professors at ENMU. Her poetry is created as an understanding of the dark moments we all find ourselves in and a hope that her readers will see that even in their darkest moments, they are not alone in their pain.

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.

CODY WILHELM

Cody Wilhelm is a current graduate student at ENMU originally from Lubbock, Texas. 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.

ALAN ABRAMS

Alan Abrams, born in Washington, DC in 1949, does not blame his parents for his years of dysfunction and rebellion, or for the opportunities that he squandered. Love—or the desire for love—sustained him. But it was work—work with his hands, work with his back, and work with his wits—that redeemed him. Now that his beard is white and his back is bent, he writes of his experiences. A few of his poems have been (or will soon be) published in *The Wayfarer Magazine*, and in the *Innisfree Poetry Journal*. His short stories have appeared in *The Hare's Paw*, and in *The Black Boot*—which alas—is no longer afoot.

NANCY FORD DUGAN

Nancy Ford Dugan's work has been twice nominated for a Pushcart Prize and has appeared in over 45 publications.

WILLIAM C. CRAWFORD

William C. Crawford is a prolific, itinerant photographer based in Winston Salem, NC. For more of his images visit @bcraw44 on Instagram.

WIT LEE

Wit lee, whose Chinese name is Li Hui, is a female poet born in Jining, Shandong province, and now lives at the foot of Mountain Taishan. She is an

editor of Taishan University Journal and a member of Taian Poets' Association. She has published more than 40 poems and one book of poetry, *Beyond Time*.

ALEXIS LEVITIN

Alexis Levitin has been a translator for nearly half a century. His forty-seven books include Clarice Lispector's *Soulstorm* and Eugénio de Andrade's *Forbidden Words*, both from New Directions. When the pandemic descended, he fled into isolation and suddenly began to write his own short stories, in attempt to redeem the remaining time and reconcile with the human condition. Since March 24, 2020, he has written eighty-seven stories, of which seventeen have been accepted for publication in magazines such as *American Chess Magazine*, *Agon*, *Bitter Oleander*, *British Chess Magazine*, *Gave-Brown*, *Latin American Literary Review*, and *Rosebud*.

BENJAMIN NASH

Benjamin Nash has had poems accepted in *Concho River Review*, *Louisiana Literature*, *2River*, *Pembroke Magazine*, and other publications.

NOLO SEGUNDO

Nolo Segundo, pen name of L.J. Carber, 75, in his 8th decade became a published poet in 71 literary magazines/anthologies in 6 countries; in 2020 a trade publisher released a book length collection titled *The Enormity of Existence* and in 2021 a 2nd book, *Of Ether and Earth*; recently he was nominated for the Pushcart Prize 2022. A retired teacher—who has taught in America, Japan, Taiwan, Cambodia—he has been married 42 years to a smart and beautiful Taiwanese woman.

VICTOR BASTA

Born and raised in Cairo, Egypt, Victor Basta immigrated to the United States with his parents when he was eight. An investment banker as well as a poet, Basta helped build three different investment banking firms over thirty years. His current focus is helping African companies raise money and expand internationally. His poetry has been published in the *Spoon River Poetry Review*, the *Cumberland River Review*, featured in the 2020 Grub Street Review, and by Indolent Books among others. He is an MFA candidate at Warren Wilson College.

HEATHER RUTHERFORD

Heather Rutherford has been published in *Life in 10 Minutes Online Magazine*, *Stirring: A Literary Collection*, and will be published in the forthcoming issue of *Euphony Journal*. She has attended numerous writing workshops, including Teaching Writing in the Community; classes at the Virginia Fine Arts Museum Studio School; and "Life in 10 Minutes," a Richmond writing school, online

magazine, and press. Heather grew up in upstate New York and escaped the cold by attending the University of Richmond to earn a bachelor's degree in English literature. She and her family live in Richmond, Virginia, where she taught yoga and meditation for fourteen years and writes and edits the yoga center newsletter. Heather has raised two kids and several Labrador Retrievers, including two yellows named Huckleberry Finn and Scout Finch.

