

October Hill

MAGAZINE



Winter 2017



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Volume 1, Issue 3

Winter Reveries



Welcome to October Hill Magazine

Welcome to the Winter issue of *October Hill Magazine*.

We are thrilled to publish some of the brightest new short stories and poetry works from authors spread across several continents. They have chosen *October Hill* as a venue to share their works of humor, wit, mystery, tragedy and triumph. We have embraced these new works for their imagination, daring and craft. Our wish is that our readers will find this a happy union.

As editors, we are often faced with the difficult task of deciding which works to publish. It is never easy. Fortunately for us, the authors whose works we chose to publish herein have made the decision-making process somewhat easier for us. Their works demand to be heard, because they have captured our attention and challenged us to think about old relationships in new ways, or because they have dared to take risks others would not take as writers.

The Winter issue of *October Hill* also marks a milestone for us. It closes out our first year of publication as a literary magazine. During our first year, we are pleased to say that we continued to innovate. We just recently started accepting Visual Submissions. You will very soon begin to see the fruits of this new offering. We are also busy planning our upcoming Spring issue, to open our second year as a publication.

But before we get ahead of ourselves, we'd like to express our gratitude to the authors whose new short stories and poetry have helped to validate our mission as a literary publication. We are extremely excited about our Winter issue. We hope that you'll be equally excited as you follow our writers across the lands of imagination.

Richard Merli
Editorial Director

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Fiction



“Snow Shadows” by Steve Bryant

Steve has been taking pictures since he was ten years old. His wife calls him “The Documentarian” because he always has a camera and take pictures to record everyday life as well as his surroundings. Snow is a particularly rich subject for the visual arts.

Off Season

By Caitlin Seymour

The snow fell so heavily that the windscreen wipers of Jim's car struggled to keep up. He cursed himself for not putting on his winter tires, and for not checking the weather forecast before he had set out from the city that afternoon. The small town of Stone Ridge was behind him, as was the comfort of the well-lit highway. Ahead was only darkness, punctuated by the occasional lone house with light shining from a window. He pulled to the side of the road and retrieved the crumpled map he had had the foresight to print out in case he couldn't get decent phone signal, which he couldn't. If he was on the road he thought he was on, he was still going in the right direction.

He drove cautiously, the wind whistling past his car, whipping the snow into waves and swirls. It would have been pretty if he wasn't so worried about sliding off the road into a ditch. The thick clouds obscured the moon and stars, and he could only see a few feet in front of the car, the headlights throwing yellow pools of light onto the road. The snow settled where it fell. It almost seemed a shame to ruin it with tire tracks.

Two pinpricks of light appeared in the distance. He couldn't work out if they were another house, or a car, or something else. His mind wandered to a documentary he had watched about UFOs, but as he drew closer, he saw that they were two old-fashioned wrought iron lamp posts, supporting between them the sign he had been looking for: *Mahican Mountain Lodge*. Very Narnia, he thought to himself.

He turned his car as carefully as he could, up the long driveway, the mix of gravel and snow crunching beneath him. A small stone hut sat at the top of the drive preceded by a sign that read *All Visitors Must Sign In*. Jim pulled up to the booth, rolled down his window and was smacked in the face by the cold.

"Welcome to Mahican Mountain Lodge, sir, how can I help?" asked the guard cheerfully.

"Jim - James Horowitz. I have a room for tonight," he said, wanting to roll his window back up as soon as possible. His face was so cold it hurt.

The guard consulted a clipboard in her lap for a second and checked off his name.

“Very good, sir. If you make a left here and follow the road, it’ll take you right to the front of the hotel, where a valet will take your car out to the lot.”

“Great, thanks.”

“Enjoy your stay!”

“Thanks,” said Jim again, but it was muffled by the fact he had already sealed his window.

Lodge was rather an understatement. The Mahican looked more like a Bavarian palace, rising out of the snow like a castle, nestled among the Shawangunk Mountains, as though some erstwhile fairy princess had chosen upstate New York for her home. Lights in the windows twinkled and glittered through the blackness. Jim shivered in anticipation of a warm bath, and bed. He wound up the road, the woodland on either side rustling in the wind. He thought he caught a glimpse of some amber eyes - an owl maybe. Finally, he arrived at the front entrance where he gave his keys to the valet and told him to be careful. He stood for a second, watching the storm rage. The air was so fresh up here you could practically drink it.

A large and ornate Christmas tree stood in the middle of the entrance hall, decorated with red and gold ornaments. Soothing carols sung by a church choir played quietly on an unseen sound system. A fire crackled in a large open grate. Black and white photos of the hotel through the years lined the walls. The whole thing would have looked like a Victorian Christmas card if the little kid curled in one of the armchairs hadn’t been playing on an iPad.

“Cold out there?” He turned to see the receptionist, a youngish woman with dyed blonde hair.

“Yes, very,” he said.

“Are you staying with us tonight?” she asked.

“Yes. James Horowitz. I’m the photographer they hired to take the winter shots for the new website and brochures. They said I should stay over because they wanted me to get shots of the sunrise,” he said.

“Oh yes, they told me you were coming. Let’s hope this snow clears up by morning. It’s meant to, I think. Here’s your room key. You’re on the fifth floor, with a lovely view of the lake.

Well, it's a lovely view when it's light out and not snowing. Did you want to eat in the dining room this evening? I can book you in," she said.

"I'd prefer room service if it's available. You know, get an early night," said Jim

"Of course, the menu is in the room and just dial zero if you have any questions or need anything at all from reception."

"Thanks," he said, taking the key card.

It was an old hotel, built in the 1800s, and still maintained an old-fashioned charm. Every room had a working fireplace and none had a TV. The fire in Jim's room had already been lit when he entered. The warmth was so gentle, so complete, that it felt like being enveloped in a thick, warm blanket. He took off his coat and hung it on the back of the door. He kicked off his shoes and sat before the fire for a minute, getting the feeling back into his toes, listening to the wind rattling the window. When his feet were sufficiently defrosted, he settled in an armchair. The snow whipped past outside with dizzying speed. He could just make out the dark shape of the lake below, and the mountains beyond. He pulled the throw from the bed and wrapped it around himself, curled in the chair. He felt as though he could sit there forever, in the cozy warmth of the comfortable room, listening to the cracking of the fire and the whistling of the wind. The crackling of the fire...and the whistling of the wind...the crackling of the...

He woke with a start. The pleasing sounds of a jolly party were coming from downstairs. Jazz music, the clink of glasses. He heard two excited voices and the click of heeled shoes float past his room. He looked at the clock - 9pm. He had been asleep for two hours. He stumbled to the bathroom and threw some water on his face and gurgled with some Listerine. He felt that fuzzy-headed post-nap haze you get when you weren't intending to take one. He checked his phone, but there was no signal. Out of service range, it said.

The sounds of the party were so inviting that he decided to go downstairs after all, rather than consign himself to an evening of room service for one. He shrugged on a blazer and headed out the door. The hotel had taken on a different quality. The light seemed a little dimmer and the atmosphere more magical. He supposed it was because he had warmed up now, but he felt a strange and wonderful tingling sensation running through his veins.

Down on the ground floor, the reception was now being manned by a stately old gentleman.

“Good evening sir,” he said in an accent Jim couldn’t quite place. He must be the night manager, Jim thought.

“Hello.” Jim looked inquiringly at a young couple dressed in 1920s attire. “Is there a costume party going on?” he asked.

The receptionist frowned very slightly as if he didn’t quite understand the question and then rearranged his face into the smooth politeness of a seasoned hotelier and said: “It is the staff’s annual off season party. As a guest of the hotel, you are very welcome to join them in the ballroom. They have hired a jazz band from New York City for the occasion.”

He made an elegant gesture in the direction the young couple had gone.

“Oh, fantastic. The other receptionist didn’t mention it, but I’ll definitely check it out.”

“Other receptionist?” asked the man.

“The day manager, I guess. The woman with blonde hair.”

Again, the man put on his most polite face. “Of course, sir. I do hope you enjoy the festivities.”

Jim followed the music down the hallway.

He felt light-footed and slightly giddy, as though he had already had a couple of drinks. As he reached the door to the ballroom, the most beautiful sight met his eyes. Over a hundred people danced, laughed and drank under a gilded crystal chandelier. All were dressed to the nines in feathered headdresses, sequined dresses and silk stockings, tailcoats, with shoes so polished you could practically see your face in them. The room was buzzing with life, and with joy for the season.

The band was playing a jazz version of *God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen*.

A couple of young women clocked Jim as they passed and immediately began whispering together.

“A drink, sir?” a tail-coated waiter appeared at his arm with a tray of champagne.

“Oh yes, thank you!” Jim took one and sidled into the room.

Just as he was starting to feel awkward standing there on his own, one of the young women who had walked past him appeared at his elbow.

“Hello,” she said.

“Oh, hi,” said Jim.

She had a lovely, open face and a smile that could light up any room. The smile extended to her eyes and beyond - she smiled with her whole body, radiating liveliness and merriment.

“I was wondering if maybe you’d like to ask me to dance,” she said.

“Would you like to dance?” he said, grinning.

“I thought you’d never ask,” she said.

“I’m Jim.”

“Elizabeth. Lizzie.”

“What do you do, Lizzie?”

“I’m a waitress here. What about you?”

“I’m a photographer. I’ve come to take pictures of the hotel for the brochure.”

“How wonderful. Do you live nearby?”

“I live in New York.”

“Oh, marvelous! Did you take the coach up here?”

“No, I drove.”

“Goodness, you have your own car?” she looked amazed.

“Well, um, yes.”

She turned to her friend and winked as they passed her on the way to dance, and Jim could have sworn that she mouthed, “he’s rich” to her.

“I have to warn you, I have two left feet when it comes to dancing,” said Jim, leading her out to the floor.

“No need to be modest,” said Lizzie.

But, after a few minutes, she bent double with laughter. “You weren’t being modest.” she chuckled.

“Afraid not. Would you not prefer...” Jim waved vaguely around the hall, where numerous other young men were showing him up badly.

“No, I’ll lead, you just follow,” she said, grasping him firmly in the leader’s position.

With Lizzie leading, Jim found that he was actually rather a good dancer (or, a good follower at least).

There was a scuffling and the party seemed to be forming into a group in the middle of the ballroom. “Oh, they’re going to take a photo!” said Lizzie excitedly.

“They really did go all out for this 1920s theme, didn’t they?” said Jim aloud, motioning to the photographer’s vintage camera.

Lizzie gave him a strange look.

“Well, yes, I suppose that is the theme.” she said.

The whole group gathered, Lizzie and James at one end and all shouted ‘cheese!’ at the photographer’s instruction.

“Good show, chaps!” called the photographer and the band started up again.

“I’m hot, do you want to go and get some air?” asked Lizzie, fanning herself with one hand.

Jim nodded.

“I’ll get my coat and meet you out front,” she said.

He smiled to himself as he made his way to the great double entrance doors.

The snow was falling more lightly now and the wind had dropped. It seemed like the storm was on its way out.

A few minutes later, Lizzie joined him, wrapped in a faux fur coat.

“It’s pretty out here isn’t it?” she said, standing very close to him. He could smell her perfume.

“It really is beautiful.”

He stole a glance at her. Her cheeks were rosy from the cold. She met his gaze.

He turned to face her, tilted her face to his.

At that moment, the doors crashed open.

Lizzie’s friend appeared, her eyes wide looking at the two of them

“Oh, sorry Mr. Horowitz. Lizzie, I was looking for you. We should go.”

Lizzie looked slightly embarrassed.

“Go? It’s not so late is it,” said Jim.

“We’ve got to be up early to serve at breakfast,” she said, apologetically.

“Oh, all right. I’ll see you then,” said Jim, his heart sinking slightly.

He gave her hand a squeeze, to show her that he didn’t mind and that he would see her in the morning.

She let her hand lay in his for a minute, gazing at him with her lovely smile.

“Yes,” she said. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

She gave him a sad little wave and then joined her friend. Jim watched them go.

He remained for a minute, watching the snow fall, and then turned and went upstairs, to bed.

Jim awoke to his alarm, which he had set to go off just before sunrise. The marketing manager had arranged to meet him before breakfast to get the shots she wanted. He yawned and stretched. His mouth tasted musty from the champagne the night before. He smiled to himself. What a wonderful night it had been. He couldn’t wait to find Lizzie at breakfast and get her phone number. He threw open the curtains and was greeted by a tranquil sea of glittering white, crystal blue and hints of pink as the very first rays of sunlight crept over the horizon. The storm had ended.

He showered and dressed quickly and headed downstairs, his camera bag slung over one shoulder. The marketing manager, Emily, was waiting in the lobby with two coffees.

“Sorry to make you get up so early, but, well, you’ll see, it looks amazing outside.” she said, handing him one of the paper cups.

“I saw from my window, it looks stunning. We’re going to get some great photos”

They made for the door.

“Oh, I had such a fun time at that party last night.”


“What party?” she asked, frowning.

“The staff party. The off season party.”

“What? The hotel stopped doing those in the 30s. We do a summer thing instead now.”

“But I...nevermind.” Jim mumbled, embarrassed, and more than a little confused.

They were passing the framed black and white photos in the entranceway. Jim glanced up and stopped, feeling as though he’d been hit round the head with a sledgehammer.

There, on the wall, was a photo captioned *Off Season Party, 1921*. A group of a hundred or so smiling people looked at the camera, and there, squeezed into the side of the frame was a tiny but unmistakable picture of himself, grinning like an idiot, his arm slung around Lizzie’s shoulder. 

Caitlin Seymour is a writer based in Brooklyn, NY. She writes stories and scripts for screen, print and web, but mostly she writes for pleasure.

The Meeting at the Boathouse

By Cathryn Mellor

I saw her beyond the liquid glass, seated at the boathouse. It was a cold February morning and the mist was lingering still between the branches, hovering above the lake, blurring the trees. I slowed my pace down, not sure whether to keep walking there or to turn back under the tunnel, to the edge of the park gates, where normal life seemed to resume.

It had been fifteen years since I had last seen Jeanette without David by her side. Her letter had crept through a few weeks ago, in January, while the search was still on-going along the River Dart. Jeanette wasn't clear what had been found, but said she wanted to meet in person to return something that had once belonged to me. She had already spoken with me the previous September, six months ago, to tell me about David's disappearance, but now meeting face-to-face was daunting and I didn't want to tell her what I had seen.

My few sightings of Jeanette over the years had been fleeting. She would usually be hidden in another room or seated in the passenger seat of David's car when I handed over our daughter, Carys, on weekends. From those brief glimpses, she had seemed to me to be the epitome of chic—fitted jackets, nipped in waist, glossy dark hair draping over her shoulders—and much younger than me. From behind the frosted front door I could sometimes hear her softly greeting Carys with endearments in French. I don't know why she wanted to hide; it seemed cowardly or maybe it was guilt. Carys made their family complete while mine was now broken.

I could see her now, seated across the lake, talking to an old lady who had a Jack Russell jumping at her feet—adding movement to the static wintry scene. Jeanette looked thin, older than I expected, her clothes dowdier and less glamorous than I remembered.

