

# October Hill

MAGAZINE



Fall 2017



# October Hill

M A G A Z I N E 

## Volume 1, Issue 2

### Welcome to October Hill Magazine

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

The works featured in our first issue of *October Hill* have already engaged and inspired our imaginations as editors. We challenged our authors to do something new for this issue – their submissions had to revolve around our theme, “A Feeling of Fall.” The essence of fall comes in many forms; it can be a time of reflection, new love, death, adventure, and so much more. Out of almost 100 submissions, as well as much deliberation and collaboration with the authors, we have selected eight short stories and twelve poems that we hope will touch your soul as much as they did ours.

It is not too often that an editor can say that he has an opportunity to make a genuine difference in the literary world. Yet, at *October Hill Magazine*, that has been our shared mission from the beginning. We created *October Hill* as an outlet for authors of new short stories and poetry whose works demand to be heard, because they seize our attention, challenge us to think, and inspire us to view the crafts of storytelling and poetry from creative new perspectives.

We hope you enjoy our first themed publication and are inspired by the submissions. One of the greatest compliments for any author is to have their work remembered and shared with others, to be discussed whether you’re at the bookstore, the coffee shop, or simply striking up an interesting conversation on the street. And, while it is far too early to determine whether we will have a genuine impact – or any impact at all – in the literary world, we are extremely encouraged by the quality of the short stories and poetry submitted to us for publication in this issue. We hope you’ll decide to join us and follow our authors as they embark on their journeys of imagination.

**Richard Merli**  
**Editorial Director**

*Cover Photo – “The Park” by Mai Tran*

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## Fiction

# The Fox

By Mahlia Stewart

Dappled light speckling the earthen ground, casting shadows on the forest floor, making it difficult to see. Smells, damp soil, vine and grubs. Rabbit! That scent, of feral warmth and dirt from the burrow. Beyond the rustle of the bush, the soft thud on the mound - a tiny heart thundering. He's been seen. Giving chase, quick steps, low profile. Darting, like an arrow loosed from a bow - into the bush, across the same mound. Quick on cotton tail, nostrils flaring. Anticipation of warm blood causing the mouth to salivate. Just a little burst of speed, prey in sight-SNAP. Dangling, strangled - vertigo and so much pain, shooting from the neck, down the spine. Breathless, legs flailing uselessly, the ground far below. Stop running, there is no forest floor, too far. Legs stopping, hanging, limp like the rest. Tip of the red brush tail sweeping the small bugs from the leaves of the bush, catching. Too much discomfort, pain. Instincts kicking in, knowing who has done this. Again. Turn the head, struggle, agony. Darting eyes, catching sight. It's her, the two-legged monster. Back to taunt him, to hurt and abuse.

She cackles, like a mad thing. It's high pitched, female hysteria. A note in the sound, can decipher, the derision and the need to inflict pain. She lowers the stick she is holding, he's lowering too, paws touching ground. Thrashing, still tight around neck, suffocation. Blood rushes, fills the sore places, burning now. Energy, flight - to thunder through the bushes like the rabbit. Cannot. Still caught, by mad thing. She leers down, tightening of string around neck. Breathing, almost impossible. Losing energy, limbs drooping, ground spinning. Collapse. Panting, can't fight. She bends and grabs neck, roughly, cruelly. Again, dangling. Drained of fight, bundled to her bosom. Darkness... Water. Vague vision, lapping water cupped to mouth by human hands. Blinking, searching - Her. She who often visits, to torment. Stop drinking water, thirsty, but afraid. Bundled in her skirts, bare legs curled around. Trapped. Rushing water, sitting by a stream. Where to escape, how to. Scared to bite, bare skin - warm, but frightening. Fingers, tickling the nose, the ears.

Flicking ears, flattening them. Heart hammering, terrified. Fingers drift up the brow. Lip begins to curl, small growl. SMACK. Pain, dizzy. She shouts, deafening horrible sounds. Can't understand, don't understand. More pain.

Cruelty, not fair. This is not hunting, this is nasty play. Need to escape, need to fight. Bare skin, unsuspecting, too confident. Too bad. Quick lunge, sinking teeth into warm furless flesh. Cannot taste, cannot enjoy - only fear. She screeches, she loosens. Legs and skirts, unbind, uncover. Free! Wriggle out, leap away! Ears ringing with the screams, the nasty shouts, fading behind. Weak, but fast - charging under low branches, through bushes, cool wind whipping face and fur. Run, and run, heart beating too fast, hurting now. Her blood, drying around the muzzle. Pawing at face, cleaning. Bad creature, bad taste. Gone now. Home. Small den, dripping with wet, smell good, smell of home. No meat today, only fear. Curl into pile of leaves, nuzzle under them. Sleep through hunger.

Bad dreams. She caresses, and then hurts him. She screams, she has sharp metal point again, pressing on him. Smell of his blood fills the air, he gasps, pants, whines. She cackles, and then she licks the metal point, her fingers, shaking, running over his fur she croons. He whines and looks up at her, then she screams again. DOOF - he awakes. Damp, wet, alone. Early morning, mildew clinging to whiskers. Stomach growling, today must eat. Find rabbits, sniff the air. Cautious to leave the den.

Graceful, careful tread, light paws on the wet grass and muddy ground. Scent of sky water hanging in the air. Refreshing, find stream.

Amber shines through trees, different sounds, different smells. Following the sound of running water, good smell - licking lips, feel dry. Cautious, looking in all directions. Yesterday, this was bad place. She is gone. Sniffing, smell of nasty thing's blood spilled on the ground. Tail drooping, dragging along the bank. Feel bad, attacking female. Small whine, lapping at water. Feel scared, feel alone. Sores under the fur itching, bruises from abuse. More bruises, more sores. Already so many. Last time hoping. Rustling in the bush behind, ears twitch. Time to hunt, so much hunger.

Hear footsteps, tense. Heart racing, crouch low to ground, listening, watching. It is female human! Move quickly to escape under bushes, but something catches. Pain. She has caught him again! Struggling, desperate, tangling in string. Wrapping legs, cannot move, collapse. Panting. Already limp, given in to fate. A face, unfamiliar face. Looks different to mad thing, feels and smells different. Awaiting, abuse, half closing eyes, breathing fast. Pain is coming, ears already flat.

Strange sound, sound like quick breath of surprise, catching in chest. Look with one eye. Female human, shedding her coat. Bringing it down to him, moving into coat. Too bound to escape, not even trying to move. String is cutting into him, now with soft human coat. Going to stream to feed water and hurt him? Panting, apprehension. Can do nothing, only wait. Off the ground now, but not hanging. Supported by female human, feel like soft ground. Not painful. Moving along human forest path, watching trees, each passing but legs not moving.

Murmuring sound, soft and rhythmic. Ears twitch, listening. Not making sense of sounds, but not hating sounds. Risking a glance, eyes darting quickly. Human mouth curves, more murmuring sounds. Nice sounds. Nice feeling. Distrust - female human is like mad thing. Sometimes kind, sometimes hurtful. Muscles tense, frightened. Prickling of sores, dull aching of bruises. Will get more soon, will happen. Fast breathing, heart beating quickly. Attempting to move, restricted. Still bound by string tangled in legs.

Sky is dimming, no longer bright. Human homes, tall and intimidating. Never venture here. But curious, something familiar. Eyes are wide, glancing at all things, head moving to watch as they pass. Nostrils flaring, open mouth, tasting the new smells. Know these smells, know these things... Don't know how. But know. More murmuring, comforting now. Only thing left from the forest, female human murmuring still the same, even in this new place. But familiar place. Human home - no opening, cannot go inside. Female human makes entrance very quickly, big tall hole human size. Inside is familiar again, why familiar? Not home for a fox. But like a home from a dream... Very clean floor, no bush, no branches, no mud. Strange ground, flat rocks, very shiny. Many coves, going inside one. Not damp or wet. Big soft rock, with lots of human coats. Nestled into, feels like leaf pile but no noise, no crackling. Nuzzling human coating, sheets. Know this.



Snuffles, tastes. Taste like human, nibbles these, exploring. Trying to remember. Feel safe, strange feeling. Still cannot move legs, still bound, but safe.

Female human watching, pain coming? Foolish to feel safe, comfortable, warm and familiar. Bad things to come... Waiting. She comes in closer, very slow, like stalking prey. Wincing. Pain coming. Ears flatten, waiting. Doesn't come. Open eyes, check human. She is reaching with fingers, very slowly. Feeling in matted fur, string moves, slides off legs and over head, untangles. Free! Not sure, laying on soft sheets. Can move? Slowly raises head, looks around. Slowly propping onto front paws, human not interfering. Standing on all legs now facing human. No challenge? Cautious stretching. Sniffing at human, still nothing. What then, female human... helping? Stay very still, watching. Mouth curves on human. Familiar. Smiling. Strange tingling, in mouth. Smile... is familiar feeling.

Female human rises. Backing away as human reaches full height, murmurs gentle sounds and slowly exits the den. Confused. Leaving? No behaviour like mad thing... Sniffing after human, smell good. Good feeling. Calm. Looking down, to launch off soft rock and find way back to forest. Crouches, launches, touches down lightly on all fours. Soft, warm short grass is nice on paws. Padding better than forest floor. A luxury from long ago. Limping towards den's exit, one leg poised, checking cautiously. Shiny flat stones, touches paw on the cool surface. Pausing, strange texture. Slipping a little, like walking on icy lake in winter. Crouching low to stones, slinking almost as flat as them. At entrance - no hole, it is as solid as before. Scratching, whining. How to pass through it?

Noise from behind, a flapping sound. Tense, hackles raised. Looking over shoulder, there is the human - bare feet clapping flat stones. She stops, watching, posture relaxed but still. Nose twitching, mouth open. Tasting the air again. Smell okay, no danger here. Turning back to entrance, scratching it. Look around at human again, communicating the need. Human doesn't help this time, she squats near to the floor, almost same level again. Places rounded thing onto the stone. Nostrils widen, saliva reacts. Meat!



Stomach is alive, growling loudly. Too good to resist, but cautious. Slinks back, growling tummy close to ground, slowly nears human and meat. Rabbit? Sniffing, already dead, no shape. No matter, meat is meat. Watches human, no movement. Safe to eat. Keep an eye. Rich but cold, morsel after morsel, chunks good size for small mouth. Too soft for sharp teeth, but meat. Not fresh kill, no blood. Strange flavour, juices.

Another rounded thing, miniature pond. Inspecting, sniffing. Seem okay - lapping cool water, taking a lot. Very thirsty. Looking up, human still here. Not moving, only watching. Familiar curve of the mouth, the smile. Vague memories. Facial expressions... Human thing. Can do it. Tilting head to side, watching human, mouth is tingling. Knows smile, cannot smile. Opens mouth instead, like a grin. Excited murmuring, not as soft as before, startles. Moving back, not sure. No shrill sound. Not like that, not so bad. Human stops making sounds, staying very still, very attentive. Heartbeat regulates, relaxing. No danger here. Sniffing at rounded thing of strange morsels, all gone. Stomach feels heavy, eyes feel heavy. Home too far, want to rest somewhere.

Warily passing the crouching human, padding with less of limping now to find somewhere to curl up. Somewhere hidden from dangers, so many dens here, many places to choose. Soft rock was nice place, like the leaf pile at home. Going to lay there, seem safe, felt safe and warm. Also familiar. Jumps up onto soft rock, feels nice under the paws, good to nestle into. Nuzzling the sheets, smell of the human but it isn't too bad. Human offered its kill, brought water in small pond - no shouting, no screaming no pain. Remembering pain, no longer nuzzling at the sheets but lifting head to inspect wounds and lick old scabs, still stinging. Will heal one day, hoping.

Darkness falls, human comes and goes. Bringing more kill, not fresh but meat. Small pond empties fast but refills quickly too. Strange, no water from the sky to fill this tiny pond. Somehow human finds it, from someplace that cannot be seen. Also, no rabbits, no bugs... so silent. Light creeps in, casting strange shadows across the den. This is time for rest, and nestling in the human coats on the soft rock. Darkness, meat, prowling, and light and rest again. Like new forest, new home. Mad thing is far away, cannot come to cause pain or hurt or cackle shrill sounds. Human has tried to touch him, but he has not allowed her. She has come close, he has growled, and she has

pulled away. Always patient, always bringing more cold meat, murmuring soft sounds that are comforting and familiar. Sometimes they make sense... they feel good, nice and warm. There is hope. Can trust?

Today human offers meat and reaches out with slow careful fingers. Watching her, busy eating, fingers are so close to touching fur but make no sound of reproach. A small flinch, as fingers brush the very tips of fur. It is a tickling, not a pain. Mad thing once ran her fingers along his nose and face, he lets out a low growl. She falters, but does not pull away, only freezes a moment.

He continues eating, crushing each morsel of soft meat easily between his fangs. The touching again, he doesn't growl. Something wet and very cold, he flinches. Sticky white paste parting his fur, it is very cool, but not painful. The human ejects more of this strange white paste from her fingers, spreads it into his skin. His sores. He growls a little, but the cooling sensation is confusing, enough to stop him from attacking. The human pulls away, pads off with bare feet to attend to usual human things. The box with the flat humans flashing, to stare at that for a time. Familiar. But seemingly, pointless.

More days follow this way, no water from the sky, no rabbits or forest sounds, just him and the human. No appearance of mad thing, only the memories, the bad dreams. Each morning, more meat, each night, more meat. Each night also stroking and sticky cold paste from the human, but this is okay. Eating the meat, and strange cooling on his skin with the human is not so bad. Not enough to attack. The murmuring is also nice, not only a comfort but making more sense each day. Can understand the meaning. Something like "It is good," or "It is going to be okay." Nice things too like, "You are safe," and "A very good fox." Human language, curious. Familiar... can understand these sounds now, but could not before...

One day, human crouches like always to stroke and then feed and to rub sticky white paste into skin. This time, finishing meat, human does not stroke with paste. Very confused, little bit scared, rising into the air. Kicking legs, cannot touch the ground. Tail waving, not thrashing. Will not bite, not that afraid. This human is not dangerous, does not make pain. But why this? "Time to go home, you'll be okay. You're all better now." Am home, don't want to go anywhere. Confused.

Outside, is very bright, loud, strange. Moving past the human homes, to the place of many trees - back to the forest. The air! So many good smells, the earth, the damp, freshness and... rabbits!

Missed the natural air, breathing in deeply. Excited!

Paws on the ground, human stands to full height. Soft murmuring says, "There you go. You're home again now, all nice and better. Don't forget me!" Already forgotten! Home again! Rushing into the bushes, excited to feel the muddy earth under paw. To breathe the smells of the forest again, the soil, the roots, the small animals in hiding. Nostrils flaring, bounding, tongue hanging out. Feeling good, feeling alive. No sores, no pain, no fear. Healthy, happy and running, the wind in the fur and the face. Whiskers brushing against the undergrowth.

Able to hunt, ears twitching, listening for sounds of a smaller furry things to chase for the kill. No more cold meat, real meat, warm and bloody. Bring to human. Skidding to a halt, muddied paws. Bring kill to human? Why? No sense to this. Survival is to make kill, eat kill, fend for self and sleep. Trotting slowly again, shoulders hunched, confused. Continue with hunting, nostrils flare, caught scent - pursue!

