



October Hill

MAGAZINE

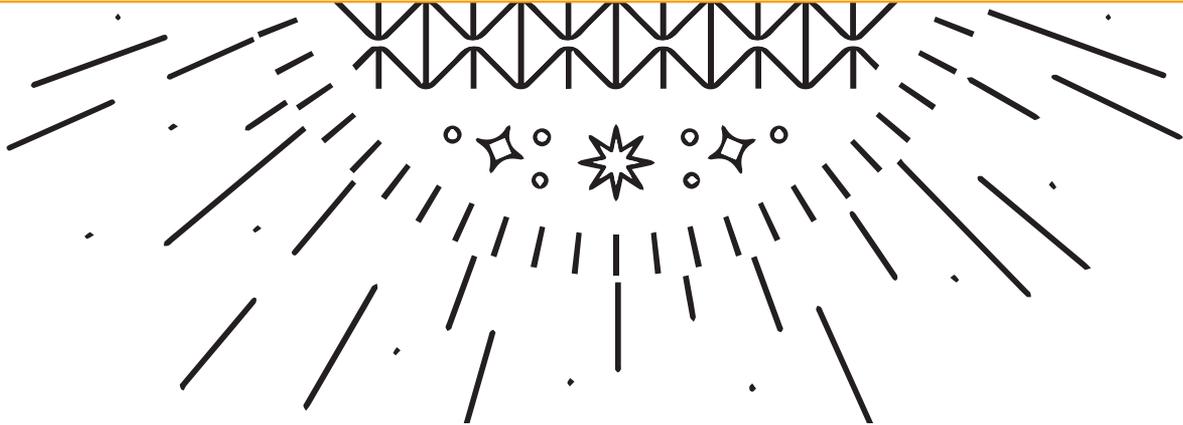
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October Hill

M A G A Z I N E



Volume 5, Issue 2



With this issue, we celebrate the beginning of our fifth year as a literary magazine. We feel as if we have much to celebrate. We have grown and broadened our editorial offerings. And we have been embraced by our loyal readers and recognized in the literary community.

Perhaps most of all, we can take pride in our efforts to nurture new and aspiring authors and to create a platform for them. That was our goal from the beginning.

No doubt we were in part inspired by the halcyon days of book publishing. The heyday of publishing was dramatized in the film *Genius* (2016), starring Colin Firth as Maxwell Perkins, the editor at Scribners, who nurtures the young author Thomas Wolfe (“Look Homeward Angel”), played by Jude Law. In the film, Perkins carves away at the layers of raw writing of Wolfe to reach the talent at its core. The author grows under the tutelage of Perkins and evolves to become a renowned author at Scribners, also the home of Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald.

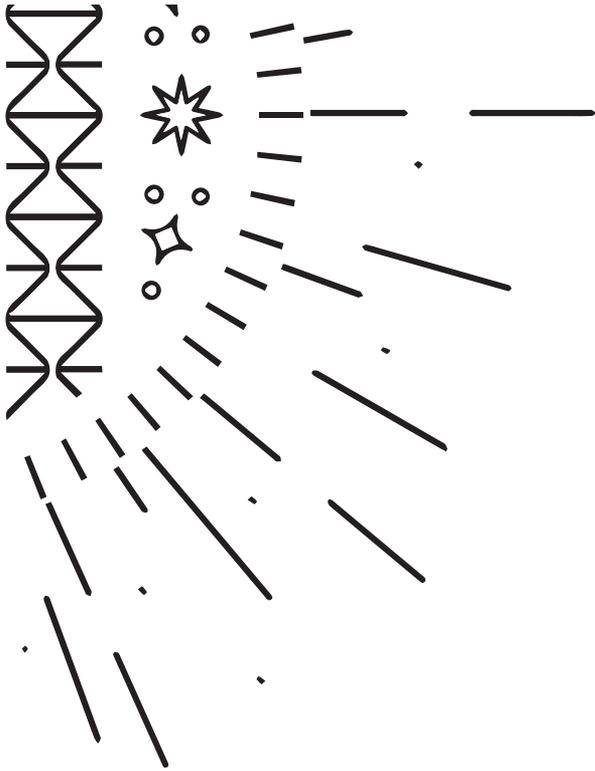
We believe it is a tragic mistake that traditional book publishers have largely abdicated their role of cultivating young authors. Almost uniformly, they have adopted a policy of refusing to read unsolicited manuscripts from new and aspiring authors. While we are not a traditional book publisher, our Managing Editor, Samantha Morley, and our Short Story Editor, Selin Tekgurler, have worked with numerous young and aspiring authors in our first four years to bring out their talents and to raise their short stories to a level of quality suitable for publication. Kudos to Samantha and Selin for their great work!

We see it as the fulfillment of our original mission of creating a platform for new authors and new voices at *October Hill Magazine* and nurturing new authors to become the best authors they can be. Many of our new authors have benefited by publishing their first short stories with us. Our publication has benefited by publishing their creative new works. Our readers have benefited by gaining exposure to rich new veins of writing talent. And the literary world as a whole has been enriched by what we hope will become the next new generation of authors.

We hope you can share our excitement about the future!

Richard Merli *Editorial Director*

Samantha Morley *Managing Editor*



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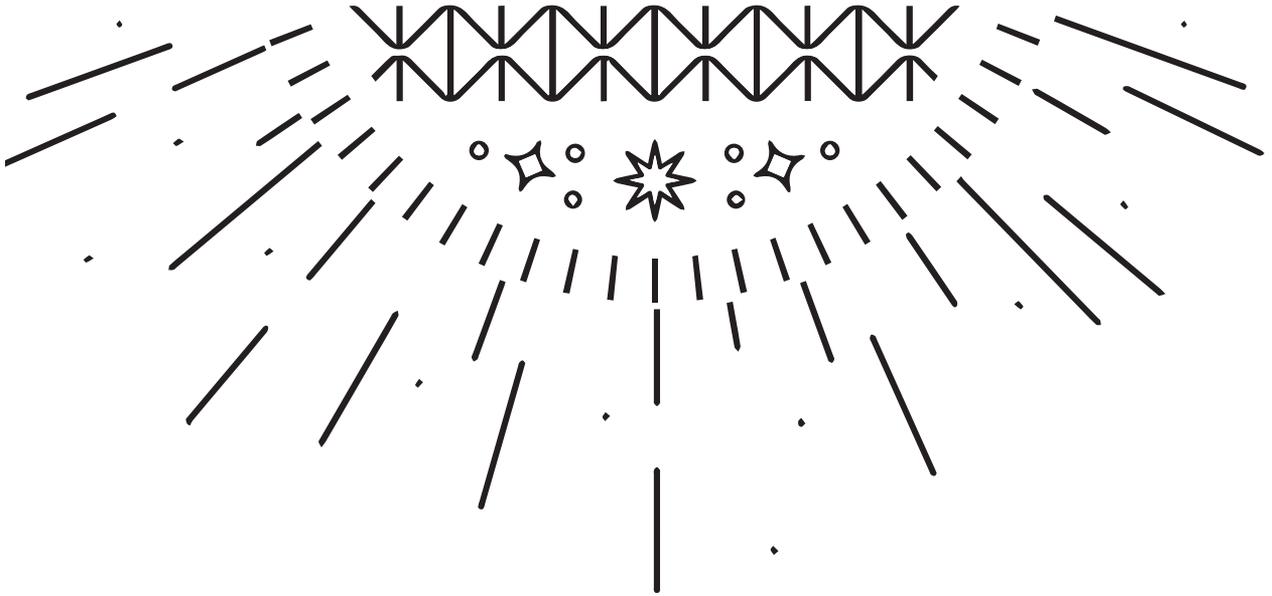
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Short Stories





The Toilet Dilemma

By: Nanci Woody

Robert—"Just call me Bob"—was a grizzly bear of a man. Six foot five. 240 pounds. Boisterous personality. Coarse language. White shirt poking out of his trousers. Scuffed shoes. Scary smart. Not your typical community college president.

Sheila—"Call me Ms. Johansen"—was half his weight. Five foot one. Serious. Never uttered even the word "damn" in her entire life. Clothes covered by a well-worn lab coat. Scuffed shoes. Scary smart. Not your typical community college chemistry teacher.

When Sheila applied for the teaching position, the all-male hiring committee asked the inevitable question. "I see you have a baby. In the event he should become ill, which would come first: your child or your job?"

"I don't mean to be pertinent, but I hope you're asking the male applicants for this job the same question."

"That information is confidential, I'm afraid."

"Well, then. Of course my child would come first. You would think me a poor mother if I answered otherwise."

The president made the final decision on all new hires. When Sheila came into his office, he shook her hand vigorously. "Mrs. Johansen, I believe?"

"Ms. Johansen," she corrected him. "Or Ms. Sheila, if you prefer a first-name basis."

"Oh, for God's sake. I hope you're not one of those damned women's libbers."

"I've been working hard to get the Equal Rights Amendment ratified, and if that makes me a women's

Nanci Woody has published numerous short stories and poems online and in print anthologies. Her novel, *Tears and Trombones*, based on the life of a well-known Sacramento musician, won several awards. She is presently writing the pilot for a streaming series to adapt the novel for television.

libber, then I guess I'm guilty."

He laughed spontaneously, sitting down behind his oversized mahogany desk. "Just call me Bob. Please. Have a seat."

When Sheila started teaching in the fall, her sitter brought the baby to campus twice a day. Though she knew it was unprecedented, she taped a "Do Not Disturb" sign to her office door, locked it, made herself comfortable behind her desk with the baby in her arms and a crib blanket over her bosom. Alternately she cooed to the child, answered phone calls from students, kissed her baby's downy head, and read her lecture notes.

Three months into her first semester at Central Valley Junior College, and just as she was passing her child back to the babysitter, Sheila heard President Bob come ambling noisily down the Chemistry Building hallway, patting backs, shaking hands, and telling jokes. When he reached her office, he stopped abruptly. "Do not disturb? What kind of message is that giving your students?"

"For forty-five minutes, I need privacy to nurse my baby, and there's no other place on campus that's appropriate, Mr. President."

"The baby? It's here every day?"

"It' is. For just a couple more months."

"I don't remember our discussing this in the interview."

"I don't remember you asking."

"Of course not. It wouldn't have occurred to me."

“Don’t fault yourself. It’s usually men you’re interviewing, and, as I understand it, they don’t nurse their babies.”

Bob threw back his head, guffawed. “You got me there, Ms. Sheila.” He smiled at her baby boy and waved his hand. “Bye, bye. Looks like we’ll be seeing you again.” He winked at Sheila. “And often.”

Sheila moved aside as Bob entered her office. She remained standing because, except for a folding chair too small for the president’s bulk, there was no place for him to sit.

Unfazed, Bob continued. “I’ve heard good things about you. People around here are happy with the job you’re doing.” He looked over his shoulder, smiled conspiratorially, and continued in a whisper. “But, confidentially, I hear the boys down here in chemistry are having a hard time concentrating. They’re not used to having a good-looking woman deliver their lectures.”

Sheila looked up and met his gaze. “They’ll adjust at exam time.”

He raised his hands in front of his face. “OK. OK. Peace now. I, believe me, have no doubt they’ll adjust.” He stepped back, removing a brochure from his pocket. “Here. Take a look at The Seventies Initiative. I think you’ll be pleased.”

She scanned the brochure. “A training program for nurses? What wonderful news.”

“And I’ve come with a proposition for you.”