It was strange that we should meet at the boathouse. Why did she pick this place? It reminded me of our summer cottage in Dartmouth, which had been David's and my holiday home—then later David's and hers. I used to love going down there every summer, while Carys was a baby, to watch the bobbing boats shimmering in the sunshine from my bedroom window and,

as daylight was fading, the torchlights from the boats slowly coming to life in the shadowy waters beneath. But I wondered now if they really had been happier times.

I had, perhaps, been almost grateful when David met Jeanette at a conference in Nice. My initial jealousy had subsided into acceptance that someone else had taken him on, been able to finally gain a reaction or incite some passion in him—or so I had thought. Though I couldn't help but feel disappointed that he was now responding to someone else with the gusto I had wanted for myself. I couldn't be pleased about that; but, on the other hand, I didn't want Jeanette to disappear, since she had taken the “problem” out of my hands, but left me still searching.

When things were going wrong between David and me his mother's words would echo in my mind: “It's all the things his father didn't say to me that hurt me the most.” I knew now what she had meant. Love was displayed with gestures of meaning unspoken, the flowers or presents on birthdays expressing everything that should have been said.

The only time I can remember seeing him animated was when I bought him an expensive watch for his 30th birthday present when we were holidaying at our Dartmouth cottage. Carys was only just three months old. David seemed to show such emotion over something so inanimate. I was pleased he was thrilled, but such enthusiasm seemed so wasted on an object.

My relationship with David had begun and ended with words unspoken. In the beginning, a note stuffed into the pocket of my red jacket at work wanting to take me out on a date; and then that other letter, expressing the end of us, typed into a document and saved onto a laptop. I found it by accident—he said he'd put everything down to help express how he felt. In it, he'd suggested that we needed a bolthole, or an open marriage to help rebuild what had gone wrong—which was shattering to read. But then he'd added a list of domestic annoyances: the Christmas treats I bought for Carys, which he considered unnecessary, and the “perishables” that I always failed to “eradicate” from the fridge. There was a Dickensian wordiness to it which flummoxed me, an aloof, chastising, practical toolkit in place of emotion, combining the piffling with the profound. He had always preferred the written word to talking: “It goes without saying,” had been his favourite catchphrase.

Maybe I should have listened to my doubts in the early years. “I think I’m in love with you, but I can’t pigeon-hole it,” he’d said. I always wondered what he had meant. There was a detachment and a distant affection that I couldn’t fathom. And he would talk about his inertia, how he felt defeated before he could begin.

I don’t think he felt he could ever change or impact the world around him, thinking that the outcome would always be the same—perhaps he felt that there was no point in even trying. I didn’t want to direct him anymore or lead him by the hand or tell him what to do. I felt the burden of carrying him with me. I became a pecking hen pushing for a reaction. “How would you feel if I met someone else?” I yelled at him in desperation. “I would quite admire you,” came the reply. I’d had enough now and asked him to leave. That wasn’t good enough, nowhere near close to how a loved one should feel.

Even though we had lived apart for a while, Jeanette came as a shock. It was one quiet Saturday afternoon when myself and Carys walked round to David’s house for Carys to spend the afternoon with him. All the curtains were closed upstairs and down. My first fear was that something bad had happened. His car was parked outside. He was inside the house.

After trying the doorbell for some time, Carys called him on my phone. “Are you in there daddy? Who are you with?”

“I’m with a friend,” he answered.

And I knew immediately that it was another woman.

Carys pushed her little hands through the letter box, and shouted, “daddy, daddy” and, as I crouched down to gently pull her hands away, I saw the red court shoes kicked off in the hallway and the handbag dropped carelessly at the foot of the stairs.

Carys sobbed inconsolably as we walked home, tears rolling down her cheeks. And as for me, David meeting someone else so soon had filled my head with self-doubt. His behaviour seemed spontaneous, carefree, not like the David I had known. Maybe it had all been my fault. Later, when I questioned him about Jeanette, he was unapologetic and unashamed. “Why, it’s been a year, Amy. Isn’t it time we both moved on?” he’d said.

But I couldn’t move anywhere, I felt frozen.

The yapping of the Jack Russell drew my focus back to Jeannette. Remembering David's words from all those years ago stifled my breathing. I took a few slow breaths to calm me down. I suddenly felt off guard, nervous at the prospect of meeting Jeanette after such a long time, wondering what she had found that she needed to talk to me about in person.

I faltered as I approached the boathouse, my mind scrambling over the past, and I stumbled over the bulky roots of the large trees fringing the lake. Rocking from side-to-side, I steadied myself back into a standing position. But Jeanette had seen me now, probably drawn to the noisy thud from my stumble against the bark. She turned her head in my direction, stretching her hand out in an uncertain wave.

I could see her more clearly now, her raven hair feathering down from her woolly hat, a barrier to the chill in the air. She looked so fragile. What I had imagined her to be now became so ordinary—a huge anti-climax. I had been creating illusions all this time. But I could still see what David had seen in her, and that thought pulsed hotly in my stomach. Pain lies dormant until forced to the surface, it never goes completely.

I was worried that it might be difficult to talk with the old lady still lingering. I wanted to meet Jeanette alone. Thoughts were racing through my head, one after another, wondering how to start the conversation. But, fortunately, the lady guided her dog away from the boathouse, back to the footpath, leaving Jeanette alone at the picnic bench. I tried to pick up the pace now towards her, legs shaking, lips scraping, feigning a smile—mouth seemed like sandpaper, no moisture, no words yet. I couldn't imagine speaking, I needed to look OK.

Walking those last few steps to where Jeannette was waiting felt like an out-of-body experience. My legs felt like they were floating, unanchored, not making contact with the ground below.

She spoke before me, "Good to see you Amy," she said.

"And you," I replied.

I was sure neither of us meant it—we were both being polite. Too much had happened and her years with David were still unspoken.

"Coffee?" I asked.

Jeanette seemed to welcome the thought. “Yes please, make it a strong one!” she said.

I nodded numbly, knowing we both needed something to help the conversation along. I noticed that her eyes were red and puffy, her face weary with worry and her once soft olive skin looked lined and tired. For the first time, I found myself feeling sorry for her as I walked to the kiosk to order the coffees.

“Is there any news of David?” I queried.

She bowed her head and shook it despondently.

“Are you eating properly?” I asked. I was filling in the gaps of the sudden awkward silence. I’m not sure why I should be concerned for her well-being, but I was shocked at how gaunt she looked. The worry was obviously taking its toll.

As I was walked back to where Jeanette was sitting, the foot of the bench suddenly caught my shoe and I nearly dropped one coffee onto the table, the heat from the liquid burning my hand as I rescued the half-full cup before placing them both on the table.

“Sorry, so sorry.” I said, scrambling around in my coat pocket for tissues, an old motherly habit.

As I was wiping the table, I noticed that she had brought out a small brown bag and was holding it tightly in both hands. “This was found two weeks ago...in clusters of rubble and seaweed...near Castle Cove,” she blurted out, explaining how a crab fisherman had described finding it “glinting like a beacon—begging for rescue.”

My heart was beating faster as her hand went into the bag. I couldn’t imagine what had been found. Jeanette brought out what looked like a silver bracelet tarnished with green, its metal eroded by the salty waters. It looked like it belonged to a woman. Perhaps they’d made a mistake. I felt calmer now, thinking it couldn’t be anything to do with David.

Even when Jeanette handed over the metal bundle, I didn’t recognize it. I didn’t want to touch or look at it; it was mangled, distorted, misshapen.

I looked at Jeanette across the wooden table. Her eyes were wide and searching, as if looking to me for answers and closure of some kind. My eyes were dead, opaque and unyielding in response. I had nothing to say.

Feeling uncomfortable, I tilted my head to look over the frozen lake to avoid her heavy gaze. The chill in the air was now biting my fingertips as I tightened the grip around the cooling coffee cup, searching for some warmth. Dog walkers were beginning to huddle around the kiosk, needing a hot drink to continue with their walk round the lake. The distraction of their muffled voices lifted the pressure of the growing silence between us. I wasn't going to break the silence since words wouldn't help. The unspoken was now my source of comfort, more befitting to my truth.

Jeanette mentioning Castle Cove had jolted me. Had she seen me six months ago when I had seen them?

I'd gone to Dartmouth then to revisit our old haunts, remembering the time when David and I had gone on holiday as a family when Carys was a baby. I hadn't told anyone about this. I'm not sure what had compelled me to go. Perhaps it was because Carys was at University and my empty nest had drawn me to revisit a past which seemed more secure than the present. Carys was branching out—and I was standing still.

My decision to go there last September was last-minute and I booked a small B&B near Castle Cove, where we had once sat looking out over the River Dart. Carys in the pushchair and we sat on the wooden bench, drinking our take-out coffees.

I checked in on Friday early afternoon. I was just stayed for a night. I didn't know that Jeanette and David would also be there that weekend—I certainly hadn't planned it. Contact between myself and David had lessened over the years as Carys grew older and wanted to spend more time with friends than with me or her dad. Was he there every weekend, or was it just a weird coincidence we should both be drawn back there at the same time? Maybe David was missing the past too and was looking back now that Carys was moving on to the next phase of her life. Perhaps we were both sorry for what Carys had missed out on growing up; us being a family together.

I spotted David and Jeanette as I was taking the passenger ferry back to Kingswear at the Old Anchor's Inn, up on the hill, next to the church. I went there for an evening stroll to walk past our old cottage. The two were sitting together outside the pub. The evening sun was fading, and the

coloured lanterns strewn across the inn and the stone gateway to the church yard were starting to shine, lighting up the scene for me below.

I crept under the canopy of the café near to where the passenger ferry disembarked. I sat on the wooden bench and watched them. It felt wrong and voyeuristic, but I couldn't stop looking up intently, eyes fixed on them both.

The light was dimming fast, but I could still see their shadows, and I could hear Jeanette's French accent lilt through the air with increased intensity. She appeared to be shouting now at David, her arms gesticulating wildly in exasperation. I could just make out the words she kept repeating: "*J'en ai ras le bol, J'en ai ras le bol.*" I knew that phrase from when I studied French at school. She'd obviously had enough of something and couldn't take any more. Perhaps the language barrier had helped mask the emotional distance of David. Maybe his English genteelness had been once considered quirky and quaint but now a source of frustration as time revealed the truth.

I sat there for a while, but I started to feel embarrassed about spying on them, so decided to walk a little way down to the holiday cottage. I wanted to peer through the window, safe in the knowledge that they were still at the Inn drinking and arguing. I wanted to see if the place had changed much over the years. The prospect was quite exciting. I picked up my pace, feeling pleased with myself as I passed the row of cottages and finally came to ours.

The streetlamp outside the cottage was lit and I could see inside easily. The outside of the cottage was painted cornflower blue now, not the lurid orange I remembered, but I was surprised to see that the inside was just the same. The old, faded, ruby-red suede settee was still there along with the dated pine table at the bay window where we had made up Carys' feeds and sipped wine in the evenings.

Nothing had been updated, nothing was new, nothing had changed. I imagined all this time that they made *our* cottage their special place, putting their own stamp on it. I had been curious to see what it looked like after all these years. I felt a surge of disappointment that I spent a long time imagining their wonderful life that now proved dull and disappointing. I was sickened at myself for living my life through them.

As I walked back down to the passenger ferry to return to the guest house, I glanced furtively up to the Anchor Inn and saw Jeanette now sitting alone. My eyes remained fixed on her until the ferry reached the pontoon at the other side and I could no longer pick her out in the blurring distance.

The next morning, I felt a bit brighter, smug after having seen the faded cottage and the argument between Jeanette and David the day before. I decided to take a trip on the paddle steamer. It was a pleasure cruise that nudged up to the mouth of the English Channel and then back in the opposite direction. It was a brisk, sunny morning and my memories of the previous day faded away as I watched the vibrant green woodland pass by. Everything looked so beautiful, the tops of the banks along the river were ski-sloping down to the water's edge, illuminating shades of patchwork green at their descent.

The wind was up and there was a cool chill in the air. Exhilaration overtook me as we made our way briefly out into the choppier waters of the open sea. My eyes followed the green marbled waters below, meeting and parting in a swirl of white and murky green. The old castle was to the right. I could make out passengers waiting for the rowing boat to take them back to the main town.

Then, suddenly, I caught a glimpse of what looked very much like David. He wasn't waiting for the rowing boat, he was scrambling over the rocks to Castle Cove, looking straight ahead, determined in his step. He was windswept and disheveled—as if he'd slept in his clothes overnight. I wondered if I was seeing things. Was it really him?

The paddle steamer was slowly changing direction and I could no longer pick him out in the distance. I felt disturbed now, remembering the argument I had witnessed the previous day, and seeing him now, striding out alone towards the rough sea. Why wasn't Jeanette with him? And what was his intention?

The reality of what had happened that day was still vivid—my mind repeating the image of David ploughing on ahead with a steely intention I had never seen before. I remembered how my neck hurt as it stiffened at angles, trying to follow David's moving figure against the grey walls of the castle while the paddle-steamer turned course.

Unconsciously, I drew both hands up to my face as I sat opposite Jeanette at the bench. I looked out over the lake and rubbed my hands round to the back of my neck to cradle my head. I don't know why I did this, perhaps for comfort. The air was much cooler now and the mist danced over the lake. The sky dulled with the heaviness of Winter.

I suddenly reached forward to pull the metal bundle towards me and immediately knew by its touch that it was David's. I swept my fingers over the inscription on the back:

To David, all our love, Amy and Carys. xxx

I remembered him wearing the watch so proudly on that holiday when Carys was a baby, flashing it in the cafés overlooking the River Dart, and constantly telling me the time, announcing that it was time for Carys's next feed.


"Alright, alright, no need to show off," I'd say.

Why hadn't he been enthusiastic about the things that mattered? It seemed strange now that something that had incited so much passion in him had found its way back to me with a sense of apology and regret.

Facing Jeanette now, I couldn't bring myself to tell her what I had seen that weekend last September: the argument between David and her, then David heading out to Castle Cove—the place where the watch had been found. But as I held the watch in my hand, my heart knew what David had intended. Perhaps I was meant to see it unravel before me. I placed the watch back in the brown bag and slid it safely inside the pocket of my padded coat.

Jeanette was still speaking. "Fishermen crabbing along the estuary have been keeping a lookout for garments that might have been strewn overboard, but nothing's come to light. Nothing has been found, Amy. Nothing apart from the watch."

My hands were now freezing cold—we had been sitting there for too long, so I placed them inside my jacket, holding the package ever tighter. Jeanette's breathless voice now seemed exhausted, volumeless, lacking the passion I'd heard in their argument outside the Old Anchor's Inn.

[J'en ai ras le bol! – I'm sick of it!] 

Born in South Wales, Cathryn has enjoyed creative writing since her teenage years but was not yet been brave enough to send anything off for publication – until now. She works in publishing and really enjoys writing workshops, poetry, the theatre and swimming in the local lido during the summer months.

