

FALL 2018

October Hill

M A G A Z I N E



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Volume 2, Issue 3

Welcome to October Hill Magazine



In the long course of human history, man has often celebrated the Earth's agricultural bounty with festivals and ceremonies of giving thanks. Ancient peoples – including the Romans, Greeks, Hebrews and Chinese, among others – have all given thanks for a bountiful harvest. Though they may have varied in their forms of celebration, they shared a common spirit and desire to celebrate and to reflect upon the many blessings of a simple life.

If we fast-forward to the 21st Century, we find that we share some of the same traditions with ancient peoples, most notably a celebration of robust harvests. Many of us, city dwellers and country dwellers alike, celebrate Fall by setting out pumpkins, gourds, wreaths of autumn leaves, or even bales of hay. Our most cherished and family-oriented Autumn holiday – Thanksgiving – celebrates the bounty of both farm and field and brings together family and friends for the purpose of sharing that bounty and celebrating our blessings and kinship.

We at *October Hill Magazine* also celebrate this time of year, which has given us inspiration for our name. Like millions of other people, we are most grateful for our blessings. We also have special reason to celebrate the short story writers, poets and other artists who have provided us with a bounty of creative works for our Fall issue, which we invite our readers to share. We are especially grateful to everyone – to our authors and our staff alike – who have made this Fall Issue a reality. We hope you'll come along and celebrate with us!

Richard Merli *Editorial Director*

Samantha Morley *Managing Editor*

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Fiction

A Penny for 50's Thoughts

By R.J. Fox

Some things in life can't be predicted. Take, for instance, a chance encounter with 50 Cent.

After my first book *Love & Vodka: My Surreal Adventures in Ukraine* was published, I tried to think out of the box as much as possible in (usually failed) attempts at getting word out about my book. So, if something caught my eye that I felt had any remote connection to my book whatsoever, I would jump on it immediately, leaving no stone unturned.

I realize now that many of these were misguided efforts to “bank” on my sudden “success” as a published author. Realize that “success” in this context is simply the act of getting published – making a single cent was a whole other issue (let alone 50 cents).

My book doesn't have a whole lot to do with vodka, to be honest. I mean, there are certainly ample amounts, but the focus of the book is on my travel adventures in Ukraine rather than a history of vodka...or love, for that matter (though I devote a couple paragraphs to the history of vodka...and several chapters to love itself).

So I decided to milk the vodka angle for what it was worth. One event, in particular, caught my eye – an enormous vodka tasting festival called Vodka Vodka! inside the historic Royal Oak Music Theater just outside Detroit. Dozens of vodka vendors would be on hand, as well as models, a DJ, and miscellaneous other modes of entertainment.

But mostly vodka.

I figured I would fill a niche. I mean, who isn't looking for a book when they come to a vodka-tasting event? Get people drunk enough and they will do anything.

On a whim, I contacted the festival organizers to inquire about getting a booth to peddle my wares.

“So what kind of vodka is this?”

“No, it's not vodka. It's a book. About vodka. Well, not really about vodka.

Vodka's in the title.”

In response to my jabbering, I was finally given a quote of \$500.

Let me make this clear: I can't even do the math required to determine how many books would be required to break even. Let's just say it would require a delivery truck and a forklift.

I couldn't even sell that many copies at a book convention where the only book available would be mine.

Suddenly, I found myself thrust into unfamiliar territory: the art of negotiation.

Somehow, I managed to talk my way down to \$250 when I essentially explained the pitiful reality of how much money there was to be made in this for me. Even at that rate, I would still be in the red, but I managed to convince myself that the exposure would make it all worth it in the end.

Besides, I was also hoping to partner with a local vodka distillery with the hope of some sort of cross-promotional partnership (it never happened).

As the event drew nearer, I started having serious doubts as to why I was willing to shell out so much money just so I could sit awkwardly at a table with a stack of my books that would never sell. Hell, if I wanted to go for the eye candy alone, I could have just bought a ticket and attended the event as a spectator.

Just when I was about to inquire about getting a refund, I received an e-mail announcing a special guest celebrity who would be in attendance.

And just who might be gracing us with his/her presence? None other than: The man.

The myth. The legend. 50 Cent.

But why?

On the surface, it made little sense.

But I came to realize that he was there to promote Effen Vodka, which he was somehow involved with.

And just like that, I had a singular focus: get my book into 50's hands. At all costs. And it would be worth every last cent (it no longer mattered that I was unlikely to make the equivalent of his monetary moniker).

So why this irrational excitement for a washed-up rapper who was never that great to begin with? It wasn't like I was a huge 50 Cent fan even back when he was a thing. (Who was?) I mean, a casual fan, yes. (Who wasn't?) And it wasn't like rappers were a coveted demographic for my book. Not to say they wouldn't like it. Point is, the idea of getting 50 Cent a copy of my book quickly became my latest obsession just for the randomness of it. I didn't care if I didn't actually meet him. But one way or another, my book would.

The event finally arrived – a cold, Michigan January night. My publisher, Jon, and I headed to the venue, hauling a couple boxes of books inside. We found our booth and nestled between Tito's Handmade Vodka and a stairwell, which at least ensured maximum visibility. Attendees were sure to at least notice the book. The bright yellow cover drew people like moths to a light.

I couldn't have been more wrong. As it turned out, most people didn't so much as glance in our general direction, their internal GPS wired to take them directly en route to the next vodka booth. A small handful glanced our way, but nothing more than a precursory one. And they often seemed annoyed by the books' very presence.

After we settled in, we cashed in a couple of drink tickets to sample some vodka, but otherwise remained stationed at our booth. Jon made noble attempts to pass out post cards promoting the book – most of which were either ignored, or dropped to the ground seconds later, where they would be trampled on by the increasingly drunken attendees.

And an hour into the event, there was no sign of 50 Cent. Where was the motherfucker?

Maybe it was all a ruse. Maybe he changed his plans. Then again, what else would 50 Cent possibly have on his agenda?

The Effen Vodka booth, which was located about four booths or so away from mine was certainly far more elaborate than everyone else's.

For one thing, it included a VIP lounge.

And in the middle of the lounge was none other than a stripper pole. Certainly, it seemed tailor-made for the 50 Cent king himself!

At one point, Jon decided to make rounds and I remained behind to man the booth. We weren't exactly staying busy.

As I sat there twiddling my thumbs, peering over two evenly stacked piles of books, I observed a clearly intoxicated older woman making it a point to make out with just about any random guy she could get her hands on, particularly random guys under 30. Most went along with it, as it was safe to assume that they were probably intoxicated, too.

Then she headed my way - the first one to actually pay a modicum of attention to us.

And she was drunk as fuck.

"What is this?" she asked, pointing at my table.

Though I sort of assumed she was getting at my books, I still wasn't entirely sure.

My guess is that she was wondering where the fucking vodka was (not to be confused with Effen Vodka).

"What are these?" the woman asked, as though discovering books for the first time.

"Books!" I said with feigned enthusiasm. By that point, I was feeling pretty down about this \$250 decision – even with the promise of 50 Cent looming.

"What kind of books?"

"A memoir. *Love & Vodka*."

"Oh, does it have vodka recipes?"

"No. It's about my experiences traveling in Ukraine."

"Oh. So, you are some kind of author?"

"Yes. Some kind for sure."

"Ohhh, I've never been with an author before," she said, rubbing her finger alongside my cheek.

“Oh, well, I’m sorry to hear that,” I said, utterly flabbergasted.

“I can’t remember the last time I read a book,” she said with a hearty chuckle.

“Well, then you should read this one!”

“Yeah. Right,” she said with a sarcastic laugh.

And with that, she walked away. Better than nothing!

Within seconds, she was making out with a douchebag in a faux hawk.

I suddenly found myself asking: is a vodka festival such a good idea to begin with? It just seems like a disaster waiting to happen. Anyway, I wasn’t there to judge.

I was there to sell books. And meet 50 Cent.

Almost another hour passed by with 1.) no sales and 2.) no sign of 50 Cent.