JEANETTE STEINMAN SHELBURNE

Jeanette Steinman Shelburne's writing has been published or is forthcoming in *Perceptions Magazine*, *Avotaynu Magazine*, *On the Bus 25*, and *Side-Eye on the Apocalypse* (LA Poets & Writers Collective). Her scripts were produced for MGM Animation, Nelvana Enterprises, Inc. (children's animated television shows), Fox News Media, NBCUniversal New Media, Tír na nÓg Designs, and The Brighter Child Series (educational interactive programs). She's a member of the Writers Guild of America. Jeanette has presented at several writing conferences and works as a teacher of life story writing as well as a yoga and tai chi instructor for seniors. She received a BA in dance from UCLA and a BA in radio-TV-film from CSUN.

SANDEEP KUMAR MISHRA

Sandeep Kumar Mishra is a bestselling author of *One Heart—Many Breaks*, 2020. He is the poetry editor at *Indian Poetry Review*. He has received the Readers Favorite Award, the Indian Achievers Award, the IPR Poetry Award, and the Literary Titan Book Award. He was shortlisted for the 2021 International Book Awards, 52nd New Millennium Award, the Asian Anthology, the Indies Today Book of the Year Award, the Joy B Boone Poetry Prize, and the Oprelle Poetry Prize. He was also the Story Mirror Author of the Year nominee in 2019.

ELISA STANCIL

Elisa Stancil is a self-taught decorative artist who, as a high school dropout and single mother, built a nationally recognized company with projects published in every major design magazine in the US. Her new memoir, *This or Something Better* takes an unflinching look at early abuse and its effects. Readers learn how nature guided and empowered her successful career, until devastating fires on her mountain forced her to face her lifelong issues with trust. She and her husband live in Northern California, where they hike and ride horses on Sonoma Mountain.

ELEANORE LEE

Eleanore Lee has been writing fiction and poetry for many years in addition to her regular job as a legislative analyst for the University of California system. Her work has appeared in a range of journals, including *Alabama*

Literary Review, Atlanta Review, Avatar Literary Review, Carbon Culture Review, Existere Journal, Flumes Literary Journal, Meridian Anthology of Contemporary Poetry, the Portland Review, and Tampa Review. She was selected as an International Merit Award Winner in *Atlanta Review's* 2008 International Poetry Competition and also won first place in the November 2009 California State Poetry Society contest.

RAISTLIN SKELLEY

Raistlin Skelley is a storyteller from the Southwestern Pennsylvania Rust Belt. His work has appeared in *East by North East, The Needle Drops, Blood and Bourbon, and Open Callings.*

RON MEINERS

Ron Meiners has been published in *BIGWORD: Reed College Writing Collection, Journal of Dutch Literature, and Drama in the Desert: The Sights and Sounds of Burning Man.* He has studied English and creative writing at Reed College and the University of Utah.

RON L. DOWELL

Ron L. Dowell holds two Master's degrees from California State University Long Beach. In June 2017, he received the UCLA Certificate in Fiction Writing. His poetry resides in *Penumbra, Writers Resist, Oyster Rivers Pages, The Wax Paper, Kallisto Gaia Press, The Penmen Review, Packingtown Review Journal, and The Poeming Pigeon.* He's a 2018 PEN America Emerging Voices Fellow. Now retired from a forty-year career in public service, Ron enjoys golfing and running.

STEPHEN SOSSAMAN

Stephen Sossaman is the author of *Writing Your First Play* (Pearson), the long-poem book *And Job Lies in the Feedlot Where He Fell,* and stories and poems in such journals as *Paris Review, Military Review, and Amherst Review.* He lives in Burbank, California, at work on a novel about northern California in the 1840s.

JANE VANCANTFORT

Jane VanCantfort has been published in *Fiction on the Web* and *Idle Ink.* She has an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of San Francisco and studied with Nina Schuyler and Joshua Mohr. Jane lives in the Sierra Foothills with her husband and pets.