Bob didn’t miss Sheila’s frown, though barely discernible. “Forgive my poor choice of words, but I bring good news. Central Valley will be at the forefront of training, and I’m here to enlist your support. Nobody knows better than you how few women are taking chemistry classes. But with this new program, we’ll have a lot of women studying science.”

“What wonderful news.”

“You already said that.”

The dilemma didn’t fully present itself until Sheila’s second year when her Chem 2A classes, designed for non-science majors, enrolled nearly all women. These would-be nurses were required to analyze urine samples throughout the semester. During

lab, they would line up at the Science Area’s one-stall toilet and wait, and wait some more, using up valuable class time.

“There aren’t any lines at the men’s toilet,” a student complained. “I hear they’ve got ten stalls.”

“Plus six urinals,” chimed in another.

“And I understand there are at least three guys to a urinal. Figure it out. Twenty-eight guys all using the toilet at the same time.”

After weeks of deflecting complaints, adjusting her lesson plans to accommodate the use of the toilet, and trying to figure out a solution to the dilemma, Sheila marched up to President Bob’s office and laid out the problem.

“Understand this, Ms. Sheila. I’ve just spent all morning with the Budget Committee trying to figure out how to fund the library expansion and new gym. I’m sorry, but I can’t get excited about your toilets.”

“My toilets?”

“Yes. Your toilets.” He stood, attempting to tuck his shirt in his pants. “Does your ERA take into consideration the fact that women take so much longer to use the toilet than men?”

“Of course. We’re aware that women don’t stand in a line like men, who face a wall and, probably to music, empty their bladders together.”

“Ms. Sheila. Your complicated anatomy is unfortunate for your sex.”

“Mr. Bob. Here are the simple facts. Two-thirds of science students, because of your nurses’ training program, are women. These students take not only chemistry but also biology, anatomy, and physiology. There is one stall for all the women in the area. The male students who, by your own admission, do not need as much time in the toilet, have ten stalls and six urinals. You never see them waiting in line.”

“You can’t expect me to undo what’s already been done. There is a fixed number of toilets.”

“At least visit my lab to see for yourself the hardship placed upon the women. And, I might add, their teacher.”

Bob arrived in the chemistry area at 2:15 p.m. the

next day to find 29 female students lined up, holding plastic cups. At 2:45, the last person in line walked out of the toilet with her urine sample in hand. He stood in the doorway to Sheila's lab, caught her eye, and waved.

"Mr. President," she called. "Come on in. Students. Let me introduce you to Mr. Bob. He's the one who can help us solve our toilet dilemma. Say hello to Mr. Bob."

The students looked up from their beakers and said "Hello" in unison.

"Mr. Bob. Please walk around the lab and check out our procedures."

Bob hesitated just a moment before approaching the first student. "I must admit, I've never analyzed my own urine." *Though I've been in a few pissing contests, he thought, like right now.*

"And students," Sheila continued, "Thank Mr. Bob in advance for making our toilet problem a priority, for recognizing the injustice, and for doing all he can to help us in making our classes much more effective and efficient."

Sheila waited one month before she again went to the president's office.

"I've been wondering when you'd show up," he began.

"Well, you've had time by now to consult with your Budget Committee."

"I've done that, and you're not going to be pleased with our conclusion. We've looked everywhere and there is simply no money to reconstruct your bathrooms."

"Does this mean doing something about the inconveniences suffered by your women students is not a priority at your college?"

"I did what I could. And I'd like to remind you that you're new here. You'll have to wait in line and live with our decision for now. Maybe next year."

Sheila took the president's comments to a science department meeting later that afternoon. The teachers, all male except her, were, of course, aware of the problem.

"Can't the girls take their urine samples across

campus to another bathroom?"

"Come on. Your male students would have a fit if they had to do that."

"They'd just find a tree."

"Women are used to lining up for the toilet."

"Sad to say, Sheila, but if there's no money, there's no money."

"Also sad you can't do anything without administrative support."

Sheila was agitated when she left campus that afternoon, thinking, *This is not only ridiculous, it isn't fair. I have to do something.*

On the way home, she bought a large bouquet of flowers. She made dinner, read to her child, and put him to bed. She discussed her plan with her husband, asking him to make two large signs for her in his woodshop.

Sheila arrived on campus the next day with her signs, a screwdriver, and a hammer. She delivered her 2A lecture. During her break, she called the three local TV stations and told them to be on Central Valley's campus at 2:00 to witness a campus revolt. She also called her women friends in PE, Home Economics, and Business to alert them.

The television vans were in the parking lot at 1:30. Sheila, after a short meeting with the reporters, went to her lab class. She immediately dismissed the students to collect their urine samples.

As the first student opened the door to the toilet, she paused, cameras rolling, and turned to those lining up. "Where's President Bob when we need him?"

When all of her students were in place outside the toilet, the line running far down the corridor, Sheila approached them, followed by reporters.

"Just look at this," she began. "Yes. Go ahead. Capture it on camera. These students, our future nurses, sometimes wait thirty minutes to get urine samples for analysis. The problem?" She gestured toward the toilet. "It's obvious! There's only one stall in there."

Someone had alerted President Bob, who was watching it all live in the lounge room.

Sheila walked the short distance to the men's toilet. "Now take notice," she said to the cameras. "There's not a single guy waiting to use this restroom."

"So how do we solve the problem? Class! Pay attention." Sheila opened the door to the men's toilet and, in a loud voice, said, "Hello. Anybody in here?" Getting no answer, she quickly pried off the "Men" sign. Amid shouts and cheers from her students, she nailed her large, neatly made "NEW Women's Restroom" sign onto the door, turned to the cameras, and, with a big smile, declared, "Problem solved."

The student nurses were ecstatic. They excitedly rushed into the toilet and checked out the facility.

"Look at all these stalls. This is like the Hilton."

"What'll we do with the urinals?"

"We'll be on the evening news."

"Wait 'til the Budget Committee sees this. It didn't cost anything."

Ms. Sheila, followed by students carrying flowers and vases, walked into the toilet. She made a big show of filling each vase with water, arranging flowers in them, and with the TV cameras recording her every move, set a vase of flowers in each urinal, each time posing with a triumphant smile. She returned to the women's toilet and hammered on her "NEW Men's Restroom" sign.

"Our Ms. Sheila's a genius!"

"Gutsy, too."

The reporters gathered around. "I understand you're the first woman to be hired here at Central Valley to teach chemistry. Can you tell our viewers what's going on?"

"I'm sure your television audience can relate to our problem as there is hardly a theater, community center, or even a church in the entire country that has adequately addressed what I'll call 'the toilet dilemma.'"

A large crowd was gathering. Somebody was playing a guitar. Classes were disrupted. Teachers gave up on insisting that order be restored and joined the students outside.

"And," Ms. Sheila continued, "this dilemma for our

many female students was too difficult a problem to be solved by our otherwise highly competent president and his Budget Committee. Women and their special needs apparently have the last priority when funds are allocated, even though Central Valley is one of the foremost trainers of nurses in the entire state."

Amid cheers and whistles, Ms. Sheila gave a little bow. When she saw President Bob working his way to the front of the crowd, she pointed him out to the television crew.

"Mr. President," a reporter called. "May we have a word?"

Disheveled and out of breath, Bob joined Sheila near the new women's toilet, leaned forward, and whispered, "You're playing damned dirty here."

Then he turned to the television cameras, pasting on a smile. "I hate to miss a party," he began. "Especially a party thrown by the first woman ever to be hired here to teach chemistry."

He looked around at the 'NEW Women's Restroom' sign, at the large crowd of students and faculty, and at Sheila standing nearby, her hammer still in hand. Unsmiling, he pointed to the sign. "I see we have some changes here."

Sheila's students scanned her face, looking for a clue as to how to respond. She brushed a forefinger across her lips. They turned their attention again to President Bob.

He looked out over the crowd. "I want to make it clear to everyone here that I have not been unaware of your problem. Ms. Sheila and I have discussed it many times, and I have done everything possible to come up with a suitable solution."

He paused momentarily, making sure he had everyone's attention before proceeding.

"To get right to the point," he said, "I want to let you know that through hard-fought negotiations, I finally was able to convince the Budget Committee that the dire need here in the science area should be our number-one priority. And I'm happy to tell you that we have allocated the funds needed to remodel your restrooms."

The crowd burst into applause.

“Hang on. Hang on. I have one more thing to add.” President Bob looked pointedly at Sheila. “Even though this change was unauthorized, I’ll have to admit that it was creative.” He smiled broadly, clapped Ms. Sheila on the back, and faced the crowd again. “Until the new restrooms are built, we’ll continue with your teacher’s innovative solution.”

He could say nothing else, for the students were not to be subdued any longer. Specimen cups in hand, the women raised their arms and encircled Ms. Sheila and President Bob, chanting, “Hip, hip, hip-hip hooray! We! Got! Toi-lets to-day!”

Bob leaned close to Sheila, saying over the noise, “I hope you’re happy. You won this one.”

“I’m euphoric,” she said, shaking hands with her students and giving them quick hugs.

“This is your party,” he said. “I’m getting back to work.”

She grabbed his elbow as he turned to leave. “Just one more thing, Mr. President.”

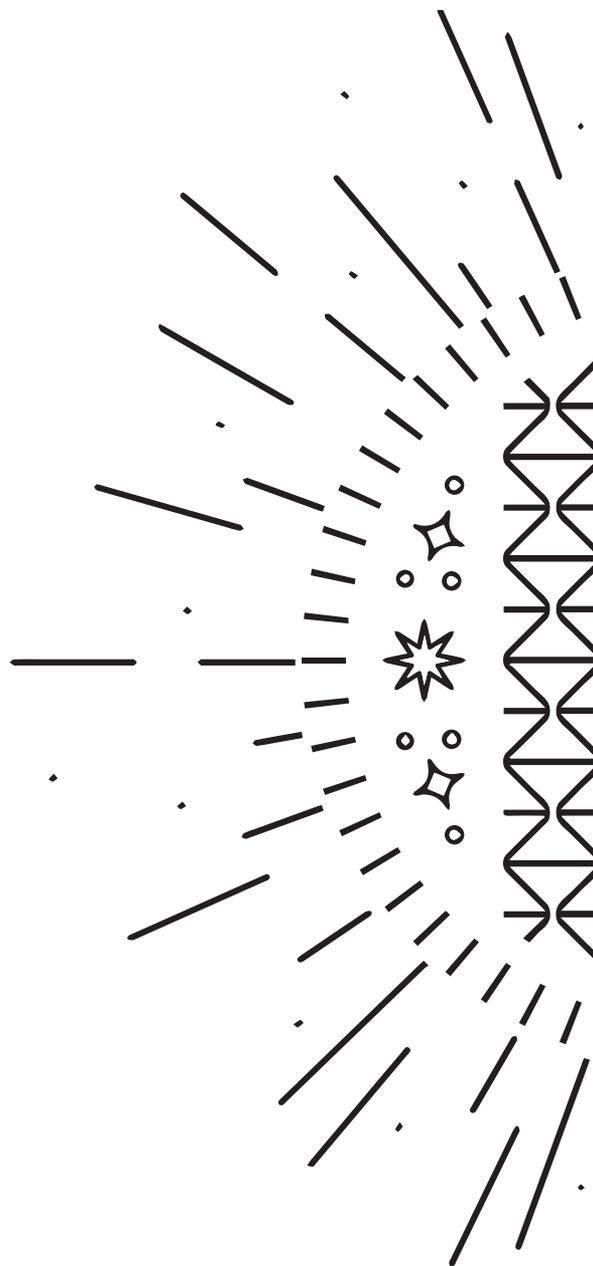
“Here it comes. Surprise me, Ms. Sheila. What’s your next off-the-wall proposition?”