What was more likely to happen? Sell a book? Or, 50’s arrival? Probably 50 Cent.

A duo of attractive and presumably highly-intoxicated (but not anywhere as obnoxious) women approached.

Perhaps I would work my nerdy charm and sell a fucking book.

“Hello!” one of them said – the clearly far more sober one. Her friend was really struggling to stand on her own two feet and seemed mostly oblivious to everything.

“Hi there!” I said hoping for the best but expecting the worst.

“So, is this your book?”

“Yes, it is!”

“How cool! You wrote it?”

“Yep. Every word. And edited by this guy right here,” I said, pointing to Jon, still eagerly attempting to hand out postcards to anyone who passed by.

The less-drunk woman grabbed a copy and started thumbing through it. Despite reading the back cover, she still felt compelled to ask: “What’s it about?”

“My travel experiences in Ukraine.”

“So, it’s fiction?”

“No. Non-fiction. Memoir.”

“So, you went to Russia?”

“No. Ukraine.”

She continued to analyze the book like a unique scientific specimen. Unlike my previous customer, she seemed to at least understand what a book was.

“I’ll buy it!”

“Great, thanks!”

“Will you sign it?”

“Of course! Who should I make it out to?”

“Maria.”

“With one ‘M’?” I joked.

“What?”

“Nevermind.” I got to work signing her book, which I wrapped up with my signature fox, which looked more like a rat.

As I continued writing, she asked me: “So are you excited about 50 Cent?”

“Yeah! Very excited.”

“I hope to get his autograph, too! And maybe a little something more, if you know what I mean.”

“That would be awesome!” I responded, handing my book over to her. “\$15.00.”

“Do you accept credit card?”

“Sadly, not. I don’t have one of those card reader things.”

“Let me ask my friend. Britney, do you have cash?”

What Britney seemed to have was an extremely high blood-alcohol level, as she continued to struggle to find her balance.

“What?” Britney asked.

“Cash. I need cash.”

“How much?”

“\$15.00.”

“I don’t think so. Let me check.”

She clumsily dug through her wallet. All she could produce were seven singles. “I’m so sorry,” Maria said.

Now under ordinary circumstances, this would mean no sale. But since the book was personalized, I would either have to wait for another Maria to buy my book...or, sell it to her for a deep discount, which would mean I would lose \$3.00 on the book when it was all said and done (now that math, I could handle).

“Are you sure?” Maria asked.

“Yes. For me, the satisfaction comes from knowing that somebody read my book. Enjoy!”

“I’ll pay you back.”

“Don’t worry.”

“No, I will. Are you on Facebook?”

“Yes! Feel free to add me!”

She never did. But at least I was going home with one less book.

That was as close to a sale as I would get to that night. The question remained, however: would I be able to hand deliver a copy to 50 Cent? I was beginning to hope that he would show up, let alone get my book to him.

As Maria and Britney made their way down the steps to the next booth, Britney tumbled, spilling the entire contents of her purse. Lying on the ground were what appeared to be several bills. Even if they were only singles, they certainly would have covered the balance of what they owed me.

And then:

“Ladies and gentlemen!” said the emcee’s booming voice, as 50 Cent’s 2002 smash hit “In Da Club” started blasting throughout the theater. The crowd went nuts. Because everyone knew what this meant, even before the announcement was made:

“The moment we’ve all been waiting for! Put your hands together for 50... Cent!”

Louder cheers. A mob of people rushed toward the Effen Vodka booth as an entourage entered to a medley of 50’s Greatest Hits (all of which were said and done by 2005).

The hits included snippets of such golden chestnuts as: “Candy Shop,” “P.I.M.P.,” “21 Questions,” “Just a Lil Bit,” “Disco Inferno,” and “Wanksta.”

The half-dollar king had entered the building! And the world couldn’t be a better place...for “just a lil’ bit.”

Though I couldn’t get a visual on 50 himself, it was a safe bet that he was insulated by his posse, as he made his way toward his booth, which now showcased a half-naked dancer twirling on the pole. Throngs of women (liquored up enough to believe that it was 2002 and that thongs were still in fashion) rushed the booth, hoping to get a piece of 50. I even spotted Maria, pulling a hapless Britney along by the hand, determined to get an autograph... and the full 50 Cent piece.

After a few minutes, as a crowd gathered around the V.I.P. booth five rows thick, it became apparent that 50 had no desire to drink vodka – or Bacardi for that matter – with the masses. Didn’t matter if it was anyone’s birthday as far as 50 Cent was concerned.

I would need to find a way to penetrate through 50 Cent’s remaining, rabid female fan base.

I was less concerned about my ability to do so and more concerned about how others might assume I was *that* desperate to get a piece of the magic stick. But I wasn’t going to let judgments from the masses deter me. Not after I got this far! Without a moment to lose, I grabbed a copy of my book and personalized it as follows:

Dear 50 Cent,

Hope you enjoy my book. Always and forever a fan. Regards,

R.J. Fox

Of course, I included my patented fox drawing and put my contact info in there for good measure. Doing so at least magnified my chance of hearing directly from him than if I didn’t include it at all.

I realized that if my plan didn't work out, then I would be forever stuck with it.

And unlike "Maria," I would have a much smaller chance of finding another 50 Cent. Signing it was a calculated risk I had to take. Somehow, I couldn't help but feel that my destiny was sealed.

I took a deep breath and headed toward the two-quarter hip hop legend – or, at least, the crowd of people surrounding him – all clamoring for the same thing. I realized that having a tangible item to deliver to him might actually improve my chances.

I stopped just short of shouting, "Special delivery for 50 Cent!"

I strategized to find my best point of entry. After several attempts at getting nowhere fast, I decided I was going to have to be more aggressive. Nobody was going to politely allow me to push past them. I would just have to plow through, looking like the biggest dick in the process. Clearly, nobody was giving up on the hope that 50 would actually interact with them, which would have made my life so much easier if they had. I just had to work my way through, one female fan at a time.

And next thing I know, I was standing on the outer edge of his 50's lair, smack dab in front of the stripper pole and quasi-stripper. And then, I spotted him...sittin' on a couch, watching the same stripper I was, and sipping on a drink.

I felt a kinship to him like no other for that one moment. I even managed to snap a few pics.

But now what?

I noticed a couple of sentries guarding the VIP lair's entrance. That was my golden ticket! But it required muscling my way past more women eager to do the same. But I already got this far. Now, I just had to move laterally about 15 feet.

But my biggest challenge lay ahead. The first few feet were a cinch.

But standing a half dollar between me and fifty were three large black women who did not want a scrawny white boy taking a piece of the birthday cake.

"Oh, hell no!"

"Who the fuck does this boy think he is?"

And next thing I knew, I was flat on my ass, knocked down in what I think was an accident, despite not being fully sure.

I sat back up and, from my vantage point, I watched the women attempt to bust through security, but they were promptly turned away.

“Fuck this shit,” said the one who “accidentally” knocked me down. “Let’s go get some motherfuckin’ Goose.”

And there was my opening. On the precipice of a dream!

I walked right on up to security, who braced themselves for a ruckus.

“So, I’m the author of this book here. And was wondering if I could somehow, um, get this book to Mr. 50 Cent.”

They looked at me, then the book, then me again. “You wrote this?” one of them asked.

“Sure did! The whole thing! Since he’s into vodka, thought he might like to read this.”

“Okay, sure. We’ll get it to him.”

I handed my book over. And then watched my book pass not through just one channel of security. Not two channels. Or even three. But four. And then, through a small opening, I saw 50 Cent himself receive my book. And it required someone having to stand between 50 Cent...and the 50-cent stripper he was ogling over with quasi- indifference. He stared down at my book, and then produced an expression that seemed to suggest “What da fuck?”

And then I walked away. Triumphant.

I often wonder whatever happened to that copy of my book.

For all I know, 50 tossed it into the first trashcan he found. Or, pawned it off onto a member of his entourage. Or, perhaps he left it in his V.I.P. booth, leaving it totally up for grabs (which more than likely meant trash).