ADAM TODD

Adam Todd is originally from Kentucky, but now lives in Indiana. He is the founder/editor of the literary magazine *Genuine Gold.*

PAUL ROUSSEAU

Paul Rousseau (he/him/his) is a semi-retired physician and writer published in *The Healing Muse*, *Blood and Thunder*, *Hektoen International*, *Intima*, *A Journal of Narrative Medicine*, *The Human Touch*, *Pulse*, *Voices From the Heart of Medicine*, *Please See Me*, *Months To Years*, *(mac)ro(mic)*, the *Maine Review*, *433 Literary Magazine*, *Sunspot Literary Magazine*, *The Examined Life*, *Dr. T. J. Eckleburg Review*, *El Portal*, and others. He was nominated for The Best Small Fictions anthology from Sonder Press in 2020 and is a lover of dogs.

KYLE BRANDON LEE

Kyle Brandon Lee is a Texas born and raised writer of poetry, prose and plays. As a graduate of the University of Texas at Dallas with a degree in Literary Studies, he has published multiple short stories, poems and non-fiction pieces. These include works at *Mirror Dance*, *Backchannels Journal*, and *Fiction on the Web*. If someday they open an old and dusty tome made of pecan bark and armadillo hide, perhaps they'll find his work within. Hopefully, it will be plentiful. He can be found at his website hillsdreaming.com or on twitter @HDTMountains.

JOHN ZEDOLIK

John Zedolik is an adjunct English instructor at Chatham University and Duquesne University in Pittsburgh, and he has published poems in such journals as *Abbey*, the *Bangalore Review* (IND), *Commonweal*, *FreeXpresSion* (AUS), *Orbis* (UK), *Paperplates* (CAN), *Poem*, *Poetry Salzburg Review* (AUT), *Third Wednesday*, *Transom*, and in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*. In 2019, he published a full-length collection entitled *Salient Points and Sharp Angles* (CW Books), which is available through Amazon, and I recently published another collection, *When the Spirit Moves Me* (Wipf & Stock), which consists of spiritually-themed poems and is also available through Amazon. His iPhone is his primary poetry notebook, and he hopes his use of technology to craft this ancient art remains fruitful.

SHARON KENNEDY-NOLLE

Sharon Kennedy-Nolle holds an MFA in poetry from the Writers' Workshop and a Ph.D. in American Literature from the University of Iowa. Chosen as the 2020 Chapbook Editor's Pick by Variant Literature Press, *Black Wick: Selected Elegies* was published in 2021. Her full-length manuscript was chosen as a 2021 finalist for the Black Lawrence Press's St. Lawrence Book Award and as a 2021 semifinalist for the University of Wisconsin Poetry Series' Brittingham and Felix Pollak Prizes. Kennedy-Nolle was winner of the New Ohio Review's 2021 creative writing contest. She lives and teaches in New York.

SCOTT PRICE

J. Scott Price's work has appeared or is forthcoming in the *MacGuffin*, *Front Range Review*, *Red Coyote*, *Sierra Nevada Review*, *vox poetica*, *O-Dark-Thirty Literary Journal*, *Visitant Lit*, and *Wrath-Bearing Tree*. He was a finalist for the 2017 Brian Turner Literary Arts Prize and served a three-week fellowship at the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts. Price holds an MFA in Writing and a Certificate in Publishing from Vermont College of Fine Arts. He was an infantryman for twenty-four years.

MELISSA HARRIS

Melissa Harris is a writer, speaker, ordained minister, and certified yoga instructor. She has worked as an insurance underwriter for the past fifteen years, having had several articles published in her industry's newsletter. Melissa received her undergraduate degree in psychology from Iowa State University and she holds an M.S. in counseling from Wayne State College and a Master of Divinity from All Faiths Seminary International. She is devoted to the practice of Heart Rhythm meditation and offers live meditation calls in the morning two times a week.