The Trial that Started a Revolution

By Wendy Coyle

Editor's Note: This selection is taken from *Simorq*, a novel in progress by Wendy Coyle, and is based upon a true event during the reign of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi in Iran. The description of the courtroom drama and the words quoted are taken from video transcripts of that day in the trial.

On a bleak January morning in 1974, the black and white television screen in Gael Ravari's living room jumped and scrolled up and down despite her attempts with the rabbit ear antenna. Her friend, Shirin, called from a silk brocade armchair, "No, no. A little to the left" and Shirin's mother, Khadijeh, who had no acquaintance with television, concentrated with great interest on the lines and snow until the picture returned and Gael scooted over to join her on the couch. Like everyone else in Iran, they did not want to miss a word of the last televised trial of two young revolutionaries facing the death penalty for treason and conspiracy to kidnap the Shah's son. Her old friends from her early days in Iran, lacking a television, traveled two hours by bus to Gael's posh Tehran neighborhood to share this remarkable event. Such media openness had never happened before and its motive seemed to be self-serving. The United Nations Human Rights Council was meeting this month in Tehran and it was said the Shah and secret police, SAVAK, decided a public trial would be a propaganda coup. It would disprove international condemnation of Iran's secret political arrests and no-trial and show His Majesty's merciful nature. The two men in this appeal could escape the firing squad by pleading guilty and begging for commutation to life as had the others rounded up for this plot no matter the only evidence was an unnamed SAVAK informer.

In the front row, the two defendants faced three military tribunal officers who sat on a raised dais. The center judge, paunchy and middle-aged, wore a uniform full of ribbons, insignia and medals along with a bored expression. Above them was a huge portrait of the King seated in full-dress military regalia. The fluorescent-lit courtroom, its walls draped in fabric, seemed

makeshift with metal folding chairs accommodating a silent audience of about 50 plainly dressed men and women, some of the women with headscarves.

The first defendant, Khosrow Golisorkhi, rose to give his final statement. His surname, a rather gentle one for an accused revolutionary, meant red rose or flower. He was a poet and journalist and he began by reciting in a deep and firm voice his own poem with the refrain, “O bountiful homeland, where is gravity, where can I stand on the earth with the weight of these bloody muffled cries?” Dressed in black pants, a black pullover sweater over a dark shirt, he had long sideburns, thick half-moon eyebrows and a large black mustache curving around his upper lip. He had just turned 30 but, as he bent over his papers, the camera showed the balding crown of his head, its sparse tufts looking more to Gael like the wispy patches on a baby’s head.

Next, he invoked the blessing of Saint Hossein, “the great martyr of Islam.” He chopped the air with his right arm and declared, “I am a Marxist-Leninist and I discovered social justice for the first time in the teachings of Islam.” He said he was a descendent of all the brave and struggling heroes of Iran and listed many from ancient and religious history. They were names known to Khadijah, an older pious woman, who murmured a heartfelt “yes” after each one. His next words announced his intention, “*Man baraye junam chuneh neymizanam.*” I will not haggle for my soul. No, I will not bargain for my life.

Gael and her friends looked at each other, expecting the court to silence him, hustle him away for this defiance, but the proceedings were live and had a foreign audience to whom the government had boasted open due process. Golisorkhi leaned, arms angled and stiff against the counsel table, an unflinching gaze upon the judges, “As Marx says, in a class society with wealth on one side and poverty and hunger on the other, the very producers of wealth are the oppressed.” He paused to connect this with another hero, “Saint Ali also says, ‘No palace is built unless thousands go poor.’”

Khadijah tapped her heart in remembrance of the first and most revered saint. Golisorkhi continued with the centuries-old story of Saint Ali’s son, Saint Hossein, and his martyrdom that touches every Shiite Muslim’s soul; how he and his followers were pursued and killed by the oppressive King Yazid to silence their calls for justice and right. “The life of Imam Hossein indeed

mirrors our current life. . .for the life of our oppressed people, our life in this court of law is jeopardized. . .though Yazid's flag won that day, forever after history remembers Hossein's resistance. . .In a Marxist society, true Islam may well be justified."

The parallels between the Pahlavi King and King Yazid and Saint Hossein were lost on no one and the theme of the hero unjustly killed that ran through all Persian mythology and story resonated. Gael leaned closer to the screen to examine this man who, at the beginning had seemed a simple poet, a rumped boy-next-door or everyone's nephew, was indeed the man who had just demolished the government's line and co-opted mullahs' sermons that preached that devout God-loving Moslems cannot be atheist God-denying Marxists or communists. In near Perry Mason brilliance, Golisorkhi had just proved, on television for millions of Iranian Muslims, the link between the highest Islamic saints, their teachings and Marx.

Golisorkhi moistened his lower lip, swallowed and continued in a softer tone as if remembering the death sentence awaiting him ". . . I was accused of organizing a Communist group even though we had not even read the books we were charged with discussing. I was arrested, tortured so much I was urinating blood. I was interrogated and charged with conspiracy. . .This is the usual frame-up in Iran. The prisons are full of young people and teens arrested, imprisoned and tortured for reading books and thinking. . .esteemed youths convicted by this very court." His hands rose slowly in front of him as if balancing an imaginary sphere. "When they get out of prison, they put books aside and take up machine guns. In the end, victory belongs to the people."

Gael couldn't believe her eyes and ears and realized how the government had made a huge miscalculation allowing this man a forum to say out loud that which was everywhere, always in whispers, stories and rumor. Had the Shah and his SAVAK chief been so arrogantly certain the Golishorkhi would be docile or that the offer to live silence him? Did the Shah understand how rapidly this was all going wrong? Then she remembered newspaper pictures from last week. The King wasn't here to listen. The royal family was skiing in St. Moritz.

Golisorkhi shifted to censorship, bringing in the Middle Ages, the Inquisition and the historical futility of trying to stop ideas and thought. He wove his own defense into the anti-imperialist struggle, describing the brutal hold of imperialist nations on the Vietnamese who fought

the American military and the Moroccans fighting the French and how, in those struggles, the foreign face of the enemy was known but in Iran it has taken over the culture. He said, “Our enemy is invisible...Our enemy could be disguised as ordinary Mr. Ahmad, or a policeman, or...Our people do not know.” He told of stories and books in the many indigenous languages of Iran not being allowed to be published but noted that “Nonetheless, the imported culture of the American Imperialists is forced on us daily by the ruling government of Iran.”

Gael watched in awe. Golisorkhi was like lawyer Atticus Finch in “To Kill a Mockingbird” or Barney Greenwald interrogating Captain Queeg in “The Caine Mutiny.” It was a masterful defense unlike any she’d ever read or seen in movies. She couldn’t help but mourn the terrible waste of this young man’s courage and brilliance. He began to weave and sway like a weary fighter who yet must stay the rounds, hold the court and speak for as long as he can. Shirin had her fists clenched in her lap and Khadijeh had tears in her eyes. Four of Gael’s household servants had come into the living room unseen, unbidden to watch the trial and were standing somberly and silently along the back wall.

Golisorkhi refuted a point made earlier by the court that Marxists want to take land and farms distributed to the peasants under the Shah’s old land reform program. He explained how the program had offered no support to the peasants but continued the same old slavery only now under a bourgeoisie production system, putting the peasants at the mercy of government banks, oppressive debt and military-supervised co-ops and village councils that denied him freedom. “Land reform in Iran merely paved the way for our society to become a dependent consumer culture that pushes on us obsolete imperialist surplus and makes us buy their foreign excess food products.” He asked, “Your Honor, can you find one just and decent man to go to the poorest corners of Tehran, the places of poverty like the Bridge of Masoom, the Maindan-e-Shush, Nezamabad. . .and ask the displaced poor there, ‘Where have you come from? Why are you here? What are you doing?’ They will say, ‘we fled, we ran away.’ That man will ask ‘From what?’ ‘From the creditors, the debts we had. We couldn’t pay.’ So, your Honor, in fact, aren’t we being ruled by the same feudal system?”

The judge who had been consulting with defense and the other judges said impatiently, “Please defend yourself.”

Golisorkhi answered “I am defending my people, sir.”

“This is your final defense. Don’t ask me any more questions. You are given notice now to defend yourself only for your benefit.”

Golisorkhi replied “I have nothing to say for my own benefit. Only for my people. If I don’t have freedom, I would rather sit.”

“You are given freedom to use for your own final defense,” said the judge.

Golisorkhi replied “Then I will sit.”

Gael watched him collect his papers, turn slowly from the table and sit. He had not backed down, he had not begged, he held the court and the nation for 17 minutes. He, the indicted, had turned the court on its head, indicting it and SAVAK, the government and the Pahlavi regime that would execute him for, if nothing else, his politics, his courage. Khadijeh held her hands upturned as if in prayer, tears in her eyes. Shirin stared ahead uncharacteristically silent. As the court called the next defendant, Gael noticed the cook and the gardener move softly in their stockinged feet along the wall toward the door. Their eyes were downcast and Gael sensed everyone in the room was bound in unity with Golisorkhi.

Khadijeh, rarely the first to speak, said, “This was not good for the government. No one will ever forget when Golisorkhi said ‘I will not bargain for my life.’”

“He told the truth. It’s how we live. Oppressed. Afraid all the time.” Shirin declared.

Gael felt overwhelmed for the world that had been brought up by Golisorkhi’s defense: images of troops fighting in Vietnam; government dogs and water hoses on civil rights protestors in the South, in Firuzabad; village babies sick with no doctors; poor peasant women in fields with bloodied hands gleaning the last of the cotton. All these against her experiences at the 2,500-year celebration parties, her knowledge of the Shah’s \$20 billion a year revenue in oil money that seemed to have changed nothing for the people. She didn’t know about Marx or communists, but social justice, the basic right to a fair deal, to freedom of expression, was an ideal she had been raised on. She thought of Grandfather and how he would have loved this trial and Golisorkhi.

Keramat Daneshian, the second man on trial who had refused to plead guilty and plead for mercy, shuffled his papers tentatively at the defense table. He was younger, clean shaven and sweet-faced, wearing slacks and a suit coat and was overall less assured than Golisorkhi. With eyes down, he read a statement concerning prisoner rights until the judge, clearly impatient, admonished him to stay with his personal defense or sit down. After a few more exchanges, Daneshian returned to his chair.

Gael, Shirin and Khadejeh, their eyes still on the screen, watched a uniformed prosecutor sporting the latest style sunglasses address the court. Suddenly, from the living room's arched doorway, they heard Cyrus' voice speaking English. "Why are you watching that garbage? They should shoot the fools." The women had been so immersed in the broadcast that they had not heard Gael's husband enter the house.

Khadijeh quickly stood up in respect while Gael and Shirin chorused, "Hello." Cyrus did not return their greeting. "You see how His Majesty has to protect himself all the time from people who want to destroy the country?" He walked across the room and shut off the television.

Khadijeh remained standing and motioned to Shirin to join her. "Thank you so much for tea. I must go now. My brother is coming for lunch." She was wise in the ways of men, aware of Cyrus's temperament and protectiveness of Gael.

"Oh, but I had invited you for lunch." Gael looked dismayed and turned to Cyrus, wanting him to second the invitation, but he said nothing. She repeated the invitation but the maid was already helping them with their coats in the foyer. Gael was embarrassed that her friends had been made to feel unwelcome and decided the least she could do was save them the three bus rides to the far away Tehran Pars neighborhood. "I'll have the car take you home," she said.

When they left, Cyrus demanded, "Why do you invite these useless people? That girl is trouble and the mother looks like a servant. I don't want them here anymore."

She countered, "They are my old friends and you shouldn't be rude to them." Already sad and angry from the trial and feeling a headache from concentrating on the difficult Farsi legal words, she did not want a bickering match. Since returning from America, they rarely agreed. Not about Ali John's school, not about the people they saw, not about politics where Cyrus now

supported the royals and the crowd around the Princess, while Gael, hearing stories of corruption and government repression, had begun to dislike them. She turned to leave the room.

She had taken one step when he grabbed her arm. “Because they gave time on the television to those stupid fools, you think you too can be smart mouth. *Pour-roo.*”

Gael’s emotions, stirred due to the last hour of the trial, flared. “They’re not stupid. They’re educated and brave, and SAVAK and the Shah just want to silence them.”

Cyrus jerked her across the room to face the tall windows overlooking the garden. Through clenched jaws in a low and threatening voice he said, “Do you like this view? Do you like this house and your soft sweet life? Don’t you ever say anything like that again. Half these servants might work for SAVAK. Or their cousin does. One word or rumour and it’s gone. Do you hear me?” He tightened his grip on her arm and she knew there would be bruises.

Gael also knew what he said was true. Many of these servants were not trusted family retainers from Firuzabad. She’d even seen one of the serving men hovering close to conversations when they had guests, especially Americans. But something inside her had awakened this morning and she hissed back, “I’ll say what I want in my own house!”

Cyrus’s face darkened with anger and Gael felt that he was going to strike her. She flinched in expectation of a blow but he recovered and pulled his lips back over his teeth in a fake smile - the way a fox bares its teeth before the kill.

“Of course, you have the right to say whatever you want in Oregon, in Wintun Mills. In that old house and old car and at Nick’s Diner. Go there to say what you want. Alone. My son is not going to live like that.”

After that day, the trial ended and nothing more was broadcast or heard in any media about Golisorkhi or Daneshian. The U.N. Council left town and the government returned to its secrecy. If there were more trials, appeals or executions, no one knew. It was as if the televised event had never happened.

In the next week Gael found herself wanting to be in Amey’s room in Meshhad, to sit under the *korsi* quilts she had so loved in her Grandfather’s house. Even though her house here had

central heating, she longed to sit toasty and warm under the wide quilt, her feet pointed toward the warm covered charcoal brazier. She remembered leaning against bolsters and eating oranges and cracking nuts while talking or reading during those long days she now recalled fondly. She decided to make one quilt here in Tehran and she hoped that sitting around the *korsi* might draw the family together again.

Bundled against the February cold of a recent snowfall, she set off to the central bazaar, taking the car to the old section of town three days in a row. She felt happy away from the house as she shopped for bright cotton bolsters and flowered quilts in reds and greens and blues. As she ordered the wooden frame to cover the charcoal brazier, visiting the shops and streets of lower Tehran, she saw men and sometimes women wearing little roses pinned or tucked into their lapels. In the shops, it seemed as if there were bouquets of red roses or paper carnations everywhere. It was hard to believe it was just coincidence. Did it mean that Golisorkhi, “rose-red flower,” was being silently being remembered?

Shirin or Khadijeh always called her from a pay phone every few weeks to check in. They’d ask one another, “Are you alright? Yes. And you? Alright.” Maybe a few words about Khadijeh’s health or her son’s school for everyone expected the phones were tapped. However, the last call from Shirin in the third week of February varied, “Are you alright? Yes. Are you? Let’s meet at the usual place. Thursday.”