Night falls, the sun rises, and then begins to fall. Blissful peace, undergrowth brimming with rodents as the bullfrogs start up their song. Time again to make another successful kill for dinner, to keep going throughout the night. Then she comes... Appearing from behind a tree ahead, always knowing exactly how to find him. She spotted him too, he froze. That shrill sound, piercing his ears. She comes charging for him, he is too late to respond. An invisible netting falls about him, he tangles, buckles and falls on his back, thrashing wildly.

That mad cackling starts up, she approaches slowly, formidable in her sheer size and skill. "Don't run from me, you stupid creature. Don't you love our little games?" Sense! These sounds made sense, but they are wrong and terrible. Not really making sense at all. And then, the pain. Already, worse than ever, as if it had been too long, the tolerance was gone. Agonising pain. "What do you think you're doing?" Another voice, usually a soft murmuring voice, gentle and quiet and warm. Now not so much, overridden with a cold fury. The human with the morsels and soft rock. She appeared through a clearing between the bushes. "Are you hurting that fox?"

"Fox?" The tone of mad derision. "This stupid animal? It's not worth your concern. It's a bad fox." A mad cackle. Pain shooting up the spine, through his limbs. What was that supposed to mean? Hard to think through the pain.

"Stop that! You're insane! What are you doing to him?" Now this voice, once so calm, low-spoken, just as menacing and shrill as the first.


Heard a scuffle, and simultaneously the pain stopped. The screaming started up, and a thudding, some gasping. The humans were fighting, distracted. Clawing at the invisible net, a ripping sound, gratifying feeling of tearing under his claws. He was free! Though that wasn't it, he almost fled - but he didn't. He turned, swished his red bushy tail and regarded the two humans, they seemed to be battering each other like wild things. Fighting over a long steel pole with a pointed tip. His whole body rippled at the sight of it. The source of his pain only moments ago. He'd been told he deserved it, long ago. This sort of treatment, this sort of pain. He was thinking clearer than ever now. Why had he taken it? Why had he allowed himself to be brought to this level? Not even human.

The woman who had taken him in fell backwards, pushed by she with the weapon of torture. The steel rod with the sharp end was raised into the air, its point glinting in the last of the sun. She was laughing hysterically, and crying all the while. Madness babbling from her crazed lips. Accusations, justifications, pleas for forgiveness and yet threats of vengeance. There was no making sense of it, it was purely terrifying. The ravings of a mad woman, violent and disturbed. Then came down the steel - it came thick and fast, target set. This time the intent was lethal. The end to this miserable cycle, finality at last, let it end. He closed his eyes, mustering all the pain, the torment - ready for it to vanish in the instant the steel connected with his body.

SCHLICK. And then he held it, gripped by the middle, blocked mid-descent. There he crouched, between the fallen and the tormentor, his hand clutching the cold steel rod. His human hand. The crazed woman stared down at him, mouth hanging wide. He looked down at himself, two legs... no tail... human. Looking back up, he met her stare, and held it for a time. "Now you see me," he growled. "For what I was all along. Not your prisoner, not to be hunted down by you like an animal anymore. I'll take no more of this from you. I have a life to live, as a man."

It seemed she couldn't speak, her words had completely forsaken her, spent in the ravings of madness, tangled and stilled by her own toxic deceit. He continued to watch her, basking in his own transformation and clarity - his re-claim on his own identity and sense of self. He was stronger. His sores had healed, his scabs had gone, so had his bruises. He felt comfortable in his own skin, and it felt like it had been an eternity since he had felt that. Too much time spent as a fox slinking through the woods, being haunted by a ghost, and repeatedly hurt by it as well. But as he stared, he realised then that's all she ever was. A ghost of a past he had finally overcome. She faded from his very sight, finally beaten, gone into the netherworld where she belonged. He was left crouching among the bushes, holding a long steel pole over his head.

A groan from the forest floor just behind him. He startled; if he still had hackles, they may have rippled in surprise. Spinning in his crouched position he recalled the woman who had shown him kindness, nursed and nurtured him patiently - and it seemed she still hadn't given up on him. He reached down into the bushes, felt something soft and pulled it out into the open where he could see her. He sat her upright, grinning expectantly. Wide eyes stared back at him, searching, analysing, trying to make sense of things, who he was. She blinked, and then looked around in confusion. "The fox?"

"Is gone," he told her, and pulled her into him, ignoring the muffled exclamations. "And so is She." 

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## Two Hot Ciders

By Hannah Levine

As I watched the first snowflake drop, I thought back to the beginning of fall--that perfect fall unlike any I had previously had. I didn't want that autumn to end, but there I stood, snow drifting to the ground around me, sticking to my socks and making my hair sparkle. I stuck out my tongue at one particularly twirly snowflake, closed my eyes, and remembered how it all started.

That Saturday began like so many others: alone in my bed imagining a different life. I pulled up my wool socks and carefully balanced my teacup on top of the prettiest book I owned, which I conveniently placed perfectly beside me, and imagined another pair of feet beside mine with a second cup of tea. I wanted my life to look like one of those perfect movies. I wanted to be the girl who falls in love with the guy over something cliché and basic like clumsiness and pumpkin spiced lattes. I wanted to fast forward cinema-style to a perfect life together, happily in bed kissing and snuggling in nothing but Calvin Klein underwear, wool socks, and warm hugs. I wanted my life to be like an Instagram picture, frozen in time to the most beautiful moment. Of course, that wasn't my life, and until that day I never believed it really would be, but for just that moment, alone with my teacup and picture-perfect book, it did the job.

I was supposed to meet my cousin Lee-Ann for brunch, but when she called, I had already decided against it.

"Sorry, but you know how it is when you go a little too hard on a Friday night," I moaned, trying to sound as sick as I could.

I was surprised she believed me, considering I spent most Friday nights alone in my apartment in bed before eleven, which, after all, is exactly what I had done. Still, I didn't want to go. Instead, I let her eat her cinnamon waffles alone and pretended to be hungover while I watched the sun peek its rays between my blinds on the special moment I'd carefully crafted.

I stayed that way until the sound of my stomach growling was louder than the TV. I checked my fridge and found a carton of milk so low I wouldn't be able to have a full bowl of

cereal, three slightly shriveled lemons, and some string cheese. I knew I should've gone to the market the day before, but I'd made the mistake of coming home from work first, and my apartment was so warm and snuggly, and outside was so cold and crisp, it's no wonder I got stuck in my bed. I grabbed a string cheese and bit the top off as a small cheese rebellion while I shimmied into the jeans and T-shirt I'd thrown on my chair the night before. Then I grabbed a jacket, some boots, and a hat to cover up the grease in my hair. Thank goodness it was fall and I looked like a chic fashionista rather than a hungry postgrad regretting her decision to skip waffle day.

I meant to go to the market, but the smell of freshly fried donuts and pressed apples wafting over to me from the cider mill beside it drew me to them. I looked around the mill. It was a true fall kind of busy that you only see during the first weeks of fall. An old man strummed his guitar while little kids ran around with roasted corn and caramel apples and ducks pecked at their feet and puppies snipped at the ducks.

I'd never been to the cider mill alone. Even as an introvert, I'd never felt comfortable going certain places by myself, and the cider mill always felt like an experience that was meant to be shared with your closest friends. Still, there I was, standing before the great big wheel with cool water splashing on my face, alone. I stood there looking at the wheel turn, trying to decide how many donuts would be too many for one person, when two hands covered my eyes.

"Guess who?!"

They were boy hands, not quite man hands, soft and big, and on my face. I panicked. My muscles immediately tensed up, and I could feel my shoulders arch in fear. My heart raced. I hadn't recognized anyone there. I turned cautiously to the boy, and he pulled his hands away quickly, as if he'd just been shocked by an electric current.

"You're not who I thought you were!" he exclaimed, crimson flush creeping up his cheeks.

I smiled in relief. He wasn't a threat. He had just made a mistake. He was cute, too. He had scruffed up hair like a Jack Russell Terrier, blue-green eyes, and a smile that was all teeth.

"Don't worry about it," I said, holding my hand over my still fast-beating heart. "I'm totally fine, just got a little scared."



I thought that would be the end of it. At the same time, I thought about how much I wished I were the girl he was looking for, and I wondered who that girl was to him. I turned to leave, but suddenly his hand was on my arm, gently tugging me back. His smile, so vibrant before, was pulled down in a frown.

“I hate that I scared you,” he said. “Can I make it up to you?”

I looked at him again and tried to decide how I felt about the situation, but before I could make up my mind, he beamed again and pulled me away from the water wheel taking my hesitation as a yes.

The line was long to get cider, and while I would’ve groaned and given up had I been alone, he didn’t seem to mind. We took our place at the end behind a rowdy family and stood in silence for a few minutes, listening to the kids in front of us argue about the validity of nuts or no nuts on caramel apples before he turned to me and reached out his hand.

“Jon,” he said, and he took my hand in his.

“Amy,” I replied, holding his hand just a bit longer than I knew I should.

A leaf fell from a tree above us. It was red and brown with a few green spotted remnants of summer, and the sun had toasted it to just the perfect amount of crispiness. We watched it fall together. It had barely hit the ground with a soft crunch when a little boy with face paint and a donut jumped on it.

“Boy,” Jon whistled, trying to ease the tension of two strangers standing in line together.

“That leaf didn’t stand a chance with that kid around!”

I smiled, unsure of myself, and nodded.

He laughed at me. “You’re very serious ya know,” he said, nudging my arm with his and lingering just long enough for me to notice that he smelled like he’d just come from a house swirling with the scent of homemade pumpkin pies. I reflexively licked my lips and leaned into him, then cringed in embarrassment at his knowing smile.

I hadn’t spent this much time alone with a boy in years. As it turned out, the quirky, clumsy girl with bangs motif only really works on TV. Jon made it easy, though. He jumped from topic to topic as if he were skipping through a park and not stumbling through a conversation with me.

“It’s so nice out today!” he exclaimed. “No wonder we both ended up at the cider mill, am I right?!”

“Yeah,” I replied, and the conversation momentarily grinded to a halt.

Jon didn’t stumble for long, though. He quickly recollected himself and kept going.

“Yeah is right! Okay, what classes did you wish you’d taken in school?” he asked. “I always wanted to take a coding class so I could program the next big robot to take over the world. That, or poetry.”

I could tell he expected a laugh, but I was too nervous. He was so cool and collected, and I was so the opposite. I wanted to respond with something witty and unexpected, but all I could muster was, “Um, astronomy.”

Jon didn’t mind.

“Astronomy? Cool! I love Star Wars!”

I nodded. I’d never really met a boy who didn’t love Star Wars.

“So what are you gonna be for Halloween? I’m going to be Jon Snow, ya know, from Game of Thrones? We’ve got the same name so it only makes sense, plus he’s a badass with a great butt the ladies love!”

I laughed. Jon Snow was one of my favorite characters, and the Jon in front of me would be a solid match for Kit Harrington. Jon smiled.

“Finally, a laugh!” he exclaimed victoriously, nudging me playfully as I covered my mouth.

The more time I spent with Jon as he rambled on, the more I relaxed, and the more I realized the anxiety that usually brews in my gut in these situations wasn’t there. I felt totally comfortable, and none of it made any sense to me. Jon was a stranger looking for some other girl, and yet, he was spending all of this time with me, talking to me like I was interesting and making me laugh about the silliest of things.

Jon frowned at me again. “You’re thinking too much, again. I can tell!”

Again, I laughed. I *was* thinking too much.

“I know the perfect cure!” Jon dazzled me with his smile again and sprinted away, leaving me in perfect confusion and loneliness. I lost sight of him as he weaved his way in and out of the

line before stopping somewhere beyond a family with two strollers and a crying baby. I was afraid to leave the line, but I felt like I was about to be punked. *Check out this stupid little girl who thought she was clicking with this really cute boy we hired to embarrass her!* I heard Ashton Kutcher say in my head. Dread began to ooze out of me. I hugged my arms and shrunk into myself, waiting for Jon to return, but without any real hope.

But, then he came back. I quickly unfolded my arms and tried to look like I hadn't just worried myself into a frenzy. He was holding a greasy bag full of cinnamon donuts. "I bought these from a kid at the front of the line who looked like he was going to murder his little sister for singing! Now we have a snack while we wait, and he has five crumpled dollar bills worth of distraction!" he said, and shoved a donut in my hand, licking the cinnamon sugar off his fingers.

At Jon's urgings, I took a bite of my donut. It was the best donut I'd ever had, warm and soft on the inside, crispy and sweet on the outside. I sighed and smiled as I let the cakey middle dissolve in my mouth.

Jon finished his share of the donuts in two minutes while I savored every bite. All that was missing was some warm apple cider to help wash them down. We'd moved up in the line, but four couples and three families still stood between us and the front door. Now, we were standing by a small farmer's stand full of fall flowers, honey, and gourds to buy. There were three barrels of sunflowers, my favorite flower, so even though I knew it was rude to look elsewhere while someone was talking, I couldn't keep my eyes off of the big blooms in front of me. Jon followed my gaze. He handed the woman working the stand a twenty-dollar bill. "Give me as many sunflowers as this will buy."

A moment later I was standing with my arms full of bright yellow sunflowers. "You didn't have to do that," I said. I was beginning to think he'd done more than enough to apologize for frightening me.

"I did though," he replied. "Sunflowers suit you."

I could feel the blush blooming in my cheeks.

We took a few steps forward. We were finally at the door. Jon held it open for me and waved me ahead like an overzealous butler. I giggled as I walked before him, mock curtsying as I

passed. Then Jon rushed ahead of me to get to the hunched over old man behind the counter first.

“Two hot ciders,” he requested. Then he turned to me, “I always like the hot kind.”

I blushed even more as I sipped my cider, hoping the steam from the cider would provide a good enough excuse for my flushed cheeks. We left the cider house and found a bench by the stream. A duck pecked at our feet for a moment, and we both watched. Then Jon turned to me.

“So Amy, I think this was a pretty perfect first date.” I cocked my head while he continued. “Therefore, it’s only natural that we continue this love-at-first-sight experiment and go on another. The annual Halloween hayride is next week. Be my date.”

It wasn’t really a request. He knew I’d say yes before I even did. I didn’t bother to hide my surprise. First date? This wasn’t a first date; this was an apology. Then again, the playful nudges, the long line, the conversation that had grown as easy as talking to Lee-Ann, the donuts, the sunflowers, the cider, and that moment he called me hot--it did kind of feel like a first date. And I couldn’t help but think of coming home with hay in my hair from stolen kisses in the back of a hayride with this perfect boy beside me.

“What about the girl?” I asked, uncomfortably remembering how this whole thing had started.

“What girl?” he replied, completely and utterly confused.

“The ‘guess who’ girl,” I whispered, afraid that if I reminded him he’d take back his offer.

“Oh,” he chuckled. “You’re the ‘guess who’ girl,” he said, making air quotes around the “guess who.” “I saw you from the hotdog station and had to come over, but I wanted to be cheeky and clever or something--isn’t that what girls like?--so I made that other girl up. Glad it worked and you didn’t press charges for harassment!”