“We need a childcare center on campus.”

“Do you have any idea what that would cost? You never quit, do you?”

“But we’d be the first in northern California. I was just thinking that under your leadership...”

“Stop.” President Bob put up his hand. “You should know buttering me up is a waste of time.” He put a hand on her shoulder, pointing to the TV crews. “You must learn to celebrate one victory at a time. Now, smile for the cameras.”





My Father's Blue Truck

By: Danis Banks

Danis Banks has an MFA in Creative Writing and teaches Writing at NYU. *October Hill Magazine* will be her first publication.

“I’ve become friends with Clifford,” said my father.

“Who?”

“Cliff Griffin. Up there? We bond over the subject of old cars.”

My dad and I were at a Japanese restaurant on the Upper West Side, near his hotel. It was a cold November evening, and he’d come into town for work: meetings, et cetera. I hadn’t spent time with him in a few months, not since August, which was when I last saw him at his house in the Catskills. I’d gone there for a family reunion that my older sister had orchestrated because she was in social media contact with all of our relatives on our father’s side and wanted to show off her kid to them in person. The gathering hadn’t been any fun, just two days of small talk with cousins and an uncle and aunt I’d not spoken to nor thought about in years. Now, I was glad for the chance to be with my father in less strained circumstances. He’d been unhappy at the reunion, I could tell, though he’d never admit it, unwilling to acknowledge that his siblings gave him anxiety. He was not inclined to show fear or vulnerability—not ever. Now, he wanted to talk about Clifford Griffin, so I let him. I even added some flattery.

“I can see why you two would get along,” I said. “Alpha males.”

My father smiled. “Cliff is actually pretty nice.”

“He’s ironic,” I said.

I’d had only a few brief interactions with Clifford since I first met him more than 20 years ago, but I wanted to show my support for this new acquaintanceship.

I knew what we were doing: our talking about my father and Clifford’s burgeoning rapport meant we were normalizing a weirdness from the past, one that my father and I had skirted around awkwardly ever since that short, odd phase when my father and Clifford’s daughter began spending time together, just the two of them.

Clifford’s daughter, Penelope, and I first met in college, long before her father got to know mine. She and I became very good friends during our final year at school. Penelope was an heiress to a robber-baron fortune, as she herself used to word it: ironic, like her father. I’d disliked her initially, as she was one of those loud theater types who would break into song in public, dramatically brush her hair in class, and make out with boys at parties in full view of everyone there. She’d be standing with some guy at the food table, the two of them all over each other, under bright lights. If you wanted to see what the hosts had put out for a spread—those measly collegiate offerings of chips, popcorn, and pretzels, displayed in cheap plastic bowls or, worse, still in their bag—you’d have to look past Penelope and whatever male was currently in her thrall, probing each other’s mouths with their tongues. She was an exhibitionist, a narcissist, and beautiful, with piercingly light eyes and nearly white hair. She spoke in an Upper East Side locked jaw and had a velvety voice that projected: whenever Penelope was around, people knew it. She smoked a pack of Marlboro Lights per day and often made herself throw up after eating, so she was, in addition to being almost six feet tall, very thin. Many moles. Strong features. Compulsive shopper. And, like me, someone who smoked pot most afternoons and drank to excess on the weekends. We got along. But there was a falseness to our friendship as if we were showing off being together whenever we were together. We knew how we looked as a pair: the

tall private-school Manhattanite with the straight, angular bob and the short, plump, curly-headed New England half-Jew, each of us pretty but in opposite ways. We had the same taste in vintage clothes and in men: If it didn't work out between Penelope and some guy, she would send him to me and vice versa. Strangely, these boys always conceded to the trading process, and she and I were never rejected by the other's cast-off.

After college, we both moved to the East Village—I on Seventh Street between Avenues C and D, and Penelope in a much larger, more expensive, overly renovated apartment on the corner of Houston Street and First Avenue, above a shiny, just-opened grocery store that newcomers to the neighborhood thrilled over but locals cast dubious glances toward. We both worked in publishing, at entry-level jobs that weren't very interesting, but we believed they might become so eventually. I was more industrious than Penelope; her parents had given her some access to her trust fund, and she knew that millions more awaited her when she turned 27. We were then 23. Her father's logic, she'd said, had been for her to work for a few years to "see how she liked it." Then she'd be able to do whatever she wanted with the inheritance. He hoped that the "project" she used it for would be related to her (ideally) meaningful time as an editorial assistant. But Penelope wanted to act, specifically in musical theater.

That aspiration changed when she met Randall, a music-industry executive and the first boyfriend of Penelope's I had no interest in sleeping with once she tired of him. He was what we'd sometimes refer to as a suit, though I can't recall having seen him in one, and we'd always say it with some admiration, mingled with contempt, because we knew that such corporate people, male or female, had power. Randall helped convince Penelope that her voice was more indie rock than Hair-Godspell-Chorus Line and arranged for her to work with a songwriter and band to produce what would be the first of several demos, tracks, and full-length CDs. She didn't "gig" ever because Randall wanted her to release her music first through his label—or, rather, the one he worked for, and yet he always said "my" when mentioning it. He believed that she would soon become very famous, then only do stadium shows and arena concerts. But, being in love, he failed to see that Penelope's voice lacked range and that the smoking, drinking, and excessive thinness made her look wan, sometimes haggard. I sensed that he had been to so many sticky-floored small venues, watching bands that no one had heard of, perform for a meager audience of

friends and family members, that he hoped to never again set foot in a beer-smelling club of any size with a plastic wristband affixed to his arm, which he'd actually need to do plenty more of if Penelope were to launch her career the traditional way, with him as her manager.

Penelope and Randall began spending all their available time together, and I saw her less and less: They would stay in and order food at her place on Houston Street or his in midtown, and they spoke of adopting a dog. Then she ended the relationship because, as she put it, she "realized what a bore" he was, and that he was "bad in the sack to boot." Shortly afterward, she got access to her money and moved to Los Angeles. I missed her at first but soon began wondering whether I'd ever truly liked her or had merely enjoyed the attention we received when we were out together. We lost touch, as they say. I became busy with graduate school, then teaching, and thought about Penelope only when I visited my father in the Catskills, where her parents also had a house in the same resort town as my father and his wife. My dad would mention that he'd seen Penelope and her ne'er-do-well siblings at the small country club in downtown Eden Lake, a hamlet of a few hundred people playing family doubles on the clay tennis courts or splashing loudly in the unheated pool, those four "Griffin kids" nearing or past 30 by then, but who still regressed to childish noisy obnoxiousness whenever visiting their parents in the WASP enclave where my father lived during the warmer half of the year, because of his wife's connection to the place.

Eden Lake was a town known for its hiking trails, picturesque rivers, cold waterfalls, and "historic" covered bridges. Nature enthusiasts from around the world traveled long distances by inconvenient transportation to stay at its fly-fishing resorts. Wealthy folks had been "summering" in the rural community since the mid-nineteenth century, and my father's wife came from a few generations of what she called, with sniffy self-regard, Eden Lakers. The house my father lived in used to belong to his wife's grandparents, and its pine-and-mothball scent was as much a feature of the place as the log cabin-style walls, L.L. Bean oval-shaped rugs, and termite-and-hornet-cadaver-filled window sills. I disliked going to Eden Lake. Not only was it located too many hours from the city and extremely remote, the train an endless journey that required a subsequent bus ride along an interminable, nausea-inducing series of evergreen-bordered hairpin turns, but very few Jewish or Black people spent time there.

Historical reasons contributed to their avoidance of the mountain-nestled town: Eden Lake's old, famous country club—not the tiny Main Street one with the always-cold pool, but a larger, more isolated institution, which had a golf course and offered canoeing to “camps” that were deep in the Catskill wilderness—had only recently starting accepting Black, Jewish, and gay people. My father refused to join the Alpine Club; his wife was a lifelong member. She frequently referred to its employees as “the help.”

I learned from college friends that Penelope was still making music as a singer-songwriter when someone sent me a link to a YouTube video for one of her songs. It consisted of Penelope riding a vintage bicycle (with a 1970s-style sloped seat and cheerleading pom-like tassels fluttering from the elevated handlebars) along the boardwalk in Venice Beach, lip-syncing a simple tune. Lazy bongos and surf guitar accompanied her on what I could only think of as a “diddie.” I was unsure why I chose that particular word—I guess because the song was so simple and nursery rhyme-ish. I watched for a minute or so before realizing that her riding a bike was all that happened. A few weeks later, I received the monthly magazine from the college we'd attended, and inside was a sidebar about Penelope's CD, released on a label I'd never heard of. The album cover art featured a photo of her standing in front of an old truck that looked familiar. I studied the picture. I studied it some more. In the background was a wood pile and landscaping that I felt I knew: the berry bushes, bright green ferns, and moss-covered stone wall that resembled those near my stepmother's vegetable garden in Eden Lake. I googled Penelope Griffin and found a website: pennygmusic.com. It contained a bio, photos, band information, links to articles about her, and other self-promoting material. The photos interested me especially.

Publicity shots for her latest CD, *Me*, were of Penelope, now apparently going by Penny, lying atop the hood of and standing before and beside a vintage dark blue pickup I recognized as my father's old Ford, which he purchased on eBay a few years prior. It was a novelty vehicle, similar to those owned by other white, wealthy middle-aged-to-elderly men in the Catskill, Hampton, and Adirondack towns, perhaps to remind them of their youth: well-preserved “classic” cars that they'd take only on short drives, maybe over to the hardware store or a farmer's market, and always on bright sunny days—the better to receive more comments and praise. A hobby, I guess, not that *they* knew how to do the inevitable repairs. Mostly, the appeal

seemed to be in how photogenic these antiques were. I could see why Penelope would want pictures of herself alongside my father's ancient truck, with its rounded, voluptuous mid-century curves. The car was Betty Boop-like; were it a font, it would be sexy bubble cartoon letters. But her posing with the old blue thing meant that she and my father had made arrangements for the photo shoot to happen. A professional had surely been hired. Were there multiple visits? Test shots at various times of day, in different lighting? I wondered whether my father's wife had supervised these meetings. Penelope was a flirt, and I didn't trust her. Come to think of it, I didn't trust him.

I shut my laptop and imagined them in his vintage truck, which he would have suggested they go for a ride in. She was 32 then, my age at the time, and he 65. He would've driven her through town and up toward the bigoted Alpine Club, where Penelope's long-deceased relatives scowled down from portraits on the walls at members masticating undercooked steaks and sipping very dry martinis. He would know about a former logging road leading to trails that he and I had hiked in the past on those day climbs we went on whenever I visited. He would turn onto one such dirt road slowly, the Ford's plump tires crunching over pine cones and fallen branches, with reddish pine needles crinkling below. Her breath would've stunk of vomit because she'd've forced herself to eat lunch that day, her mother having been watching. My father would park, not at a trail head but at some other spot where nobody went, except on drives such as this. He'd reach past her legs, letting his elbow touch her knee, to open the glove compartment and remove the silver flask—a gift from his wife—that he kept in there. He'd pass it to her and think, *mouthwash*.