The usual place meant Café Naderi near the university around 4 o’clock, their usual time from the old Tehran days. Gael called a *taxi-telephoni* and wore a dark wool coat and flowered headscarf. Their own driver would report her comings and goings to Cyrus when or if asked and she wanted privacy. When she arrived at the café, Shirin kissed her on both cheeks and Gael noticed she wore a long-sleeved rose-print dress. Gael ordered two hot chocolates, two napoleons and a box of pastries for Shirin to take for Khadijeh. Settling at a corner table overlooking the street, their backs to the café, Shirin whispered to Gael that Golisorkhi and Daneshian had been shot yesterday at dawn.

The only news Shirin could tell her was word-of-mouth stories repeated quietly from trusted person to person. There had been no official reports, not a word of the two now heroic

figures. She said, “God remember their souls. The two bravest men. After they were sentenced to death and taken to Evin prison the jailers tried everything to make them beg His Majesty for mercy. To admit guilt, to make the Shah’s offer of life look beneficent and their own defense a sham. They tempted Golisorkhi, cruelly promising him things like ‘We will bring your son to visit, you can hold him and as he grows up, he can come to see you.’ But Golisorkhi knew the trap, knew if his only child, Duman, came, he would weaken and want to live. He said, ‘You cannot bring him. I will not see him.’”

Shirin wiped her eyes and looked behind them to see that no one was watching. Gael was numb. The death of the men so unfair, so needless. And she thought of her own son, Ali John, just a few years older than Golisorkhi’s. Never to hold him again, never to see him grow, never to say goodbye.

Shirin continued, “The night of 17 February, before the dawn execution, they sang songs all night. Revolutionary songs in the loudest voices so the whole prison could hear them, knowing at dawn they would be taken in front of a firing squad. They sang ‘*Iran Zamin*. Land of Iran.’ They sang, ‘*Hava delpazir shod*, Spring Will Come’ and more to keep up their courage and to inspire the comrades to resist. On the execution field, they refused blindfolds so they could see the eyes of their executioners and the red dawn of the morning and they sang again standing side-by-side in front of the firing squad. When it was time, they sang one last verse.” Here Shirin grew quiet as if in a trance and whispered the words of the revolutionary song:

“O Comrades. Oh heroes. We die for our country without fear

From our blood tulips will grow.

Tulips and flowers will cover the earth like a garden

We stand tall like Damavand Mountain

We give our life for the people

We will not stop our struggle until death.’

Then the two together shouted to the firing squad and gave the order. ‘Fire!’”

The two women stared into their empty chocolate cups, as if for a sign, for comfort. Then they stood, hugged and said their goodbyes. After Shirin left, Gael walked up Khakh street, past the

University of Tehran, toward Elizabeth Boulevard until finally a light cold rain and the early dark overtook her. She hailed a cab, and on the way home, stopped at a flower kiosk near the junction of Old Shemiran Road, where she bought a bouquet of long-stemmed red roses.


Inside the cab again, the driver asked a question common in Iran: “How much did you pay for them?”

She told him the amount.

“Too much,” he shook his head as he pulled into the traffic heading north. “Khareje-ha chuney mizanan? Do you foreigners bargain?”

“Not usually. But I do.” Gael replied.

“Iranians do.” the driver said. “But I won’t bargain for my life.”

They continued in silence with only the swish-swish of the windshield wipers filling the space. Then Gael removed a single red rose from the bouquet, leaned forward, and dropped it on the seat next to the driver. 

Wendy Coyle is the author of the memoir “Iridescent Iran” and is currently completing a historical novel, *Simorq*, about the years leading up to the Iranian Islamic Revolution of 1979. She lived in the Middle East for many years, was an interpreter for the State Department and directed language and cultural centers in Tehran and Meshhad. Originally from northern California, Dr. Coyle currently lives in New York City.

VI

By Claudia Rose Pomponi

My dearest mother,

I would like to put this letter for you into a beautiful glass bottle: blue and green like the Atlantic Ocean when the sun hits it just at the right angle on one of the perfect summer days that have built my childhood. Then I would like to put it into that gorgeous body of water, watch it drift away and finally, reach you, one day far in the future. I would want it to peacefully float up to you, for it to be a beautiful sunny day, and for you to feel at ease when reading it. I could not be near you when you read it, because it would break my heart to see the way your face would fall. I could never tell you how bad it really was because the night I had to tell you I was going on medication I watched your face go from puzzled to devastated. You reached across the table, held my hand and said you were so *sorry*. You told me that you thought I was always your happiest child; so carefree and full of life. You said you always pictured me as being *perfect* and you were so sorry you never knew how I really felt. Right then and there, when I saw your face like that and heard you blame yourself, I promised myself I would never tell you how bad it really was.

So if I had to tell you, I would tell you like this.

The first time was water.

I was fifteen.

I discovered the way water could become so hot to the touch that while it burned my skin, it numbed my mind; and suddenly all the pain I was feeling in my head and heart went away.

One time you came home while I was upstairs in my bathroom, still in my clothes from field hockey practice, the water running so hot from my faucet the entire mirror was fogged. I stuck my wrists under the piercing stream and watched it turn my skin raw as I heard the downstairs door open and your familiar voice calling up to me. I almost wished for a second that you would come upstairs and see what I was doing, find a way to help me understand why on earth I was doing it

and to make me stop. But you didn't. I turned the water off, sank down against the cool, tiled wall and cried.

There was something about heat, because the next twisted addiction was hair straighteners and curling irons. The first time I did it I held it against the inside of my wrist and bit my tongue until I tasted blood. It seared the skin right off. I told you I had burned it on a pot while boiling water for pasta.

Maybe it was because you had noticed that mark that I decided to try and do it somewhere more shocking. Maybe I wanted you and others to notice so that maybe, *finally* someone could help me stop this terrible habit. One night I took the hair straightener right to my face. Seared a patch of skin straight off my cheek and watched it bubble up into a huge blister.

I did this twice more: once on my forehead and once on my chin. The one on my chin was so bad that it bubbled and bled. It was Valentine's Day and the next day you and I were leaving for a vacation in Puerto Rico. When I put my face under the warm, salty water it stung my chin. *That means it's healing*, you told me. Was I healing?

From then on, I stayed away from hair straighteners and curling irons. I thought that if one more of those mysterious burns popped up on my face someone might start to question. In reality, I wonder if I secretly *did* want someone to question. To help me. To stop me.

The next time I was seventeen.

I took a heavy-duty flashlight and smashed it against my forearm until it was red, raw and starting to bruise. When you came home I told you I had fallen on my run. I ended up in the emergency room. It was Labor Day Weekend. I know the doctor didn't believe me because he looked at my knees and elbows and asked how I did not have any cuts or scratches from the fall. When I left there in a shiny, black cast I said I would never hurt myself again, it had been too close of a call.

I never did.

That's because I don't have to use a curling iron, a metal flashlight or scalding hot water to intentionally hurt myself. Now I hurt myself every week by all the needles I stick into my skin day after day like a pin cushion. By all the IV's that all the nurses poke into my arm. By all the mind-

blowing migraines from my medication that keep me in bed for days on end. Maybe my body finally got the message. Now, because of my illness, I am forced to hurt myself almost every single day.

I am nineteen years old when we are sitting in the small, bright, sterile room of Yale New Haven Hospital. Four doctors have preceded this visit. Two small procedures that went inside and tried to fix what they thought was wrong with me; tried to fix what was astray in my tiny, confused, and exhausted body. Both times when I awoke groggy from anesthesia I was met with a face that said *sorry, we're still not sure*. Two false diagnoses. Twenty-six allergy tests. Plenty of tears. Several months. Now we are here. It is June 20, 2013. I have just finished my freshman year of college. I am in the pediatric specialty ward of Yale New Haven Hospital holding your hand. It is both precious and devastating.

The doctor who enters the room is bald. He is not dressed like the doctors I am used to in scrubs or a white coat. The strong scent of hand sanitizer follows him. He enters dressed in khaki pants and a navy blazer. Introduces himself as Neil Romburg: he specializes in immunology and oncology. It is in that moment that my entire world suddenly comes crashing down around me. He has just shook my hand one moment prior and now, with just a few words, he has taken my already, fucked up, nineteen year old life and smashed it into a million, teeny, tiny pieces. It is then that I realize my body is failing me. He says words that I cannot hear or understand. A sound like rushing water fills my ears and I stare at him. You do the same. We both seem oddly calm. We are mainly just confused.

If you happen to be reading this and you are not my mother, my diagnosis was of a severe immune deficiency. All of the antibodies in my body stopped working for me, requiring a lifetime of injections of other people's to keep myself healthy and living. My body stopped fighting for me. It is serious and it is chronic. I will live with it for my entire life.

When he tells us this, he tells us other things too. Like how most patients go on to develop lymphoma, like how many patients with this condition eventually need a bone marrow transplant. Those words tumble and tumble around my mind. The room is suddenly too hot and too cold at the

same time. A nurse comes to get me and take me to another room for blood tests. She looks at me with a bright face and takes my hand. *You are so beautiful*, I remember her saying, *so beautiful and tall. You should be a model with all that beauty*. My mouth makes something that sounds like a laugh. I wash my hands in a metal sink and stare into the mirror. *Lymphoma. Lymphoma. Lymphoma.*

When she brings me into the next room there is another nurse waiting with the same bright face I will become too used to seeing. The face that looks at me with a smile, waiting to give me a compliment and make small talk while they stick a big needle in my arm. The face that will look at you the same way, but with something else behind their eyes. Something that says *I am so glad this is not my child sitting here*. Something that breaks your heart every time. Something that leads you to tears one time in the Hershey Emergency Room two years later and makes me promise to myself that I will never do or say anything that would lead you to tears. It was too painful.

It was after this hellish diagnosis that things really turned again.

I sat outside the next day on the patio with the warm sun blinding my vision. I am not sure how long I had been sitting there. Minutes? Hours? It was the middle of the afternoon. I was still in my pajamas. I heard the familiar squeak of the door opening behind me, but made no move to turn around. In a moment you are at my side, holding a small bottle. I look at it questioningly, but do not ask. *It's holy water*, you explain. Someone at work has given you two bottles that they had lying around. After they heard the news of my diagnosis they thought they would be better in your hands than theirs. Little do we know that the second one will come in handy exactly a year later when my oldest sister grows a lopsided tumor on her left knee. You tilt my head back and I close my eyes. Your hand smooth's my hair; a sensation so small and familiar that it almost makes me feel as if it can fix everything. Fix me. You say a small prayer, something I cannot exactly remember the words of now and pour it lightly over my forehead. The water reaches my lips. It is when I taste the saltiness of it that I realize I am crying.

This is when water started to come back to me.

Many of those days during that long, slow summer I spent sitting on an Adirondack chair at the beach, my eyes glazed over as I stared at Long Island Sound for hours on end. I sat there with

bandages on my arms and legs, wanting to drift away into the middle of that sparkling blue. I wanted to leave all these problems back on dry land. I did this almost every single day. Often you would find me sitting there, book open in my lap. *What did you do today?* You would ask me, your face smiling, hopeful, trying so hard to help me. *Nothing*, I would always reply. *Nothing at all.*

I am sorry. So very sorry, for the way your face would fall when you would have to watch me sit there, so isolated, physically and mentally. I wonder how many times you stood behind me, watching my still, small figure staring out into nothing, before you actually approached me. Ten times? Zero times? Either way, I am sorry that I forced you to constantly try so hard: so hard to bring me back to life.

I am twenty-one when they find the tear in my knee that will require surgery. Like several times before, you are at my side in the doctor's office. Once again, it is June. June seems to be the month my body finally gets the attention it strives for. You do not know this, but I have the number six, in roman numerals, tattooed on my side. Six for June. Six for all the hells we have gone through together. Six for strength and six for love.

Here is the part that breaks my heart the most to imagine telling you. When you would get to this part of the letter I would hope you would be feeling strong, would be feeling how thankful I am for your love and strength, and that you would be able to take it.

It is one week before my surgery and I sit in the bathtub. Your bathtub. You are downstairs making dinner. There is probably music playing and there is most definitely a glass of wine at your easiest convenience. My mind is so lost. I stare ahead at my red toenails peeping above the bubbles. *Russian Roulette*. I now think the darkest thought, which has ever crossed my mind. I think of how easy it would be to go under this warm, delicious bath water and never come back up. To leave my life in the most luxurious place of this home. I keep staring at my red toenails and I think how sad it would be if you had to come in here and find me with my perfectly painted, apple red toenails.

I take a deep breath in.

I did not do it. Because that is when I realize what I am doing; I am playing Russian Roulette with my fucking life. I could leave my life, leave my pain and hurting heart behind, but I


would be leaving behind a whole group of people who would then hurt more than I ever could have. Especially you. You would hurt the most.

The next morning, I sat on your bed while you got ready for work. I have done this since I was a child. Sometimes we don't even talk. Today I tell you that I think I need to start going back to therapy. You look at me and your mouth forms a perfect "O" as you simply say, *Okay*. No questions or inquisitions.

Days later I sit in Maryellen's office and tell her these things. I tell her about the bathtub and as the words fall out of my mouth I feel as though I am sitting across the room watching someone else say this. Surely this cannot be me saying these awful things, *right?* But it was.

I saved myself when I did this. Maryellen saved me. Kyle saved me. My friends saved me. But more than anyone, you saved me, even if you do not know it. I could never have saved myself if you were not there all along holding my hands and telling me that it was going to be *okay*. Because you are my mother, you are automatically always right, so I believed you and it saved me.

I am six years old and it is a perfect day in Rhode Island. The sun is shining, the water is sparkling, blue and beautiful like the aquamarine diamond earrings you will give my sister for her twenty-first birthday. The waves are monstrous today because it is the day after a storm. *Days after storms always bring the best beach days*. These are words we have all grown to live by. I am dipping my toes near the edge while you keep a close eye on me. You do not go near the water because it scares you. It always has. It is funny that none of us have inherited that fear. We are three little fishes. I venture further in and overestimate my strength as a wave rolls towards me. It knocks me down and I am suddenly being spun in a cloud of sand and white, foam. You have thrown your fears aside and jumped in after me, pulling me out and smoothing my wet, matted hair out of my face. I cry bitter, salty tears and you tell me that it is *okay*.

You saved me. You saved me. You saved me. 

Claudia Pomponi graduated from Gettysburg College in 2016 with a dual degree in Education and English with a concentration in creative writing. At Gettysburg, she received various awards for pieces of writing, including this one. She is currently finishing her MSW at NYU.

Maui

By Natalie Plotkin

A Salamander from the Ether strolled down the shore of a black sand beach. He ran his hands up and down his front and worried that his skin was matte-ifying in the breeze. Behind him, a tail the shape of a massive spatula left a thick trail in the sand. Two eyes on either side of a spoon-shaped skull were lost in the middle distance. From the looks of it, he was locked in pensive frustration. You see, the Salamander had been dragged from his familiar wont by an acute unhappiness throbbing in the back of his mind.

Back at the Ether, the Salamander had a reputation among his coworkers for his melancholic disposition. When the other cupbearers inquired as to the Salamander's well-being, he would catapult into a confusing orchestra of hems and haws that fell uncomfortably onto the lap of his listeners. Indeed, before the Salamander had even gotten to relaying the explanation for his humor, he'd made whoever he was speaking to disinclined to listen.