ANN HARPER REED

Ann Harper Reed has been published in *TAYO Literary Magazine*, *Sou'wester Magazine*, the *MacGuffin*, *ONTHEBUS*, *Broad River Review*, *Umbrella Factory Magazine*, *Crack the Spine*, and various other publications. She has also been nominated for the Pushcart Prize. Ann rappelled from helicopters to fight forest fires in the Sierra Nevada, traipsed the Peruvian Amazon, created "best in show" pastries in New York City, worked her family's factory floor in Iowa, massaged the dying and heartbroken, taught high school calculus, and helped bring babies into the world as a doula. She is a member of the Los Angeles Poets and Writers Collective and currently resides with her exceptional husband in New Mexico.

KATHLEEN ZAMBONI MCCORMICK

Kathleen Zamboni McCormick is Professor Emerita of Literature and Pedagogy at Purchase College, SUNY. Her academic books include *The Culture of Reading and the Teaching of English* (MLA Mina Shaughnessy Award), co-edited volumes on *Teaching Italian American Literature* and *Teaching Joyce's Ulysses*. She's published numerous essays in journals and collected volumes on pedagogy, Italian American literature, and James Joyce's *Ulysses*. Creative work has appeared in such journals as: *Moon City Review*, *Green Hills Literary Lantern*, *Madison Review*, *Euphony*, *South Carolina Review*, *Italian Americana*, *Paterson Literary Review*, *Superstition Review*, *Kestrel*, *armarolla*, and many others. Her novel, *Dodging Satan: My Irish/Italian Sometimes Awesome but Mostly Creepy Childhood* was shortlisted for the 2020 Rubery Award, won the

2017 Foreword Reviews Gold Medal in Humor, the 2017 Illumination Bronze Medal for Catholic Books (Pope Francis won the Gold!), among other awards in humor and religion. “Bella Giovanni’s Cul-De-Sac” is one of the stories Zamboni McCormick will use in her next novel which focuses on social class and abuse. You can read more of her work at kathleenzmccormick.com.

EDWARD MICHAEL SUPRANOWICZ

Edward Michael Supranowicz is the grandson of Irish and Russian/Ukrainian immigrants. He grew up on a small farm in Appalachia. He has a grad background in painting and printmaking. Some of his artwork has recently or will soon appear in *Fish Food*, *Streetlight*, *Another Chicago Magazine*, *The Door Is a Jar*, *The Phoenix*, and the *Harvard Advocate*. Edward is also a published poet.

KRISTIN LAFOLLETTE

Kristin LaFollette is a writer, artist, and photographer and serves as the Art Editor at Mud Season Review. She is the author of *Hematology* (winner of the 2021 Harbor Editions Laureate Prize) and *Body Parts* (winner of the 2017 GFT Press Chapbook Contest). She received her PhD from Bowling Green State University and is a professor at the University of Southern Indiana. Learn more about her work at kristinlafollette.com.

PATRICK THERON ERICKSON

Patrick Theron Erickson, a resident of Garland, Texas, a Tree City, just south of Duck Creek, is a retired parish pastor put out to pasture himself. Besides a forthcoming chapbook, *Better Late Than Never* (The Orchard Street Press, 2022), his work has appeared in *Quiet Diamonds: The Poetry Journal of The Orchard Street Press* (Summer 2021); and in *Grey Sparrow Journal*, *Tipton Poetry Journal*, and *Sheila-Na-Gig online*, among other publications. More recently, his work has appeared in *Smokey Blue Literary and Arts Magazine*, the *Charles Carter*, and *Shift*.

EMMA LAURENT

Emma Laurent is a former (and sometimes) Democratic political operative. When not on a campaign, Emma is focused on writing timely pieces on culture, punk music, and spooky run-ins. After writing hours, Emma can be found mouthing off, watching baseball, and reading Stephen King. She is currently located in an antelope laden field in Wyoming.

MAGNUS ONE

Magnus One is Italian and lives in Italy, he has published stories on blogs and Italian literary magazines. He is currently responsible for the cultural site vuoiubblicare.it.

KING GROSSMAN

King Grossman is a sojourner, social justice activist, nonviolent revolutionary, novelist, poet, writer of short prose, as well as a children's story. His poems and short prose have appeared or are forthcoming in *Delmarva Review*, *Bear Review*, the *Round*, *Licking River Review*, *Crack the Spine*, *Forge*, *Tiger's Eye*, *Burningword*, *Ignatian*, *Drunk Monkeys*, *Pennsylvania Literary Journal*, and many others. He's working on his fifth novel. He lives in Carmel-by-the-Sea, California with his wife, Lisa; dog, Bogart; and sun conure parrot, Sunny.