That was as far as I got before deciding the whole thing was my fault: I had flirted with Clifford once, had I not? She was punishing me for that, and maybe my father was, too. It had happened back when Penelope and I were still friends, and we'd rented a car and driven up from Manhattan to visit our respective parents at their respective Eden Lake homes. That particular summer weekend, the country club in town—not the Alpine Club, but the small, unpretentious one on Main Street—had hosted a soiree of some kind, maybe a fundraiser or auction. There was a tent, dance floor, and several bars, each a mere folding table strung with tiny white lights. All the locals were in attendance, meaning summer people—year-rounders never went to such events. They weren't invited. I'd encountered

Penelope's father standing at a bar with his arm over the shoulders of his youngest son, the only one of Penelope's three brothers who seemed like he might get a job someday. Clifford fixed his gaze on me. He was clearly drunk: red-faced and wet-lipped, leering and wolfish. Weirdly, I found him attractive: He was a father but not mine; he didn't care about me, but it wasn't my father who didn't. He asked what I was having, and I said that I'd recently quit drinking.

"A cheap date," he said.

Penelope's brother laughed and wandered off, unsteady, though it was still early.

"Vulgar expression," I said before I could stop myself.

"Is it, now?" said Clifford, leaning close—teetering, rather—so that he peeked down my dress.

"But not from you. Everything you say manages to sound refined, somehow."

He wobbled backward and grinned, revealing shiny incisors. I looked over this middle-aged wealthy person from top to bottom, half-conscious that I was comparing him to my father, whom I'd teased on the way to this party because he'd bought a lottery ticket at the Stewart's gas station in town after filling the tank of his Volvo wagon, which, at the time, was his only vehicle.

"You still play the numbers, Dad?" I'd said, embarrassed for my father. He had money now. But some of his habits, like buying grocery-store desserts (IGA or Shaw's, certainly not Whole Foods) hadn't changed. Clifford, in contrast, was born wealthy. Any gambling he'd done would've been at Monte Carlo. But surely he'd consider the whole venture of "money for nothing," as he would've called it, whether high-stakes or Powerball, to be sordid, a loser's game. I eyed his slicked-back graying hair, round tortoise-shell glasses, firm torso in a polo shirt tucked into ironed khaki shorts that were worn too high on his waist, braided leather belt, muscular brown calves, slim, almost feminine ankles, and loafers with tassels, and thought, *I would totally sleep with him*. Then Penelope swooped in and yanked me to the dance floor so we could perform our twosome routine of being so opposite-looking yet such good friends.

But maybe she hadn't pulled me away to dance. Maybe she'd wanted to take me elsewhere before my eyes traveled back up to his face.

Shortly after I saw the photos on Penelope's website of her posing with my father's blue truck, I went to Eden Lake for Thanksgiving. My sister "couldn't make the trip from Boston," as she put it, which meant that she didn't want to. Neither of us enjoyed going there. But if I skipped it that year as well, my father would be alone with his wife in the cold, snow-capped mountains, just the two of them eating some kind of roasted small bird followed by a pie from Stewart's. I hadn't heard from nor spoken to Penelope for a few years, but I couldn't ignore the pictures. I needed to say something, which was reason enough to travel all that distance. One's father doesn't sleep with one's former close friend and have it go unmentioned. I didn't object so much to the cheating part; my father was an adult and could do as he liked in his marriage. Of course, I wanted him to be ethical. But our parents aren't always so upstanding. It was the choice of Penelope that bothered me. Of all the people to seduce. Or be seduced by.

And yet...she was attractive. She was also extremely wealthy, and my father cared about that; her air of entitled insouciance—that privileged nonchalance—was an effect he'd tried but failed to cultivate in himself.

The morning after the holiday, my father and I took the trash to the town dump in his old Ford: It had a truck bed that was easy to load things onto. This was my first time riding in it, and I exclaimed at how silently the motor ran, how smoothly it drove. I wasn't really interested. But my father is one of those people who needs a lot of praise and attention. To prevent the bad mood that always seems about to descend, I dote. I fawn.

"And it looks so good," I said. "I can see why Penelope posed with it for her album cover and publicity photos."

Silence swelled in the truck cab with NPR filling the quiet between us. White wintry sun streamed through the skeletal branches of bare trees on both sides of the road, its feeble light shining bleakly onto dead leaves and old patches of snow, which remained from a weeks-ago storm.

Finally, my father said, "You saw the pictures?"

"A friend from school sent me the link to her website," I said, not quite accurately. "She and I have lost touch."

"I haven't seen the family around here for a while."

He pointed to a rise above the road. “There’s the local cemetery where Althea and I will be buried.”

“Dad! That’s so morbid.”

“No, it’s not. It’s realistic. I’ve already reserved my spot, right next to Althea’s.”

I wasn’t about to mention Penelope again. Plus, I would never know how to word the subject: “So, Dad, did you and Penelope have sex? How uncool of both of you!” He would deny it, and I’d feel soiled by his deceit.

“Just don’t be in any rush,” I said as we ascended the road to the dump. The cemetery was to our left, its tombstones grimly facing a sentinel of mountains. Hoary frost sparkled on dry yellow grass that sloped upward to the old graves, some of which protruded from the ground at bent, jagged angles, as if desecrated. “I don’t like to think about your not being around.”

“*Memento mori*,” he said and shifted into a lower gear, the hill having become steep. “Remember death.”

“I know,” I said, defensive. As if!

“I think it’s good to face it squarely, without illusion or fantasy,” he said. “Althea and I want to be cremated. But our headstones will be here, with *Memento Mori* engraved on them. If you ever have questions about my will, you should ask. I believe in total transparency.”

Not total, I thought.

We unloaded the trash from the back and threw the dark plastic bags into the gaping landfill with a satisfying hurl. Perhaps I found it so enjoyable to toss those remains of our Thanksgiving dinner, and a week of my father and his wife’s accumulated garbage, because it felt as if I were discarding my hurt feelings about his and Penelope’s tryst. But why should I feel wounded, after all, by their behavior? It wasn’t as if I wanted to sleep with him. If anything, I should feel flattered: Clearly, he was transferring his Oedipal desire for me onto her, while she was displacing her lesbian lust for me onto him. So they’d been together because, in fact, both of them wanted to sleep with me! Or so I thought during the drive back to the house, with Bach on the radio and my father philosophizing beside me about being ready to die, so that one doesn’t fear death and can therefore have a good death, or something like that. I wasn’t

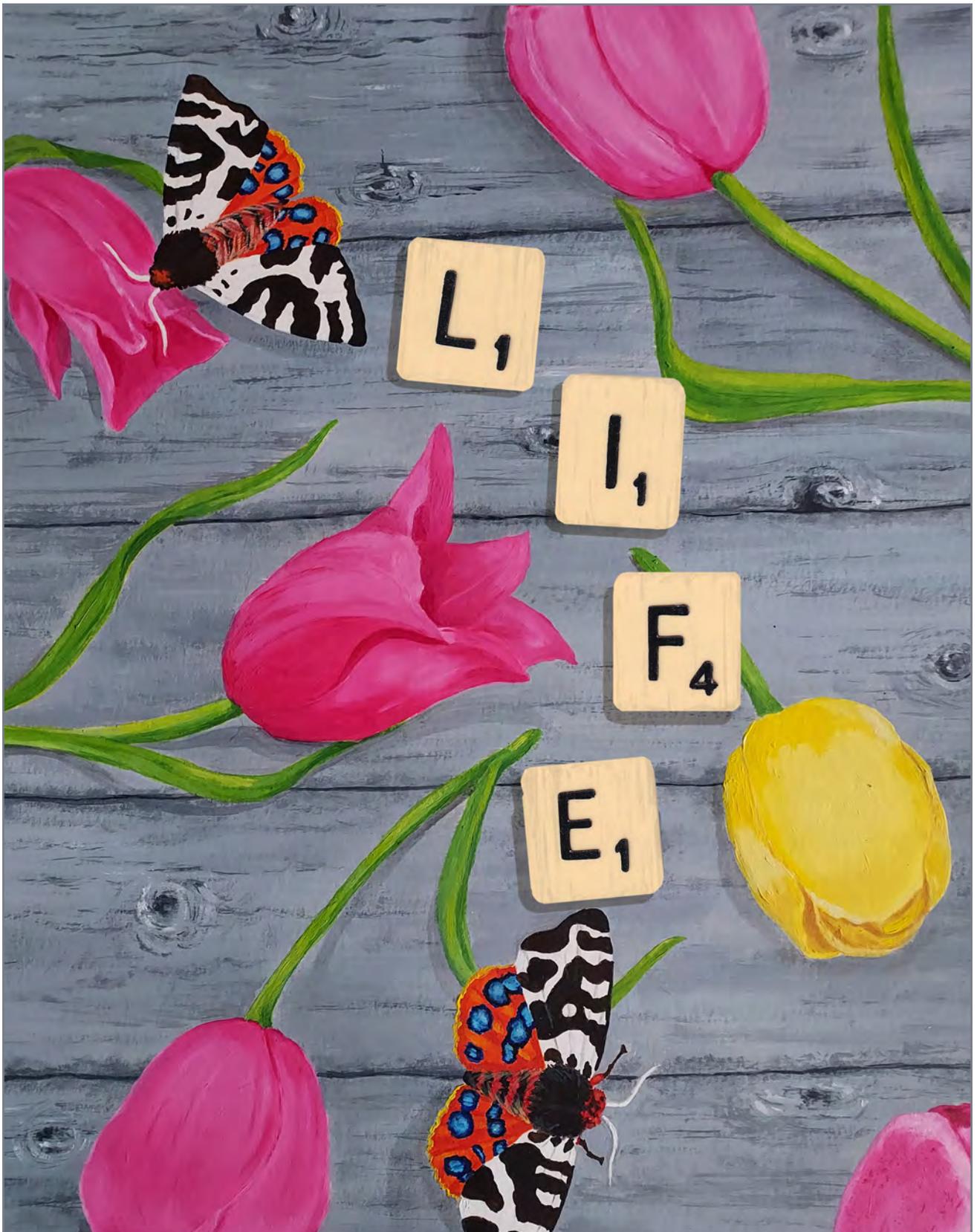
really listening.

But maybe it hadn’t been like that at all. Maybe they’d both done it to hurt me. Sex that was hostile to a third party. Or, I was not part of the equation in any way, and they were simply attracted to each other—which would be worse, my feelings irrelevant. I realized that I would never know why they’d done it because I could not ask.

Over the years, I conveyed my awareness of their affair, or brief dalliance, as it more likely had been, by deliberately not mentioning a woman who had been such a good friend of mine and whose parents spent most of every summer in the same Catskill fly-fishing resort town as my father and his wife. The silence communicated my knowledge. So for Dad to say the name Cliff Griffin more than a decade after those photos were taken of Penelope with the dark-blue truck meant that he wanted to bury it. Maybe his referring to the man even signified his regret. His friendship with the father of a person he never should’ve had sex with suggested that he was also making peace with Clifford, who would’ve hated my father had he discovered what Penelope had done.

In the Japanese restaurant on the Upper West Side, at the next table, sat two teenage girls. My father looked ancient next to them, like a great-grandfather or Rip Van Winkle. Father Time. Santa Claus. The girls had their phones out, face up among the sushi plates and dishes for soy sauce. Neither one had even glanced at us, even though the mere canal of space between our table and theirs was not wide enough to pass through without edging one table or the other a few inches to the left or right, such that my father was locked into place across from me, like a ship in its berth. The girls were probably 15 or so, out for a friend-date on a Friday night, using their parents’ credit cards, or maybe their allowance, which, I could tell from their clothes, hair, jewelry, and makeup, would be sizable. They were not much younger than Penelope and I had been when we first danced together in living rooms at parties, enjoying how boys looked at us, and later, when we were a bit older, the way men stared at us, at bars, clubs, and other, more interesting parties. Penelope had seduced someone who was inappropriate, and maybe that was the main difference between us, and the reason we’d stopped talking. My father, though, would remain in my life until he left it, not by design or rupture, but simply because he was very old.