I stood in shock. There was no other girl. *I* was the guess who girl. In that moment, a spooky hayride with Jon sounded more than perfect. “Me?” I asked, still not believing it.


He smiled and kissed my cheek.

“First snow, eh?”

Jon slid his mittened hand into mine and handed me a thermos of hot cocoa.

“Don’t get me wrong, I love the snow. But that was a pretty good fall, I’d say,” he said.

I beamed at him as a snowflake fell on his nose. Then I stood on my tiptoes and kissed the spot where it had melted upon landing.

“Yeah, pretty good fall,” I replied, laying my head against his chest and hugging him tight, the smell of two hot ciders whirling around my memories of the most perfect fall. 

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# The Pessimist's Daughter

By Maggie Lewiecki

I live in a Southern Gothic novel. Somewhere in author heaven, Eudora Welty is knowingly smiling as she watches this year's Thanksgiving play out like a scene from one of her wry-est short stories. Every family gathering, whether it's a baptism or Christmas, has an underlying tension. Even someone with no knowledge of my family history can hear the rattling of ammunition in the chamber of every loaded exchange.

Every family has a unique history of slights, both imagined and actual. Much as we like to profess, ours is no different and every time we get together is an addition to and a culmination of ours. We're walking a taffy tightrope: sweet with a foreboding danger as it's stretched from both ends. Speaking of it would constitute acknowledgment of the ever thinning surface we're on. We will enjoy our Thanksgiving together, so long as no one points out the vitriol spilling out of every pore.

My grandparents' house is the same as always. The window boxes are overflowing with fading summer flowers: pink peonies, yellow zinnias, and deep purple dahlias all now just shadows of their former grandeur.

My mother briefs me on the rules for the day as we walk up the yellowing tree-lined path to my grandmother's freshly-painted powder blue front door. The rules are the same as they've been since I could speak, but a refresher course surely can't hurt.

I am not to allude to drinking, imply that I in any way am aware of the existence of alcohol, or (heaven forbid) drink even sparkling apple cider within ten square miles of my grandmother. There are similar rules for tattoos (like the one on my left shoulder), piercings (like the one in my nose), and mixed-metal jewelry (my grandmother thinks mixing gold and silver is a tacky tragedy). If I break any of these rules, our bough of the family tree will wither.

"I know it's ridiculous, but it's easier for everyone if you don't rock the boat," my mother tells me. She knows the consequences; she's been part of this family a lot longer than I have. Her

caution has paid off over the years. So long as I don't do anything horribly uncouth this year like put my elbows on the table or take the last dinner roll without making a show of offering it to everyone else, we can still be the part of the family that made something of ourselves, even if I was born in "The City".

The front door creaks as we enter. The women all wear linen pantsuits with orthopedic shoes and printed cardigans while the men wear plaid button-up shirts tucked into jeans. A crowd of various aunts and uncles surround me to ask "how I've been" and "how my love life is going." Whatever answers I give will be passed around every Methodist church in a fifty-mile radius. Small-town rumor mills have to start somewhere.

My grandmother is talking about taking out the back wall of the kitchen, although she's been talking about that for as long I can remember.

"I just think it would open up the space so much more," she says for what must be the millionth time. "It just feels so closed off."

Aunt June *still* isn't speaking to Uncle James. She hasn't since James married "that harlot" Susanne. Susanne slept with June's boyfriend back in high school and June has hated her ever since. My grandmother, ever vigilant, has seated the two of them as far apart as possible.

"My Susanne has come down with a terrible bug. Poor thing just can't make it to Thanksgiving this year," Uncle James tells us.

"That one's been going around town," my grandmother says.

"Oh, what a shame," Aunt June says with no remorse whatsoever.

We join hands to say grace, my grandfather's lazy drawl filling the spaces between us like butter in the pores of a dinner roll. The little cousins giggle when they open their eyes and see each other across the table also not following the prayer as they should be. My grandfather pauses and smiles indulgently and presses a benign finger to his lips while Aunt Nancy frowns and shakes her head at her nieces and nephews.

I couldn't be happier when that last "amen" is spoken punctuated by gentle hand squeezes on both sides. Everyone holds forks at the ready; it's time to eat. I take a moment to look out at the spread that my grandmother has slaved over all day, loudly refusing help at every point. Creamy



potato casserole, green beans with bacon, and perfectly golden dinner rolls are all laid out on my grandmother's deep wood dining table. Not even the vegetables are vegetarian where I come from. Plates are passed around the table, everyone piling some of whichever dish is closest to them onto each until you've gotten your own back. Say what you will about Southerners, but you can't say we aren't polite.


"Marjorie, you'll just have to give me the recipe for this," great-Aunt Carol says between bites of dressing.

"I'd be glad to," my grandmother replies with a smile. Whether the smile is from pride or because she knows that great-Aunt Carol can't cook her way out of a brown paper bag is unclear.

As the meal winds down, we retreat into the den to sleepily watch the Cowboys and then the Longhorns lose yet again. If there's one thing that we can agree on, it's that the Cowboys are going to have to start running the ball if we're going to get anywhere this season.

By the time family members begin to take their leave, at least four aunts are ready to scream after an entire day of insults hidden under four layers of indirect politeness, each punctuated with an indulgent "bless your heart." They wouldn't dare, though. Composure must be maintained. Instead they all smile with a visible tightness both around the eyes and their feathering lipstick. Each will be a martyr in her own story of today. Hugs are exchanged and lipstick marks from smacky kisses are left on every sleepy child's cheek.

"We should do this more often!"

"Well, Christmas is coming soon!" 

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**Maggie Eliza Lewiecki is a Texan living in New York with an intense fascination with the ins-and-outs of the culture of the American South. Maggie's family would like to insist that nothing she writes is based on her actual family, but to say that would be disingenuous of her.**

## **Doom's Chapel**

**By Lawrence Weill**

The cemetery nestled close to the bottom of a long, slow hill, partly hidden by great grey-barked hickories at the edge of the grounds and a scrub of cedars just outside what remained of the old, spiked iron fence. The markers, colored in drab pastels of yellow and green from years of lichen growth, absorbed heat from a late summer day. At one end of the old graveyard stood a weathered, peeling white chapel with a sign on it proclaiming it Doom's Chapel. No path led from the gravel road that passed nearby the cemetery.

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Rainwater plodded down the hot, dusty grey lane. The just-beginning-to-set sun still glared down at him and into his eyes, and Rainwater cursed his mistake at trying to take a shortcut to the highway which led to his being lost now. He knew better than to get off the main road. This old gravel lane seemed to go on forever. He had figured this road would lead to the U.S. highway and from there it shouldn't be too difficult to catch a ride south, maybe as far as Tennessee, by night. But now it was clear the road only went farther and farther back into the country, and all Rainwater found along the way were fields of corn and cattle and, occasionally, a corpse of trees hanging over the road where it bent to cross a creek by either ford or wooden bridge or to meander some long-forgotten property line. At least he had found water in a stream that appeared to be clean, but Rainwater couldn't be certain. There was always the chance that it flowed through a pasture upstream, or a field that had been sprayed with insecticide, but he had little choice. The day was hot. He was sticky from perspiration from his too heavy clothes and from lugging his pack, which seemed to weigh a hundred pounds in the moist-warm September air.

Rainwater had company as he walked: red wing blackbirds sat on tufts of grass, barely bending the stalks, giving the white-headed traveler an "okalee!" as he trudged down the road; groundhogs fussed, hunched over some piece of digging and stood up to watch the old man pass;

cows looked up slowly as he passed, watching with disinterested eyes, chewing slowly, steadily; lizards sunned themselves on the gravel of the road, scurrying off to the side and into the tall weeds as the traveler marched on. He had not seen any people along the road, not even a farmer working in a distant field. Now the light was beginning to fade and Rainwater wished for any sort of shelter to rest in for the night, but there were no barns or houses or sheds anywhere in sight.

Rainwater's stomach ached from hunger - he had not eaten since he had visited the soup kitchen at the Salvation Army in Greenville that morning - and now he would have to sleep outdoors. He tromped up a hill. He never should have taken a ride in the back of that farm truck. The farmer had let him out at the edge of nowhere and now he was lost someplace in far western Kentucky. He really had no idea where he might be. But any more, any ride was a relief, even one in the back of a dirty farm truck was better than walking, although he still had had to sit in the back while the farmer sat alone in the cab. There just wasn't any trust any more.

As he reached the top of the rise, he stopped and dropped his pack on the gravel. He reached down and grabbed a strap and dragged it off to the side, although he had seen no traffic since he had left Lamasco and made the mistake of taking this little road off into no place. He reached into his pack, took out a battered pack of cigarettes and lit a partially smoked butt. He hated spending what little money he had on cigarettes, but it was the one vice he allowed himself. He sat by the edge of the road, a little stand of trees behind him, and beyond that, yet more corn, and before him the road, winding on down the other side of the hill. He smoked his cigarette in the first dusky light of the beginning evening. A bright moon rose behind him, almost full. Rainwater turned and stared at the moon, dragging the smoke out of his cigarette. He stood up, dropped the spent butt onto the road and stepped on it. It was then he saw the tiny building at the bottom of the hill where the road turned and headed for still another creek.

Rainwater yanked up his bag and hustled stiffly down the road. If someone were home, he could perhaps find them just cleaning up after supper and glad to spare some leftovers with a man of the road. The light was beginning to fade more quickly now. Rainwater hurried to reach the bottom of the hill. He thought it odd that no lights came on in the house. When he walked around the turn in the road, the tiny structure appeared to be empty. He was disappointed, but decided at

least he might find shelter for the night. Stepping now past the row of cedars that had partially hidden the building from his view, Rainwater stopped suddenly and dropped his bag again and stared at the little broken down chapel surrounded by an array of marble and granite markers leaning every which way and largely overgrown with Johnson grass and thistles. The sign hanging uneven above the door proclaimed it as Doom's Chapel. Doom's Chapel? Really? Truth in advertising, he supposed. Rainwater shook his head. The light was purple-grey now. Rainwater walked through the little cemetery, resigned to attempt to sleep within whatever protection the chapel might provide. He dragged his bag behind him. As he approached the site, stepping high over the weeds, his foot clanged on the remains of the old iron fence, twisted and destroyed by the extraordinary force that is a combination of time, rain, wind, sun, and disrepair. He was not excited about sleeping in a graveyard. It wasn't that he was superstitious - or at least he didn't consider himself superstitious - but he just didn't like the idea much. And Doom's Chapel? It just seemed a bit spooky.

When he walked past the first marker, he leaned over and read the inscription: Wm. Doom b. 1842 d. 1865 and below that in a small semicircle: SGT First Kentucky Brigade. Rainwater could barely read the words. They were washed out some and the dusky light made him need to kneel now before the marker to read it all. Clearly, it was a very old cemetery. And the name... He resolved to try to read some of the other stones, but after he had inspected the chapel.

Rainwater pushed on the fading wooden door, and it creaked but did not move much. He pushed it harder, moving it some, but something blocked the path the door would take. When he had pushed the door far enough, Rainwater slowly peered around the edge of the door until he could see in. It was almost dark, but he could see that the chapel was littered by the remains of an old pew, destroyed by vandals. There were chains and pieces of rope, perhaps used to place markers. What had blocked the door was a chunk of granite from one of the markers, broken off and hurled through the window perhaps by teenaged boys who saw the old chapel as an oddity and nothing more. Rainwater pushed the door harder and managed to open it enough to squeeze himself through. When he stepped in, a barred owl called loudly above him as it left the rafters and flew out through a hole at one end of the chapel, the suddenness of the sound making Rainwater's heart

pound. The owl sat in one of the hickory trees at the edge of the cemetery and hooted at Rainwater for disturbing him. Inside the chapel, it was nearly dark, the windows being partially boarded up except for the one broken through by the slab of granite, but there was a spot in a corner that seemed clear enough to rest on. Rainwater scraped away pieces of debris and glass with his boot, then spread a frayed old blanket from his pack on the floor. It certainly wasn't the Hilton, but it would have to do.

Rainwater went back into the graveyard before it was totally dark and found a number of 1800 dates on the markers, and some markers that he couldn't quite decipher but might have been older. At one end of the cemetery was a long row of small stones each of which said, "Child." Some of them had dates and occasionally one would have a name but most of them did not. A huge red oak had grown up at one side of the cemetery. Beneath it were more markers with the names Doom and Curry on them. Rainwater walked around the graveyard and returned to the first marker he had seen. The last fading light fell on the stone, the angle of the light making the words easier to read. Rainwater thought there was a simple sacred look to the site. It seemed like a good place for an eternal rest. Rainwater wondered what sort of place he might end up. Some pauper's grave, perhaps. Or maybe tossed in a prison yard, if he was ever found. He shook his head to shake away the memory. He would prefer to be cremated and his ashes spread in the Pacific, where he had still so many memories of his early days in the merchant marines, his shipmates and he sharing adventures in ports from California to the Philippines. Then again, his girls were in Ohio. Ohio. One resting place is as good as another, he supposed. And in its way, it would have him close to his family. Rainwater realized he was kneeling and staring at the marker now.

"Well, Sergeant William Doom, may you rest in peace. You look to have come from a fine family." Rainwater's voice was swallowed up by the fading grasses and orange hickory leaves. He stood and nodded at the stone. "Sergeant," he said again. He had not heard a voice, even his own, all afternoon, and he let himself be kept brief company by the sound of it. A slow breeze brought cool air to Rainwater and he retreated to the chapel. As he squeezed into the door, the owl called from the hickory. Rainwater recalled his grandfather many years before telling him that the owls were always asking, "Who cooks for you?" He laughed and called to the bird, "Nobody cooks for

me tonight." He pushed the door closed behind him and shoved the heavy piece of granite against the door to prevent any other animals from getting in. He curled up on the hard floor on his blanket, his limp overcoat still on, and fell into a quick, deep sleep. His long hike had drained him. Rainwater slept deeply, his tired muscles trying to relax after the long hike he had taken on the hot road. His leg muscles especially cried out for minerals to replace those lost to perspiration during the day. He was nearly dehydrated.

The owl roosted in a hickory tree, unwilling to fight the human for rights to the chapel.

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It was nearly eleven when the pick-up truck pulled up next to the cemetery. Music was playing on the radio and a girl was giggling. Then the driver turned off the vehicle, opened his door, and climbed out. He walked quickly around the truck and opened the passenger door.

"Come on, Darlene. It's okay. My daddy used to take me out here rabbit huntin' when I was a kid. Ain't nobody comes out here no more, though. There ain't nothing to be scared of. "

"Well, then why are you whisperin', Billy?" The girl giggled, but she was whispering too.

"Come on," the boy was pulling her hand. "Wait'll you see what I got fer you, Darlene." The boy reached into the back of the truck and grabbed a brown paper sack.

"Billy Doom, I know what you got," she laughed teasingly.

"Sshh." The boy put his finger to her lips and looked around himself in mock terror. "Don't you know they might hear you, and then they might GIT you." He jumped at her, and she giggled. Billy let go of Darlene's hand and reached into the back of the truck again, this time retrieving a small folded up white quilt. He trotted over to the cemetery. "Come on, Darlene." The girl climbed out of the truck and closed the door gently.