Of course, it was also possible he kept it, but never read it, nor had any intention to. I also acknowledge the possibility that just *maybe* 50 Cent *has* read my book.

Stranger things have happened!

At the very least, I take great pleasure in knowing the possibility that – if only for one fleeting moment – there existed a copy of my book addressed to 50 fucking Cent.

How many writers can take claim of that fact?

I could hold my head up high, no longer a wanksta...but much more gloriously, a gangsta.

The bottom line is this: I went in with a goal. And left with the goal accomplished.

And in this business, success is measured in small increments. One cent at a time. 

R.J. Fox is the award-winning writer of several short stories, plays, poems, a memoir, and 15 feature length screenplays. Two of his screenplays have been optioned to Hollywood. His first book – a memoir entitled *Love & Vodka: My Surreal Adventures in Ukraine* was previously published by Fish Out of Water Books. His website is www.foxplots.com. Or follow him on Twitter @foxwriter7

Putting It Down

By Nicole A. Michaelis

“We have to put it down,” she says, her eyes wide open, staring straight into mine.

He nods. “It’s started to smell bad.”

“And it leaks! God, it leaks so much now. Not just at night,” she adds, throwing her arms dramatically up in the air.

“I see,” I say. “Let’s schedule a time then. How’s next Tuesday?”

She nods enthusiastically. “Tuesday’s perfect!”

He smiles.

I note the date on my pad. “Then we’re done for now,” I conclude, getting up from my seat to show them out.

As most people, Ally can’t remember when the first symptoms started showing. It must have been some time last year, maybe in the summer. Probably right after Independence Day when it just didn’t seem to recover from the escapades and fireworks as it did the years before.

“We thought it’d pull itself together. But it just kept acting strange and tired,” Sam said.

Things got worse from then. Some days Ally and Sam couldn’t find it at all. It was like it had just disappeared. She went out with her girlfriends, had too many margaritas, and smelled of smoke when she came home at 4 a.m. in the morning. He worked late, lost a lot of hair, and had to start wearing glasses.

Then it would suddenly show up again. For a weekend, or a quiet Wednesday evening. They’d drink wine by the fireplace, and sometimes, Sam would get high and they would both laugh a lot. But the next day, it disappeared again.

“It must have been around Thanksgiving when we didn’t see it for two weeks at a time. I think that’s when Sam started sleeping with his secretary,” Ally explains.

Sam shrugs. “Could be.”

She remembers spending a lot of time with it over Christmas, though. They even bought it gifts—a trip to the spa and a new kitchen-aid.

“The old kitchen-aid had been a big issue for a while. Ally kept complaining that it wasn’t working and that really pissed it off.”

The new kitchen-aid seemed to make it happy for a while. At least it stuck around and wasn’t so sluggish anymore. But then Ally found out about the secretary the Thursday before their planned trip to the spa.

“That’s when I first thought about putting an end to it,” she admits. “I mean it shouldn’t have to suffer this much.”

I can’t help but notice how attractive she is. Her watery eyes shine bright as she tells her side of the story. She pulls down her skirt uncomfortably but sits up straight, hair in a tight ponytail. When the two of them met she must have been the prettiest girl he had ever seen.

Ally goes on to explain that from that late January day on, it left a trail of stinky odour wherever it went.

Ally and Sam couldn’t be in the same room together. They had optimized their schedules to ensure they weren’t home at the same time. Sometimes Ally left dinner for Sam. Sam would then clean the kitchen or do the ironing for both of them. Then it would come out for a while and stroll around the house.

“See, it’s not like it always looked sick. Sometimes it still seemed to enjoy itself.”

But as the days ticked by, there was no getting around the fact that it was suffering more and more. Sam would stumble upon a puddle of its excretion and get mad. He’d scream at Ally to clean up after it more. They’d have a huge fight, which usually meant the following night, one or both of them would wake up from the stench it left in the hallways.

“The whole house started smelling so bad! We kept finding new puddles and discharge everywhere. It really wasn’t feeling well,” Ally says.

One Friday night in April, Sam didn't come home from work. He had packed two bags and decided to stay with with a 'friend'. Ally came home to find it lying on its back on the carpet. "I really thought we lost it then," she says with tears in her eyes. Ally called Sam in a panic and when he came home to check on it, it slowly recovered. "It was fine for a while after that."

I watch Sam as he pulls his phone out of his pocket and briefly glances at the screen. I notice an expression of unease as he fiddles with it and can't help but wonder if it's the other woman, that secretary. I liked Sam and admired him for his dedication to hard work and, until a few months ago, to his wife. I wonder what went wrong. I wonder when he decided family wasn't a priority for him. I wonder if starting a workplace affair was his escape from an entire bundle of responsibilities at home, another way to spend more time at work. I consider inviting him for a one on one session, but realize that I don't think he'd be interested. These sessions had been Ally's idea. And maybe that's why they didn't help. He'd never really been fully there.

Sam continues recapping the events. The following weeks, it got worse and worse. Ally and Sam both got used to the smell and the puddles, barely noticing them anymore. They were part of their daily life now. But there was no getting around what had to be done.

So last week, finally, Ally sat Sam down and they had the long due discussion.

"We should relieve it of its pain. I think we need to put it down. It's the best thing we can do. I can't watch it slowly decay anymore," she had said.

Eventually, Sam had agreed. It was difficult for him to say goodbye to it after all those years. It had been a great companion. It had always been there to comfort him and they'd had so many great times together. But he had to agree with Ally: they couldn't ignore the symptoms anymore. It was getting weaker by the day and it was clearly in pain. He had made an appointment with the doctor the next morning.

It was a sunny Tuesday morning, almost June again. Sam carried it in his arms to the clinic. It was slumbering when they got there.

“It almost looks content,” Ally pointed out as Sam lay it down on the table. I looked at it briefly, and then got the syringe. “Ready?” I asked.

Both nodded.

I reflected on the final session from a couple of weeks ago. Ally had done most of the talking but Sam had agreed to all her points. That wasn’t typical for him in our sessions. I remembered the defeated look in his eyes and how Ally had avoided eye contact all together. This decision had been a long time coming for them and clear to me.

So today is the day, I thought to myself as I slipped the syringe in.

It only took a few moments for it to be over. Ally cried a bit. Sam couldn’t even look. They took care of the paperwork quickly afterwards and left the clinic.

“You know what, I think I’m going to take the bus,” Sam said.

Ally understood.

She arrived home a few minutes later and packed her bags. She left a note for Sam that she’d be staying with her sister for the week and expected him to move out all his stuff by the time she was back.

That was it.

The house already felt empty. It smelled normal again. She could feel that it was gone.

Their time together had come to an end. 

Nicole Michaelis is a poet and freelance writer based in Stockholm.

Elder's Word

By Micah Johnson

The Keller residence appeared in sight. All of Allen's friends, who rode the same, aged bus as he, couldn't miss it. It sat behind the tree line, old and with a dinged roof. Allen's excitement grew as the driver steadily pulled to a halt.

"Keller, Allen!"

"Yeah! Devil's Woods, here I come."

His friends hollered and waved goodbye. He did the same, turning and watching heads retreat back inside the bus. There was no time to waste, especially today. The heavy backpack on his bony spine, which held several workbooks, an elementary science book, and a lighter, didn't slow his pace. If there really was a "treasure to find" down along the trail, he'd have a peek for himself.

"You best stop right there, boy." It was Pops, his granddad guardian.

His figure, skinny as Allen's, approached his grandson. He could tell he'd gotten approval from Miss Knight. Allen had already wandered near that trail he forbade him to explore. He called it the Devil's Woods.

"Miss Knight said-"

"Miss Knight nothin'. She ain't your parent - I am. Get in the house now 'fore I decide to use my hand."

Allen remembered how it felt. The pain, the shattered dream, and the situational embarrassment. When Pops meant it, he wasn't messing around. He was very conservative and biblical, unafraid to tan his hide in public. Allen said nothing else then, feeling disappointment brew inside him once again. He slumped across the unkempt yard, angrily opening the screened door.