Patricia Sáez is a Spanish illustrator who combines oil and digital techniques to create powerful images. Her art grows from her life experiences in Spain, South Africa, and The Netherlands. She has participated in several exhibitions in Asturias and Barcelona and her main objective is illustrating books and magazines.

Everything Changes

By: Scott Pedersen

*B*rigid

Brigid was born eight fidgety years ago. She and her younger brother, James, spent Saturday afternoons at their Uncle Brian's house while their mother was at work, caring for patients at a nursing home. When it was full summer, Brian led the children down an ancient trail into the woods behind his house. In the damp forest corridor, Brigid lifted rocks to discover spotted salamanders, sneaked like a mink to spy on nesting warblers, and jumped with her two companions over a creek filled with swishing eelgrass. Finally, they snaked their way through tall sedges to the dark-sand beach at the east end of Mill Lake.

This year, their first excursion was delayed by heavy rains that turned the trail to mud. Now, after a dry week, the three lounged in weathered wooden chairs in the backyard. Brigid, starting to squirm, hoped today would be the day.

"Gorgeous weather," said Brian, looking around. "Did you know this land once belonged to your great-grandparents?"

That story again! Brigid glared at Brian, who continued. "They had horses and rode them all around the lake and—"

"And that's their hitching post out back," said Brigid. "Uncle Brian, you told us that last summer."

"Well, excuse me." He reached and playfully gave Brigid's earlobe a slight tug. "What do you say we go on a hike?"

Brigid popped from her chair and grabbed James'

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arm. "Come on, sleepyhead!" James slid from his chair.

The trio ventured past the backyard, each ritually yanking the rope dangling from the old hitching post. Soon, they were heading through the forest to the lake.

They found no salamanders along the way, but there on the beach was that pink quartzite rock—the heavy-looking one they'd seen for years—that no sensible person would lift just to see what was under it.

"Uncle Brian," said James, "do you think there could be a salamander under that rock?"

Brigid rolled her eyes.

"Maybe," said Brian. "There's no harm in looking." He kneeled to get a good grip under its edge, braced himself, and tilted it upward in one smooth motion.

He gasped. Brigid and James lurched forward.

"Stay there!" yelled Brian. He let the rock fall. "We have to get back to the house."

Instead of taking the trail through the woods, the three hiked up a shorter path that skirted encroaching sumacs along the edge of a grassy hillside. When they reached the backyard, Brian disappeared into the house. He emerged a minute later, holding his phone to his ear. "You kids will need to stay out of the way for a while. The police are coming."

From behind an unruly forsythia, the children watched a patrol car pull slowly into the driveway.

Finally, it stopped, and two officers got out. A discussion ensued, with lanky Brian towering over them and repeatedly pointing toward the lake.

“Maybe Uncle Brian found some stolen money under that rock,” whispered Brigid. “Mom said you can’t keep money if you find it. You have to give it to the police.”

Brian yelled to Brigid and James. “I’m going to take the officers to the beach. I need you kids to stay here. Don’t leave the backyard except to go into the house.”

The children climbed atop Brian’s picnic table. Over tall prairie grass, the strip of beach was visible and soon populated by three figures. The officers crouched and lifted the quartzite rock while Brian turned away.

“Look,” she said. “Uncle Brian doesn’t want to see it again.”

Then came a survey of the entire beach, with haphazard poking into the surrounding cattails.

“They’re coming back,” said Brigid, turning to James. The cuteness of his brushy hair and merry eyes didn’t temper her annoyance. “Why did you ask Uncle Brian about that stupid rock? He already told us there aren’t any salamanders on the beach!”

“I forgot,” said James.



The next Saturday, Brian answered Brigid’s questions about the previous weekend’s strange event by claiming it turned out to be nothing and then, even more disappointingly, by making excuses for not going on a hike. To Brigid, they made no sense. But, soon, she was resigned to just playing in the backyard. Brian lounged and watched as James occupied himself with toys in the sandbox.

Brigid leaned into her palms on the arm of Brian’s chair.

“Uncle Brian, how did Grandpa die? Mom won’t tell me.”

“I’m sure she just doesn’t want to upset you,” said Brian.

“I won’t get upset. I promise.”

“Well, okay, but don’t say I told you.” Brian leaned forward. “At the end of last summer, someone—we don’t know who—killed him.”

“What happened?”

“We were at home when he asked me to go on a walk with him, but I had planned to go shopping.”

“For what?”

“Nothing I couldn’t have done without. And when I got home, he wasn’t here. I couldn’t find him anywhere, not even in the woods. And then the police told me they found him.”

“Where was he?”

“He was over at the abandoned farm across the road—” Brian’s voice trailed off as a squad car pulled into the driveway. “You two stay here. I’ll see what they want.”

Brigid recognized the two officers who got out.

“They’re back,” she whispered to James. “This time, they look mad.”

With the officers’ backs turned toward her, Brigid could hear only Brian’s voice. His irritated tone and pinched face told Brigid that her uncle wasn’t pleased.

“You think they were his? That’s not possible. My father was cremated. Of course, with his hands! I mean, I assume so. I only saw his face at the morgue. How could I be a person of interest? I’m the one who called you! To throw you off? I’ve got news for you. I’m not that clever. I want you to leave!”

With the officers gone, Brian went inside the house and reemerged with a pack of cigarettes. He sat on his chair and fumbled, trying to open it. Brigid asked gingerly, “Do you smoke, Uncle Brian?”

Brian looked up at Brigid sheepishly. “I quit a long time ago.” He tossed the unopened pack on the ground, leaned back, and shut his eyes.

“I wish you had a trampoline, like the one at Aunt Barb’s.”

“She said you can’t use it,” said James.

“No, she said *you* can’t use it!”

“Enough!” said Brian, sitting up. “Look, I need to tell you kids something. Do you remember me showing you my site where I sell art for invitations and cards? Well, I may need to get a different job, because I’m not selling enough. And that means I might have to work on some Saturdays, over at the new supermarket.”

“But we come here on Saturdays!” protested Brigid.

“I know this isn’t good news. I’ve talked to your mom, and she said you can visit Aunt Barb when I’m working. Just remember, everything changes. You’re changing all the time. It’s okay to let a change bother you. Just do the best you can, and maybe something good will happen to make things all right again.”

Brigid listened to Brian’s words but was more interested in the change in his face.

“Why are you crying, Uncle Brian?”

Brian used the heel of his hand to smear a tear off his cheek. “It’s because I’m doing my best. But I don’t know what’s going to happen.”



Brian

By autumn, Brian felt detached. He was a mourner haunted by the death of his father, nearly broke, and now a figure of suspicion. He’d hardly slept in weeks. When sleep did come, it brought harrowing dreams of shocking accusations shouted in courtrooms crowded with strangers. Why couldn’t they believe that he and his father had been like brothers?

He knew it was time to reach out. With a phone call to his friend Connie, he arranged dinner out at a favorite restaurant. They’d been close confidants years ago and had recently reconnected after a chance meeting. If anyone could lift his mood, she could.

He stopped getting ready because of a speck of orange light in the distant darkness. He pressed against the window and stared until he was sure—yes, there was a fire on his beach. He’d never been strict about trespassing. But a bonfire crossed a line. He put on a light jacket, grabbed a flashlight, and headed for the lake.

There, sprawled on a blanket next to the fire, were three teens—two girls and a boy—looking devilish with the spiky flames in front of them. He approached, expecting to face the bravado of typical poseurs drinking beer. *Best to be tough-minded from the start*, he thought.

A hunched girl in an oversized sweater held up a bottle. “Want a beer?” she asked in a grating voice.

“No,” said Brian. “You kids need to leave. The sheriff lives on the lake. All I have to do is make a call, and he’ll be here in his boat in five minutes.”

“Go ahead and call him. Nobody listens to you anymore.”

“What are you talking about?” asked the boy, warming his bare feet as he idly poked the fire with a stick, sending up a swirl of sparks.

“He was on the town council, but they kicked him out.”

Brian shined his flashlight on the girl’s face. “Is that Hannah Pinter? It is. You were the nicest kid, Hannah. This is so disappointing.”

“Not as disappointing as what you did to your dad.”

“Hey,” chimed in the other girl, “that’s the guy who killed his old man!”

“What?” The boy dropped the stick and shot up onto his knees.

“Yeah, he dismembered him right on this beach.”

“Let’s get out of here!” The boy started gathering his things. “We didn’t mean to trespass, Mister. Come on, you guys. I’m getting in the boat.”

After the interlopers left, Brian kicked some sand on the fire and headed back toward the house, his desire for a night out extinguished. In a call to Connie, he begged off their plan and then broached a more important subject. “Did you have a chance to ask Bill about the loan?...I understand...I already asked her. But she’s tapped out, too...No, she’s my only sibling...I wish it were just the property tax. Now I have a big lawyer’s bill on top of it.”



James

During the short days of winter, afternoons spent indoors were like being in a prison. On one cooped-up Saturday, as Brian sat in his easy chair with an unopened book in his lap, James stood at his feet, staring at the liquid on his upper lip.

“Hi, freckle face,” slurred Brian.

James approached slowly. “Are you okay, Uncle Brian?”

“Sure, I’m fine. Now, you let Uncle Brian enjoy his drink. Just play for awhile longer, okay?”

Longer? James had already done everything imaginable in Brian’s living room. That half-eaten bowl of Christmas candy? Yuck! Time to throw some on the floor.

“I gather you kids want to go for a hike,” said Brian. “Oh, well, the air’s getting thick in here anyway.”

Soon they were warmly bundled, with Brian in his black wool peacoat and ready to face the cold and wind. Leaving the backyard, Brian tramped past the hitching post as though it weren’t there.

“We didn’t pull the rope!” protested James.

“You can pull it if you want to,” said Brian indifferently. His steady thrusts through the snow had Brigid struggling to keep up and James falling behind.

As James hiked through the forest, the tree roots and stray rocks he so easily avoided in summer were now hidden, leading to tripping and headfirst plunges into the snow. Each time, he looked up to see Brian obliviously marching onward.

When they reached the beach, Brian headed straight to the edge of the frozen lake. Beyond its crusted expanse was a backdrop of barren trees under roiling clouds, a bleak scene in dreary shades of gray. The sign at Traxler’s bait shop on the west shore, normally as red as a cardinal, looked washed out. With snow starting to fall, even its hint of color disappeared.

“Uncle Brian,” said James, shivering. “Uncle Brian!” Getting no response, he tugged his coat sleeve. “I’m cold! Can we go back?”

“I’m going to stay here for a while,” said Brian. “I want you two to go back to the house and wait for your mom to come get you. Do you understand?”

The request puzzled James, but he felt bound to obey, and so he and Brigid headed up the path along the sumacs, occasionally turning back to see Brian, still immobile at the lake’s edge. James remembered the many ice fishing shacks he had seen on the lake the previous winter. Why were there no shacks now?

It was too cold to ponder for long, so the two continued trudging through the snow and finally reached the house. James, exhausted from the slog, sank to his knees to retrieve the hidden house key under a rock next to the front stoop. He was about to unlock the door when he snapped his head toward the lake. Was Uncle Brian still okay? He’d been behaving strangely all afternoon. James ran to the picnic table, climbed on top, and looked out over the white expanse. Brigid clambered up to join him.