Darlene sat on the blanket next to Billy. She wore cutoffs and a thin white blouse.

"Here, try this, Darlene," Billy whispered. "It's called Morgan David. My momma drinks it all the time."

"Yore momma? I thought yore momma was a Baptist." Darlene laughed again. She took a long drink from the bottle. "Ooh, that's good, Billy. Here, you have some." She passed the bottle back to Billy, who took a long swig as well. "D'you steal this from yore momma?"

"Shoot no, Darlene, she'd beat me for drinkin', but she'd kill me for stealin' her drink." They both laughed quietly. "I got it from Johnny Jean. He has an I.D., you know."

"I don't like him." Darlene took another draw on the bottle. "He's always fightin' and tryin' to beat up on somebody. You oughtn't hang around with him." She drank again and passed the bottle back to Billy.

"Aw, he's okay. He's never messed with me." Billy took a drink from the bottle. The sweetness of the wine made him shudder. He gave it back to Darlene who swigged a drink.

"Ooh wee," she sighed. "I feel that goin' right to my head. If'n I didn't know better, I might think you had intentions, Billy Doom." She said this louder and looked sideways at the boy in the moonlight, then lay flat on the blanket looking up at the stars. Billy watched her for a few minutes in the cool light of the moon and his eyes began to glaze over. "I just love the stars, Billy. Ain't they just too pretty?" she said after a few minutes. She propped herself up and took another long drink from the bottle. She handed the bottle back to Billy and lay back down as he swigged the wine.

"Yeah," Billy glanced skyward then returned to his stare at Darlene. The light from the moon accentuated her youthful figure and made soft her round, fair face.

"And the moon. Ain't it pretty too, Billy?" She sat up long enough to take another long drink. She had to turn it up high because they were already well into the bottle. She lay back down on the blanket and shivered. "I shoulda wore a sweater. If I'd known we were gonna sit out in the graveyard, I'd've wore a sweater." Billy watched her shiver, then leaned over suddenly and kissed her.

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Rainwater felt the nudge of voices outside and stirred.

The owl on the hickory tree opened one eye, then the other. He turned his head and looked at the two humans lying next to the grave.

Rainwater's leg, his right leg, felt a definite, painful need for replenishment. It began to stiffen. Rainwater turned and rolled over near the small pile of ropes and chains.

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"Oh, Billy, you take my breath away," Darlene whispered as she wrapped her arms around Billy's neck and kissed him. "Or maybe it's the wine." She giggled and kissed him again.

Billy pulled away for a moment. "Darlene, I want you," he said too flatly. Then he took another drink from the wine bottle. It was nearly empty now. Billy's head was beginning to spin. He reached down and placed his coarse hand on Darlene's chest and she moaned softly. Then she moved his hand from her breast to her side.

"Don't be a bad boy, Billy," she whispered.

"Come on, Darlene. Nobody'll know but you and me." Billy pressed his body on top of Darlene.

"Billy, no," she whispered. She kissed him again. "Let's just kiss."

"I don't wanna just kiss, Darlene. I want you." Billy pressed Darlene's shoulders to the ground.

"You're hurtin' me, Billy." Darlene called out and tried to free her arms.

"I don't wanna hurt you, Darlene. I wanna make you feel good, an' I wanna feel good myself." Billy held Darlene's arms close to her so that she couldn't move them. She struggled to push her arms outward with a firm and steady pressure.

"Billy, please don't do this. Please don't hurt me." Her voice was not gentle now, but firm and frightened and loud.

"Aw, come on, Darlene. You know you wanna as much as I do." He pressed himself on top of her and tried to kiss her, but she didn't want to kiss him now. He began to press his pelvis on Darlene. She struggled to free her arms, but he had her pinned.

"No, Billy! No! Stop!" She looked up at the marker they were lying beneath. "Oh," she said suddenly and Billy stopped pawing her for a moment. "Oh, my God, Billy!" Her eyes were fixed on the tombstone.

"What?" Billy pressed his hand on Darlene's breast again and began to move his hips on top of her.

Rainwater hobbled towards the door. He pulled it open, scraping the granite tombstone when he did.

“What was that?” Billy swiveled his head but he didn’t move his body from atop Darlene.

Darlene squirmed under Billy's weight. "Billy, stop. You're hurtin' me. Wait. Look at that, Billy."

"What?" He groped around Darlene's zippered jeans, but he was too dizzy from the wine to figure out by feel what he should do.

"This is yore grave, Billy," Darlene said quickly, hoarsely. “This is yore grave!”

"What?" Billy looked up at the marker and saw his great-great uncle's name. "What?" he said louder.

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Rainwater’s leg cramped hard, but he was more concerned about the voices that now had him fully awake. He hobbled himself over to the broken window and peered out. He saw a girl – not much younger than his daughters - being held down by a boy, struggling. Rainwater’s leg caught in one of the chains but he kept making his way outside the chapel to stop what was happening. Rainwater lurched out of the chapel, his cramped leg pulling the chain behind him, clanking. “Hey!” The moonlight made his grey coat ashen, his white hair glowing. He wanted to stop and free his leg, but he needed to stop this boy first.

His call surprised the owl and the owl let out a call from his perch in the tree.

"Billy!" Darlene's eyes grew wide. "Who's that?"

"Uhh!" Billy was already trying to stand up, but his balance was off and he staggered.

Rainwater's leg demanded potassium and cramped hard. He grabbed his cramping calf muscle and cried out in pain as he advanced on the two teenagers, the boy now tottering before him a head taller than he, "Aaah!" Rainwater started losing his footing and put both hands up to gain his balance "Aaaaah!" The pain was penetrating. He saw the girl, free from the boy, and he wanted her to get away before this oaf decided to beat up an old homeless man. “Go!” He yelled at the girl, but in the moonlight, his hands stretched before him, and his balance so off kilter, it really came out just towards the both of them. Billy backed up several steps, his eyes bugged out wide.


Darlene crawled a few feet on all fours before getting her feet up under her. She ran in a wine-induced zigzag towards the truck. Billy stumbled and fell on the old fence, his jeans snagging on the cast iron spikes.

The owl called again and flew to the red oak. Rainwater's foot finally untangled from the chain and he started falling forward towards Billy.

Darlene made it to the truck. "Come on, Billy!" she called impatiently. Billy was snared by the fence. He watched with terror as Rainwater stumbled towards him, out of control, landing directly on Billy's back.

"He's got me, Darlene! Oh Lord ha' mercy he's got me, Darlene! Oh, Momma!" Billy covered his eyes as Rainwater rolled off him. Rainwater worked to gain his footing, should there be a fight ensuing. His leg started to relax. Darlene saw the keys in the truck and drove off in a cloud of gravel and dust. Billy never turned around to face whatever had crawled out of the chapel after him. He finally freed himself from the fence and ran down the road after Darlene, his pants ripped from the crotch to the belt in the back. Darlene drove all the way to her house without slowing down. Billy ran for several miles before he finally slowed to a walk, then sat down in the road and threw up the half bottle of wine. Then he cried.

The moon was nearly set, its last light making the tombstones iridescent in the cool night air. Rainwater finally felt the muscle relax completely in his leg. He stood up straight. He looked at the route the young people had taken on their exit and shook his head. He turned around and picked up the white quilt and the almost empty bottle of wine. He looked down at the marker again.

"Here's to you, Sergeant. There'll be no desecration tonight, sir." Rainwater drained the bottle and made his way back into the chapel and lay the quilt atop his other blanket. The owl flew back to the hickory tree and sat. Rainwater settled back on the floor to sleep. In the cemetery, a cricket began a slow, steady call. 

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**Lawrence Weill is an author and artist in the woods in far western Kentucky. He has novels and non-fiction in print. His work has appeared in a wide range of local, regional, and national journals. Prior to his life as a writer, Lawrence worked as a philosophy professor.**

# Agnes and I

By Jack Boardman

“Gizza kiss,” he’d said. “Go on, no-one can see us.”

The red jacket is on the floor amidst fallen bed sheets come morning, like a dollop of sweet jam in unstirred semolina.

Agnes has been dreaming again.

You can spend so much time dwelling on the motives of others that you forget yourself. That’s what one of the counsellors told her. Agnes keeps all their advice, writing it down in her scrappy calligraphy that looks like hens have trodden ink all over her notebook. Combined, they make a contradictory, misleading anthology, pulling a fragile mind one way and the other, professing to both live and hide.

These counsellors, they say a lot of things.

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Agnes can’t write

aGness cant write

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Ag ness country

Ahnes cunt right

Aggie’s cunt rye

Aggie can try

Aggie Aggie oy oy!

\*\*\*

Agnes is about to break, snap from the tendon binding her to the earth.

I'm here to save her.

The Build-A-Bear store is a distressing place for anyone sane enough to see it without the inebriation of childhood. Anyone over ten enjoying it is borrowing something they can't let go. Agnes stands amidst shelves of dismembered tokens of youth and joy, limbs on the floor, glass eyes, sewn hearts. Agnes is alone.

She is unwell even from afar, jaundice beneath the halogen shop lights. Her frazzled hair on end like electric shock treatment lingers in the tips, impossible to tame in the bun at the nape of her neck. Her hair is grey, once black, like silver jewellery that reveals itself as lead when black scratches manifest with scrapes and time. A preliminary snood of loose, goosed flesh dangles from beneath her chin. Her vacant eyes filled by something beyond the room.

It's like seeing a toddler stray from its parent near stairs. You tense, watch, wonder, thinking it's none of your business. Agnes chews the wrist of her blue cardigan, growing agitated. In a store of woollen hearts and glass eyes, the violet threads loop from her clamped, chipped teeth like veins.

She catches me watching and glowers directly at me, then to my chest and away just as assertively. The first glance is a warning to me, the second a warning to her.

It's an invitation as plain as the written word and I pick up a bear, then another, making them dance and fight and finally bone. A nutshell Punch and Judy demonstration of man and woman and all the ways they fill the blank void of boredom without words. Her pupils flit around the room like aimless flies, lingering on the teddy sex show, a smile shining from somewhere within the sunken chasm of her face.

I move alongside her, matching her far-off gaze to scrutinise bear heads. 'Which one you getting?'

"Why are you bothering me?" she mumbles, checking over her shoulder to see who might be near.

"*Bothering* you? I thought you looked a bit... down, like maybe... I don't know..."

"Like what?" she says.

“Like you needed help choosing a bear.”

“You don’t work here.”

“Not my fault they won’t hire me. I like bears and I like body parts. This is a good place for me. You?”

She faces me, looking around the shop, through me. Once, twice, three times she allows her dancing eyes to stall upon me. Again, her eyes wander to my torso so I unzip my jacket, hold it open to show I’ve nothing to hide and spin. Patting my ribs I tell her, “Built the same as all of them – the bears, that is, not people. Naught but a fluffy heart in here.”

She’s not smiling, though. “Don’t usually see you in here,” she says, speaking into her palm as if giving a private message on a walkie-talkie.

“Not really my scene, if I’m honest.”

“No, I thought this was a safe place,” she says in her Welsh croak. Her forlorn stare past my shoulder makes it too severe to be banter.

“Didn’t know it *was* a scene.”

“No, I suppose you’d sooner be some place causing fires, skiving, twagging,” she says, getting agitated.

“Fires” I say as she drifts away like I’m not there.

Seamlessly she makes for the exit, still holding a panda and making no effort to conceal it when the alarms go off. She marches one way then another, startled by the approaching security guards, turning to me, her stranger, in reprieve.

Luck carries these things; with religion it’s faith, with laziness coincidence and with imagination? Divine magic.

Whatever it is, the commotion causes a woman to lose control of her pram, which barges a man’s shins who, in turn, topples into a clown selling balloons who tips and falls with a mighty splash into the water feature where people toss their coins for luck. His Disney balloons float to the high ceiling. Life is a circus and a group of lads around my age boot a fire exit door, setting off another alarm as they escape with their stolen loot.

Agnes sees none of this. A step behind each event, she turns in a circle catching them after they've happened until she arrives back at me.

"What did you do?" she says.

I take her hand. "Now! Run!"

Agnes scampers after me, sprinting without her feet leaving the floor. Fear and exhilaration brighten her face.

Outside she composes herself, smoking, barely slowing her pace as she marches through town.

"Not going to tell me your name" I say at her heel.

She won't answer, too shaken, too embarrassed.

In three strides I skip to her side, sort of waltzing to make fun of it all. "No one saw us. No one can see us now," I say, half singing. "Look at 'em all, they're busy, they're mindless, they're shopping. They don't care."

"You got that part right," she says, concealing it as a cough and yawn like it's a sin to speak.

"I helped you escape," I say.

"*Helped.*" She clucks. "You did all that did you? Well, I thank you. Good day."

"Aren't you going to tell me your name?"

"Why should I?" she says into her handbag. "What would you do with it?"

I laugh. "Call you by it."

"Call me by it? Like a dog, you mean."

She takes a hands-free earpiece from her bag and wears it without connecting the wire to a phone. "So," she says, stern as a teacher. "What have you to say?"

"What's with the hostility?"

"I see things," she barks, touching the earpiece for effect as passers-by peek. "I see things that aren't there. People, they talk to me and doctors, they give me prescriptions and they come to my house and they go everywhere I go so I go to places it's safe."



I stand stock still, arms out, exhibiting how here I am. “You trying to tell me something here?”

“I have to be sure,” she says. “You seem... you seem... like a nice lad,” she decides, “but I have to be sure before talking to strangers.” She’s embarrassed by the confession, irritated by it.

“What do you want from me, then? Why are you still here?”

“I just want to make sure you’re okay.”

\*\*\*

Agnes can’t make eye contact with them, these hallucinations of hers. Sometimes they are so real she can’t distinguish them from the people she is supposed to talk to. Makes the real folk think her rude, stoned, off-kilter, delusional.

Which she is.

\*\*\*

5 things that stay the same:

Sky

Birds

Bricks

Weather

His jacket

5 things that tell when:

Newspapers

Mobile phones

Hair styles, not clothes

Sometimes music and TV

Notebook

\*\*\*

She decides I’m less than a third of her age. “It should be *me* walking *you* somewhere so you get there safely,” she says.

I tell her I’ve got nowhere to be and the vague impression of the town and its busyness fades to lower buildings and greenery as we traipse the streets then lanes through ginnels in our own company. She shivers the whole way, like a car with a shuddering motor not likely to make it.

“You look freezing,” I tell her. “Want to wear my jacket?”

Agnes forgets I’m there, or acts like I’m not. On a street of chestnut trees she’s rattled by the young scallies collecting conkers, calling her names.

“Aggie Aggie Aggie! Oy Oy Oy!”

Like they've rehearsed. They know her as bullies. She's a child beneath them. "Who you talking to, Aggers? Who's your friend?" Conkers rain, some like hail, stinging. Agnes makes haste and doesn't see when I throw them back.

By her side again, I ask, "What are you so nervous for?"

She pats her chest to temper her heart, leaning against the splintered wood of the ginnel wall. "I need... to catch my breath." With urgent turns of her head she picks a spot and says, "Perhaps we could sit for a moment." Bonds are made in adversity. We're not strangers anymore.