"Oh wow, look at the time," they'd say, "I've got to hold some canvas for Diana," or, "I'm pretty sure I'm assigned to fan Shiva in about ten minutes," or, "Shoot buddy, I've got to go soak in some mud, my skin is *parched*. Can we finish this later?"

"Yeah. Sure," the Salamander lisped toothlessly, "later, later. That's fine."

So the Salamander bore the weight of his suffering silently, conflicted by its nature; even he wasn't sure why he was such a downer.

Despite his temperament, the Salamander was a good worker. He had performed the menial duties of his kind for eons: carrying baskets filled with apples, distributing the contents of ichor-laden vases and the like. It wasn't a thankless job exactly. Cupbearers were given individual, algae-covered coves for them to retire at the end of the day, rubbery arms and legs that did not tire while they worked, the guaranteed security of the Ether, and—for most—teeth that better accommodated talking. Our Salamander, however, had waived his privilege for teeth. For what reason, no one was

sure. Still, he had the cove, which he quite enjoyed, the malleable extremities, and all the other trappings of comfort the Ether could offer.

Perks aside, it's important to note that Salamanders were widely regarded as the least important fixtures of the Ether. The totem pole was stacked as so: gods on top, then their attendants, foxes and rabbits, then their paladin carriers, monkeys of varying sizes, then their note-takers, ravens, and finally, on the bottom, their cupbearers, the salamanders. Centuries passed without the occupants of our Salamander's native world giving his depressive state any thought whatsoever. On the contrary, most denied his presence on the whole. Not a total loss for the Salamander; it was due to his lowly status that he was able to steal off one afternoon.

As the Salamander's assigned throng of cupbearers poured wine into a massive communal vat, he muted the squashing of his feet against the marble floor and made his way toward a broom closet tucked behind an array of decorative palm trees. Upon entering, he navigated a mess of godly what's-its discarded from eras past. The Salamander paid them no mind. He was looking for something specific at the back of the room. He stopped in his tracks when it was finally found. Oh, he thought, it had been such a long time. The Salamander stared longingly at the object—a dust-caked door. It had been out of commission for years, obscured by a massive festival cornucopia. The Salamander struggled to push the cornucopia on its side. As it fell, a plume of grapes toppled out of its mouth and to the ground, where they were dislodged from the vine and rolled every which way. The Salamander paused to ensure none of the cupbearers from the other room had detected the crash of the cornucopia with their keen sense of hearing. The uninterrupted gush of wine quelled his concern. The Salamander went on with his business, placing a palm on the door's exposed wooden edifice and willing it to take him where he wished. Where would he go? he debated, the Pre-Lapsarian Country? Shangri-la? Sheol? No, no, he would let his core do the talking instead of his head. The Salamander tentatively wrapped his fingers around the knob, drew a deep breath, and opened the door to a tropical scene in The Mortal World.

Ah, The Mortal World! A notoriously half-baked place dominated by people the size of Etherial Salamanders. They were known for their existential dread and thinking very highly of themselves. Because of this, communication with the Ether had be fraught with conflict. After a

particularly problematic kerfuffle a couple millennia or so preceding the Salamander's jaunt, all ties to domains outside the Ether had been purposefully severed. Transport doors were blocked or boarded-up or forgotten, hence the massive barricade a la cornucopia. It was widely known that traveling through the doors was a reprehensible offense. But that didn't stop the Salamander. After a moment of pause, he closed his eyes and waddled through the door's threshold. His feet sunk slightly. His skin warmed. He looked out at a charcoal shore. Well, he thought, Maui! The door shut behind the Salamander and expanded, becoming translucent. There it would wait for the hand that had called it open to once again request its services.

The Salamander turned around once, pausing to admire the easy roll of the ocean. Then he turned around again, pausing to admire the land, green and rocky and fresh. He thought, this isn't like the purple hills of the Ether at all! What a relaxing change. He shook his head, his neck, his shoulders, his torso, and stepped into the tide. Sound waves being pushed to shore—smooth like the surface of shale and warm like a flush of flattery—massaged his body. With their encouragement, and after giving his eyes a good rub, the Salamander was pushed into motion. Thus, he began to wobble down the shore in exactly the state that marked the beginning of this relation. And now that you know the circumstances of the Salamander's travel, I can better explain what transpired next:

The Salamander honed in on the flecks of sand stuck to his backside. He cleared his mind to an impressive state of repose, a vast swath of nothingness. He was neck-deep in nothing when a plump, upright figure appeared on the horizon. A moment longer and the Salamander was pulled from his torpor by the clarity of a human's features.

"Strange," the Salamander's voice was a thin hum. He vocalized consonants with the roof of his hard palette. "Very Strange." He made room for contemplation—an experience he found amusing. What should he do?

"Hell, what is that? Hey you!" The space around the Salamander's head rippled with the human's shout.

"Me?" He replied as the wave lost steam behind him, fanning out, a vague suggestion of noise distorting the view of a volcano at his back.

“Did you hear me? You! There!” And again, a rocket of vibration tumbled from the human, carving a path to the Salamander. This time it warped pieces of Maui it touched like a funhouse mirror. The Salamander hated that the human was so bombastic. Too much sound gave him a headache.

“Oh yes, I heard you,” the Salamander rejoined as loudly as he could (no louder than a running brook to the human ear). “Quiet down.”

The human didn’t quiet down. It cupped its hands over its mouth and hollered. “Hey! Hey You! That’s one crazy costume!”

The Salamander wasn’t sure what it meant by “costume.”

“A costume?” he replied, cooing aquatically, “Costume?” His steps felt labor-intensive. He wondered: was that good? Was it a threat? Should he make for the door?

The Salamander faced the ocean. He couldn’t leave until the human was gone. The stalks jutting out of the sides of his cheeks prickled when he considered what might happen if he opened the door in front of the human. It wouldn’t be harmed, of course. But if the story of its experience was marked, the Salamander would be responsible for the false impression that the Great Being in the Sky was still concerned with the happenings of the world below—which was folly. Back at the Ether, the Salamander thought to himself, the Great Being was retired, bathing herself in a communal vat of wine with the other gods, trying to forget the mess she’d made. In fact, debate about the Great Being was what had caused the hullabaloo that led to the banning of doors in the first place. The Salamander shivered at the thought of his punishment for using the door; the other gods would reclaim his cove and relegate him tasks day and night. Tasks which, for lack of any other option, he would be forced to perform with a vacant, axolotl smile plastered on his face.

While the Salamander winced at his musings, the human approached from behind.

“Hey! Hey Guy! Great suit. Hey, did you hear me? That’s a-” It reached for the Salamander’s skin, cutting itself short when it removed its hand and bore a clear, moist film all over its palm. The Salamander turned with a start.

“Oh my!”

“Oh Lord!”

Both backpedaled until they tumbled to the ground. The Salamander's hands slipped down the shore, sloshing in the tide. The other was toppled by an ankle-height dune. The human panted, chest heaving up and down. The Salamander re-moistened his skin, licking his flat fore-face and eyeballs. For awhile, they stared. The human reminded the Salamander of Elo, a god of creation - *the Great Being!* - who enjoyed the company of Salamanders more than the other gods. The thing before him shared Elo's wide jaw, her beady eyes, her flighty gaze, and her low brow - all in miniature, of course. The real Elo was fifty feet tall and seldom wore clothes. The human, on the other hand, wore a floral button-down and a pair of brown shorts.

"Are you some kind of sea monster?" The human asked, its hands pushing its body along the sand. Its vibrations smacked the Salamander in his forehead. "Are...are you going to eat me?"

The Salamander pushed air out of his nose contemptuously and lowered his lids to half-mast. "I'm not going to eat you," he sighed, "you'd hardly be digestible."

The human sat taller. His eyes grew. "You're a giant talking newt!"

In the Ether, newts were a meal-time delicacy. Therefore, equating salamanders to newts was considered insensitive.

"Newt?" The Salamander puffed his chest. He was a head taller than the human and could easily tangle its limbs behind its back if he wanted to, pin it to the ground, and crush its bones. "I'm no newt."

The human crawled backward. "Okay. Not a newt. Great!" Its words brushed over the Salamander's nose in a brittle, wonky stream. He thought this was a particularly pathetic move on the part of the human. "So, uh," its voice still shook. "Why are you here? I've been coming to Maui every winter for five years, I've never seen any...uh, *you's* around my cabana. I mean," the human continued, "I didn't think things like you existed."

The Salamander hoped ignoring the human would be a turnoff, that it would drive it away. Unfortunately, the human found the Salamander's silence enigmatic. It started to consider what it'd read on the internet about people who claimed to communicate with Jesus through their cat or parakeet or goldfish. Really, a man-sized lizard, er, thing wasn't so different. It cocked its head to the side.

“Where did you come from?” The human paced forward and sat down. Its toes touched the ebbing tide. It glanced from the Salamander to the horizon several times. “Are you, uh,” it hesitated. “God?”

The Salamander’s gills stiffened in shock. A god? He would never be mistaken for a god at the Ether. Gods and cupbearers were so different there was really no way of confusing the two. More importantly, the Salamander was one of millions of his kind. He had no notable features, save for his lack of teeth and subsequent lisp because of said lack of teeth. He was indistinguishable. Un-unique. But the human didn’t know that. The human hadn’t seen a cupbearer before in its life. The Salamander contemplated the least blasphemous course of action. Then he contemplated the most desirable course of action. He settled on the latter.

“Yes,” the Salamander said, struggling to sound profound. “I am that which...cannot be me but...that, er, I am...”

That was enough confirmation for the human. It spoke without leaving room for breath. “Wow, I wouldn’t expect uh...to be, well...you know. Then again, I’ve never been a religious guy so I really shouldn’t be passing judgement. And hey, last week a woman from Indiana said she met the Virgin Mary at a Citibank kiosk so, uh, I guess this is real. Um, sorry about all the jerking off in high school and, uh, that thing with the fireworks and—well, hey, why are you here? Scratch that, you’re going to whip me into shape, aren’t you? I could use some advice—”

The Salamander put up his hand and cut the human off. He reevaluated his position, reaching back into his memory to channel the idiosyncrasies of the gods he’d served. First, he tried Minerva’s empirical slant. He propped one arm on his knee and looked directly over the human’s head.

“You live your life...to be alive for someone else.” He narrowed his eyes. “Living is then the knowledge that...coexistence...breeds satisfaction.” The Salamander’s face remained stony in spite of his fear that the human would call his bluff. What had he just said? He asked himself. It was utter trash! Gibberish at best.

The human furrowed its brow. It nodded slowly at first, then it jerked his head as though overcome by rapture.

“Like my marriage!” it exclaimed, lowering its eyes to the ground. “But you probably know all about that...” it twiddled its fingers. “And well...other things.” The Salamander was so self-conscious of his godliness that he wasn’t paying attention to a thing the human was saying. As such, he didn’t notice when it continued, “Am I supposed to use this as a, erm, confession?”

The Salamander was feeling very put upon. He ditched Minerva and attempted to emulate the gods who donned brooms and white robes. What were they always saying? Moksha this? Satya that? Ah-ha, the Salamander thought, that’s the ticket. Look insightful, he commanded himself as he crossed his arms over his lower abdomen and arched his back. The human leaned away. No, no, that was wrong. Insight had come off as constipation. Time to regroup.

The Salamander casually brushed the sand off his legs. “Your duty is to level the scales.” He opened his mouth and closed it again, unsure of whether to include another thought. “Level the scales and you achieve...perfection.”

The human pouted at the sea. “Alright,” he said, “level the scales. Hm. I can do that.” The Salamander subdued his excitement at being listened to. A freckled hand was lifted to the human’s face. “My family, well, they’re not in Maui with me. But you probably know that, too.”

On the contrary, the Salamander didn’t know anything about the human’s personal life before or after its statement. He was busy glowering at his inability to pull Al the Judge’s virtues from his recollection. Al was a character. Always leaning against his pillars. Tenet-wise, the Salamander could only remember constant condescension about being merciful—lofty talk for the only god who let his dirty tablecloths collect in the dark corner of his temple instead of handing off to the cupbearers (i.e. our Salamander) to shake out.

“I know, I know. It’s bad.” The human interpreted the Salamander’s expression as disapproval. “My girlfriend wants me to leave my wife. Sure, fine, we’ve been seeing each other for a bit—seven years. But I’ve been married for fifteen! That’s not an easy thing to ask a guy to do, you know? And—and! My girlfriend says she’ll leave *me* if I don’t file for divorce. I’m supposed to call her today—my wife, I mean—and end things. I thought I’d get some fresh air before things hit the fan.”

The Salamander hummed, shifting into Ganesha's signature lotus pose. She was always pleasant to serve. Sometimes helped the cupbearers with their work. Refused to take paladins around the Ether. Very considerate.

"The overcoming of obstacles. Spiritual defecation. Learning to transcend...om," he searched for a word, any word, "matter?"

"Sure, sure," the human replied, "spiritual defecation. Got plenty of that. My daughter, Julia, found Katherine's—my girlfriend's—underwear in the living room sofa three weeks ago and showed her mother. I've been in the doghouse since. She knows about everything now. If I call her to end things, it won't be a surprise..."

The Salamander remoistened his eyeballs again. He was running low anecdotes. Who had he forgotten? "Erm...surprises are the spice of life."

"You're telling me." The human chuckled. "Katherine was a great surprise, too. Stone Cold Fox," the human declared, impressed with itself. The Salamander wasn't sure what was so attractive about a frozen fox. "I'd do anything for her. I've *done* everything she's asked me to do. And now this...look, I'm a generous guy, but I'm no pushover. I need to think about what I want, right? I need to think about what's right, *right*?" The human gestured emphatically.

The Salamander had been listening to the human and because he'd been listening to the human he hadn't had time to think up a truism. He scrambled to collect his thoughts. The human wanted to know what was right? Stupid question, he thought. From what the Salamander could tell from the gods, rightness meant something different for everyone. So what could he say? The Salamander settled on the thing he asked himself before sneaking into the broom closet.

"Well, what do you *want*?"

"What do I want?" The human repeated, "what *do* I want. That's a question worth answering. Uh, I want...damn." The human rested its back on the ground next to the Salamander. "The happiest I've ever been in my whole life was here. Five years ago. Katherine and I bought this cabana with my summer bonus and locked ourselves in for seven days. I didn't take any calls. Didn't talk to anyone. No work, no wife, no stress. Just Katherine."

The lulling wake trailing behind the shoreline licked the Salamander's chin while the human ruminated.

"My wife's always wanted me to be someone I'm not; a pencil pusher, a sensitive guy, a father." The human snapped its fingers. "That's the difference between her and Katherine. When I started balding, my wife made fun of me. Katherine said I looked smart. When I bought a convertible, my wife told me to take it back. Katherine gave me road head down Route Six. Jeez. You know, I've never felt more right than I do around Katherine."