Something had changed. Brian was walking out on the ice, far from the beach.

“What is he doing?” wondered James aloud.

Brian stopped and wrapped his arms around his torso as if to keep warm.

A sound like china hitting concrete cut through the air. Brian dropped into the lake in an instant, with only his head still visible, and then he was gone. Brigid flinched and grabbed James’s sleeve.

James raised his mittened hands to cover his face. When he peeked over them, the lake was an uninterrupted crust again. He could not even tell where his uncle had gone under. He started to cry.

“Didn’t he know the ice was too thin?” he asked.

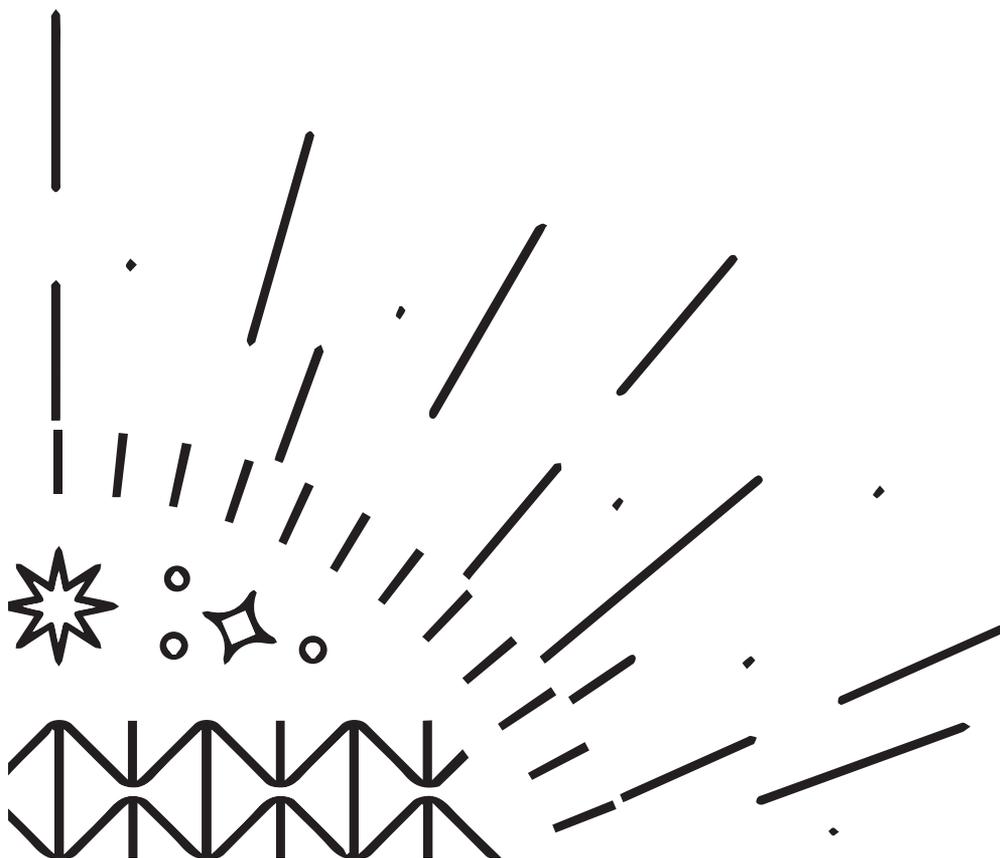
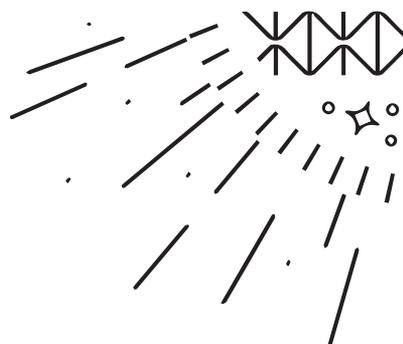
Brigid paused, and then she, too, was in tears. “I think he did.”

Once inside the house, they searched frantically for a cell phone, knocking things off tables and yanking open drawers. Then the jar of a ring tone had them climbing over each other to get to Brian’s home office. Brigid grabbed the phone from Brian’s desk.

“Our uncle fell through the ice!” She looked at James. “It’s a message.”

“Hang up and call 911!”

After Brigid’s call to the police, the two went to the bay window in the living room to wait. James climbed into Brian’s dove-gray easy chair, sat sideways—leaning into the soft chenille—and stared at the changing sky. The clouds were shifting and, in places, parting, letting through fanned streaks of sunlight.





Brian Michael Barbeito is a nature poet and landscape photographer. Work appears at Fiction International from San Diego State University and is forthcoming at The Notre Dame Review's best of the best issue.

The Wild Woods

By: Laura Spaeth

Before our family fractured, there was fun. There was the sea, the sand, and the perpetually ravenous seagulls. They hypnotize me: their screaming beaks, their frenetic hovering, their swirling, swooping dives, which catch the crusts of my uneaten French toast. Someone nearby is reprimanding me: “Don’t feed the gulls! It annoys the guests!” I ignore them and keep tossing. The patrons at Duffy’s By The Lake will get over it and live to stuff their faces with another oversized breakfast special. As I toss my last crumb, I pause to breathe in the fish-scented air. It was happening. My hair was already curling in the misty breeze. It was finally here. Summer.

My best friend and her family had already been in their “second home” in Greece for a month. Her father was the souvlaki king of a kiosk in the Paramus Park Mall. They vacationed there for three months in Pessada, Kefalonia. My father was a freelance artist. We vacationed for one week in Wildwood Crest, New Jersey. It was a far cry from Europe, but it was our Parthenon, planted in this kitschy beach town, frozen in a 1950s motif. Apparently, this man named William Morey thought of designing it this way after visiting the posh resorts of Miami and Fontainebleau. Forget Florida and France; it looked more like it was designed by Elvis after a night of heavy drinking. In other words, it was beautiful.

During the day, its themed motels, some resembling space ships, sparkled in the sun with signs boasting, “No vacancy.” At night, overhead and underwater lights lit up built-in pools, like a David Hockney retrospective in varying hues of aqua. Every motel had a different theme: *The Jolly Roger*, *The Fleur De Lis*, *The Saratoga*, and *The Pan Am*. As we pass one after another, my father drives too fast for my mother, who sits gripping the dashboard while popping her gum. Sandwiched between my older siblings, I look out the

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window of our station wagon. *Look at this motel. This one has a twisty slide, Astroturf, and fake palm trees. Why aren’t we staying at The Royal Hawaiian?* I wonder, but don’t ask. I’m new to keeping my mouth shut. I was not my father’s favorite, and my inability to hold my tongue wasn’t winning me any prizes.

I never understood why everything seemed to be my fault. Perhaps I was the scapegoat my father needed. A sacrificial doeling until I grew up to study self-help gurus and become “good with it.” I couldn’t blame him. I watched him work long hours, pouring over illustrations on a draft board. The detailed, eye-straining work, impossible deadlines, and stress made him burst on numerous occasions. On the other side of the pressure cooker was my mother—forever spinning plates in an attempt to quell him and quiet us, to stop us from spilling blood all over the floor of the bathroom that we three kids shared. She was overworked, overwrought, and let you know it. Someone was always in trouble, and we rotated our family grievances like a lazy Susan. But for the brevity of this yearly respite, in a motel called The Singapore, we were all friends, Blanche. Our differences were shelved for body surfing, shuffle boarding, and buckets of nightly caught fiddler crabs.

After four hours in the car with no radio—my father’s choice, not ours—we arrive. As we exit the wagon, a cute porter with sun-bleached hair and white stuff on his nose helps with our suitcases. My sister regards her neon nails, making sure she doesn’t chip one as she goes for her bag. The color she’s wearing was specifically chosen for her travel outfit. She planned all clothing schemes two weeks prior. Every variety of tube top, tank top, and short set was neatly laid out for the next day’s activity. Her organization was baffling. We were not going to Buckingham Palace; we were going to the Jersey Shore, to the boardwalk,

and Morey's Pier, to eat fries with the skins still on, to ride bikes built for two, to drip ice cream and sausage-and-pepper juice on clean shirts. And, if we had enough self-discipline, we would leave the beach early enough to secure a coveted table at the most happening place in North Wildwood, a restaurant called Zaberer's.

Barely unpacked, we head for the water. There was something about this beach. It was wide and flat on a ground that felt more like silt than sand. Something about the sprawling terrain, its motels dotted behind it, felt like a Monopoly board come to life. Or something about how you could walk out for what felt like miles and still be up to your knees in water. It was safe, with a perfectly tanned, Central Casting lifeguard every 40 feet. My father was not a great swimmer. He grew up during the Depression and walked to school with two different shoes on his feet. His family could barely afford footwear, let alone swimming lessons. He had to teach himself how to swim, and he did. Despite his lack of proper form, he forged the breakers with us. My mother stayed behind. She was afraid of deep water and never went above her knees, even when we begged her. Her late Sicilian father was her permanent ear prompt, "You could-a die ya in-a two inches of-a water!" he'd say. Instead of drowning, she chose fruit. She was in a constant state of fruit: buying, washing, and distributing it. Then she'd sit there, a happy spectator. I often wondered how she did it, just sitting there. I'm up to my waist in white water now as I glance back at her under our umbrella. She's waving now. I'm aware she's by herself, but I don't run back to keep her company. I'm eight years old, but I feel older, an elderly brain in a young girl's body. I think to myself, *Was this the life she dreamed of? Who is she, this blanket-sitting, fruit-vending mother of mine?*

Back from our joust in the water, we are icy wet, dripping, and silty. The cold water rising from our bodies cools my mother in our shadow. She hands me a giant plum. My father hands wet dollar bills to my siblings. "Buy what you want," he says, and they do.

Mostly, it's Marino's Italian ice and pinball games. He doles out cash with the swiftness of an Atlantic City blackjack dealer. I find my towel and claim a square of beach to the side, establishing a small sense of independence from my family. With every bite of my plum, I leak juice down my bikini top. I pretend not to see as my mother offers a napkin. I'm free. I look out at the ocean and throw a bit of plum in the air. One, two, three...and in seconds...a flock of seagulls screech in suspension. It's Alfred Hitchcock's *The*

Birds, and I'm reveling in their frenzy. A pissed-off beachcomber shoots me an evil look. Too late—I'm in a trance again, my daydreams suspended in flight.

One by one, we pull ourselves off the beach, reluctant deserters in search of a shower. The Singapore stall smells like Coppertone and mold. It's not fancy, but at least my mother doesn't have to clean it. We wait our turn for the shower, but this time we don't mind. We're watching television on a double bed, which smells like a motel—a mixture of bargain laundry detergent, saltwater taffy, and bleach. We watch shows on odd channels that we can only get when we're here, like *Praise The Lord* with Jim and Tammy Faye Baker, the bible-thumping Christian cultists who would later be charged with federal fraud. During the commercial break, I entertain my mother with my best Tammy Faye. With her frosted coral lipstick applied way outside my lip line, I clap and cry with feigned joy, "Praise the Lord!" She's in tears. I can do no wrong when my mother is laughing.

It's almost dusk. We're back in the car, a long way from ordinary in this blue-collar paradise. What's only been a day feels like weeks. My sister and I pull down our straps, comparing tan lines in the back seat. It's a vain, banal victory that should never be celebrated. We talk about the boardwalk piers that we'll visit and the rides we'll be fearless on. As we pull up to the restaurant, my father delights. "Look at this. The perfect spot! Good thing we got off in time, huh?" No one responds. We've been here before, and we know his parking victory is temporary.