\*\*\*

Agnes: hair grey as the ashes of a fire near faded. Her warmth felt only by gloved hands seeking to pry. Memories sustain the embers yet stifle flames. Keeping it alive is an agreement of held breath and knowing when to blow.

\*\*\*

We sit among bin bags. A dead cat's tail and paired hind paws stretch from between metal canisters, a mattress and rusty barbecue. Rain water has collected in the tyre marks leading to a parked jeep. Grass sprouts intermittently. I dance to cheer the silence, doing a kind of tap routine with lots of splashing and jazz hands. Agnes chews her sleeve and opens a broad notebook in her lap.

I tell her, "You'll ruin your top, eating it like that."

"You're a child, what do you know?"

"I know you'll ruin your top."

"I've got a whole wardrobe of long-sleeved jumpers all chewed at the wrists."

I ask her, "What do you bite when you're not wearing sleeves?" and she shows me the bite marks of her leather bracelet, then her finger tips void of nails, nibbled like pork shanks to the pink, raw bone.

"What's with the diary?"

"It's not a diary," she says. "Maybe it is now you've said the word. They say I should keep one. They tell me to write to keep myself company, to make sense of it all."

"What do you write?"

“That’s none of your business, is it?” she says, lowering her arm a degree to reveal a further fragment of the page she’s been writing on. There are speech marks, indents, the paragraphed structures of stories, lists and the stanzas of poems. In between are doodles, games of noughts and crosses, sums and scribbles. Better yet, photos flicker between the skimming pages and I tell her to let me see. She keeps her hands to herself.

The pictures are of Agnes in varying forms. She’s a bairn in them, but Agnes enough. Few are in colour, their lines fading and pooling into one so that faces are eyeless, mouthless orbs. Agnes’s eyes are misty. She sighs and looks into the pictures, through them. The page turns and there are school kids, black and white except for one lad, a cocky type, the brazen chauvinist, hands in pockets, elbows out. His red jacket with its collar up is the only colour.

I say, “Who’s that guy?” and Agnes slams her hand down, closes the book.

She covers her eyes and hums a tune with no melody, making sounds through her nose as I try to calm her down.

My dancing doesn’t help, neither does the laughter of the bullies beneath the chestnut trees.

I pick up a stick and run, growling, screaming out the ginnel towards the terrorists collecting their conkers.

\*\*\*

Photos are the shadows of another’s past. The notebook is riddled with them. They’re memories now, their lines hazy, faded as ghosts. Each figure is reduced to a mannequin, re-enacting a familiar scene, but there’s no sentiment here, just the props on the empty stage. The smiles are bleached so all that remains is the stance, the hand on hips, the boy pedalling, the girl skipping with a phantom rope. Bicycles and plaits suggest childhood, but the faces have aged in their stories beyond the captured moment. It is a trick: these children keep you busy, distracting you while time’s hands move on. That old man is wormfood by now, that bicycle is rust. The baby in that cot? She went on to get divorced three times. That boy is long gone.

A photograph is a dangerous thing. One day it is no longer real, no matter how much you believe it to be evidence of something real, something that existed.

\*\*\*

The kids are done playing conkers now. Agnes checks the coast is clear, scurrying like a rat from its hole.

“I’ve an appointment,” she says. “An appointment with a doctor. I can’t be late.”

“That’s alright, I’ve got nowhere to be. I’ll walk with you, make sure you get there.”

“Is that why you’re here? To walk me?”

“*Why I’m here?* Do I need a reason?”

“A teenage troublemaker offering to walk an old strange woman to her doctor? Yes. Yes, I’m afraid you do need a reason, but that is why you’re here, I suppose.”

Despondent I stand, telling her, “I can leave.”

She acts like she can’t hear again, packing away her notebook and cigs and readying herself for another slog. “Now, you’ll just have to learn to keep up,” she says, and goes ahead.

Agnes doesn’t want the doctors to see us approach together.

\*\*\*

5 safe places:

Toilet

Garden

Health club

~~Bear shop~~

Florist

5 places to stay away from:

Salon

High street Sainsbury’s

Debenham’s café

Pub on corner

Park bench by pond

\*\*\*

Imagine if it is England that is the problem, the allergen. Fifteen when Agnes came, full of Wales.

Three weeks in and an Englishboy broke her heart. If she still remembers, did the wound not heal?

Memories are scars. Did she not recover?

\*

Agnes detests her surroundings – I can tell without asking. The teal walls, fake plants, charity-donated furniture, it all makes her writhe and twitch like she’s allergic. Everything she touches gives a static zap. It’s silent in the room. I’m watching from the shadows through the parted door, stealing her glances.

“Did you try to write it down? What about the lists?” the doctor says.

Agnes shrugs, tries to cackle but it wheezes, more illness than attitude. She hides her reddening face.

“Have you tried what we talked about?”

“What was that?” she says, like a malapert teen showing off for her friends in class.

“Last time we met we discussed coping strategies, things that some other people find helpful.”

Agnes mews. “Did we?”

The doctor and the counsellor, they see none of her charm, none of the fun she’s having. She keeps her secret watching at the door. They share concerned glances. The tattered wrists of her sleeves don't help, nor the way she stares off into the mid-distance, blurry eyed, unfocused, lost in an eternal daydream.

“One idea was to write about your experiences.” The lady’s false brightness makes Agnes wither. “We were saying how it can be a good idea to turn them into fiction, as a way of removing yourself from what’s happened. For perspective.”

“I’m no writer,” Agnes says.

The man, the counsellor, leans forward in his chair to venture half-time tactics. “What about writing the letters I suggested? When there’s an especially *difficult* episode, by giving them a name and writing a personal letter to them, it can humanise the *issue* – makes it easier to understand and tells them what you want of them.”

Agnes scoffs. “You think humanising something makes it easier to understand? Last time I was here it was my ex-husband. Which one of him would I post a letter to – the real or imagined?”

“The one that bothers you.”

“They both do,” Agnes says. “The real one has a Facebook account. Would it be as medicinal to Tweet him?”

Her Mona Lisa smile roams, unable to keep her eyes from flitting to the sliver of the parted door. Out of some vague notion of professionalism and political correctness, the doctors won’t ask why or what she is grinning at. They glance, make notes all the same. That’s the beauty of it: their

vantage skewed at an awkward angle so only she can see me from their semi-circle arrangement of chairs.

“And the people you see...” the man says, reluctantly. “Your husband...?”

“The hallucinations,” she corrects, repositioning herself when a nervous jolt commands her body. “What about them?”

“Do you feel the medication has helped at all?”

Agnes takes her time replying. One of the doctors prompts, saying her name.

“They’re still there,” she says at last. “Should they have gone?”

I turn around, bend over and pull down my shorts, making my arse cheeks talk along with the doctor’s explanation of the reduced symptoms some people experience with certain meds. Agnes blushes a violent red that makes the doctor ask if she’s okay when she crosses her leg and faces away. Wrist at her mouth, chewing her sleeve, they can’t see her cheek wrestling a dimple, like small mice burrowing in sand to hide.

“Agnes?” the woman says. “I have to ask: are you seeing anything, anyone at the moment?”

“Oh, *who* would have me,” she scoffs, aflutter at the compliment.

“I mean anyone... anyone in the room – any of the hallucinations you’ve mentioned.”

I laugh out loud, too busy pulling up my shorts to hold it in. *Who would have me!* Agnes turns suddenly at the sound, then the doctors.

“It’s just my... nephew,” Agnes says. “He’s visiting.”

The doctor doesn’t even look at the door. “You seem distracted,” she says. The doctor’s younger by twenty years at least, long-legged in a skirt suit, her blonde hair pulled immaculately back, shining with accuracy. It’s impossible for her to say anything to Agnes without it sounding patronising; the harder she tries not to offend, the more her condescending tone creates a wall between them.

Silence ensues until the man gets up from his chair and crosses the room towards me. I make to run for it, but his act’s too obvious as he strides with too much pathos, announcing, “Who’s here? There’s nothing to worry about. Point them out.”

“Wait!” Agnes says, her voice croaking in desperation. “I – Yes! Yes there is someone there,” she says, calming when he stops short of the door. “If you take another step you’ll stand on his foot, and-and – “

The counsellor is satisfied, swelling slightly like he’s bested someone in a pub when the bouncers intervene before conflict can go down. “So tell us, Agnes, who is this character? What do they look like? What would be so bad about me standing on their foot?” He moseys, wide-stepped back to his chair.

“Well, he’s quite a lot bigger than you,” Agnes says to watch him deflate. She smiles openly, taking the opportunity to look directly at me where my one glowing eyeball shines with the scar of light through the parted door. I wink, she giggles.

Agnes thinks for a moment, her foot tapping with excitement.

“He’s – He’s in the corner of the room. Big, I said big already. A great beard. Long with grey and red in it. Burly, ever so burly like a-a-a lumberjack, he is.”

“Has he got an *axe*?”

Agnes grins devilishly, then thinks better of it. “No. No axe.”

The lady has some sense of humour and shares her little joke. “He doesn’t sound so bad.”

“No,” Agnes says, holding my gaze. “I suppose not.”

“What does he want?” says the counsellor.

“Oh, now you mention it I’m not sure. He’s here to help.”

“Are they... welcome?”

“I’d rather not say. Wouldn’t want them getting big-headed.”

“Why do you think you are seeing him?”

There’s something to the question that sobers her. The sparkle leaves her eyes as she solemnly replies, “I don’t know. That’s the trouble, isn’t it? I’m not sure, and neither are you. They just appear, don’t they?”

She brings her sleeve to her mouth, staring off out of the window again. “I’m not sure if it’s worse knowing they will leave.”

“Does he seem real? Do *they* seem real?”

Agnes sighs. “What’s the difference?”

The stale mate of silence returns. The counsellor glares right at me. “You said your nephew is visiting? How long will he be with you?”

I wink when she looks back and take the lighter from my pocket. Before Agnes can reach out, yell stop, I hold it to the fire alarm. Flick.

\*\*\*

Even scallywags can get cold, but there is no knowing what a thief will give in order to take. Pneumonia for a kiss: a fair trade.

Went home with his jacket, wanted to burn it, kept it in a sad box on a high shelf in a dark cupboard.

In her notebook, Agnes writes stories. They are memories called fiction, fiction that exists. In between are photographs. The real characters the same as the fake, all are black and white on the page. There’s no need for silence, for pretending not to see on the page.

Each word counts.

\*\*\*

The alarm blares, staff and patients file out. A nurse clucks, tells someone the bloody thing’s always going off.

It’s cold in only a t-shirt. I hold out my jacket like a matador’s cape. Without stopping, Agnes spares a glare at the red and growls, ‘Put it back on, you fool. You’ll catch your death.’ She holds a cigarette between shaking fingers, hurries ahead down the street. I have to run to keep up as she marches to put the clinic behind her. Agnes ducks between parked cars unannounced, slaloming trees and pedestrians, switching to the other side of the road again without warning. Car horns blare, people swear.

“You going to wait or what?” I shout at her back. “I get you don’t want them to see you with me, but we’re in the clear now! No way to treat your nephew, is it?”

Agnes doesn’t laugh.

“Thought I was doing you a favour.”



“Favour? What favour,” she mumbles.

“C’mon, where’s the fire?”

“They’re trying to help me. You, you’re just trouble.”

She takes a sharp left into a park, lighting another cigarette, tossing the last before it’s gone out. The gravel soundtracks her hurry. She meanders the winding path. “Look, I’ll leave you to it if you don’t want me here!”

“Ha!”

“I’m only here to help.”

“Perverted, this is. Perverted! Why else would you be following some old bat? Who said I wanted you here in the first place?” she mumbles into her sleeve.

“You didn’t tell me to leave either.”

“And what good would it do?”

“Say it now, then. Tell us leave and I’ll go.”

Agnes pauses long enough to shoot her frantic, bloodshot eyes like she’s flashing a gun.

“I’m going to start looking like some psycho here if you don’t stop to talk to me. We both are.”

“I’m not mad!” she snaps. A near game of footie stops. A mother gathers her offspring.

“Don’t *ever* call me mad.”

“I’m sorry,” I say, taking advantage of her subdued hiss. “I didn’t mean it. You’re not. *I* know you’re not.”

“You don’t know me. You don’t know anything. Anything at all!”

“You’re shivering,” I say. “Will you just take my jacket?”

Agnes eyes it like the red will burn her. “I don’t want it. Keep it away from me. Don’t ask me again.”

She continues down to the pond and takes a seat on a bench made private between the blouse of a willow tree and an estuary of reeds. Lily pads create the illusion you could keep walking until a formation of ducks make ripples in the solid platform.

I give her space while she scribbles in her notebook, standing in sight for when she turns around so she knows she isn't alone. My t-shirt glows in the paling light. Agnes gets tired of fighting. Her shoulders relax and she sinks.

Gently, I approach, sitting when she doesn't refuse. Evening has fallen, unannounced, her white breath rising to guild with the clouds.

Agnes holds a bag of old bread in her lap, busying her nervous fingers by breaking it up into smaller pieces. She shivers so hard her teeth chatter, so I spread my jacket across her shoulders without permission.

"I came here when I was young. When I was your age," she says, meekly, speaking so softly the ducks aren't disturbed. "I kissed my first boy here. That was a... that was a good time, that was. I don't mind that it comes back to me. Mind you, I wouldn't've said that at the time. Heartbroken, I was. *Hated* the scoundrel. Cocky so-and-so, wouldn't take no for an answer. Ever such a good kiss, we had."

I venture a smile. "So *that's* what we're doing here."

Agnes blushes, her lips fumbling like her dentures have come unstuck. She reaches three shaking fingers into her bag of bread to feed the ducks. "Pneumonia, he got. Killed him and all. Was the teachers who told us in assembly. Me there crying at the back and no one hardly knew who I was or why I'd be so bothered. A secret like the one we had, you wish everyone knew."

Watching them swarm, she gasps and clenches her eyes shut and, to her surprise as much as mine, a tear falls down her cheek. It runs like a rain drop over cracked, dry earth.

I reach out to catch it and she pushes my hand away.

"I don't like all this, not knowing what's not real and what is," she says, her voice younger than mine in her frailty. "You can't say it to the doctors, can't say it to anyone. They see you cry and they up your dosages."

"Then be happy this is real."

"Sick of it, I am," she says, tearing at the stale bread slices. "Everything, it's all about what's there and what isn't any more, what I can see and-and —"

I hold her hand to keep it from shaking. She runs a calloused finger along my goosebumped arm, finds my nose close to hers.

I whisper, “No one can see us.”

The kiss is hers. I keep my eyes closed so she can keep the moment as her own.

Agnes rests her head on my shoulder and says, “Such a good memory.”

\*\*\*

Visions of life, the opposite of a dream.

Squandering all I can reach out to touch.

In a life of fiction do these imagined friends of photographs

Miss you when you're gone?

There are days she calls out to her mother from the foot of the stairs and there is no reply. She sees the old hand upon the bannister, questions who these blue veins belong to, whose nails are grown to yellow talons and skin has pruned. The mirror is no help. She asks it, who is this daft mare, this red-eyed stranger glaring so mean, so confused?

She wants her mother, asks where she has gone.