After the midday's blaze had cooled off, when Allen and Pops came together after challenging homework, the time came to eat - mashed, salted potatoes with canned green beans between them. A

single cheap candle increased illumination. Pops' face bespoke a tired but purposeful will, one that gave Allen chills up his back. He spoke an impromptu prayer as his parents used to do.

Then they carried on in silence. Suspenseful, unnerving silence.

“Pops, why do you get to go to Devil’s Woods but not me?”

He didn’t answer. Even his shoulders cared not to raise.

“Pops, why do you-”

“Only thing, boy, you best be worryin’ about’s your homework. How long did it take?”

Silence. Stark quiet.

“Finish supper,” he then instructed. Disappointment defined the tone. “Then get those problems worked. It’d be time for bed here soon.”

“But why-”

Suddenly, Pops sharply uplifted his head, staring directly with a king’s pair of eyes. His right hand extended all fingers, bony and pale. It lingered, momentarily suspended to the side. This was Pops’ warning gesture, and it brought the words Allen prepared to an unforeseen termination. He wouldn’t tolerate another plea, even if the next did so gently.

Defeated, the curious boy remained quiet. What was so dangerous, he imagined, about some tattered woodland down yonder? What could possibly be there to fear? He asked himself these questions until the justifications appeared as baseless as God himself. Grandfathers were storytellers - at least he thought. Pops ignoring the questions, shooting down Miss Knight... Nothing was making sense. Not a bit.

Before either knew it, the night had woken. The crickets, native to the property, were arriving full-fledged to chirp all around. In the air were its friends: moths and fireflies. Only moonlight and a lone light pole allowed anyone to navigate the yard.

Pops had come and tucked his little Allen in. But these sheets and covers wouldn’t hold him down the next hour. Miss Knight’s wise words had kindled his unbreakable will.

Ten o'clock struck and the boy began his way down the dimmest hall. He pressed the screened door's handle, a low hiss sounding from it. Outside felt humid, as the grass and dirt were dank and soft. Luckily, he'd strapped his brown sandals on. They squished with each step.

The path toward Devil's Woods led just past the Keller's light pole. Allen walked, not even looking behind him once. He didn't speak, but he didn't try to muffle the squishing noises either. Broken twigs, scrap metal, and burned paper littered the ground. The temperature dropped, and the wind steadily picked up. Gradually, the dampness below him lessened. Lessened more and more, and then it was gone. Another light pole, slightly less bright, revealed two more trails. He stopped, spotting the wooden sign nailed to the tree in the middle: "Devil's Woods."

Darkness obscured the uplifting smile that came unto his lips. Without further hesitation, he chose left and jogged onward. He could feel his pulse reacting to how he'd finally found it.

Behind him, the light pole flickered. Flickered again, faster and violently.

And then...shut off completely.

* * *

"What a twisty place," he wondered.

It certainly was - sharp slopes vertical and horizontal, several interconnected streams, and a small way through an even thicker, darkened woodland. Allen visited each of these, too excited to care for the goosebumps growing on his arms, legs, and core. By then, the air had already fallen below freezing.

The narrow walkway grabbed his attention, so he approached. Ducking his head, pushing against leaves and branches - he was determined! Determined to conquer this thicket, to be an eyewitness, and to do it all before Pops could wake up. There was a light up ahead, barely visible.

And as he reached it, the ground below him swallowed his lower half. The boy gasped loudly, the ice-cold water shocking every toe, both feet, each leg. He'd never sensed such a steely wake-up. A few times with Pops slinging cold water from the kitchen sink onto his face now seemed like a smack on the rear. Struggling, he wasn't able to prevent the liquid from soaking all the way through. The clothes he wore were his plain, grey tee and black gym shorts he used for bedtime. As so, thin cotton and nylon

bade him pretty exposed. After a moment of splashing and suffering, he pulled himself out. He felt dry land again, so he began to pace around on its surface. It was seconds later when his tan-colored eyes finally registered it: this was a river, leading farther and deeper ahead.

Within five minutes, shaking turned to shivering. There was no fire, no house nearby, nor any towels to dry with. Only air, which was still chilly and blowing increasingly harsh. All the running had exhausted him, moreover when he sank down earlier. In fact, Allen had gone through it all, having not slept since last night.

Worst of all, the way out was long behind him. Perhaps treasure remained in the thicket; he'd honestly just pushed through without a second thought. Having goofed up, he began wondering when this wetness would evaporate. Sweating didn't help. Windy conditions didn't help. Rocking and pacing, too, came to no avail. Why did water, he asked, make everything colder out here?

An hour went by. Nothing improved. Even the oxygen he breathed now stung his throat. His sweat, mixed with soggy garments, stuck clinging like a virus. Allen rubbed his eyes, too weakened to move. This riverbank bore wet grass and soil, but he reckoned it was better than nothing. So, he lowered himself down. Defeated for the third time today.

“Can't wait for school tomorrow.” Young, weary eyelids finally shut.

His sleep was relaxing. Warm and heavenly.

Steady and terminal. 

Micah Johnson is a published essayist, poet, and fiction writer from El Dorado, Arkansas. Previous works of his have appeared in South Arkansas Community College's literary magazines, Writers' Ink and Between the Lines, and on iFixit's website! Micah blogs at www.diamondextra.net and stands tall for the literary “English purism” movement!

That Luminous Autumn Day

By Mahnaz Mohafez

Looking at our wedding picture hanging on the wall, Amanda's elegant gestures in her whitish bridal gown are still alluring to me. Although we celebrated our silver anniversary a few weeks ago, nothing has changed a bit in my mind. The angelic picture of Amanda has remained flawless, and my feelings for her are the same as the day I saw her for the first time.

It was one of those brilliant September mornings when the dance of colorful leaves made such a pleasant scene on the earth. There was a mild breeze that caressed and dishevelled the hair of little girls ever so gently. The neighbors were making themselves ready to start a new day. Schoolboys were on their way to what they tended to call their second home. I myself had special plans for the future and I thought very good things would happen to me as soon as I could find a chance to raise such ideas with Dr. Harrison, the seasoned wise dean of the university to which I was admitted.

Amanda was one of my sociable classmates famous for having a cordial rapport with all the people whom she befriended. She was awarded the title of top student ever since our official learning began. After all, it took a smart person to be an architect and, as our professors admitted, Amanda had all the qualifications of a talented engineer. That September day she wore pink from top to bottom in a way which made her attractive to everyone. As always, she was helping her friends with their assignments. She treated them kindly, with a smiling face and an admirable tenderness, which all of our classmates found in her person from the first day of university. Her curly golden hair was basking in the sweet sunshine.

"This is a good opportunity to have a chat with one another. Don't you think so, Eric?" I heard a familiar voice from behind my back while my eyes were following Amanda's actions every single moment. It was my friend, Michael, whose sister was a close childhood friend of Amanda.

"Why do you always surprise me with such bad habits - speaking abruptly?" I asked him.

“Oh, sorry!” he said innocently. “I had no intention of disturbing your privacy. I just noticed you were daydreaming and imagined that a sudden suggestion could help you think better.”

“But you were wrong this time, because I can’t recall what I was thinking.” And it was really so.

“What has happened to you, messy guy?” he asked provocatively. “As far as I know, you never lived orderly. Where does this jest come from, then? Are you kidding?”

Hearing these clownish words, I got so furious that I wanted to smash his head against the wall on which he leaned. It was then that a roaring anger reigned over my personal territory, and nothing else.

“Disgusting!” I berated him. “I’ve never seen a fool like you before. You are such an idiot. I don’t want to waste time quarrelling with you. Leave me alone!”

Michael’s eyes were filled with tears. But there was a hindrance, such as male arrogance, which stopped him from bursting into tears. Well, you know, we men have learned to hide our feelings when it comes to being deeply resented.

The poor boy departed without saying a word. Afterwards, I was alone with my torn thoughts and unable to think anew. Nothing seemed to work well on me. I could not recollect what my plan was about. Nor could I focus on something else to make such aimlessness end. Moreover, the embarrassment I felt right after breaking Michael’s heart was about to choke me.