The painted footprints of a green giant mark the way to the fantasy that is Zaberer's restaurant. I stretch my foot on each one as we approach the entrance. My father closes the door on the last vestiges of sunlight as we enter a room lit by Tiffany lamps, hundreds of them. Their colors bounce off wine bottles, water glasses, and waitresses like a rainbow exploding at night, scattering glass all over the ceiling. It's half French Quarter, half jungle: Blanche DuBois meets Tarzan. In other words, it's beautiful. Everything you see is part of a place you might never visit. There are swans, electric hip-swinging hula girls, clowns, coconuts, painted horses, totem poles, tikis, an Indian Chief, and a giant motorized gorilla, which roared like King Kong. The food was simple and good. Juicy steaks and crab legs that look like they'd eat you if you didn't eat them first. Our cocktails arrive in glasses with parasols and translucent-colored plastic monkeys. A large man at an adjacent table shouts, "Zaberize it!!" This means that he wants his cocktail tripled in size. Who could blame him? He arrived late

with his family. He was obese, his neck pouring out of a tight white collar. He was sweating profusely and probably had a bitch of a time parking.

After my father pays the bill, we head back to our motel to change into casual clothes for the boardwalk. This was the '70s when people dressed for dinner. Granted, it was in plastic leisure suits. Nonetheless, it was an attempt. This was also where my sister's outfit preparation pays off. She quickly pulls on a cute short set while I struggle to find my sweatshirt. My father remarks that my sister's shorts are too short. But my mother assures him, "It's the fashion. Let's go!"

We hit the road again. Within minutes, we're in a sea of station wagons. My father's parking fantasy is finished. He's handing cash to a muscle head with a lit Marlboro and a wad of bills. "This is the best you're gonna get, chief. All lots are full. Enjoy!"

As we step onto the boardwalk, my head is spinning with Tilt-A-Whirls and suspended swings. It's almost too much: the food, the lights, the parking spot for which my father paid too much. My mother holds our ice cream as we head for a coaster. She's scared of them, too, even the baby ones. She waves from below as we ascend. But I don't feel bad this time. She's not here for thrills; she's here for dessert. Fortunately for her, there are enough waffles and ice cream to snuff out a lifetime of suburban housewife blues. She's going for broke on a Neapolitan now and cannot be stopped.

I'm nauseated. Between the soft serve and spinning rides, I might throw up my Zaberer's. I swallow hard and breathe in salt air. It passes. We're passed. We've exhausted every pier and played every game. My feet have the weight of that green giant. I look up at my mother. It's time to go.

As we leave the boardwalk, a tram car filled with tired seniors announces its presence on overblown speakers, "Watch the tram car, please." My sister pulls me out of the way as I'm not paying attention. We walk in varying degrees of silence as I look to my left at the beach. Enter glorious melancholy. The lights from the Ferris wheel throw specks of color on white water as it rolls into shore. The screams from the coaster soften like background Foley on a film. We're satiated, and we know the drill. We'll go back to our motel room and watch Johnny Carson. We'll lay a box of Laura's Fudge on an ugly bedspread and cut a piece from our favorite flavor. It's so rich that you can't possibly eat a whole slab. I pride myself on the fact that my name is the same as this famous confectioner,

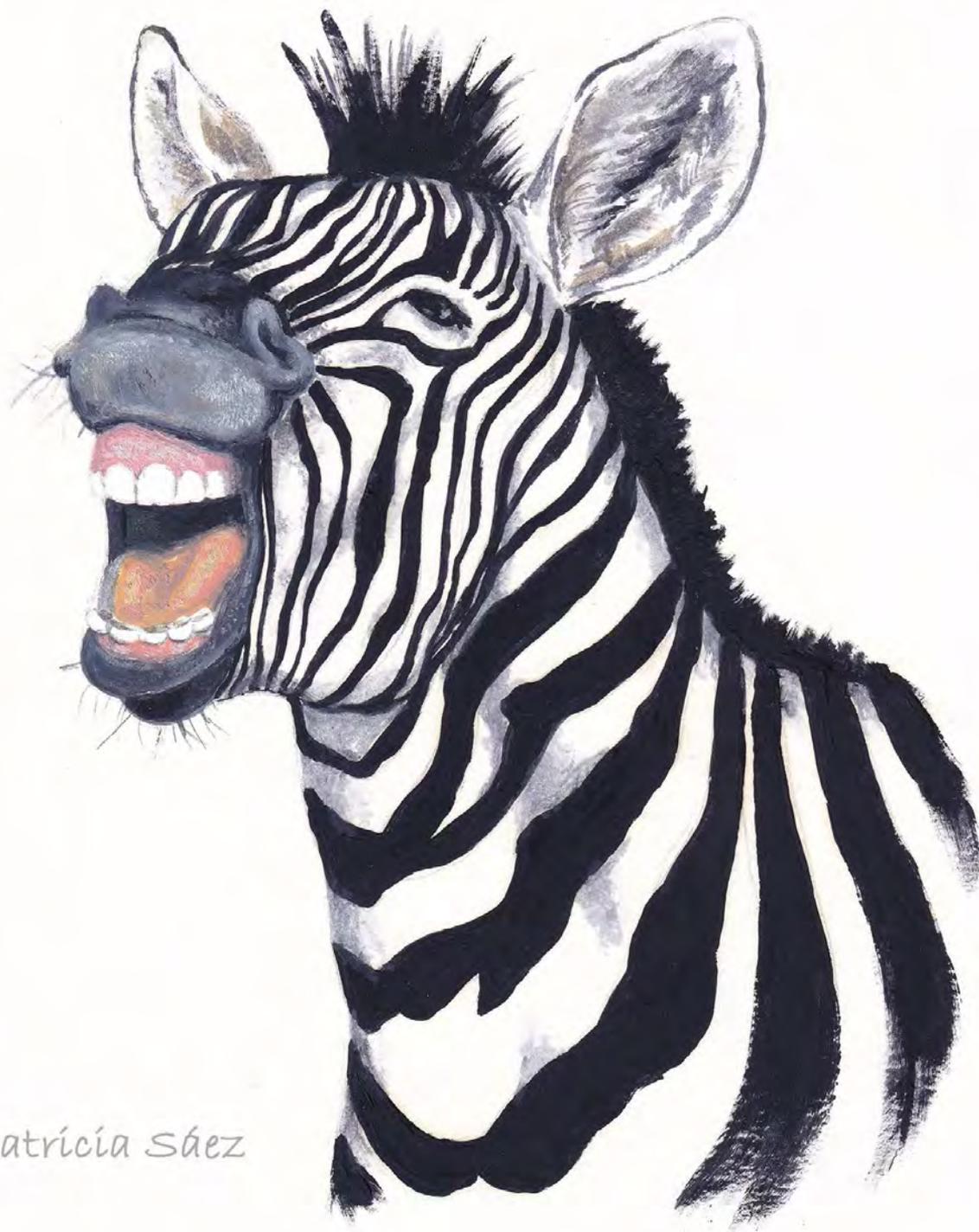
another banal victory on a spectacular night.

We vacationed here each summer, and, every time we came, I'd walk the beach alone at night and in the early morning. You can't get in trouble when people are sleeping. I did this for years until I never got sick of it and grew up. In 1991, a fire took Zaberer's down. I read that they built the restaurant back up, but it was too late. The new owner couldn't keep up. The magic had passed. Its Tiffany lamps and hula girls were sold to the highest bidder. I would have purchased a lamp had I known they were selling, and I often wonder who was lucky enough to win the bid on King Kong. In 2003, another fire burned down much of the boardwalk with 30-foot flames scorching Mariner's Pier. Despite the destruction, the town managed to restore most of the damage, and the distance of the Wildwood Crest beach eluded the wrath of Hurricane Sandy. Some of the themed motels that filled the place with wonder have been replaced by generic condos. The Singapore is now surrounded by a metal fence with a sign that says, "DANGER, CONSTRUCTION AREA. NO TRESPASSING." The interiors of the remaining motels have fallen to disrepair. Only the exteriors remain, suspended in '50s glory, a retro-chic trip to the past.

My mother died 15 years ago. She must have been lonely after all, because she took the rest of us with her. For mothers are the glue of everything, and, with them, everything goes. Our family is fractured; our differences are many and deep. I have no wisdom to share. No happy, colorful, saltwater taffy ending. Family, like fire in the wind, travels in many directions. Some things cannot be repaired. For the souls of siblings at odds, there is no auction house. My father is elderly and ill. Like a dry wooden plank on a boardwalk, we find ways to repair him. We do it. Separately. Together. Then separately again.

I'm stuck in my apartment for the first time this summer. Even a day trip to Coney Island seems like a far-off dream. My seagulls have stopped screaming. In their place are two quiet doves. A pane of glass separates us as they stare through my soul and eat the seeds that I've set. I'm mesmerized as they coo, kiss, and copulate on my fire escape. I watch them every day. There is no flock, no frenzy—just silence. I watch them. They watch me, then glance back as they fly away...free.





Patricia Sáez

I Bring the Good News to Herr K.

By: Dennis Vannatta

Strange. Strange that I understand both Czech and German perfectly, but hardly stranger, I suppose, than the fact of my being here at all: Prague, in what would be the early 1920s, I'd guess, based on the mix of cars and horses in the streets. Did I say "the fact" of my being here? All a dream, of course, although a remarkably vivid one. Smell that horseshit! And the starched-stiff collar tight around my neck, and the heavy wool suit jacket prickly at my wrists.

I approach Oppelt House on Old Town Square, Franz's last residence, a fact I must have learned from Ernst Pawel's biography, which I read many years ago and would have sworn I remembered almost nothing of. He lived at No. 5, I remind myself, and I am preparing a little speech to introduce the object of my visit when my legs carry me right past Oppelt House and down a side street off the Square.

I've gone no more than half a block before I turn into a restaurant, or perhaps it's a coffee shop. Only one table is occupied, on the far side beneath a bank of windows, where *he* sits.

The waiter shows me to a table next to Franz's and offers me a menu. I ask him, in German (apparently, I can understand but not speak Czech), to bring me a cup of coffee.

I sit facing Franz, too shy to raise my eyes. When I finally do, he's staring right at me with those enormous black eyes. He gestures kindly—or is it ironically?—to the chair beside him, which I take to be an invitation.

I stand up, in my clumsy haste almost knocking my chair over behind me, and stammer, "Herr K.—I mean, Herr Kafka—it would be an honor...that is..."

Dennis Vannatta is a Pushcart and Porter Prize winner, with stories published in many magazines and anthologies, including *River Styx*, *Chariton Review*, *Boulevard*, and *Antioch Review*. His sixth collection of stories, *The Only World You Get*, was published by Et Alia Press.

He stands up and bows stiffly but politely and once more gestures to the empty chair.

"Please. Join me."

I sit across the tiny table from him. With those great melancholy eyes, he watches me patiently but with a hint of skepticism, the same look he must have trained on petitioners to his office at the Workmen's Accident Insurance Institute. Then I noticed those Klingon ears—he could appear in a *Star Trek* episode without makeup! I suppress a giggle at the thought, and he smiles as if he's in on the joke.

"Perhaps there was something you wanted to tell me?" he prompts.

"Yes, well, you see..."

At that moment, the waiter appears with my coffee. I take a sip.

"Delicious. Of course, Prague is famous for its coffee houses. No, wait. That's Vienna. Beer. Czechoslovakia is famous for its beer. Budweiser."