TAMARA ADELMAN

Tamara Adelman is a former massage therapist, ironman triathlete, and now writer and golfer living in Rancho Mirage, CA, the playground of Presidents and the Adelmans. She has a certificate in Creative Nonfiction from UCLA.

SUE ALLISON

Sue Allison was a reporter for *Life Magazine*; her writing has also been published or is forthcoming in *Antioch Review*, *Harvard Review*, *(mac)ro(mic)*, *Threepenny Review*, *Flights*, *Fourth Genre*, the *Diagram*, *Isacoustic*, *Puerto del Sol*, and a Pushcart Prize collection. She holds an MFA from the Vermont College of Fine Arts.

IRENE O' GARDEN

Irene O'Garden is a Poetry Educator with the Hudson River chapter of the national River of Words program, connecting children to nature via poetry and art. In 1987 O'Garden founded the *Art Garden*, a performing literary magazine, which she produced, hosted, and wrote for 25 years. She blogs at ireneogarden.com.

LAURA KING

Laura King holds a Master of Divinity degree from Union Theological Seminary in New York City and is in the MFA program for Creative Writing at the Rainier Writing Workshop in Tacoma, Washington. Her work has appeared in *Neologism Journal*, the *Opiate Magazine*, *Modern Haiku*, *Ponder Review*, *Evening Street Review*, *Wrath Bearing Tree*, *Hollins Critic*, *whimperbang*, *Slant*, the *Meadow*, *FRiGG*, *Visitant*, and the *Los Angeles Times*. She lives in Sacramento, California, where she is a hospital chaplain.

SCOTT HUGHES

Scott Hughes has a bachelor's degree in English from California State University, Northridge, and he attended writing workshops at UCLA. He lost most of his writing projects in a 2017 wildfire that destroyed his house and neighborhood; he started writing again shortly after. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Wrath-Bearing Tree and Visitant*. He is a self-employed building contractor.

MARTE CARLOCK

After spending almost 20 years chasing facts for The Boston Globe, Marte Carlock decided it was more fun to make things up. Her poems and short fiction have appeared in more than forty publications. A native of Texas, she now lives near Boston, Massachusetts.

JEFF RICHARDS

Jeff Richards's short story collection, *Everyone Worth Knowing*, launched in 2021 from Circuit Breaker Books. He has published two novels, *Open Country: A Civil War Novel in Stories* (Paycock Press, 2015) and *Lady Killer* (Mint Hill Books, 2019). His fiction, essays, and cowboy poetry have appeared in over 27 publications including *Pinch*, *New South*, and *Southern Humanities Review* and five anthologies such as *Tales Out of School* (Beacon Press). This story was inspired by Shemekia Copeland's song "Uncivil War." You can find Richards at jeffrichardsauthor.com.

MURRAY SILVERSTEIN

Murray Silverstein has been published in *RATTLE*, *Spillway*, *Poetry East*, *Nimrod*, *Connecticut Review*, the *MacGuffin*, and *Pembroke Magazine* among others. He has authored two books of poetry: *Master of Leaves* (2014) and *Any Old Wolf* (2007), the latter of which received the Independent Publisher's Bronze Medal for Poetry in 2006.

VIRGINIA SCHNURR

Virginia Schnurr's poetry has been published in *Primavera*, *Fox Cry Review*, *Calyx*, *So to Speak*, *Nightsun*, *Thin Air*, *Worcester Review*, *Confluence*, *Controlled Burn*, *Eureka Literary Magazine*, and *Meat for Tea: The Valley Review*. She is a trained children's librarian and ran the literary magazine at a Quaker boarding school.

GLENN ENTIS

Glenn Entis lives in San Francisco, California with his wife. He writes poetry about almost everything except his long career in computer animation and videogames.