“What’s the use of a burning tongue?” I yelled. “I shouldn’t have talked to Michael that way.”

“But things like this happen among all friends.” It was Amanda this time. Seeing her standing beside me and watching me with her cat-like green eyes, I was so surprised that I forgot why I had yelled. Amanda was a very sensible girl, so adorable, and I loved her so dearly when she tried to calm me down with such beautiful and appropriate words.

“Catherine has told me everything about you,” said Amanda.

“Catherine? Who is she?” I asked.

“Your friend’s sister and my close friend,” she said with a sweet smile blossoming on her shining face.

“And what is that everything she let you know of?”

“That you are a studious person who dreams of making spectacular homes for people of this city.

This is so nice, isn't it?”

“How can't it be so? It's the first time someone speaks this way of all my dreams.”

“Gosh! Perhaps because your dreams are similar to those of mine,” she said passionately.

And finally, I recalled what I had intended to talk with Dr. Harrison about. I used to be an ordinary student with simple thoughts. But this really was not the way I was. I was pondering designing some well-shaped modern structures, and Dr. Harrison was the first person with whom I wanted to share such work.

“Our class will begin in less than an hour. Do you want to join me for a hike to our department?” asked Amanda.

“I'd be glad to.”

It took us about 45 minutes to arrive at the engineering department. It did not feel like it, however, as Amanda's personality was so tender I was thinking about something beautiful to tell her all the way there. Something which could enchant any girl at her age. Something like: “How could I be so ignorant of your kind person all this time? Life with you seems like paradise.” Or “Is there anything I can share with you forever?” Nevertheless, there was a voice whispering in my heart wanting me not to open up a discussion like this at the time.

When we arrived at the department, I pretended that I was too tired to keep up with her, only to stand alone and watch her approach our math class. Indeed, she was as heavenly as an angel, a girl whose manners bewitched me every second. I didn't know when she came to me or how she mystified my heart. I only knew that she was absolutely different from all the girls I had met until then. There was something celestial in her person which I was particularly fond of.

Meanwhile, Amanda, who was completely unaware of my interest in her, left me to sit in the first row of the class, a place where she always sat. Michael was sitting next to her. Seeing me at the doorway, he stared at me from the corner of his eye. But we said nothing. He just gave his ears to our math professor, who was making a vehement speech about curved spaces. The only disinterested student was

me. That day, I felt, I had no special enthusiasm for listening to my favorite subject. All I wanted was to be a lifelong partner for Amanda. She became my world, and I regretted why I never recognized that she could be the lost part of my soul.

That day passed by so slowly. I had no understanding of what time it was or why I had to leave the classroom to be at home. I wanted to accompany Amanda and talk to her very seriously, but I did not dare to speak a word. I thought the passage of time could do me well.

“I’ve been watching you all day. I think you fell in love with Amanda. Am I right?” It was Michael. Hearing his words, I lowered my head. I was too ashamed to look directly in his eyes.

“Don’t bend your head, good man! Things like this are quite normal among friends.” He patted me on my shoulder and reached out his hand to me to show that he was not upset. I took his hand in mine and apologized for being rude to him.

“Nevermind, Eric! You haven’t answered my question yet. Are you in love with Amanda?”

“If I say no, I will be biggest liar in this world,” I said emphatically.

“Listen carefully! If you ask me, I would say there is no other way except to express your sincere words to her. I mean, it’s all upon you to show yourself as the hero of her life. You know, girls like her are scarce these days.”

“But I am afraid. I’m such a shy boy and I can’t look in her eyes.”

“You should, Eric! Put this cowardness aside and be as courageous as a lion who thinks he is ahead of all.”

“But there is no...”

Before saying one more word, Michael put his hands over his ears just to encourage me to stand on my own feet. I felt I had no choice but to find the best possible words every man in my situation should put forth to win a young girl’s heart.

That day ended in bitterness, for I thought I was unable to do one of the most important things in my life. While Amanda’s lovely face was before my eyes, I didn’t have enough resolution to ask her to be my wife. “Oh, boy, you should never do this!” I told myself. “Amanda is rational, beautiful, and very

talented. There will be men equal to her, those with whom she can taste real happiness.” Saying these words, I closed my eyes and let the darkness of night pass.

It was very early the next morning that the dim rays of another sunny autumn day awakened me. I spent many horrible hours last night wallowing in loneliness with nightmarish dreams of losing Amanda.

Having eaten a light breakfast, I decided to leave for university. I intended to be the first person to meet Amanda. When I reached there, I could not find her. I felt very sad because on my way to university I was wholly thinking about what to say to her. While obsessing over such disappointing thoughts, I heard someone calling my name.

“Mr. Robinson! Can you come to my office for a while?” It was Dr. Harrison, who I wanted to talk to yesterday. But why did he call me today?

In the blink of an eye, I found myself sitting opposite of Dr. Harrison. He looked very jolly. He then addressed me in a serious tone and said:

“Well, son, this is to congratulate you on being a candidate for a new academic project! It was just the other day that I received an email asking me to introduce two young students for their cooperation. This is a constructing project, which offers opportunities completely in line with what you are studying. And during this time, I was consulting with your professors to help me with choosing those students. Without killing any time, they all approved of Ms. Amanda Thompson and you. So, you have my big congratulations! I’m supposed to notify Ms. Thompson of it as well.”

Although it was too surprising to believe that my dream was coming true, I was convinced that there was a hint of its happening. I humbly thanked Dr. Harrison and hurried to Michael’s on-campus residence. He was still in bed when I opened the door and jumped into the air, exclaiming: “Luck is on my side. I succeeded at last!”

“What has happened, Eric? You have never been here at this time of the day,” said Michael.

“You were right, my friend! I’ve fallen in love with Amanda and it seems I’m about to win her heart!” I shouted fervently.

“But how?” He could not hide his surprise.

“With this new cooperative project.”

Then I explained what the project was about and how it could put me on path of endless delight.

“Show yourself, guy! Don’t lose this chance, and let your heart speak for you.”

“I will! Oh god! Nothing else could make me as happy as I am now! I’m over the moon!”

And such bright days they were! I’ve never forgotten how joyfully they passed, one after another.

“You know the rest of story, dear David!” I turned my head to my son and tried to touch his heart with paternal impressions. “Your mother entered my world in one of those September days when our joint project was nearly finished. I remember that day very clearly. There was a rainbow in the sky and such an indescribable pleasure written on my heart. Your mother became not only the bride of my house, but also my loyal comrade for all these years. Can you believe it? We have been cooperating with each other for more than two decades and, during this long period, all of our clients have been pleased with the work we did for them.”

“This is the magic of love, Dad!” my son said. “You are the luckiest man I’ve ever met in all my life.”

“What are you talking about, dear guys?” Amanda came in to join us.

There was a roar of laughter in our home. Meanwhile, I mulled over what my son told me about luck. I believe he was thoroughly right in saying that. How grateful I was for having such a lovely family.

Do you know what I think about love? Love is our destiny. We are all born of love, to be loved, and to share love with those who deserve it. 

Mahnaz Mohafez, who holds a M.A. in English literature, is very interested in writing in different literary genres. She has published two poems so far, which emerged respectively in New Poetry Magazine 2018 and in October Hill Magazine (Summer Issue 2018). She is currently working on her debut novel.

The Chanting Ladies

By Cathryn Mellor

“It really won’t weird you out,” Carla reassured me.

“Really?” I looked quizzically, biting my bottom lip and looking at her absurdly with a wry smile.

“Crickey!” I shouted as Carla took me by surprise, ripping off the hot wax from just under the knee.

“They’re a great crowd, you’ll love them,” she carried on, oblivious to the stinging red patch creeping up to my knee.

Conversation was limited between Carla’s swift swiping at all angles while her silver chunky chain dangled above me as she worked up to the bikini line.

This part was going to be sore and I was tempted to sink my teeth into the chain suspended above me and to bite into it until the pain was over. I gave up speaking now.

I counted one, two, three in my head until the next strip was torn back. This one was starting to burn.