The Salamander was poking a finger into the sand, noticing how the grains surrounding his skin cooled the lower he went. "Then there's your decision," he mumbled. The human looked at the Salamander blankly. The Salamander, concerned that his response was too pedestrian, let nervous energy drive his gaze to the ground, then to the sky, then back down to the ground again. This, to the human, looked an awful lot like a nod of approval. Its eyes widened.

"You're right. That's it. What's right is what I want. I want Katherine. *Katherine's* right." The Salamander pressed his lips together and endured the human's crescendo as it jabbed him in the temple. "Right?"

The Salamander shrugged.

"That's it!" The human's voice grew quiet. "Thank you," it said, "thank you." It rose, dusting off its hindquarters. "I'm going to call her. I'm going to call her right now. I'll call my wife and—" It looked sadly back at the Salamander, who was feeling delightfully influential. He could see where the gods got off thinking they were so great. "I'll never see you again."

"Yeah—er, yes."


"Never? Well, how will I know this wasn't a hallucination? That I didn't talk myself in circles until I decided to leave my family?" The human's eyes were glistening; the Salamander was jealous of their moisture. He acquiesced woodenly to its plea for reassurance, fumbling off the ground, facing his companion, reaching out a hand, and placing it, sandy and soggy, on the human's face. It left a dirty mark.

“I am that which cannot be, but that I am. I will be never near, never far. Look, and I will not be found. Do not look, and I will be everywhere.” The Salamander projected with fortitude, watching the sound he made dash across the human’s face like the flames of a bonfire.

A tear rolled down the human’s cheek. The Salamander gestured inland to punctuate their shared moment. The human understood. It ran back down the beach, presumably to its cabana where Katherine was waiting for it to call its wife.

The Salamander stepped into the tide to cool his feet and watched the human until it was out of sight. When his only company was the unperturbed white noise of the beach, he meditated. Should he continue walking? Be known as the Salamander God of Maui? One of one? Or should he reopen the door and go back to his duties? Greet his home as though climbing between the folds of a clean pair of sheets? One of millions? He asked himself, what do I want?

Before the Salamander’s journey, he thought uniqueness would be nice. But it turned out he wasn’t very good at managing the baggage that came with being unique, coming up with ideas and all. Fine, he’d leave that to the gods. So, what was it he wanted? A new home? No, the old one was fine. A new body? No, the old one was fine. A new life? Surprisingly, no, the old one was fine.

After everything, the Salamander uncovered the answer to his question in the joy he derived from pondering: he wanted a choice. And he had one! Faculty, now a heavy stone in his hand, was fine to feel. As fine as everything else. More than that, it was good. The Salamander sighed happily. He reopened the door to the Ether. He returned to the broom closet, cleaned the grapes from the fallen cornucopia, and rejoined the rest of the cupbearers. As he walked back to the vat of wine where the gods were sprawled in repose, he wondered if it was too late to ask for teeth. 

Natalie Plotkin is an undergraduate student at New York University double majoring in English and neural science. She works at a neuroscience lab conducting memory research and writes satire inspired by the questionable life choices of herself and others. Eventually, she hopes to pursue a PhD in psychology.

In Sickness and In Health

By Kim McCutcheon

Deprivation, as it turned out, was not her salvation. Weeks of avoiding food and sleep were taking its toll. Charlotte began to rapidly lose weight, developed unsightly black circles under her eyes and became increasingly distracted as her energy waned. She was consumed with worry about her relationship. It was common for her to be covered in dark bruises from bumps and falls, unable to focus or pay attention. “It’s okay, though,” she joked, “Black is the new Charlotte.” Yet, she felt ugly and worn. Her hair had not been washed in weeks, and she could not recall the last time she had taken a shower or inhaled fresh air. She decided reluctantly the time had come and quickly showered before heading to the grocery store for some supplies.

She had been gone less than an hour, yet her energy was depleted from the unfamiliar fresh air and sunshine. Being shut inside had made her too comfortable in her surroundings and increasingly self-absorbed. She was an actor playing a role in a waiting game with no control over the outcome. She had a director that she was unable to escape and had grown to despise. The ending was beginning to appear bleak. She found herself praying for the end to come and simultaneously petrified of its arrival. “God never gives us more than we can handle,” she reminded herself. In that moment, she caught a glimpse of the white envelope.

Her mood was always dark, but for Charlotte, black was the new normal. She rarely smiled anymore. Her home life was not what she wanted and not at all what she had planned. She had a relationship that was failing and there wasn’t a damned thing she could do about it. The house was always dark except for the glow from the television projecting artificial rainbows across her living room walls. The air inside was heavy and stale, windows shut tight, preserving the summer humidity. She desperately needed control, but was ultimately failing.

Charlotte spent increasingly more time in her chair and less time on her hobbies. She couldn’t recall the last time she had picked up a book. The TV would blare all day. Her chair had formed a permanent mold in the shape of her backside where she sat, endlessly staring at the

screen, not paying attention. She would drift off to sleep, but mostly she would coast in and out of consciousness, still sitting. She was afraid to fall into a deep slumber, consumed by the potential consequences. She longed for a break in the pain, but did not plan for the arrival of the envelope.

She almost missed it at first. Void of energy, she slowly climbed the stairs to the kitchen, clutching the handrail tightly, well aware that she could lose her balance at any time. She made a not-so-quick path to the coffee pot before checking to see if the dog needed his bowl filled. In that moment, the flash of white, clearly out of place, caught her attention. A simple, white envelope sat perched against her yellow daisy flowerpot in the center of the round, oak breakfast table. Her name was neatly typed on the outside of the envelope. “White,” she thought, “is the color of innocence.” The thought should have brought comfort, but why did the sudden appearance of the small white paper package fill her with such dread? She knew without opening it what the contents contained, so she avoided it for as long as she could.


The past few months had been unbearable. She knew their relationship was failing, and she had no idea why or how to make it better. She had always known what to expect, what reaction she would get and what response to anticipate, but things were different now. They were not communicating or co-operating. Her needs and requests were either ignored or rejected altogether. She was beginning to feel betrayed and abandoned. Most days she would have been happy for a little recognition. Her frustration and anxiety were mounting and she felt helpless to repair the damage. They had spent a lifetime together but now their relationship was falling apart. She was losing control and losing herself along with it.

The dreaded envelope would force her to confront the truth. She wasn't sure she was ready to accept or deal with it, but there it sat, in an innocent white envelope on the kitchen table. She froze in the middle of the kitchen floor, her heart pounding almost audibly in her chest. She could feel the blood coursing through her veins all the way to her feet. Her toes and fingertips were simultaneously pulsating with each rhythmic heartbeat. Her mouth was dry, this time from fear, not dehydration. She thought she had become accustomed to fear but she was filled with paralyzing terror at the sight of the innocent white envelope. It beckoned her. It patiently waited for her to respond, and knew she eventually would. It controlled her. It overwhelmed her every thought and

possessed her in that moment. She considered leaving it alone, ignoring it, but knew she couldn't and wouldn't. She had to give in. She had to look inside the innocence of the white paper folds. Fearing the worst, she wondered, "Could white be the new black?" Would this envelope justify her fears and confirm her dread?

She had already lost so much control and was not about to lose more. She wouldn't let it taunt her any longer. Her feet felt glued to the floor and her body trembled with fear as she cautiously took the two steps toward the table and the white envelope. Her hands shook and fumbled as she took a deep, unsteady breath and ripped at the seal of the envelope. Something inside her tore as she opened the envelope. She felt her eyes well up with tears. She unfolded the sheet of innocent white paper inside and, before beginning to read, noticed that the handwriting on the page flowed like her life-blood, only to come to an end with a flourish and unpredictable finality. The words were blurred at first, through her tears. When her sight finally cleared, she read the plain truth in black on white... in black and white.

It was the Dear John letter she had expected. Their relationship, as she had suspected for months now, was to be no more. She had known the end was near, and now, on paper in black and white, she was forced to accept the inevitable. Diagnosis confirmed: Stage 4 Lymphoma. Their relationship, mind and body, was coming to an end. Their separation, a slow and painful one, waning over months, was now solidified. Her body would no longer be one with her mind, and in their separation, she knew she'd lose everything.

In sickness and in health was a lie. 

Kim McCutcheon has maintained a long love affair with reading and writing and has an ever-increasing passion for the arts. Kim earned a joint Psychology/English degree from the University of Toronto and has worked as a Communications Consultant, writing for a Toronto-based benefits consulting firm. She presently manages national sales for a Montreal-based publisher. Kim is at her best when she is "creating" and is currently working on her first "best-seller."

The Diary of Mysteries

By Patrick Hjerten

Richard stood in the bow of the ship that floated into the harbour in Valeria. Drakken, his black and white silk monkey sat on his shoulder and looked through his light brown hair like it was looking for lice. *How can one avoid lice*, Richard thought to himself, *when one has travelled the five known kingdoms during the last four years?* He had seen the sapphire monument in Jadipuhr and the singing forests in Luthenia and most important of all survived to tell about it.

Richard's trail of thought was interrupted when the massive ship bumped into the harbor bridge. He heard the screams and shouts from the merchants who waited for the precious cargos that would fill their already full coffers and their already large bellies.

Richard caught the scent of jasmine powder mingled with the salty sea air and rotten fish. The smells intensified in the midday heat when the red sun scorched down on them. Richard felt the taste of bile coming up in his mouth. He had not eaten today. He was nervous about meeting his family again.

What would his mother say about his adventures? What would his family say? Richard thought about the diary that was in his cot below deck. It contained everything he had experienced during his travels. There had been so many adventures, so much fun and light memories but there had also been quite a lot of darkness. A shiver went down Richard's spine. Drakken sensed Richard's tension and put his paw on Richard's cheek.

"It is okay, Drakken." He stroked the monkey's silky fur. "Someone just walked over my grave." Richard took the small monkey into his arms. "My little sisters are going to love you and they will feed you dried figs until they come out of your ears." That seemed to please the monkey. Drakken let out a sound that, to Richard, sounded like laughter.

He looked down to the harbor beneath him and saw the priests of the blind God, Schmler, in their hooded blue coats. Schmler was a mean God who terrorized his followers because of the loss of his eyes. His priests, Schmler's earthly representatives, did the same. Richard's grandmother had always frightened him with the blue priests when he had done something naughty. It always

worked and he still felt a slight fear in their overwhelming presence. Richard touched the talisman hanging around his neck. The yellow tinted stone had been tied around his neck when he was born. It was a custom among his people to do this with their children as a way of bringing them luck. When Richard reached his twenty-eighth birthday the stone would turn its colour into black. All of the stones did that and it was a sign that a person had reached maturity.

Captain Rasch stood by the rudder with one foot on the ledge of the deck. When he was on water one could really see that he owned the oceans. No one could navigate them quite like him. Richard approached him to say good-bye.

“Young Richard, you are leaving us.” It was a statement and not a question. The wind caught the Captain’s long hair and blew it into his tanned face. He swept it away like you would a fly. “You’ll be back.”

“I doubt it, Captain.” Richard looked down at his dark brown boots. He was indebted to this man but he knew that fate had other things in store, at least for now. “I need to go ashore. I need to see my family. I haven’t seen them in four years. It’s time.”

“When I first saw you, I thought you would amount to nothing but you have proven me wrong many times. That made me glad and I hope you will be back. If the sea was made for someone it was made for you.” The captain looked out over the sea towards the horizon and Richard knew that he had made his peace and that it was time to go.

Richard went down the landing and accepted the good-byes from his fellow crew mates. He made his way along the harbor area, his walk more like a swagger due to sea legs. He saw the slave girls from Dascha with their traditionally long, black hair and the nose ring in the right nostril. A man with Richard’s build attracted attention and the slave girls turned around to admire his broad shoulders and his long hair tied with a string. He felt a surge of pleasure that he still got the interest from the opposite sex.

Richard ignored the merchants that tried to sell silk from Matrucia and spices from the rocky islands beyond the empire of Nomi. Everything was familiar to him and nothing seemed to have changed while he was away. There was comfort in that. But he knows that he has changed and

he was looking at everything with new eyes. *Perhaps you never really can return home*, Richard thought to himself.

He moved quickly along the streets, remembering the familiar paths he memorized as a child.

Drakken kept a hard grip on Richard's hair and looked right and left on everything that they passed by. Richard set his sights on the eastern hills where his childhood home was.

The eastern hills were a poor but proper area in Valeria.

Richard's pace slowed, his thigh muscles aching due to his fast ascent up the steep streets. Children laughed and played by the square of the Lost Souls. Richard darted through the square and paced after a couple of hundred yards. Soon a light blue house with red roof tiles came into view. His parents' house. He was home – finally, home. His heart skipped a beat as he took in the sight. Hurrying up the last few steps, Richard knocked on the heavy, red wooden door. His heart pounded in his chest – he was soon to see his family! After a moment or two, the head of his sister, Louisa, peaked through the door.

“Richard!! It's really you! What a surprise! Why didn't you let us know that you were coming home?” She threw her arms around his neck and let him give her a firm hug.

Richard entered the house and was welcomed by joyous screaming and hugs from the family members that came into the hallway. His mother took him by the hand and pulled him into the kitchen and pushed him down into a chair.

“Now, my son, it's been four years and I only have six letters. I could slap you into next week for that!” Her eyes flashed but Richard could see beyond her displeasure and saw that she was happy he was home. “Is this how you treat a mother's heart! I thought that my heart was going to give out when I saw you! And I have nothing at home to prepare the welcome feast that I have imagined that I would cook when you came home. So, by the eyes of the Goddess Belona, what are you doing home?!”

Drakken had hid inside of Richard's shirt when his mother started shouting. Richard reached for his sea bag and took out a leather-bound book with a thick string bound around it and put it on the table. Richard put his hand on the book and looked straight into his mother's eyes.

“Because of this.”

“You have come home because of a book and not because of me?!” The indignation in her voice was unmistakable.

“The book is the reason why I have come back to you. It reminded me about what is important.”

“What do you mean, Richard?” Louisa said with curiosity.

“In this book I have written down all of the adventures that I have experienced on my travels on the high seas.” Richard explained. “And in so I remembered the importance of sharing experiences with your loved ones. I wanted you to be there with me but since you weren’t I wrote everything down so that I could share it with you here and now instead.”

“But it must take a long time to tell all those stories?” Richard’s mother said. “It is quite thick, you know.”

“You should be glad of it. I am not going anywhere until I have told you every last detail.” Richard’s face shone with a radiant smile.

“That sounds good to me,” his mother said. “But before that we need to have food, if we are going to fully enjoy your stories.”

She started scurrying about and giving orders right, left and center. More than an hour later the kitchen was decked out with a feast worthy of the name. *My mother can really make miracles with what she got.* Richard thought to himself. *Her larder is always full with more than the essentials. She just wanted to make me feel guilty because I sprang a surprise on her.*

The candle lights gave a warm glow to their faces as the family members filled Richard in on what happened since he had last had been at home. While he filled his stomach with meat and his mother’s homemade gravy his mind was filled with the gossip of the neighbours. After a long session at the kitchen table he was fully sated in more ways than one and slowly made his way towards the living room. He sat down in an armchair and started going through the pages of his book.


“This is perfect! How could I forget about this?” he said to himself.