\*\*\*

Agnes is gone. Night lacquers the trees, moonlight burnishes the rivets of the lapping waves and lilies. Reeds stand like forests in the dark. The willow tree and its tentacles glow like a jellyfish. A park is a lonely place at night on a bench without the life of play. I shift and hear the crackle of paper in my jeans. In my pocket there's a scrunched bolus that glows like a snowball without light. I unfurl it, holding it up to the moon's lamp, squinting to make out what her child-like scrawl says.

“Your name was Nicholas. I knew you once and I'm glad of it. You were a boy in school, making my day with your trouble. Thank you for saving me today when I was in need of a friend. I will think of you from then and today when I am alone in the park, my lips the scar of our kiss.

“Please, Nicholas, I have to ask you not to visit me again. Please, stay gone. I want to be missed, too.”

The page torn from her notebook falls to the water lilies and I wait for Agnes on the bench.

\*\*\*

Autumn is longing, undefined between its hot and cold bookends. Winter is in puberty, mourning summer's youth. It finds its way into the city, the trees realised all of a sudden by their fallen leaves, the pollution separate to the biting air. Autumn is fully-formed, one skin shed and another on its way.

\*\*\*

After the last episode, brief as the memory itself, it's been at least a month since a visit to the bench. Autumn has found it's way to the park, the leaves a different colour like when the local vandals have at the wall with their spray cans in the middle of the night while others sleep.

It's not safe on the bench, never has been. Scrapbook at the chest like a shield, the holey shoes wade the fallen red leaves. Nature has all but devoured the dew-damped beams with its living filigree of weeds.

It's lonely without him. As mother said, life is half-spent telling people 'go away', half-spent weeping 'come back'.

How the cartridge paper has its favourites, wilting open on memories most frequented. The notebook may as well flop upon a picture of cigarettes on the hour, on images of food three times a day for the many ways it's in sync with the addled brain and its collage of madness.

Photos remind the fiction was once real. Wales is a black horizon against a pale sky and she is a knock-kneed girl, white in the foreground. The next page sticks. An adhesive has developed from touching the photo too much over the years. Little bits of frayed paper torn from the opposite page cling to the gloss like snow has fallen in that frozen scene, maybe ash. Nicholas: trouble itself. Time has bleached his smile, though the jaw juts, so certain, self-assured, eternally cracking his joke. His red jacket a flame in a colourless world, to which a homesick schoolgirl couldn't help but blindly flutter, nor a deluded spinster it seems.

It's too cold here alone. Time for bed, for sleep. The bench won't last another winter.


\*\*\*

When he didn't come back, the rumour at school was he'd set off a fire in the science labs, got out his arse at a teacher, been on the rob.

\*\*\*

With the eyes closed the hands can find his and imagine the cold grip. The heart races, skips its beat at the excitement of a life ahead, the errors and things to look back and miss all away in the unknown future.

The shoulders feel the warmth of his jacket spread across them. Yesterday's Agnes has taken it from the box in the cupboard, laid it as a treat for the version she'll be come the morning. The bleary eyes make out the haze of red. His scent lingers on the collar. It's like waking and thinking the dream is real. She clings, for it's only when she wakes that she learns she's dreaming, and she says into the collar of his jacket so that no one can hear, "Just once more, let him be real and then I'll give him back."

She keeps her eyes closed and speaks his words back to him: "No one can see us." 

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**Jack Boardman is a writer from Manchester, England. He is currently working on a novel, "Dear Mr. Busby", the story of a young scallywag whose outlook changes when she peeks into the world of an elderly, autistic painter.**

# Over Calm Waters

By Joshua Siegel

When I saw the dock again it was August. I made my way past my father's cottage, down the rotting wooden steps to the water. The thin reeds, which lined the path, were flowing with the wind, and I could hear the final chirps of the crows before they left from the cold. I took off my shoes, my socks, and let my bare foot touch the grey wood. So I found myself sitting by the water tracing my fingers along the surface – setting ripples across the glass.

The dock was ruined now; wooden masts which once stood tall in the shifting weather were now cracked down the middle and slowly rotting in the water. Barnacles took homes between the splinters. They were arranged like miles of the same suburban neighborhoods, huddled together by overwhelming sameness. And on the main platform still somehow resting above the water were the white half-moon shaped shells dropped by passing birds.

I pushed my vision away from the dock. Moved my head back and rested it on the wooden landing so that I could watch for the birds with the white shells. I saw no birds, only white clouds. Yet if I closed my eyes, to this day I swear, I could hear the soft beating of wings and the sound of chirping.

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There were white birds diving for fish as my father and I cast our hooks below the surface. The fish traveled in enormous schools– so large that we could see their silver scales flash in the midday sun. We were catching bricks that day. Usually when we decided to spend the day fishing we would be rewarded with five maybe six bluetails. Yet that day, I remember, we were standing on the dock for hours with not one flapping body in our orange bucket. And yet there they all were – in the water – the school of aluminum fish mocking us after every failed cast of the rod.

The heat from the sun turned us into silent machines. There was no chit chat, no banter. Only the quiet rhythm: cast, feel, reel, hook, repeat. Cast, feel, reel, hook, repeat. Sweat ran down the backs of our necks. Eyes fixed to the shifting water.

My father had a bite. I could tell because he closed his eyes and moved his fingers to the end of the transparent string, feeling it dance across the line. He stood there silent. More quiet than I had ever known my father to be. And with a quick flick of the wrist he started to reel. The slight click of the crank started steady but was soon frantic as the line rushed back to the surface. I grabbed the bucket and headed to the other side of the dock. I know my father yelled out, but over the sound of chirping and the shells dropping on wood, his cries were garbled and distant.

To this day I couldn't tell you if my strides were too long, if my foot got caught between the planks, or if the one of the white shells pushed me over. But before I knew it I was falling head first toward the water and the fish, of course, was lost.

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In the hours between when I hit the water and found myself in the bathtub, I detached from world around me. I couldn't feel the cold water or the hair on my father's arms, that must have been around me, as he dragged my body off the dock. It was only me and my head. And now, after all this time, the one memory I know is real, the one I know to be true, is what I saw under the waves in those brief moments.

My feet are thick in the coils of thorned plants. They inch their way around my ankles, up my thighs, and over my shoulders leaving small red streaks in their path. My skin is pale, dripping with the deep red. I look up and through the reeds to the sound of the fishing rod. That incessant clicking, steady at first, now gaining speed, humming along with the beat in my head. I see no line but feel the pull, coming from deep, coming through the reeds.

I try and pull my arms up, to break away from the thorns in my skin. They pull me down, harder this time. I use my teeth against the stems, breaking the branches only to gasp from the cuts in my mouth. The pull of the rod is agonizing now, marking deeper streaks along my legs and arms. At the moment my body gives up its fight, I feel the plants break their hold, sending me toward the center, toward the core.

I know I'm there because I see the rod. It's taught but silent now. I hold my breath and listen for the sound of the click that brought me here. Silently, so as not to start the pull again, I creep toward the rod. As I get closer I start to hear breathing, deep and slow, coming from beneath me. I crouch to brush away the thorns and see the face that won't leave my mind, the first face I saw when I came into this world: frumpy, greased cheeks, with red streaks around the eyes.


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I hit my head on the faucet when I woke up in the bathtub with the tropical fish curtains. Stumbling out of the tub, I went toward the window, rubbing my head from the pain, and taking quick looks at my arms to make sure there were no marks. My father was in the driveway, heading toward the car, probably going to grab a carton of pistachio to go with dinner later. He took the car round the corner, it was the last time I saw him.

They told me they found him on the side of the road. They told me I didn't need to identify him, that it was redundant at this point. I didn't care. I needed to know. So when coroner pulled the sheet back to show me my father's body, I was surprised I didn't hit the floor in tears. I had seen it before, felt it before, and you don't need to cry when the only thing you feel is déjà vu. Stone cold eyes, I examined his face. The only words I can remember: frumpy, greased cheeks, red streaks around the eyes.

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The August breeze hits my cheeks. It's colder by the water this time of year. In my mind, I imagine the leaves are falling, hitting the water one after another, sending waves around the dock. I see my father at the top of the stairs, the rod is in his hands. All at once I hear the sound:

Click, click, click. 

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**Josh Siegel is a writer, director, and photographer currently studying at New York University. He studied the craft of writing with Zadie Smith, and lived at the La Pietra Center in Florence, Italy. He is concerned with the pain of memory, in all its forms.**



# My ThurberEsquecapade

By Anthony Rubio

I wonder sometimes if reading too much literature can prompt our daily lives to take on the character of fable. A taste for lit, be it light or deep, may start to color our days in unexpected ways. Say for instance you're reading about elephants. That night you flip on National Geographic channel, and herds of elephants are trampling across the Serengeti. The next day, while sitting in the park, the couple on the bench near you is listening to a nature CD - of elephant calls. It's as if reading about these large, personable creatures has suddenly made the world all about elephants. This brings me to my ThurberEsquecapade; where the short story I'd just read bubbled over into my day. I was carried on an escapade, similar to those of Walter, the daydreaming character in James Thurber's story, *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*.

Did I tell you about my day as Walter Mitty? It was one of those bright, sunny autumn days that nature graces New York City with in October. Things were going along just fine until about 3:15. That's when the Trickster decided to have a little fun with me. I was catapulted through a series of events that began with the simple purchase of four juicy looking tangerines and ended with me breaking the law in order to get home from work.

I'm an art teacher and my class and I were returning from a school trip to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Emerging from the darkened subway stairs into the bright blueness of the day, we spotted a fruit cart. Buying fruit on the street is a real New York treat. Being in season, the tangerines, with their shiny orange color, looked really good. The vendor assured us that they were tasty too. Another teacher and I along with two students began to make our selections. "Let me treat," I said, buoyed by the moment. The students replied, "Mr. Rubino, we'll pay for our own." "Naaa, let me pay," I insisted, acting all Italian, with the hand gestures and everything. "Put your money away - I've got this."

Then Mr. Big Spender counted out a dollar in quarters, and without realizing his folly, paid the fruit vendor. The teacher and the students thanked me and I made a note to myself to get to a cash machine as I only had change left in my pocket.

I went to proctor my after-school art club; they're painting a mural. It's a big canvas and the kids are really into it. One of the 6th graders, Sasha, is around 4 ½ feet tall. She wields a large painter's brush with the confidence of a pro. By the time we are ready to go, paint is splattered all over the room and the students. But a good time was had by all. It's about 5 p.m., and I head back onto the streets. My first thought is to find the nearest ATM. My Metro card is on zero and my big 50 cents isn't getting me on the subway.

It's pretty quiet on the side streets of Chelsea today, until I hit Sixth Avenue - here's the crowd. Everyone's out doing something, all going somewhere; and they're usually in a bit of a hurry. Not racing, mind you, that would be uncool in this artsy neighborhood. But let's say they're pedestrians with pep in their step. No lingering; except to window shop of course. I spot an ATM machine and take out my wallet, but there's a glitch; no ATM card.

Oh yeah, I gave it to my wife to get the rent money.

Hmmm... that's a problem.

But no worries, my bank is open late on Thursdays.

Relieved, I begin making my way down to my bank in the Village. But did you ever get the feeling that this is just the beginning? I enjoy walking, and sometimes as I walk I ponder life's deeper mysteries like; "Why the heck did I have to treat for those tangerines?" The headline reads; "Art Teacher's Foolish Folly."

As I get near the bank I start to lighten up. I want to take out some money, hop on the train and go home. It's been a long day.

But the bank is CLOSED!

I think, "This is too crazy," and I scrutinize the sign: "Open Late Thursdays until 6 p.m."

I read and reread it, with utmost concentration, trying to construe why the bank is closed.

Open late on Thursdays... And then the Aha moment; Hello, Mr. Rubino - it's Wednesday! As Mr.

Thurber would say; some people, nobody knows why, have a genius for getting themselves into minor difficulties.

Times like this denote the appearance of the wily Trickster. In Native American lore this can be the Coyote or a crafty Hopi Kachina. They may ask you in a mock innocent way; “What’s the matter - something wrong?”

From reading Native American tales I gather that these Trickster spirits cook up these offbeat situations to put us through trials of endurance. It’s their way of testing our mettle. (And having a good laugh on us!)

Bugger! Now I’m in a jam. I begin walking again, but my previously jaunty “what a great day” step is gone. I wonder how said citizen, (moi), is going to get from bustling Manhattan, to home in Queens. I usually enjoy walking around the Village, checking out the architecture and the shops. But the glamour of the city quickly fades at rush hour. The crowds of hurrying commuters and streets are filled with yellow taxis, honking their horns.

In the background of my mind I can hear George Benson singing his great jazz song *On Broadway*. It’s about a musician, with very little money, trying to make it in New York. To the sound of his melodic guitar, he sings, “And how ya gonna make some time, When all you got is one thin dime, and one thin dime won’t even shine your shooooes.” You can try humming the scat singing part to yourself while I try to figure a way out of this mess.

Since I’m actually near Broadway, if I were in a better mood, I’d probably head over to 12th Street for a visit to the venerable Strand Bookstore. Out on the sidewalk, they have carts of reduced priced books. There’s usually a small crowd of book nuts milling around and I’d be right out there with them. But I digress. I looked for a quiet place where I could collect my thoughts, and figure a way to get home.

On 10th street I found a brownstone stoop and sat down. I hope the owners don’t mind, sitting on stoops is a tradition in my old neighborhood in Brooklyn. It helps you to think. Sitting on the stone steps, my mind went into Walter Mitty-mode. I started daydreaming. I recalled a time when I was far from home, with very little money. It was the 1970’s and I was in college. My friend Ray told me and few other friends that he could book a round trip train ticket, from Montreal

to Vancouver and back, for 150 dollars. The vivid memory of that journey began rolling in my mind.

One August day, four friends and I boarded a train in Montreal destined for the west coast city of Vancouver. A gong sounded, and the doors closed. The train chugged slowly out of the station, embarking on its 3,000 mile journey across the magnificent Canadian landscape. The conductor collected our tickets and wished us a good trip. “But where’s our return ticket?” we asked.

“These are one way tickets guys,” he casually replied, and moved on to the next customer. We sat there, stunned.

One of the guys, Ricky, let out an anguished cry, “One way tickets?”

Poor Ricky; he was a confirmed city kid. This was his first jaunt with us. Can you imagine your first time out on the road and you find yourself on a train to Vancouver, British Columbia with no return ticket! Ricky became enraged. He jumped on Ray (who had bought the tickets). He started choking him and yelled in a panic, “How are we gonna get home?”

It was pretty crazy. We separated them and calmed Ricky down.

Then, in harsh, yet colorful words, we told Ray what a nut he was for buying one way train tickets. Ray looked dumfounded, and was as genuinely apologetic. Shaking his head in dismay he said, “Sorry guys; I really screwed up.”

After that, we all had a good laugh about it. This was going to be some adventure, and we’ll have to hitchhike home!