EMILY HYLAND

Emily Hyland's poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *armarolla*, the *Brooklyn Review*, *Mount Hope Magazine*, *Sixfold*, *Palette Poetry*, *Maryland Literary Review*, and the *Hollins Critic* among others. She recently placed third place in the 2021 Frontier Award for New Poets contest. Emily earned her MFA in poetry and her MA in English education from Brooklyn College. A restaurateur, educator, and mindful movement teacher from New York City, her cookbook, *Emily: The Cookbook*, was published by Ballantine Books, an

imprint of Random House, in 2018. She has been a member of the Community of Writers since June 2019. Emily is the co-founder of the national restaurant groups Pizza Loves Emily and Emmy Squared Pizza. You can find Hyland at emilyhyland.com and emmysquaredpizza.com.

JOHN MURRAY

John Murray's most recent work has appeared in the *Los Angeles Times*, the *MacGuffin*, and *Mount Hope Magazine*. He lives in Los Angeles.

ANDREY GRITSMAN

A native of Moscow, Andrey emigrated to the United States in 1981. He is a poet, essayist, and a physician. Gritsman has published ten volumes of poetry and prose in Russian and six in English. He received the 2009 Pushcart Prize Honorable Mention XXIII and was nominated for the Pushcart Prize several times. His poems, essays, and short stories in English have appeared and are forthcoming in over 90 literary journals, including *Nimrod International Journal*, *Cimarron Review*, and *Notre Dame Review*. His work has also been anthologized. Andrey received MFA in poetry from Vermont College and runs the Intercultural Poetry Series in New York City.

VICKI NYMAN

Vicki Nyman is a reading tutor at an elementary school in the Minneapolis area. She studied Creative Writing as a graduate student at Hamline University and independently with poet Jim Moore. Her work has appeared in *Evening Street Review*, and the *Remington Review*. Originally from Chicago, Vicki now lives on four acres in semi-rural Minnesota with her unruly husband and XXL puppy. She enjoys listening to classical music and Chapo Trap House.

RAND CARDWELL

Rand Cardwell has viewed the world through the eyes of trained military observer with a poetic heart. Those experiences pour out in his writing and poetry. He resides in East Tennessee. Some of Rand's poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *El Portal*, *Evening Street Review*, *DASH Literary Journal*, and *Visitant*. His non-fiction book has been published by Tuttle. He enjoys frozen margaritas, trout fishing, wordsmithing, two amazing grandchildren, and the love of a very special lady.

ALITA PIRKOPF

Years after graduating from Middlebury College, she received a master's degree in English literature from the University of Denver. Later she enrolled in a poetry seminar at the University of Denver taught by Bin Ramke. Thereafter, poetry became a long-term focus and obsession.

CELIA MEADE

Celia Meade is a poet, novelist, and painter attending Sarah Lawrence for an MFA in poetry. She is presently studying under Afaa Michael Weaver and have studied with Marie Howe and Jo Ann Beard. Her work has been published or is forthcoming in a number of literary journals. She also has an MFA in painting from the University of Calgary and studied at the Royal College of Art in London.

STEPHEN A. GELLER

Stephen A. Geller earned an MFA degree from the Vermont College of Fine Arts in 2018. His first novel, *A Little Piece of Me* (2014), received numerous positive reviews and has a five-star ranking on Amazon. He has published in *GNU Journal*, the *MacGuffin*, *Pennsylvania English*, and *Sanskrit* magazine.

SURENDRIYA RAO

Surendriya Rao is a practicing litigator and poet. Raised in Texas, he has made his home for the last fourteen years in New York City, a place that has been for him “the city of final destination.” He currently resides in Brooklyn. His work has appeared in *Rattle*, *Vayavya*, the *Bombay Literary Magazine*, and the *Bangalore Review*. His chapbook, *Sitting Shiva*, was shortlisted for the Kingdoms in the Wild 2019 Poetry Prize. He broods over sound and rhythm in language, hoping to find some secret traces of memory (personal, cultural, historical, etc.), and then tries through poems to catch and organize these emanations into something. He likes to think that he does this, at any rate.



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