Happy about his first choice of adventure, he rested against the armchair and closed his eyes for a while. Soon he was joined by his sisters, Uncle Geoffrey and his wife, and, finally, his mother. They arranged the living room and brought forward some glasses and a pitcher of black currant liqueur. They lit their lanterns as well as the large candelabra that stood on the table in the middle of the room. Richard's mother made a small fire in the fireplace, not so much for warmth but for bringing light and the right mood.

Eventually everyone settled down and got comfortable in preparation of hearing about Richard's adventures. It seemed like Richard disappeared into his own world for a moment when he looked down at his book. He tried to get as close as possible to the feeling he had had at the moment when the event had really happened. Richard cleared his throat and took a sip of the black currant liqueur.

"I thought that I would tell you about the time we had sailed upon the open sea for several days and discovered a small island that wasn't on any map or sea chart. What we discovered there was both exciting and frightening..." The family huddled close to Richard as they immersed themselves in his enticing story.

Once more they were all together, sharing experiences and being united in the most important thing of all ...

.... Love. 

Patrick Hjerten splits his time between the Swedish countryside and London city life. He works as a freelance writer, copywriter and translator. Telling a story and writing have since childhood been very important and, in adulthood, even a passion for him.

Calluses

By Nick F. Cise

I was sitting at the bar on a Friday afternoon, sipping a short glass of bourbon, anticipating the arrival of a young college graduate. He was coming to make me a proposition. About a year ago, I realized that I was ready to move on from my restaurant, and the young man knew I was looking to sell.

I heard the front door creak open. The bartender, Willy, grinned over at me. After a few footsteps, the guy came into view. He carried a briefcase and wore a grey suit, his brown hair spiked up in the front.

“Martin?” I asked as he got closer. He stuck out his hand.

“Yes, sir. How are you?”

I shook his hand and immediately noticed something that already told me everything I needed to know about this man.

“I’m fine. Yourself?”

“Great!” he said with enthusiasm.

“Well, have a seat.” He sat down in the chair next to me. Willy walked over.

“What can I get for you?” asked Willy.

“Tanqueray on the rocks.” Willy grabbed the gin bottle from an assortment of liquors behind him and poured him his drink.

“So, how long have you been out of school?” I asked.

“Since May.”

“What did you study?”

“Double major in Business Management and Hospitality.”

I took a sip from my glass. “What have you learned?”

He paused. I waited patiently for an answer.

“How to manage a business, and how to satisfy the cliental of that business.”

I nodded.

“I’m going to be straightforward with this one.” He appeared prompt. “What makes you any more valuable than any other businessman coming in here to buy my restaurant? What makes you more capable of succeeding than the next decorated college veteran?”

He lifted his briefcase that rested on the cushion of the stool next to him and placed it on the bar top. “I’m prepared to make you a cash offer. Right here, right now.”

I looked over at Willy, then back at Martin.

“Let’s slow it down-”

“Would you take one million dollars?” Willy left the bar area and sat down in the empty dining room. I stared into the boy’s face, really trying to see what he was made of. Was he a man with a vision, or a resourceful schmuck with enough money to make any move he wanted? I cared about the difference; this wasn’t just my business, it was my grandfather’s, and I had an obligation to make sure the transition of power was going to someone who had more than just power in their pocket. I must admit, it would’ve been a lot easier if I had a kid of my own, but that’s just not how life turned out.

My grandfather, Ed Goldman, was a working-class man. He started washing dishes at a pizzeria when he was seven years old. Worked his way up to busboy, then to server, and eventually became a manager. The owner, Micky Johnson, considered him family. When Micky passed away, my grandfather received a call that Micky put him in his will. He used the inheritance money to open up the restaurant.

He told me that I would own it one day but I never knew how much work it would really be.

I spent years working for my grandfather. I grew to hate it. Endless nights as a busboy still haunt me. I remembered climbing up those basement stairs on continuous runs filling up the ice bucket from the machine. As I heaved those buckets up those flights, I questioned whether I really wanted to end up here for the rest of my life. I concluded that I didn’t. Then twenty years passed.

I finally wanted out for good. In order to attain that, I needed to find someone that my grandfather would hire. They had to struggle, because a person who struggles their whole life lives by a different code. That person has bled and stopped the bleeding. That person knows how to survive while stranded.

“Do you have a response for that offer?”

I polished off the last of my bourbon and looked him in the eye. “I don’t.”

He took a sip of his drink. “How about 1.2 million?”

I shook my head disappointedly.

“No.” I said.

He appeared puzzled, as if his plan was failing right in front of his face, and he couldn’t do anything about it – because he’s never been in a position where someone was allowed to judge him for living a sheltered life.

“My father and I have done a lot of research on your restaurant, Mr. Goldman – these are fair offers.”

“Where did you get the money to even make bids like that?”

“Well, my fa-” I stood up and pushed my bar stool in.

“Have a nice night, Martin. I wish you the best of luck.”

“You too.” He seemed confused, but eventually got up and walked out.

I joined Willy at a table in the dining room.

“Why not him?” Willy asked curiously. I looked down into my palms, then back at Willy.

“He didn’t have any calluses. The man who buys this restaurant will have calluses on his hands.”

“What’s that matter?” asked Willy.

“Look at your hands.” Willy briefly examined his hands, then looked back to me.

“How did your hands get so blistered and worn...?”

“I worked really hard.”

I grinned. “Exactly.”

A few hours later, Willy and I closed up the restaurant. We had a few drinks in us, and all was right for the night. Willy stuck out his hand to me.


“Night, boss.” I shook his hand.

“See you tomorrow, Willy.”

I noticed something that already told me everything I needed to know about this man.

One year later, I shook the same hand right after I handed over the keys of my grandfather's restaurant.

I didn't ask Willy for any money up front. We have a deal in place. There was one contingency.

"The next owner in line must have hands like yours and mine." 

Nicholas Forest Cise began writing short stories when he was ten years old. He has been committed to storytelling ever since. Nick graduated from West Morris Central High School in 2014 and went on to receive a certification in the Writing Arts from Rowan University in 2016. Nick continues to write short stories, novelettes, novellas, and screenplays.

Black Flood

By Rinita Banerjee

2.36 a.m. 7 June 2014, Lawrenceville, Pittsburgh

The sheet under Ori crinkled like the lines on the skin above the very old woman's eyes – the space between her eyelids with white lashes trimmed almost close to the lids, and her thin, white eyebrows – thread-like thin, threadbare. An old Tibetan woman seated on a narrow street side in a hill station, knitting a pair of woolen gloves. What color were the gloves? Ori had seen her while on a family holiday. She could not recall exactly where the family holiday had been, or the year on which this trip was made. How did that matter? It was a hill station though, in India, for sure. And the lines, deep rules carved to a measure, she remembered clearly. Why the lines on this woman's forehead though? Ori didn't know. She couldn't think. There were some on top of her nose as well; a flat, broad and fleshy nose, its tip like the bulbous cap of a stray mushroom. Ori didn't know. She couldn't think. Doesn't matter, doesn't matter.

Ori notices the darkness in between the lines, the troughs, within the folds of the sheet: like the pit of a dry well, darkening close to a rapidly approaching sunset. Intense abyss upon abyss. A blue sheet with white flower petals, their boundaries lined in crimson, purple and green. Also, orphan leaves in various patterns painted hither thither, as if aimlessly thrown to fall, wherever.

Blue – the uninterrupted blue like of the sky on a bright, sunny day. A vast ocean tilted, cellophane-wrapped, end to end – that blue.

Sleep does not come. Ori's eyes.

Ori never rid her eyes of the thick black kohl. On both her upper and lower lids, the kohl comforted itself, thickly laid as it was in a deep, undeterred slumber. Awakened from time to time only to be banished, it would accept the abandonment. Its retreat only meant making place for another of its kin to be comforted in the same deep, undeterred slumber. There was the relentless shade of the large black lashes too. Ori's eyes felt like home.

The very light brown of a dried Autumn leaf, Ori's irises had a glossy hue. The color of the pupil was the same as the lines above and below – black. Surrounding the pupil and streaking the

outer rim of the irises, were waves of a light sky blue. Once they had reached a certain height, each a different height from another, they had stayed there, immovable to a child's command of "statue!" Whipped to rise, the waves had obeyed the torture of never being allowed to rise further, or to dive in, and under, or fall, slide, spread, seek, return. Ori's eyes.

She raises her head; the space on the pillow her head rested on, warm, smells of her scalp, skin, hair, her shampoo, but no dreams. One could tell. Not one dream.

Ori gets out of the bed and walks to the kitchen. Switching the light on, she then turns to her right, a random stop during her nocturnal wandering. Bending towards the rice cooker, she notices a tiny roach inside it, blanketed by just a grain of white rice; the roach sleeps, like a child on its side. Ori spoons it out. It lies still, lost in sleep. Wretched being, how it rests! Oh, no! Dead, she realizes. Did the grain weigh on it so heavily? She is going to throw it down the sink, and hold the tap loose to let the water wash it away. The roach's presence disgusts Ori. She does not mourn its end. Released.

Ori rests her body against the sink staring into its metallic grey chastised off the remains of the dead. No charred bones, no ashes, no memory. Cleansed. Clean. The kohl around her eyes patiently anticipates a return to the dark. But that blue – Ori must remember where the sky belongs. She cannot quite place it in her head. Nine in the morning outside the King's Cross St Pancras underground station in London; sometime in May, six years ago?

There, she has reached. A half-smile quivers on the corners of her mouth, uncertainly.

Her hands wrapped around, across her body to shield it against the cold, hostile breeze, she had looked up at that wide-eyed, all-at-once blue of the sky. It was faraway.

But the blue she sees now also smells of bidi smoke, and garbage spilling out of bins on to the streets, under the auto drivers' chappals, and under hers; there is also spittle from the mouths and mouths and mouths full of chewed betel leaves, nuts, tobacco and pickling lime. Spittle splattered on the streets, a deep muddy brown and red and crimson, flat, like the uneven, broken back of a fly's corpse. Then her turning around to Roop's shouting her name, "Aratrika!" Bright car lights. Cold.

But why is Roop here?

A sweater, mustard yellow in color, heavy, dripping with water. And then...And before?

Roop, her best friend through the last few years of school. Her closest friend. Her only friend. Like no other, then. He had died in a brutal accident along with his parents; all in a car, on their way back from a late-night film show. Blood. Roop's shouting her name louder and louder amidst tears and webs of saliva. Stop. This face, she will forget. A persistent dream, him shouting her name. A bad dream, but no nightmare. Roop was in it after all. This scream, she must forget. Purpose. Survival.

Again, the despairing muddle and coming away from – something, somewhere. There was also a running away from – no muddle there.

Ori rubs the lower lid of her right eye, smudging the kohl on her cheek, the kohl, helpless in that moment of being pulled away from home. Ori's knuckles – thirsty, mean. The thought of Roop was that little drop of ink in a cup of water, spreading its vein-like claws slowly but certainly, twisting into whirls, then disappearing, muddying the water a little. Her lungs feel crammed inside a thick, water-heavy, wheat-dough, stitched with iron-wire. As if, as if. Wire, wire, wire – criss-cross, all over. Lungs without arms. How could breath bloom?

Tears. Dripping dough. Dripping like the mustard yellow sweater. "Aratrika!" Pause. Blank.

In the meantime, the spider. Ori lets the small, black spider climb the wall behind the trash can in her kitchen tonight. She watches with habitual stare its light-footed, assured climb. The spider scoffs at the smudge of the kohl. The grin!

She remembers, she forgets, she forgets, she forgets, she fades in the white blur of memories like the white grains of rice stuck to each other in the cooker. And then, the impression of feet made from red dye, framed on a wall. She couldn't remember whose. Blinded by the shine of the metallic grey of the sink. Piercing light.

"You're still awake?" Poupée asks.

Poupée, Ori's forty-one-year-old daughter. That's right, forty-one to be specific. Born in 1975, 1975, 1975 – Ori recites in her head. She had not been able to say that to Natalie, when her friend had visited only yesterday asking about Poupée, and somehow the conversation had led to her daughter's birth year. Thankfully, Poupée had entered the room at the time to save her from the

few minutes of vacantness that had fractured Ori's face at Natalie's innocent remark: "You can't remember Poupée's birth year! Now, come on Ori!" She had laughed.

Poupée had responded to Natalie, as humorously, "1975, Natalie Mashi! Of course Ma remembers!" She had looked at Ori with her eyebrows raised for a second, and then hurriedly asked, "Tea? I'm making some for myself."

Ori had stared back at Poupée for some time. But Poupée, following her retort to Natalie, had walked to the kitchen right away. There had been a slight embarrassment at her mother's forgetfulness. Increasingly sustained forgetfulness.

Ori's emotions were hard to decipher at that moment. She had looked down at the floor, like a student would in prayer before a school exam; closing her eyes tightly, Ori had begun to test what else she could recall about her only daughter. Her favorite polka-dotted frock – white dots over red – from when she was small, three or four years old, still kept in Ori's cupboard – she will take it out from exactly where she kept it, tonight itself. Her fight over Ori's wanting to give away a saree to Mithu, her cousin – how livid Poupée had been – hadn't spoken to her mother for around ten days! Which saree was it? The purple banarasi? Ori smiled at the thought of this annoyance, and felt proud at also being able to remember the amount of time they had spent between not talking, Poupée avoiding her mother, and her father refusing to intervene, instead supporting their daughter's indignation over the betrothal of the saree in another's undeserving hands. Most undeserving hands. It should have been Poupée's, John had pronounced, and then gone and stood holding his daughter tightly in his arms. Ori could not help but forgive John this innocent prejudice. Her daughter Poupée: Ori had not forgotten that, at least not that. After all, after everything, no matter what, Poupée, "my' daughter Poupée." She won't forget that. She won't, but she was, she won't, but she was.

Over a couple of mornings Poupée's face had been taking time to register; it had felt as if she had floated towards Ori from elsewhere. Poupée's frown had stayed with Ori. But Ori's guilt at the delay in grasping who Poupée was for a few minutes had led to Ori hugging her daughter close to her chest for some time, every morning now. As if, Poupée's closeness to the rapid beatings of Ori's heart would engrave the remembrance of her forever, never, never to be erased.

And the cupboard – John and Ori had loved that heavy mahogany, that lush deep brown of it. A marriage present. Why couldn't she remember who gave it to her? Why? Why was it so hard? Ori won't ask Poupée. Poupée, the only witness to her life past now. Some of it at least. But she won't ask her. The favour of being reminded was a burden too heavy.

John, why did you have to die? Why? Last year.

Slightly startled at first, Ori replies to Poupée: "I came for a glass of water." She neither mentions the blue sky, the feet drawn from the red dye, nor the blur. Never Roop. Of course never him. Never, never.

Poupée sees no glass of water around Ori. She keeps standing by the kitchen door, leaning on it, her hands crossed against her chest. Poupée sighs. Ori listens as she begins to walk back to her bed.