It’s a five-day train ride to cross the continent and we met interesting folks on the way. Bob Levi was a student at Columbia and a really good chess player. As we headed west, we whiled away the slow steady hours, playing chess, reading and goofing around. We camped at a Lac St.Paul, in British Columbia, and then traveled on to Vancouver. When it was time to go home, my friend Jack and I first headed south to Los Angeles. There we turned east and started to hitch hike our way across the continent. Willa Cather’s Nebraska was the longest stretch. It was beautiful though, traveling on Nebraska’s flat prairie, you feel so close to the sky. One night we slept in a Kansas cornfield. Jack and I were awakened by the loud roar of tractors plowing the field. It was a

magical dawn; we got up early, and drank in the farm's earthy fragrance as the sun was coming up. Its yellow light painted a warm glow on the verdant cornfield, lighting it up like a vision. It was a Wizard of Oz moment.

You learn a few things when you hitchhike 3,000 miles. For one, the kindness of strangers, takes on new meaning. Car drivers bought us dinners and cold beers. And I gained a new respect for those wild, but generous, tractor trailer drivers. They livened up our road trip, and quickened our pace considerably. We finally made it back to New York. It took about eight days.

Although I was traveling around the country in my mind, I was still sitting on the stone steps in Greenwich Village. I was startled out of my reverie by the sound of voices and laughing. A group of young office workers was passing by the stoop where I was sitting. They were talking loudly and joking – probably on their way to have a drink after work. Not a bad idea I thought. It was just turning twilight and I felt a wistful longing for home. I looked across the street, above the row of brownstone houses; a few stars sparkled in the azure sky.

I reconsidered my financial situation. I took out my wallet (which I knew was empty) and began to work through every crevice, every nook and cranny and all those little hidden pockets. My futile attempt to make money appear ended where it began: wallet empty. Contents of my pants pockets were; keys, 50 cents, and a few seashells. I really don't know why I carry the seashells around, I just like them.

With my prospects looking very dim I said my mandatory prayers. Right now, a little divine intervention wouldn't be a bad idea. I also consider panhandling - but I'm just not up to it - not tonight anyway. I ask myself what the folks in the stories I read would do in a case like this. They would pretend to have options; I could jump the turnstile or maybe I could jump the turnstile. Both options, if you're caught, end up with a pricey 100 dollar ticket, and the cop taking an embarrassingly long time to write it. This is so everyone in the station knows you tried to beat the fare. I cringe at the thought. After all these years of quasi-respectability, back to teenage tricks again.

I resolve to approach the inevitable turnstile jump with an air of professionalism. All those years working with streetwise students, listening to all their excuses and pleas for another chance,

has taught their teacher that a little honest begging doesn't hurt. I approached the token collector and told him that I didn't have the fare. I noted that I was an art teacher and was really in a jam. He looked at me with the calm composure of a Zen master who had seen it all. (And I'm sure he has). He said plainly, "I can't let you go through without paying."


In my best attempts to be wily I nonchalantly leaned against the station's tiled wall. It was obvious what I had in mind, but I thought I was being stealthy. Another "commuter" with similar designs slid in next to me. We wished for the same things; a nice noisy train, a scuffling crowd and enough diversion to increase our winning chances. I know, it sounds simplistic, turnstile jumping 101. But it was the best I could do in a frazzled moment.

Finally, a nice noisy train came rumbling into the station. A little crowd shuffled about, making their way towards the exits. With my adrenaline surging, I made my move and scooted under the turnstile. The toll collector called out, "Pay your fare," in a mercifully low voice. I appreciated his kind gesture as I ran like hell for the train.

The last thing you want to do as a fare jumper is miss the train. As I thrust myself through the train doors I gave a quick look back over my shoulder; no one chasing – I'd made it. I felt exhilarated. "Ah," I thought; "this is why people do things like this - for thrills. Maybe I'll try it again sometime." On second thought; "Naaa - probably not."

As the train rumbled along I pondered my fondness for reading stories and folktales, (perhaps too many). And buying tangerines; (definitely too many!).

I also mused about long, thought-filled walks through the city, and glorious subway rides home. Some would take the unfolding of the day's events as a cautionary tale, that it was time to become more realistic and "get with it." But that's a tough call for an artist. I guess I knew that in the spirit of Walter Mitty, my forays into folktales and stories would have to continue, no matter what their effect.

When I finally reached home base, my long journey concluded. I could see now that a Thurberesque atmosphere had snuck into my day, and charmed it in a whimsical way. Then it dawned on me; I really need to find myself some hobbies. 

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**Anthony Rubino is a writer and a sculptor. His memoir piece, *My ThurberEsquecapade* was originally published in Michigan State University’s journal, *The Offbeat*. His literary interests include the writings of Carl Jung, the humor of P.G. Wodehouse, and the poems of Marianne Moore. Anthony has a penchant for perusing used book stores in search of inexpensive old volumes, and recently found John Burroughs 1903 “*Literary Values*” which he is enjoying. He lives in New York City with his wife, and his trusty research assistants, their dogs.**

# Streets of Gold in the City of Angels

By Melissa White

It's fall in New York. The muggy heat of summer is gone and now the air is crisp and cool. The leaves are turning. There's a spring in my step as I hurry down West 86 Street toward Central Park for my morning run. As I enter the park and approach the jogging trail, I see a homeless man asleep on a park bench. His clothes are filthy and tattered. I'm close enough to smell his stench. His arm drops down off the bench and dangles toward the ground. He clutches something in his fist and as his hand opens, the object falls to the pavement below. I move closer and pick it up. It's a "BLACK LIVES MATTER" button with a black fist raised in protest. I hesitate and think back in my mind to the first time I felt the weight of Black Power. Back 25 years ago to the Rodney King Riots in L.A. in the spring of 1992. I close my eyes and remember the video that started it all. The video that rocked the nation.

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In the darkness, you couldn't see the uniforms or the badges. The only thing you could see was the beating; the repeated, savage blows to the face and head of a solitary large man, surrounded by a gang of thugs. The big man staggered and fell to his knees slammed by Billy clubs that cracked his skull, split his lips, and ripped his earlobe apart. He tried to shield his face with his hands but it was useless. They converged all at once; too many of them to count, attacking him relentlessly. When the beating finally stopped, the big man groveled in the dirt, backlit by glaring headlights through a cloud of dust, until two more men appeared, kicking him while the others held him down.

And what was different about this random act of violence, separating it from so many other beatings just like it?

It was recorded.



For weeks, images from that grainy black and white video inundated the news and made headlines in every major newspaper, not to mention the covers of *Time* and *Newsweek*. Back in the days before Twitter or Facebook or Instagram, there were no ranting Tweets in all CAPS taking sides or pointing fingers. But that didn't stop the video from going viral. National TV and radio talk shows fed the media frenzy until they literally slit the wrists of this city, with wounds so deep its scars may never heal.

And the subsequent police brutality trial?

That was the final breaking point.

Within hours of the "not guilty" verdict, violence flared at the corner of Florence and Normandy, spreading faster than a wildfire in Malibu Canyon until thick smoke engulfed the entire horizon. Los Angeles was now a war zone. Up close and personal. In your face with its bigotry and black power, and its low-lying clouds of suspension of disbelief. If you were in L.A. during the Rodney King riots, it's something you will never forget. Looking back now with the hindsight of Ferguson, Baltimore, Chicago, and so many other cities where senseless acts of police violence have ignited fevered protests, this is what I remember...

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This morning it's raining ash. From the balcony of my apartment, I stare out across my South Central neighborhood until I notice a fine layer of gray powder blanketing my guardrail. Normally my neighbor's potted palms and patio furniture bask in the sunshine on her balcony, but today they are blackened with soot. I hear gunshots, a distant siren, and a baby crying downstairs. "Mayhem" doesn't even come close to describing the past days' events. It reminds me of watching the Persian Gulf War unfold on CNN just a few months earlier, with live footage of neon green tracers raining over Baghdad. Except this time the war zone isn't halfway around the world.

An explosion echoes down my street and fire engines periodically scream by house outside. Yet I lay on my couch watching continuous "live riot coverage" with surprising detachment. It's difficult to connect the images on TV with my own neighborhood. Even when I recognize the burning buildings it seems more like war-torn Bosnia than my home.

When I first moved here from Mississippi, Los Angeles seemed like another planet. But it grows on you, little by little. Especially with the love I found with my teammates through my basketball scholarship at USC. But even now, after living in South Central L.A. for six years, I still find this hard to believe.

Thousands of people are arrested each hour. The police resort to using duct tape since they've run out of handcuffs. It doesn't seem possible, such blatant anarchy and rampant looting, most of it committed by ordinary people. On every network, Eyewitness News teams race to get there first, broadcasting arson, robbery, random shootings, and even two women fist fighting in the street over some dresses they've just stolen from the Sears store in Hollywood.

The mayor imposes mandatory curfews and martial law. The governor mobilizes the National Guard and asks Congress to declare the City of Angels a disaster area. All the while, just like a carnival barker at a media freak show, Police Chief Gates stages sidewalk press conferences outside the Hill Street station, begging people to stay at home. Lying on my couch, I feel like a Palestinian refugee under house arrest on the Gaza strip. I can't sleep at night with all the endless gunfire, police helicopters, and sirens.

The language school where I teach has been closed for two days. Payday was the day before yesterday and I still haven't gotten my paycheck. I have four dollars and sixty-two cents in my purse and my bank account is overdrawn. There's no food in the house, but I'm afraid to go out. Damn. I should've bought groceries last week, instead of getting that weave. At least my hair looks great. Besides, it's not the first time I've skipped a meal for great looking hair. I look in the bathroom mirror and lightly run my fingers over my plats as my empty stomach growls. How was I to know that this could happen? That normalcy could so completely evaporate.

On the second day of rioting, I'm so hungry I can't see straight. To hell with the mayor's "stay home" mandate. I grab my money and head to the corner grocery store.

When I step outside I'm awe struck. This is utterly shocking.

It's much worse than I'd imagined. Guttled, burned out buildings smolder all along the street where I live. The air stinks like a trash incinerator, making my eyes water. The stench of burning rubber is so thick I can taste it.

Standing on the corner, rubbing my eyes, I notice people streaming in and out of Circuit City Appliance Store, pilfering TVs, microwaves, and DVD players. Anything they want, they walk in and take. A tattered old man stumbles through the intersection, pushing a large entertainment center on wheels. It's loaded with stereo components, eight surround sound speakers, and a 42-inch TV. He struggles to push it up the concrete embankment underneath a billboard. It starts to roll back on him so I run to help. My six foot one inch frame towers above him. When we reach level ground at the top, he grins.

"Thanks," he says, eyeing me up and down. "Damn. You play ball?"

"Used to."

"For real?" He shoves his grimy hands in his pockets. "Where?"

"S.C."

"Lady Trojans?"

"You got it." Not anxious to tell him my life story, I glance around at his "home" beneath the billboard. "So how you gonna use this stuff without any wall outlets?"

Chuckling, he spits through the gap in his teeth. "Lemme axe you this, you think I care about *wall outlets*? I ain't even got any walls."

He laughs, loud and harsh, and then starts to cough. I hurry back down the embankment to the street below and can still hear his hacking cough behind me.

Approaching the corner, I see two Cadillacs and a BMW screech into the Sac-n-Save parking lot. Immediately the car doors fly open and several people jump out and run inside. I notice that all along the storefront busted out windows gape open like a mouthful of cavities. Shattered glass litters the sidewalk. It crunches underfoot as people come running out of the store with cases of beer, toilet paper, diapers, dog food. Anything they would normally buy, they're stealing. Why? Because they saw other folks getting away with it on TV, and there's no one around to stop them.

I jog further down Pico Boulevard toward Korea town. Oddly enough, the grocery store at Pico and Vermont hasn't been burned or looted. As I near the store entrance, a deafening blast rips across the sky above me. I dive for cover between two black jeeps, the only vehicles in the parking

lot. When the shooting stops, I spot three Asian men on the roof of the store with automatic assault rifles.

Growing up in the Deep South, I've seen plenty of racial violence, but *never* like this. And I've taught enough ESL classes to know that Asian people are frequently intimidated by my size and my black skin. But right now, I'm so far beyond hungry I don't care about that crap; all I want is a damn can of soup and some orange juice.

I wave my four dollars over my head and crawl toward the entrance.

Hearing no more shots, I gather myself off the pavement, my hands still raised. Something moves behind me. I turn to find an old woman squatting by the pay phones, urinating on the sidewalk. It's so pathetic. She stares at me then smiles, exposing her bare gums. When she finishes, she steps across her golden pond of piss; coming so close I can smell cheap wine, urine, and excrement. She reaches out to me and without hesitation I give her my last four dollars. She takes it, laughing, and grabs my hand. Her skin feels like sandpaper.

"Blessed be those who by their kindness entertain angels unaware," she says, stuffing my money in her shirt. She pulls a 40 oz. Budweiser from her pants and offers it to me. I feel nauseous.

Shaking my head, I whisper a meek, "No thanks," and finally manage to pull my hand away from hers. Another round of gunfire explodes overhead.

I hit the pavement face down and cover my head as the sound of shattering glass surrounds me. Dozens more rounds are fired, then nothing. After an extended silence, a siren wails in the distance, and only now do I realize that I'm crying. Tears soak my face, hands, and the concrete beneath me.

Wiping my eyes, I notice the smooth amber-gold puddle of beer spreading slowly across the pavement towards me. I lift my head and see the old woman lying two feet away in a contorted, crumpled heap of rags. I can't believe this is actually happening. The police finally arrive, sirens blaring, lights flashing. Several more shots are fired then everything's still and quiet again.

Hardly encouraged by the presence of these squad cars, I crawl up beside the woman and realize she's dead. My money dangles from the neckline of her shirt with blood spattered on it. I watch the police chase down several gang kids, none of them look a day over thirteen. I grab my

money from this corpse then, overwhelmed, I sink to the ground on my hands and knees beside her, unable to hold back the tears. The concrete beneath us shimmers a liquid gold and reeks of warm beer.

I'm sobbing now, crouched like a whipped dog. An eerie silence descends on the parking lot, slow as buzzards circling overhead. Waves of fear, anger, and hatred hang in the air like vultures, homing in on us carrion below, waiting to devour what's left of this city's sanity and pick its bones clean. I close my eyes, trying to make it all go away; but the street is still here beneath me, glistening with liquid gold, deep in the burned and broken heart of the City of Angels.

Two days later I join dozens of volunteers at the corner of Florence and Normandy. Off-duty police officers lead our group as we canvas the neighborhood, shoveling debris and painting over gang graffiti. Three elderly men salute us as we pass them on the street.

A woman steps out of a diner with "BLACK OWNED BUSINESS" spray-painted in big red letters across its boarded-up windows. She offers us barbeque and lemonade and calls us "God's army of angels."

She laughs as she fills my cup, a big gold tooth parting her full ruby lips. Returning her smile, I think to myself: *Maybe she's right*. Trying to imagine halos above our backwards baseball caps, I glance at this paint splattered group around me. I see possibilities sprinkled everywhere, peppered and seasoned with our various skin colors. That nagging ball of fear I felt earlier this morning in the back of my throat vanishes now like a perfect fade-away jumper. One quick swoosh and it's gone.

Enjoying our barbeque, we sit on empty crates in the shade of the diner's sooty awning. The owner moves easily between us, refilling our lemonade cups and handing out little angel stickers. She peels off one for each of us and sticks them to our shirts.