“Honestly, at first – even I thought it was nuts, but now I’ve done it a few times, I actually feel calmer. It kind of works.”

I nodded, trying to brighten up my eyes to show that I was still conscious and enthusiastic.

“I guess it’s like having faith in what you can’t see,” I threw in, trying to focus on this idea of positive thinking and show that I was trying to be on board with the whole idea. I was still unsure.

“I’ll get in touch with Mina and I’ll invite you to the next meeting,” Carla said as she nodded her head assertively. She was now working around the bikini line at such a pace I had no breath or thought processes that could help me make any decisions, never mind form an opinion. After all, I had the next burst of stinging pain to contend with.

“Okay,” I suddenly blurted out. I spoke in a staccato, high-pitched tone, trying to show that I was in control of the pain and that I had heard and understood what Carla had said.

“Oh, and sorry about the music by the way ... it’s music to die to,” Carla said as she stirred the hot wax for the next few strips – “I didn’t choose it.” She frowned and narrowed her eyes into a wicked sparkle.

I laughed inside. The music was like a funereal dirge and I presumed it was still playing after the previous client had left. She must have had a massage, I thought, or a facial – weird choice though. It made me think of Sacha and that made me laugh all the more.

I was wondering what had driven Carla to join the group. I thought she was back on track with Stewart and that they had ironed out their issues and started again.

I wondered if ironing out issues was ever really possible if they stemmed from something too deep-rooted and if they belonged inside someone else. And surely, the awareness of the issues themselves must come from the person with the issues rather than the long-suffering partner. These rambling thoughts were helping me deal with the pain.

Carla was very attractive, dark and petite with a quirky sense of observational humour. She spoke so lyrically. I saw her more hosting a seminar on critical thinking than working at the salon. She was insightful and aware of the peculiar behaviour of emotionally-damaged men and yet susceptible, as I had been, to their initial charm.

I blew a long prevailing sigh from my puffed-out lips as I remembered what had happened the night before when Mark came home drunk again from the pub with the scent of someone else. I had known about his affair for some time and wanted him very much to leave but I knew the boys would be devastated so I had to hold it together for them.

“All done – you alright there?” Carla asked, probably thinking it was the sensitive parts of my nether regions that caused my slow outpouring of breath. I nodded, curling up the sides of my mouth to feign a smile, masking the real reason for my exasperation.

“How are things going with you and Stewart?” I asked. Carla rolled her eyes as she tidied up the waxing trolley and slapped on the tea tree moisturiser to soothe my freshly plucked skin.

“He’s started following me round like a puppy dog, watching everything I’m doing, asking where I’m going and checking my phone when I’m upstairs in the bathroom.”

“Oh God, that’s so annoying and a bloody cheek.” I felt for Carla, but I couldn’t bear to tell her how things were with Mark. I almost didn’t want to admit he was equally crap. Relating the events of last night would have sunk us both and I wanted to believe there was some hope.

“You’re coming to the next meeting my dear,” Carla announced with some certainty. “I’m signing you up and there’s no backing out now!”

“Will there be wine?” I asked cheekily.

I wasn’t sure what was involved with this meeting with Mina and her Buddhist friends, but I was happy to explore any options of venturing into a more positive, alternative world other than my own. What was the harm in sharing an experience with a group of women who also felt the same? I guess it’s better than guzzling a goblet of wine when the kids were eating their tea to blot out Mark’s latest fling and looking for a window of opportunity to go out with Sacha for a drunken night on the town.

Sacha was my other friend, who I met at a Wednesday yoga class. I only went there for the sleep yoga session at the end, which is when you follow a guided meditation into a peaceful Zen garden. I didn’t really go for the yoga stretches but Sacha went to do all the bendy positions. I was always surprised how she squeezed into her lycra with such voluptuous curves. I tried not to catch her eye during class, otherwise I knew I would be tempted to laugh. I always thought that people who did yoga would be sinewy and lithe but not Sacha. She was a breath of fresh air.

Sacha had left a stressful IT job in London to join the world of being a celebrant. She said it was like giving something back, having been pensioned off in her late 40s and living in a very comfortable townhouse in town. When she wasn’t meeting bereaved families, she was at the crematorium conducting services. I loved the text messages that came through when she was running late: “Give me 10 mins, still at the crem – the family chose the long version of Queen’s ‘Who Wants to Live Forever.’”

Sacha was continually tapped into her spiritual side, clearing her meridians on a weekly basis. She didn’t call passing onto the next life ‘death.’ It was rather more of a ‘transition.’ I quite liked that

phrase. I tried conjuring up sentences where I could use it and the same one would pop up, “She transitioned last Tuesday, your honour.” It made me laugh – I don’t know why I would say it in a law court of all places and why I had to be specific with the date. Sacha’s terminology for all things spiritual made me smile when used in the hum drum of everyday life and it seemed to help balance things out somehow in a calming way.

The last time she helped me was when I was having a panic attack in the park and we stopped to sit on a park bench. She told me that the spirit of an older man was sitting with us, smoking a woodbines and smelling of Old Spice. That not only calmed me down but also made me snort with laughter. This wasn’t out of disrespect or disbelief but out of utter loveliness of how the totally random can sometimes shake us out of the howling present.

I loved hearing about her antics with men as she shimmied in her neon-streaked lycra. She soon became my drinking partner. Yoga was sometimes swapped for nights on the town where she’d wear her fifties-style vintage dress, high shoes and style her straight blonde hair into a tousled bob. She was an outrageous flirt and watching her with men made me feel there could be other options than my Mark and that one day I might escape. Sacha was daring and carefree.

“He’s got a twinkle - I love a man with a twinkle,” she said one day over coffee. I knew then that she’d succumbed to the coffin bearer at her latest funeral. He looked like Father Christmas. I’d always thought Sacha had a strange taste in men.

I mentioned to Sacha Carla’s proposition of meeting Mina and her Buddhist friends. We were hanging out at the local coffee shop. We sat near the window waiting for Carla to finish at the salon. She was obviously running late with a client.

Carla eventually appeared and slumped into the chair opposite us near the window, her eyes were quiet, searching, and red – I could tell she wanted to cry. She kept clearing her throat, gulping down the pain. She didn’t want it to surface – I knew that. Something must have happened with Stewart. I knew he had started to monitor her and watch her every move.

Sacha lifted the mood by launching into what had happened the previous night with some man she'd started seeing. She said that she wasn't sure if she fancied him. "I couldn't fancy a man who nestled into me. I don't find it manly and I want to be the one who did the nestling onto a man's broad chest. He was a bit on the small side and it all seemed the wrong way round. I said he could stay but nothing was going to happen ... he couldn't take his belt off even – his top was OK." She described how she slid into the bed next to him for a cuddle and how he had started sticking his tongue down her throat. "It was far too big and rough – how I imagined a cat's tongue to be as it sandpapered the roof of my mouth. At one point it felt like he was brushing my teeth in sweeps of lizard-like action. If he was the right man, perhaps I would have liked the nestling of him cradled under my chin, and his tongue gymnastics, but I didn't."

The sepia light struggled through the brown blinds of the coffee shop and circled Carla's dark bob with a halo of golden light, making her look saintly and sad, looking more vulnerable, almost childlike, bathed in a softened glow. Sacha was still rambling on about how she crept out of the bed when the man started snoring. She curled up on the settee downstairs, relieved that she was now alone. The built-up anxiety had filled her stomach with air and she was dying to release her internal gas.

At this point in the story Carla burst out laughing. It was then that I knew she was going to be okay.

It was Carla's day off the next day and we all decided to go to the meeting with Mina.

I'm not sure what Sacha and I were thinking as we waited for Carla outside of the coffee shop next door. We didn't wait long before Carla pulled up in her silver hatchback. I felt myself smiling nervously at Carla as I plonked into the front passenger seat. Sacha was giving me knowing glances in the back seat of the car, expressing a look of 'What are we doing?'

Carla drove us like a maniac to Mina's friend's flat the other side of town. She was on a mission. The back of the car was full of dog hairs and discarded drink cans from the school run. Sacha sat in the back looking apprehensive and deep in thought and I chatted to Carla in the front seat as her fingers foraged through coke cans, loose change and bunches of car keys, one of which belonged to the salon, to change gear.