"Pari, your mother has an early onset of Alzheimer's. It is progressing fast. But Mrs Oliver is finding it hard to accept. She almost denies it is happening. I suggest counselling," Dr Jones had said to Poupée a couple of days back. Her mother was fading, she knew.

Sleep does not come.

The roach's curse?

Ori sits cross-legged on her bed, a pillow to her back. She takes the book she has been reading and half-opens it on her lap. Trying to find the page she needs to start on, she stops. Another page has opened instead. She looks up, and then down towards the book, and then opening it to the page where she has halted, sees a crude boat with a sail drawn in green-inked pen, a ball-point – its bottom faces the gutter of the book. It did not interrupt the words. Mere description, more and more and more of it. The maw of not being able to remember was growing enormous, its appetite increasing. The maw – bare, naked, dehydrated, screeching.

Deep fall, swooping in between gorges, onto a gorge. Stuck. Broken. Bent.

Ori's eyes: The pupils have grown larger, almost spilling over to join the kohl lines. A black flood is about to turn the waves rogue. Child's play, no more.

Still Pittsburgh. A hospice. During visiting hours. Poupée sits in the chair by Ori's bedside reading haikus aloud to her. Basho's. Lightning, candles, summer rains, singing skylarks, the moon – all, traced through words. Only words now. Does Ori hear?


It has been a year, two months, and eleven days since the flood. Ori's eyes have ceased to be home to deep, undeterred slumber. One can only see the crude boat with a sail drawn in green ink stuck in the glossy hue of the irises. Sometimes there is also the blue of some sky, the blue of someone's eyes. Blurred. No polka dots surface in the folds of her palms; only burnt holes in place of the dots that get larger and larger till there not is one jot of the fabric left for the palm to feel.

There are traces of Roop's howling her name again and again and again, but they no longer need warding off. Roop, a heart's vestige, no more.

Dust is settling thick and fast, layer upon layer upon layer. Intense abyss upon abyss. The well is choked with the black flood to the brim, and the water has thrown Poupée over its rim, flung her out, away, far, further. Like vomit, infected bile, then wiped off, now absent.

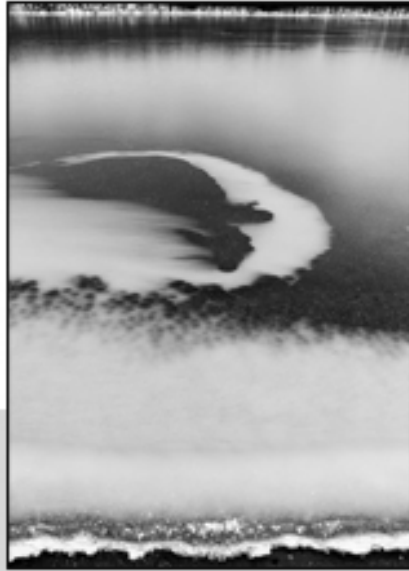
Only if one looks closely enough, one can find traces of the once-abundant kohl in the black dots at the center of Ori's eyes. Only there.

Ori's eyes. Home, once. Now, only the carcasses of walls stand, about to dim themselves to more forgetting – uncurbed – more loss, and more ends.

Defeat. 

An assistant copy editor with Rupa Publications (India), Rinita completed her MA in English from the North Carolina State University (2016). Earlier, she was as an editorial intern at the Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill (USA). Awaiting publication of her first translated work, her short stories include: 'Upon the Hour of Return' (The Punch Magazine, 2017); 'The Door'; and 'Keeping' (Tuck, 2016).

Poetry



Photos by Alexa Jade Frankelis

Through this series Alexa wanted to reflect her feeling of solitude and the therapeutic feeling of spending time in nature through abstractions in order to really study the natural space around her and play with natural highlights and shadows the sunlight, snow, and plants create. Since in Winter everything is literally and symbolically dead, it is the best time to go out and reflect, aspiring for a better year to come, and showing where there is death comes new life. All works are captured using 35mm film.

The Fall of Darkness

By Romi N. Andrews

Autumn leaves of despair

Lost moments, cherished love

The beacon dimming

The light flickering, dimming still

The lighthouse, stripped of its wooden skin

Tearing off against a black sky, cracked by lightning against

A fierce darkness—threatening to ravage the suffering beacon of light
that tries to shine through

The wind strikes the ocean waves

Inflicting terror, threatening loss

The waves respond with rage,

Beating jagged, dull-colored rocks

The field of wispy flowers shake in the wind

She holds onto her umbrella, her dress whipping her bare legs

She looks to the sky—pleading for Heaven to show grace

A ray of light spills through a dove-white cloud, its feathery fingers
swaddling the blemished sky

Heaven's merciful kiss whispers the darkness and storm away

And once again the gentle, sweet sigh of peace has replaced the black

face of Fear 


Romi Andrews was born in Cape Town, South Africa. She remembers writing stories when she was eight years old. Apart from pretending to be a fairy, or Supergirl, it was her favorite thing to do. Romi has two articles published in *Skipping Stones*, one article published on *Kidslife*, and one article published on *PopMatters*.

Falling Flat

By Cindy Lynn Brown

We do know it, I know it. How darkness grows larger and more humid and the day becomes so tiny that I almost cannot fit inside it; and yet I forget about it every summer and imagine candlelight and hot cocoa and that it is ever so beautiful with four seasons and golden foliage whirling

She is alone as she drops flat on her stomach in the mud, spreading her fingers as far apart as possible, she doesn't have to be alone, but she is, we watch with our noses pressed against the cold glass and see her wriggle and splash and soon the little, green shovel will be covered in leaves

We know it happens every year and yet it takes me by surprise, overwhelms me. The amount of work to do versus the amount of sleep and the way the first sleet clings to the tire of my bike before disappearing and that the feet are the last to remain suntanned when fall has bleached everything else 

Cindy Lynn Brown is a Danish-American poet and translator. She has written six collections of poetry and one novel, all published in Danish. Her work has been translated into numerous languages and performed all around the world. She organizes an international poetry festival every year in March. For more: www.cindyllynnbrown.com

Pseudonymous

By Aria Ligi

I am baring it out completely, not in the niceties of bows,

But revealing-ne'er concealing, what it was.

While you laid me on the rock,

Whilst you lay with me draped and torn in the dark.

It was there, unabashed without delay,

This love I carried.

Not your fervent wish- not the mask,

Deist with your broken crown, the golden crest –


Familial pledge unbound, but the washed and naked being,

Glistening and stealing the sleep from my eyes,

The treasured pleasure of each sunrise.

My love for you- battered and torn,

By your hands, crimson and warm,

Remains -the wayward being- waiting to be born. 

Aria Ligi has been writing for over 50 years. She has an expansive resume across genres as well as being featured in: The Australia Times, The Vermilion Literary Project, New Poetry, Light Journal and Z Publications.

She Stood in Line Since 3 a.m.

By Devesh Bhatt

She stood in line since 3 a.m.,
This winter felt real cold,
The bank said there's no currency,
her life was put on hold.

There was no money for begging.
There was none for her to borrow.
People had hope for the better days.
How could she share her sorrow?

She stood in line since 3 a.m.,
No earnings for the day.
How would she feed her little one?
All she could do was pray.

There was food for begging,
But that too had a line.
She got enough for the night,
With hope it'll be all fine.

She stood in line since 3 a.m.,
It was her fifth day.
They said there was no currency.
She no longer wished to pray.

Those who could bear, were able.

She could not bear the wait,

She went for work, for mercy.

The contractor reduced her rate.

She worked onsite since 3 p.m.,

She worked till it was dawn.

By the time her turn came to collect,

Half her wages were gone.

The hunger and sweat gave sickness,

None that she could afford.

The contractor said, don't worry.

Soon all will be restored.

There was no line at 3 a.m.,

People said, the money had come.

The nation knew that few had died,

In line for a measly sum.

But none knew of another line,

Where nameless bodies piled.

Including those of women,

who came in with a child.



Devesh Bhatt was born, bred, and raised in the Himalayan Town of Nainital (India). He rediscovered the joy and passion in writing while reading over works he wrote as a child. He spends his time in the hills wandering, pondering, and writing.

We Are (Not) Seventeen

By Gina Elbert

we stand on the threshold for hours.

submerged in our senses,

one of us has to let go and look up.

not you.

January air seeps into our bones,

but there is no snow.

in fact there is only the two of

us, wrapped in shared arms and

separate dreams.

at sixteen,

i see only the front door.

it would open if i asked it to.

“may i be so bold”

sits on the tip of my tongue.


“would you please –”

the wind whistles past

singing a love song it just invented.

the first time you kiss me,
the porch light blinks on.

“Close your eyes.”

we shiver
but not from the cold. 

Gina is an undergraduate student from the New York City area and is currently studying English and Computer Science at NYU. She is an avid reader, cat lover, and crossword solver as well as an aspiring writer and librarian.

Old Love

By Mindy Ohringer

Can't find my glasses,

Misplaced my purse.

Didn't file those taxes,

Socks or shoes: which comes first?

But I know there's hot coffee waiting,

a toasted bran muffin, with low fat cream cheese.

In my house, there's someone who loves me,

Who I still aim to please.

Can't find my keys or wallet,

My lipstick has wandered away.


Everything that was easy is harder now,

I'm grateful for the man who has stayed.

I'm often asked: "Do you still have your husband?"

"Is he rich? "What was it that he used to do?"

I say: "He's a hard worker and a good lover."

Happy Anniversary, darling! What a joy to be with you. 

Mindy Ohringer received a B.A. in Political Science from Barnard College and an M.A. in Politics from N.Y.U. Her writing has appeared in "The Great Neck News," "The Great Neck Record," "The Columbia Spectator," "New Choices," and "The Greenwich Village Literary Review." Mindy writes about love, history, politics, feminism, and mortality. She blogs at thewifeinwinter.wordpress.com

Wreckage of My Past

By J.J. Campbell

another night

drinking

just another

night spent

thinking about

the wreckage

of my past

lost lovers

needless deaths

souls chased

away by an

unwillingness

to confront

my demons

another empty

glass

another tough

lesson about

running out

of time

i'm sure there

was a special

someone out

there

too bad she

never had a

chance



J.J. Campbell is currently trapped in suburbia. He's been widely published over the years, most recently at In Between Hangovers, ZYX, Winedrunk Sidewalk, Poetry Pacific and Horror Sleaze Trash. More of J.J. can be found on his blog, Evil Delights. (<http://evildelights.blogspot.com>)

The Silent Step

By Neetu Malik

softer than snow

falls death's silent step

flakes fall upon sorrow

to cover its head

comfort so stealth

it makes no sound

lulls every ache that

the soul confounds

so cold it numbs

pain with its touch

extinguishes all flames

that have burned so much



For Neetu, poetry is an expression of the rhythms of life and the human spirit, which strike different beats depending on the sounds and silences generated by experiences. She shares her writing on a few different platforms and is a frequent guest contributor to the Australia Times Poetry Magazine. She has also been published twice in The Poetic Bond Anthology, edited by Trevor Maynard, UK and published by Willowdown Books. Neetu lives in Pennsylvania, USA.

90 Years Old


By Samuel R. Jordan

A lone swan, life looming thin,
Above; still and untroubled,
But beneath; peddling woe.
circling in charming and
pointless patterns for others,
Who, with their fleeting smiles
and warm dregs embrace, left no
Time to fret on your cruel fate.
they *settled down*, as they
say, and won't let you forget.

Fortune favours the loud,
and you sir, are always
quiet; forever brooding,
Like sour termites, within.
Forever gliding, on some
quirk course; glaring up.
Now look upon those
stars, and know no eyes
wander back down. Unjaded cob; You'll start
to look your age.

Now the lily pond runs dry,
The summers wither awry;

Young drifting lantern, do not
fidget nor fright. Bleached will
be the memory, by casual dose
and daydream's icepack. As
Death's door swings forth, meek
regret shall close in like a
vulture bearing a blanket.
The ever distant mirage of

Esteem! What feats and strife lie
Beyond this water's blurry edge?
What twinkle toed delights?
What unappreciated majesty,
of some faraway morning blue?
How was life too long and
Not enough? You are wedded
To these weeds, gambling nowt
but grain. You'll become what
you loath. Now, lone swan;
peddle on. 

Samuel's Indian and Irish roots permeate his work and define his perceptiveness as a writer. Whether it be a screenplay, poem or short story, his work always tries to investigate his sense of a place and purpose in the world through literature. Currently a Film and TV student at NYU, he hopes to pursue a career as a writer, both of fiction and poetry.

Coffee Shop

By Elayna Alexandra

Strange the characters that gather here

on a Sunday Morning.

The quiet, reserved and introverted,

The embellished,

and effervescent.

The negro man, his slight body tucked into an extra-large suit in teal.

He walks in and out the double garage doors slung up in the cool summer morning

a smoke, the paper, and a rose are his accessories,

collected

and then placed

over and over again.

Stories fill the eccentric walls

and spill out onto the sun filled patio were more gather in small groups

Conversations ebb and flow,

coffee a constant line of connection at every table.

And it is a wonder how a place like this takes its place in the biographies of these characters,

these people who gather on,

a Sunday morning in a coffee shop

with blue bottles in the sun.

Laughter,

coffee,

headphones,


and the squeak of bathroom doors, where there are no mirrors inside, as if to remind us our image is

not that important, or maybe it is us, that is not that important...

That instead of individuals staring in a final act, we are all just extras filling out the background.

And here these lives, these conversations fade to create the tapestry of story woven, varied and oh so deliciously interesting and yet unknown.

Here in this heavily caffeinated paradise, lives are made, stories told, departure points reached, or missed.

And it doesn't matter if we are something or nothing. 

Elayna Alexandra is a writer and artist. Her writing is mostly unpublished but her artwork has been displayed at the Smithsonian and other galleries around the United States. After a creative break, she is returning gingerly to what she loves most. Elayna works for herself doing creative strategy, communications and business development.

Mirror

By Sway Anso


You chose to love me,
Damaged and used
You cared to heal me,
Ignored where I bruised

Before I kept asking,
What does she see

In me...

So I chose to trust you,
Damaged and used
Sharing what I have
Ignoring where you bruised

And now I understand,
What I see in you

In me. 

Not long ago, a defining moment took hold of Sway's life, and shook his take-for-granted attitude. And from that moment, and the many months of getting better, he realized that life was never about collecting, but rather, about sharing whatever gifts we all have.

She Fell Hard

By Debbie Fox

She fell hard for the tattoo artist.

Though his tool drew blood,

his velvet touch pricked her heart,

his words needled her to tears,

she pointed at him

with painted nails

and offered him her bed.

He slept alone

on a bed of nails.

Eschewing her blueberry pancakes

he swallowed a fish skeleton whole

licked her lips

inked them blue.

She bought him thirteen ambrosial

previously red roses

drained of color like her cheeks.

Biting the heads off

she wrapped the thorns lovingly

in cardinal feathers.

A speck of crimson from her thorn-torn lips

balanced on the point of a torn thorn.

She was prickled pink. 

Debbie Fox is a Canadian/American and is editing her novel, *The Jazz Funeral*. She has a memoir in *Existere Journal of Arts and Literature*.