These little cherubs amuse us but the bottom line here is easy to see: This woman is not a rarity. Even with all the recent violence there remains a core of true goodness in most folks here.

I lift my shades off my eyes and watch her, a true angel, spreading her wings and reminding us how to fly. She stands there, sweat glistening on her brow as she serves those who

have come to clear away the debris of hatred, anger, and fear, and she replaces it with love and compassion. I feel a pang in my heart for her so intense and yet so tender all at once, that I feel like I can fly too. My heart goes out to her and I whisper across the heat and dust, “Thank you.”

Thank you for lifting us up with your simple acts of kindness.


This is how we overcome the aftermath of violence. This is how we refuse to live in a world of rampant racism. This is how we carry ourselves 25, 50 or 100 years into the future to that golden world where people of color are no longer terrorized by unconstitutional travel bans, hate crimes, threats of mass deportation or idiotic chants of “Build that wall!”

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I smile to myself, remembering that smoldering L.A. street and I summon the strength to continue to fight for that bright future I dreamed of so long ago, one exhausting day at a time. I look down at the “BLACK LIVES MATTER” button in my hand and I approach the man sleeping on the bench who just dropped the button on the ground.

I lean down and pin the button to the man’s frayed lapel. He stirs in his sleep and opens one eye.

I smile at him and whisper, “Peace, my brother.”

He smiles at me then yawns, rolls over, and goes back to sleep on his park bench. A cool wind stirs the trees overhead, as red and orange leaves drop to the ground all around us. I love the feeling of fall in New York, and I cherish the feeling that change is coming. Yes, change is definitely coming. 

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**Melissa currently lives and writes in San Francisco. Her literary short fiction debut collect, “On the Green Earth Comtemplating the Moon,” was published in December 2012. She is currently working on a new film she is writing, directing and co-producing.**

# Poetry

# Autumn's Nightingale

By Janki Tailor

As the sun kindly lifts the starry veil of night

There stirs a nightingale in the trees

A tame orb rises, liberating burning anthracite

Yet, the nightingale awakes to a tempered breeze

He awakens to a new tale, one of vibrant hues

Where celosias, heathers, and goldenrods blossom

Where tenacious greens gave way to chartreuse

And thus his heart skitters against the breast some

Mother Nature sings to us of her metamorphosis

By placating the sun, girding the winds, and tinting plants


Listening, the nightingale responds in earnestness

Do you hear him, his ethereal chants?

And despite his long and virtuous melody,

The rest of the world lay laced in slumber

So great an equinox but recoiled to sleep's ebony

The nightingale, a Hermes and harbinger 

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**Janki is an undergraduate student majoring in Biology and on the premedical track and has just started to submit my short stories and poetry to writing contests and magazines in the hopes of improving herself as a writer.**



# Fallen

By Lana Scibona

We move like Frost at his impasse,  
Brought to a halt when faced with a decision.

Time slows down for us and we circle each other, and the trees, speculating.  
I weigh my options and try to mask my desire for you to choose me

Last night I dreamt we were in a car you were driving  
I asked if you loved me and you said “absolutely.”

The leaves, golden and rusty and scarlet, crunch under my boots and yours.  
Branches loom, nearly bare and  
Full of ambivalence.

The yellow wood knows nothing of decisions;  
It is a peaceful and accepting, unlike my wretched pumping heart.


There are not two roads here but several, more than I care to count.

I look at you and I see my life spread out before me like a Thanksgiving feast.  
We live near the Redwood Forest,  
Our children with hair the color of autumn leaves,  
“Somewhere ages and ages hence.”

And yet,  
All we may need is a brisk trot through the  
Shallow part of the woods.  
I will return home again,  
Satisfied.

We find ourselves caught.  
We could walk together and sometimes run,  
And find ourselves parting halfway through the wood.

There is no way of knowing where we will find ourselves,  
What will make all the difference?  
And each of these trails has its own winding twists and turns.  
We have no map nor wisdom to serve us.

Instead, we sit and occasionally pace,  
Under the gaze of the undergrowth.  
I am only one traveler, and all I can seem to do is  
Wait. 


---

**Lana is a student in her final year of NYU Gallatin. She specializes in creative non-fiction, poetry, and cultural criticism. She is also the co-editor of a student arts and literature magazine called the Gallatin Review.**

# Budapest

By Felicity Massa

Iron shoes line the winding bank of the Danube,  
An installation in remembrance of the Jews,  
Made to take off their shoes before they  
Perished at gunpoint, and were swept away.  
A little girl tries to stick her toes in a pair  
That look about her size.  
But they're cold and hard and have no give.  
A warm fall breeze whips at her hair,  
Compels her to dance with the leaves that swirl around her.  
She tugs at her mother's gingham skirt  
But she is too hurried, too busy.  
*Come now*, her mother sighs.  
The little girl struggling to tug back on her shoes  
As her mother pulls her away  
Over the chain bridge, where the market had been set up  
In what looks like an abandoned train station.  
While her mother haggled with the  
Shopkeepers over grains of rice,  
The little girl waited, watched, smelled.  
Spices of all kind hang from the booths,  
Sage, hot peppers, garlic, coriander, spicy paprika,  
They mingle together in the fragrant air that smells of goulash.  
The sharp odor of large wheels of Gouda, Brie and Trappista,

Cabbage and leeks, slabs of beef hanging from hooks,  
And upstairs, the traditional dirndls  
Once brought to Hungary by the Germans  
Now sit surrounded by cheap snow globes and magnets.  
All of this enough to turn the little girl's head, and  
The dazzling sunlight streams through the windows, blinding her.  
The chiming of the clock by the window signals noon and  
She shuffles towards it, thinking of all the trains  
That had not run by that clock, and that would never.  
Nose pressed up against the window, her breath fogging the glass,  
She gazes across the river,  
Beyond the chain bridge  
To the other side of the shore, where  
She can almost make out  
The shoes like tiny ants. 

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**Felicity is an undergraduate student majoring in Biology and on the premedical track. She has only recently started to submit her short stories and poetry to writing contests and magazines in the hopes of improving herself as a writer.**

## In Season

By Annalise Goeke

Ladybugs crowd every window of the country house  
shining red in the light,  
and clicking—

Clicking and Shuffling  
as they climb over one another.

They say winter is on its way,  
and they have come here to die.

Clicking and Crunching,  
brilliant red,  
attached to the screen.

It's good luck for a ladybird to land on you.

but in number,  
there is nothing more terrifying  
than the tiny buzz  
and prickle against your skin,  
as they fold their wings away.

They say winter is on its way,  
and the air in the house  
is without the weight of Summer,  
and the hand placed stone walls of the kitchen  
are cold to the touch,  
and outside the creek basin is freezing over.


With winter, comes our season too.

Grandpa closes up his garage,  
and our trips are less and less.

Missy is not fat with kittens,  
and the dinner table lengthens to fit cousins.

The cranberry sauce is red and jelled,  
with canned ridges and no berries,  
and the yams with melted brown sugar  
are too sweet to eat.

We swallow dry meat with  
onion stuffing,  
and meet no one's eyes,  
Scraping china plates  
with silvered forks.

The hunters fire off their guns on private lands  
and there's no conversation over thanksgiving dinner. 

---


**Annalise Goeke is a poet and recent NYU alum, originally from St. Louis, Missouri, now living in Brooklyn, New York. She began writing poetry in her youth and pursued her passion through formalized studies while at NYU. This will be her first publication.**

# The Alchemist

By John Lysaght

Bearded inquisitor,  
His black woolen tunic draping  
Cloaked in mysticism  
Complete with caduceous medallion,  
Golden magic wand  
Honoring Hermes---  
Spirit guide and  
Patron of knowledge---  
Bricked away from contradiction  
Walled from inner illumination  
Mining in speculation  
Within his darkened laboratory  
With pestle and mortar  
Retort and crucible  
Flask and fire  
Manipulating the four  
Universal elements  
Bows to his processes  
Filled with incantation.  
Questing for the unattainable,  
His brow etched with furrows of futility  
From his materialistic search  
For the philosopher`s stone,

With its perceived powers:  
To transmute base metals into noble ones,  
To uncover the elusive elixir of life,  
A panacea to eradicate all disease,  
From which will flow  
Man`s immortality.

Exhausted in effort  
Misguided by intentions,  
His illusion fades  
His body slumps,  
For truth is not malleable,  
Immortality not a distillate.  
Integration into wholeness---  
A vulnerability to enlightenment,  
An elevation of consciousness,  
The ascension into the light---  
Is a resurrection balancing  
Self with nature,  
A spiritual conversion,  
A journey of faith. 


---

**John Lysaght is a poet and author of fiction from Long Island, who has had rich experiences as a teacher, counselor for at-risk youth, therapist for community mental health, social worker in Times Square and probation officer. John began writing poetry as an undergraduate at the University of Scranton. John is a poetry contributor to Esprit; Avocet, A Journal of Nature Poetry; Poets West; Nomad`s Choir; and Calliope`s Corner.**



# Don't Cry Any More Persephone

By RH Peat

Oh there are plenty of days  
to remember from the first Narcissus  
to the fey of ripened Pomegranate.  
We could dream about the stars  
before we sleep in the far fields  
quilted among the daffodils.  
We have all summer to play in the river  
until the shivered beginnings with Autumn's rain;  
then we'll count the red and yellow leaves.  
We can dance our dance beneath bright trees  
before the Pomegranate splits and bleeds  
with its tart sweetness upon our lips;  
we'll let it run down our chins  
in crimson drips— drop  
by drop along the ground.  
It's that day we must say goodbye, once  
again. That last moment in a dark month  
before your sorrowful indifference begins 

---

**RH Peat is 75 and lives in California foothills. He's been published in the USA, New Zealand, Australia, India, England, Canada, and Japan. He has also operated poetry readings and taught poetry workshops.**

# Fading Colors

By Robert Savino

There's no better time to observe  
nature's colors than during the falling of leaves  
in light of the reflective sun . . . the opal moon,  
while acorns drop for squirrels from oak trees.

The orange face of emotional pumpkins  
on doorsteps await the arrival of costumed visitors  
and with a sip or two of witches brew truth  
twists with imagination to emerge in social laughter.

Yet I struggle in the darkness of this life-season,  
struck with grief, erratic heart beats  
to the rhythm and beat of Fred Below's drums.  
Read the newspaper. Listen to the news.

A volatile economy, pollution, border disorder,  
the lapse of leadership integrity, the Yankees  
not in the World Series  
and a merciless winter season looms.

Time to unravel in forgiving winds.

Whatever happened to stories with happy endings? 

---

**Robert Savino, Suffolk County Poet Laureate 2015-2017, is a native Long Island poet, born on Whitman's Paumanok and still fishes there, for words. He is a Board Member at both the Walt Whitman Birthplace and the Long Island Poetry & Arts Archival Center. Robert is the winner of the 2008 Oberon Poetry Prize. His books include *fireballs of an illuminated scarecrow* and his first collection *Inside a Turtle Shell*.**

## **Fallowing**

**By Cameron Conaway**

We occupy only the dusty  
closets of our mind's mansion

forgetting that cultivation  
is deathless, breathless,

that it occurs in the unseeded  
and in the built environments


of seasons.

All walls fall. Rooms beyond  
the dust are untouched.

Our work is to enter them,  
to go beyond names, frames.

Fall is frozen, is rainy season,  
is sweat and bundle, is go out

and stay in. Fall is the meaning

we bring and a time to sing. 

---

**Cameron Conaway is a poet and journalist based in San Francisco. He's the author of *Malaria, Poems* (Michigan State University Press), which was named a "Best Book of 2014" by *NPR*. Conaway is also a recipient of the Daniel Pearl Investigative Journalism Fellowship, an honor given to one journalist each year. Connect with him on Twitter**

**@CameronConaway.**

# The Prisoner

By Neetu Malik

The Prisoner

Follow me


into her kohl-rimmed eyes,  
smudged, darkly alive.

Into deep coal pits through tunnels  
she dug with her own hands --

pretty fingers that  
caressed lace and silk,  
crafted velvet dreams  
which made you sink  
into oblivion--

with the same hands  
she mines into  
blackness so hard,  
you hold your breath  
so you can breathe

when she releases you  
from the clench of her gaze;

you watch her transfixed  
as she peels rocks off the walls,  
her chiseled face a still life painting,  
its color robbed. 

---

**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.**

# The Curtains Were Blue

By Shelby Graham

Last night

I took

One

Two

Three

Four

Five

too many shots

of tequila

I took his face

(it was scratchy

he hadn't shaved

tiny thorns pricked my fingertips

that should have been the first sign)

into my hands

leaned my forehead

into his

(his eyes looked like the night sky)

and whispered

“I love you”

He took my hands in his



(I thought of the rose petals i'd plucked

earlier that day

asking

he loves me

he loves me not

he loves met

he loves me not

he loves me

he loves me not)

kissed my nose

(his freckles reminded me of

stars

Like the moon descended from the sky

and blessed his cheeks)

He brought his moondust mouth

close to mine

“Go to bed

Sweet love

You won't remember this

In the morning” 

---

**Shelby Graham is a NYC-based poet and theatre maker. She has worked with such companies as *Pipeline Theatre Company*, *FUMA Theatricals*, *Break the Sex Myth*, and more. Her work tends toward free form and eclectic structure. She will be graduating from New York University this May.**

## Succinctly

By Miriam Barnaby

Me one, vast fields around me.

Wheat far above my head,  
forming a shelter from the sun,  
shining through it,  
licking its surface.

I feel fear penetrating my body.

Numbness keeps me still, soil is my bed.

My eyes looking up. The green eyes  
that never cried of happiness  
are now unable to cry at all.

The brain fighting to make sense,  
racing with the light.

Bugs, the things I've always feared the most,  
are here. Crawling up my face,  
entering my ears, nose, mouth.

They eat their way in, enjoying  
the sweetness of my flesh.

Just as you used to.

Slowly it's getting dark until,  
someone has turned the sun off.

The soil no longer pricks my back.

How much I love these bugs.

They are a part of me now,  
eating all my pain away.

I hear an alarm clock.


My body stiff as ever.

I open my eyes full of water.

They are searching for you.

You are still here but,

now I know, you should never

have been. 

---

**Miriam Barnaby is a mediator, specializing primarily in domestic disputes, and is also a fully qualified ESL teacher. She is the author of a collection of poems and finds poetry the perfect outlet to express her true thoughts and feelings on a variety of subjects. Her poetry can be found under the profile “English By Midas” on Facebook.**

# One Kind of Autumn

By Vincent Spada

Away, away, away

Rush the leaves in all their splendor

Drop down the curls of brown

The rainfall of September

Drifting, drifting, drifting

Fades the sunshine to the gloaming

The heat now in retreat

The cold shall soon be roaming

Rise, rise, rise

See the harvest moon so ghostly


The face one can't erase

The things that matter mostly

Gone, gone, gone

The year, like lightning flashes

A time caught in a rhyme

and swiftly by you passes... 

---

**Vincent Spada is an author and native of Massachusetts, with three book titles to his credit.**

**His works include children's tales, poetry and sports trivia, along with articles on various subjects.**