I didn't think we would make it to the other side of town in one piece. We eventually got to the small high-rise 1960s block after Carla managed to park half up, half down on the pavement in a lop-sided, skew-whiff fashion. I had no idea what to expect. This wasn't Mina's house. It belonged to her friend, an ex-model who came from China to live in England.

Mina greeted us warmly at the bottom of the stairs and we walked in single file up the rigid, stairwell. My first thought was that this wasn't what I was expecting. Buddhism and a modern '60s flat didn't seem to fit. As we meandered through the L-shaped flat to the sitting room with small oblong windows at the end of the corridor, we were met with a collection of international faces, some young and some much older. The ex-model from China was hosting and didn't speak any English at all. She communicated through hand gestures, nods and smiles. I was mesmerised by her cheek bones – she was more majestic than beautiful.

We were ushered to three spare seats dotted in amongst the strangers around the square table. She offered us teas and coffees and handed out plates of sweet pastries and fruit. I smiled and made polite conversation, starting to feel the slight tension ease. Mina introduced us to the group and we explained how we three knew each other. I explained how I was a client of Carla's and I knew Sacha from my yoga class. They all nodded and smiled, welcoming us into to the group.

Mina handed us a booklet on Nichiren Buddhism and explained that we were going to face the 'Gohonzon.' It looked like a small shrine that was placed symmetrically in the dip of a Cherner '60s almost-backless plywood chair with a curved bar at the top. I couldn't take it seriously. It had an air of ridiculousness as though we were paying homage to the '60s era of pot-smoking free love. I had a gurgling of fear that I was going to start sniggering. I shifted in my seat in an attempt to find some inner calm.

I didn't fully understand the meaning of the shrine and the way it looked, slightly askew in the dip of the chair which looked similar to one my mother used to have. It took me back to when I was at primary school. I used to eat my snack seated on one of these chairs when I returned home from school.

Mina rung a small bell before chanting ‘Nam-myoho-renge-kyo’ three times and we all joined in.

We all started to recite from the small booklet. I tried not to catch Carla’s eye as I came to the line ‘Ch-ken hara-mitsu’ on page 15. I couldn’t help thinking I was reading about chicken. I had no idea what I was reading but I went with the flow.

The session seemed ended on a long repetitive chant of ‘Nam-myoho-renge-kyo’ that continued for 15-20 minutes. I didn’t think it was possible to keep chanting the same phrase over and over and over again. It seemed to have a hypnotic effect and take on a life of its own. The vibration in the voices of some of the others at some points grew louder than my own and then quieter at different times. When we came to the end of the chant, tears were starting to roll down my cheeks and I tried to brush them away discreetly. The Vietnamese lady next to me handed me a tissue. I felt oddly cleansed and lifted and I couldn’t explain why. I had chanted an ancient Chinese text which I didn’t understand and I was with a group of strangers in a small high-rise ‘60s flat on the other side of town.

I scanned all the faces surrounding me and I wondered what drew us all to this table. Perhaps we all were lacking something and the bit that was missing could be found in the company of other women with similar stories – women who were with controlling men, philandering men, or women who couldn’t find any connection with anyone, and sex was not about a loving relationship, but an extension of a yoga stretch. Were we all damaged and in need of repair? The Vietnamese lady next to me said that chanting was like holding a lantern to safety, which made me want to cry even more.

After our polite good-byes to the Chinese ex-model and hugs with Mina, we filed back down the staircase to the main door of the block of flats. Pushing the main door through to the cool September air was a relief. It felt fresh and reassuring. Sacha broke the silence. “I don’t think I’ll be going there again.” I smiled in the direction of Carla.

We were silent during the car journey home. I turned to look at Carla in the seat next to me and she looked distant, lost in thought. If nothing else, I thought her driving was a lot less erratic than when she pulled up outside the salon.

Thanking Carla for the lift, I got out of the car and walked through the collected leaves by the coffee shop, turning left onto the terraced street near home. I knew I wanted to go to the meeting the following week. 

Cathryn Mellor was born in South Wales, UK. She has enjoyed creative writing since her teenage years. She works in publishing and really enjoys writing workshops, poetry, the theatre and swimming in the local lido during the summer months.

Poetry

The Sea of Tranquility

By Ian Colville

I was born in a leap year.

That year Armstrong made history,
stepping into inches of tranquil dust
while we cheered and waved
to claim our part in his glory.

Some folks revel in plots and denial.
So my theory goes: No astronaut's wife
heard a whispered confession;
no spaceman's kids were ever told
it was all faked and Daddy's a fraud.

No gossip escaped to give the lie
to them having been. And if you've seen
when you've searched online for the signs,
you'll know what was left by Apollo behind:
a flag left in peace, for all mankind. 

Ian Colville has had over 60 poems appear in curated publications and recently won the Paragram humour prize. He writes on all manner of topics, occasionally employing the Scots vernacular, and is an inveterate reader. When reading, he much prefers traditional forms of poetry; the stuff of 'dead poets.'

Dali's Melting Clocks

By Maya Coseo

Time moves in funny fragments,

years stack up like dust on CDs.

I was sixteen last month

and my friends were babies

born on the other end of the calendar.

Today, none of them are teenagers;

I am twenty.

Last week, I started college,

life seemed

different.

But I blinked,

and I'm a junior now.

Yesterday it was June,

and I had

two months of summer.

But August is upon us

and my father will be

sixty-two in five days.

He's retiring soon.

I thought I knew

where I was going:

college, then real life.

I was wrong.

The future is space—
infinite, unknowable,
and inhospitable to
human planning.

But we astronauts
try anyway.

I wonder if

I will remember this

Tomorrow 

Maya Coseo is a college junior majoring in English at Gonzaga University. Her poetry has appeared in several literary magazines. She found her passion for writing in high school after having some of her work published. After graduation, she plans to write professionally and eventually wants to publish her own poetry book.

In the Crook of a Giant Cottonwood

By Terry Savoie

Two soon-to-be
eaglets in
shells, turned & tucked,

sheltered within
the horse-hair bowl on
top of a horse dung
cushion that's com-
posting to keep
the two tempered & warm

so they might begin
as each of us has
begun, living on
what's past,
on what's been
rotting so long, so well. 

Terry Savoie has had more than 350 poems published in the past four decades in journals such as *Poetry*, *APR*, *Ploughshares*, *Chelsea*, *One* and *North American Review*. Terry's chapbook was awarded the Bright Hill Competition winner and was published this past spring.

Patience

By Emma Diab

You are the warm waters
breaking through the frigid spray
at Rockaway Beach

the waves that lay me down
and envelop me
in molten sunlight

only to recede
into the deep
when the Ocean
breathes in the shore.

At each exhale, you weave
through my hair
ribbons of salt and sand
until you have fashioned for me
a crown made of time
studded with the dust
of seashells past.

They catch the Moonlight
when your tide comes flooding in. 

Emma Diab is a magazine editor based in New York City. She studied Journalism and Middle Eastern & Islamic Studies at NYU, graduating in 2012. This is her first submission to a literary magazine.

Only a Small Death

By Marjon van Bruggen

With you go Archaic patterns
of a home, you will never come home to again.
Like an amputation, it will haunt and hurt me.

Only a small death, of course,
not the full ceremony with mourners, a hearse,
residuary legatees and a coffee table after the ritual.
Just a small, fully-conscious end.

Never again will you sleep in this room,
see the sun rise through glass at this familiar
angle, never again adjust to the shape
of this bath, the smell of this cupboard.

You have died expected, yet suddenly.
The arrival of the undertakers made me realize
this is for real. Their muscular detachment
dissolves bonds between chairs and rooms,
shelves, and their books.

The house offers its own valuation of you.
Dirt appears in embarrassing contexts.
If you were still alive, you would feel
the need to apologize.

Casual adjuncts of ordinary living,
dustbins and drains, the unremarkable
clergyman, haloed in the otherworldly glare
of the last rites, achieve reality
just as you end with them forever.

Neighbors, paying a deathbed visit,
acquire the tender resonance of friends,
while I stand non-existing, dumb.

But die as you go, birth exists
on the edge of extinction. 

Marjon van Bruggen is a 77-year-old Dutch woman. She's written poetry since she can remember, but only the last few years have her poems appeared in various magazines and anthologies. Marjon was shortlisted twice in literary contests.

Simplicity

By Douglas Finlay

In the corner of the old
darkened room, under the lost fabrics
woven during mythic times
stood a tin box full of family history –
at once regal, but still a shadow –
as though one existed.

Frightful, really, the thought of
opening it - what would it reveal?

But there were no papers there,
nor filed about in
neat piles the bills, proof of
the new modernity presented in warranties,
certificates even, pieces
of names from places unseen,
but somewhere heard.

They were as distant now
as the old guitar hand
that once swept across the fingerboard,
Playing to colors,
searching for simplicity

through a wreck of complexity,

trying to salvage a life. 

Douglas Finlay has enjoyed a long career as an award-winning journalist and editor. He has written poetry, his first inclination, for as long as he can remember. He lives on Long Island.

Now Altogether

By Duncan Richardson

the rhino beetles die
kicking one last time
doing carapace rolls
twitching feebly and waiting
in the growing heat
for the ants to come
and pick them clean

leaving no one to mourn
no one to complain
how things change
just a pure gap

between generations
so when the eggs hatch
next time around
the young crawl out
to a brand new world
uninterpreted
theirs
alone 

Duncan Richardson is a writer of fiction, poetry, haiku, radio drama and educational texts. He teaches English as a Second Language part time in Brisbane, Australia.

October Night Serenade

By Allison Bohn

I sit

and relish in the silence.

Garden-variety crickets play

outside my window.

They are out there

chirping, fighting for attention

for territory.

And I am here

listening

dwelling on their songs

that they play on their legs

like little mandolins.

We humans think

we are so much above insects.

We step on them, squish them,

end their lives

because they interfere

with our own.

Yet, we chirp for attention

fight for territory

and continue to drone on

to a melancholy rhythm

we produce

through the thwap
of the souls
of our shoes
and the banging
of the chambers
of our hearts.

We trudge on:

Little crickets

chirping in the night,

writing our own song. 

Allison Bohn, 29, is a Writing Instructor at Oakland University where she earned a Master's Degree in English. Her writing is laced with feminist coos and speculation. She lives north of Detroit with her husband and dogs.

Where to Find Her

By Mindy Ohringer

She's here today, telling me to bring a stone.

She's not there – but respect must be paid.

She's here today, so I'm Jersey bound.

She's not there – but her dust beckons.

She's here today past Routes 1 and 9,

Spiraling kisses from beyond the Goethals Bridge.

She's here today, and I am so tired

When she reaches out, I will surely go...

It isn't time. It isn't your time.

I know. I know.

Hey, I'm with you, we're shopping in the Americana Mall.

You're trying on little black dresses, in a Miracle Mile changing room.

Can't you find stray kisses in the wind?

There, there, and there... 

Mindy Ohringer writes politically charged fiction and poetry. Her writing has appeared in *The Thieving Magpie*, *The Greenwich Village Literary Review*, *October Hill Magazine*, *New Choices*, and *The Columbia Spectator*. She has been a Writer in Residence at Byrdcliffe Arts Colony. Her website and blog can be found at <https://mindyohringer.com>.

Memories of Sand
We Once Loved Each Other

By Rickey K. Hood

As sand in hand escapes through fingers

Your love, your memory

Empty through fissures

In my soul

A grasp of dry sand

Slipping hastily from my hand

As the sensation of you in my arms

Holding you tight

Shielding you from harm

A closeness too tight... I now see

You slipped away/ where you can breathe

I waited for you

But you...ebbed steadily away as

A night's dream/ once awakened

A love undying/ discovered mistaken

Gone

As sand in my heart

Emptying through cracks

In my soul from the start

A timeless sea of emptying sand

An hourglass

For eternity

This place that is now left for me

A desert for love

And fidelity

Love unrequited

In this place it must rain

To bud forth

A new love

And love obtain 

Rickey K. Hood is a poet and essayist. His works have appeared in anthologies such as: *Journey to Timbooktu; Our Truth; Main Street Rag, and Humanities in the South.* He received his BA degree at The University of North Carolina at Charlotte. He now resides in the DC metro area.

October Wind

By Joanne Soboslai

My loved one, are you near?

There's a thickness in the air.

It heavies my breath,

And tightens my chest,

And fills my eyes with tears.

Surrounded by the dark,

I'm waiting for a sign.

Come back to me, come back to me,

And once again be mine. 

Joanne Soboslai resides in Quaker Hill, Connecticut and is the author of "Promise Of A New Dawn," her first novel, a work of romantic fiction, self-published in 2017. Her love of writing, both poetry and fiction, stems back to childhood. "October Wind" was written in the middle of a blustery October night, one month after the passing of her beloved rescue dog, Simon. She hopes readers, especially those who have lived with grief, can relate to this poem written straight from her heart.

Travel Dishes

By Christina McDermott

Sometimes, travel calls for cake

to serve as dinner.

It tastes sweet and heavy

like nights at home

after winter sunsets.

Like the laughter that follows

dumb jokes on long car rides

through snowfall.

When you arrive

late at night,

cut a slice.

Sit at the table

and take a bite

of cake and frosting together.

Remember the headlights

of the trucks you saw

on the journey –

beaming like a different shade

of ice.

You are here now,

warm, and no longer hungry.

But the icy eyes of trucks remain

unable to come in from the cold. 

Christina McDermott, a student studying English and linguistics at UC Berkeley, is fascinated by the relationship between phonetics, metaphor and poetry. She enjoys learning how to apply her linguistic knowledge to her creative work. Currently, she is working on a series of snapshot poems and a children's novel.

Hopeless Poem

By Garrett Buhl Robinson

Sometimes I wonder if I am only
capable of making mistakes.
I always have the most uncanny
way to find precisely how anything breaks.
I've stepped off ledges while reaching for stars.
My bumbling always crumbles into jumbles.
I spend hours tuning stringless guitars
while boasting of times when I was humble.
I'll find something odd from the peas in a pod,
make a mess with nothing but emptiness.
Yet at least I know the roads I have trod
while I sing songs consoling the hopeless.
In the world's endless possibility,
failure is my failsafe consistency. 

Since 2011, Garrett Buhl Robinson has been reciting his poetry to the public on 5th Avenue. Through the years, he has published eight books and adapted one of his novellas into a solo musical which he has performed Off-Broadway and in other cities. Recently, he published his second book of poetry, "Beauty beyond Reason," celebrating performance dance. Garrett currently lives in Brooklyn but has been bouncing around the United States since he left his Alabama hometown in 1992 by jumping on a coal train.

Merry Christmas!

By George Atkinson

They come into the world with eyes of blue.

They've been sent here to tell the truth.

Cold stethoscope hints at a life of sadness—

But his parents' hearts are full of gladness.

We oppress them, we beat them

and make them follow orders...

But little children's eyes

are like little tape-recorders.

And once we are old and need them to help us,

history unfolds, and then they remind us...

Forty-Five years old—Red White and Blue eyes

recorded every lie you told throughout your whole life.

We wish we hadn't taught them 'time is money'

Our fate rests with them, isn't it funny?

We taught them to be greedy and grovel for cash

but now that we're needy—we take it all back.

They cover their ears with thousand dollar headphones

they can't hear us from the retirement home.

Instead of loving money—we should have taught them to love.

Now they're always running and never have enough.

They come into this world with eyes of blue.

They've been sent here to tell the truth.

But we have taught them: lying is better.

And now, our Christmas? A re-gifted sweater. 

George Atkinson is a survivor of child-abuse as well as combat in Afghanistan. You might say he has a double-dose of PTSD. George enjoys writing poems and painting artwork. His loving wife of 25 years helps him when he's in the throes of an episode; she is truly his angel.