He frowns. "Budweiser? That would be German, I believe. Are you thinking of Budějovické pivo, by chance? Perhaps you've come to the wrong place."

"I'm sorry. I haven't done a very good job of explaining myself," I say, realizing at the same time that I haven't even attempted an explanation.

He shrugs. "Don't concern yourself with that. I generally find explanations unsatisfactory anyway."

"I'm not even sure how I got here," I say, and he nods sympathetically.

“I think this may all be a dream.”

“Quite possibly,” he says. “Who can tell? And what difference does it make, after all? Dream or reality, here we are.”

I plunge right in, “I come to you from the future.”

It sounds so pompous that we both laugh, but I forge on, “No, really. The 21st century. You think I’m crazy, but I swear it’s true.”

He continues to laugh but stops, startled, when I say, “Of course, it’s not necessary that you accept it as true but only that you accept it as necessary.”

“But how do you...?” He stares at me for a long moment, then says, “You must have been speaking to Max.”

It takes me a moment to realize whom he’s talking about.

“Oh, Max Brod, you mean. No, I’ve spoken to no one since I arrived here except you—and the waiter.”

Perplexed, he mulls over how I could have quoted from *The Trial*, which he read to his friend Max Brod but never published in his lifetime.

I use this as a point of entry for my mission.

“He didn’t do it, you know. Max Brod. He never burned your manuscripts.” His perplexity deepens.

“Burn my manuscripts? Of course he hasn’t burned my manuscripts. Why on earth would he?”

Obviously, I’ve come to Prague before Kafka, in despair, made that request of his friend.

“Never mind that, never mind,” I say. “The important thing is this: They will be published. *Amerika*. *The Trial*. *The Castle*. Your marvelous stories. Your parables and paradoxes. I’ve read them all. Millions will read them all. That’s the good news I’ve come to tell you. You need not despair. You will be published. You will be read. You will be considered a great writer, one of the greatest of the twentieth century. Take joy in the news I bring you, my dear Kafka. Take joy!”

He stares at me incredulously and then begins to laugh. Although it’s reported that when he read *The Trial* to Max Brod, he laughed until the tears ran down

his face, I’ve had trouble picturing Kafka laughing. But he laughs now in a burst of loud braying laughter that is itself so comical— this is Franz Kafka!—that I begin to laugh, too.

Suddenly, he stops and stares at me with something like consternation.

“But *The Castle*. How on earth do you...? No one knows about *The Castle*, not even Max. How could they? I haven’t come close to finishing the damn thing.”

I shrug. “I told you where I came from—*when* I came from. No, you’ll never finish it, but it’ll be published anyway. And why not? For your century, the fragment is probably the most appropriate literary form.”

“From what I’ve seen of this wretched century so far, you may be right...So, I’m to be great? Ha ha! This isn’t a dream. It’s a preposterous joke!”

“I’m not joking.”

“So you say.”

He cants his head, peering at me. “Hm. Let’s assume I accept everything you say. I still have to ask you: Why have you come to tell me this?”

“But I told you: to bring you the good news. To save you from despair.”

“Yes, yes, and I’m grateful. Even if you are a madman, I’m grateful for your kind madness. But isn’t it unnecessary? Why not let me find out in the normal way, in my own time? It would have been pleasant to find out a little bit at a time, so to speak. I’m afraid you’ve spoiled the surprise, old man.”

“Oh no, not at all, because, you see...Well...”

I can’t go on. I can’t tell him why there’ll be no pleasant surprises for him. I can’t tell him *that*.

He waits for me to continue, then, when I don’t, frowns in puzzlement. Then I see it in his eyes: realization.

“Ahhh. Yes, of course. I see.”

He smiles almost apologetically.

Then, as if I’ve called forth the *thing*, a tremendous cough wracks him. Then another. He takes a

handkerchief from his pocket and presses his mouth into it and coughs and coughs.

Only then do I notice how gaunt he is; how gray his complexion is.

Finally, he gets the coughing under control. He lowers the handkerchief from his mouth, then holds it toward me as if presenting me with a gift. I can't bear to look at it.

He nods sympathetically, then looks upward and says dreamily, "The first time I saw it, the blood, and realized what it meant, it was like...it was like falling in love."

I lurch up from the table. "I must go."

"Of course," he says.

"I meant to bring you good news, but I'm afraid that I've—"

"Not at all. Go, my friend. You mustn't be late."

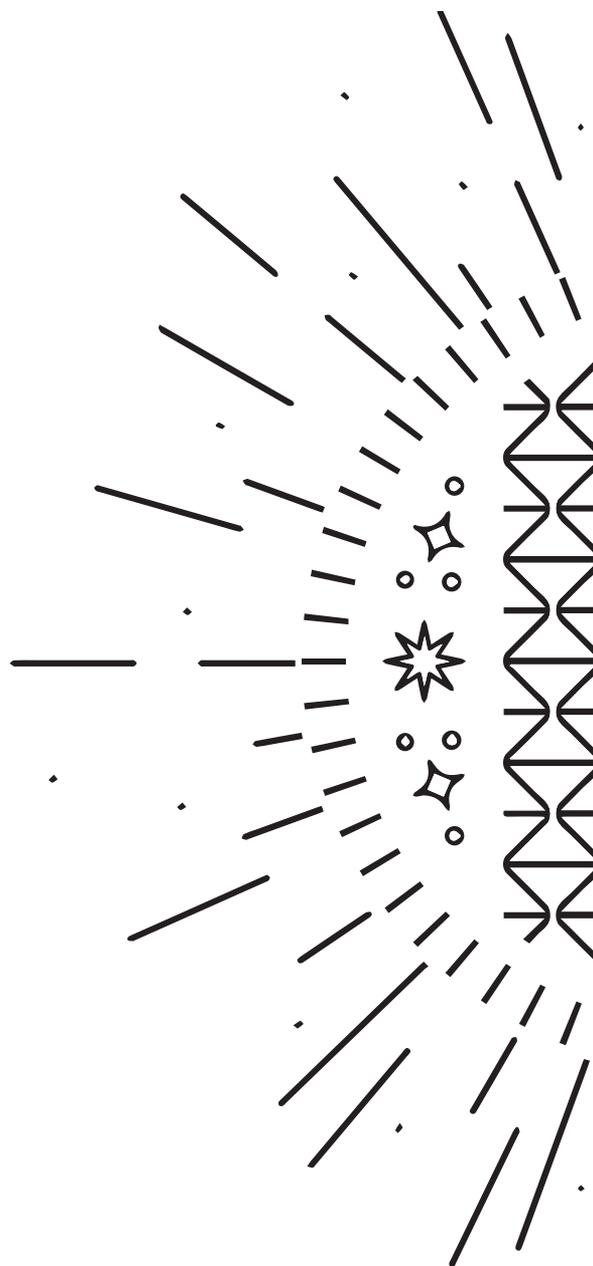
Desperate to be gone, I turn and rush for the door but am intercepted by the waiter, who grabs me by the sleeve of my jacket.

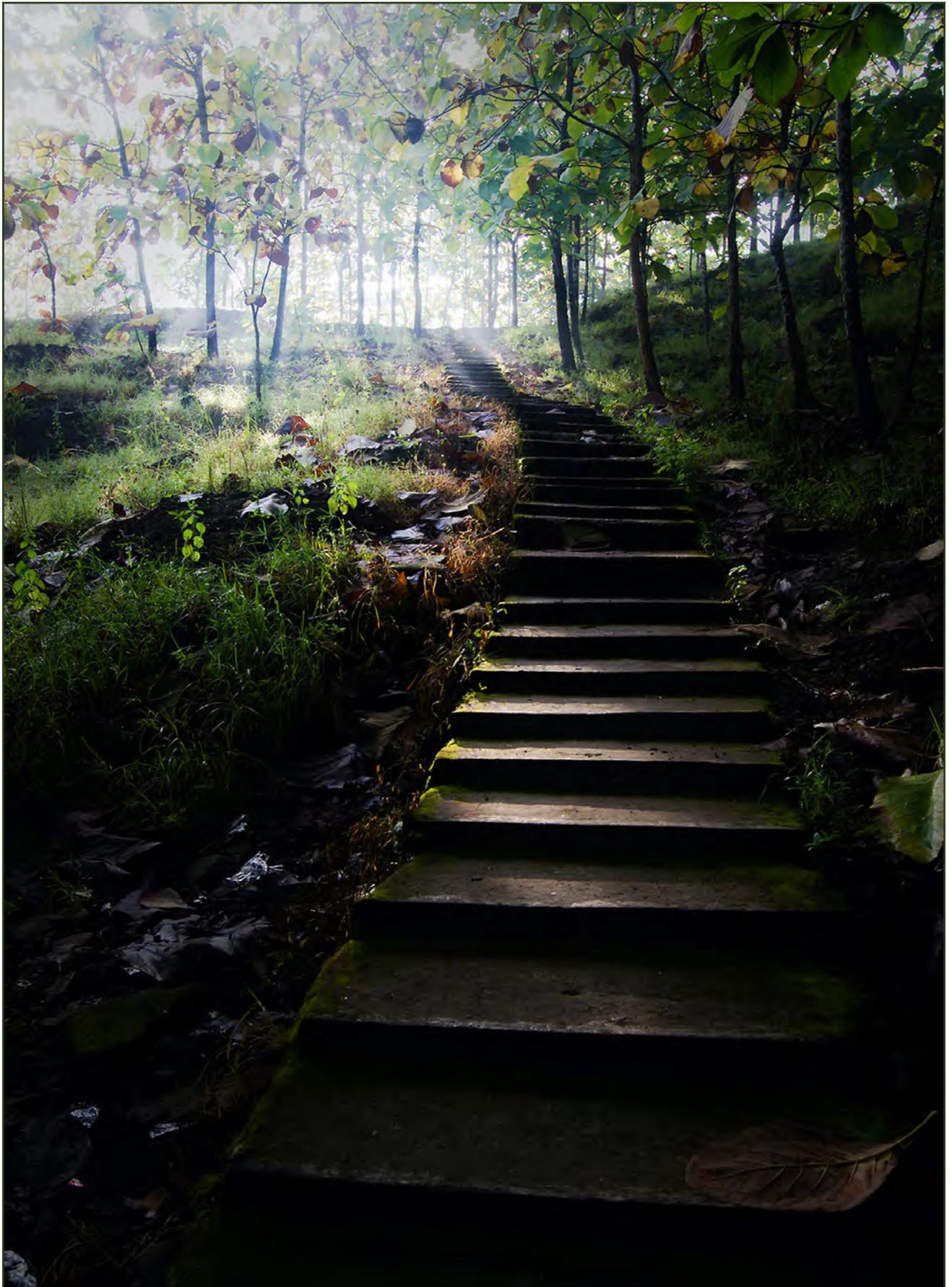
"Just a moment, sir. The coffee. You must pay."

"Nonsense," I say, trying to pull my arm free. "This is just a dream."

"Still, you must pay."

Behind me, I hear Kafka chuckling.





The Wishing Stairs

By: Carly Kapusinsky

Carly Kapusinsky is a recent SUNY New Paltz graduate whose works can be found in the *Sublunary Review*, *CBR*, and *offMetro*. A Rockland County native, she's most often scoping out the stacks of the nearest library, clicking away at her computer, or dragging friends on new hiking trails.

Everyone knew that the woods were haunted.

It was simply part of the mountain, spoken in the same breath as the high altitudes and dazzling views. Children would down their breakfasts and rush to play in the nearest copse behind their homes, unaccompanied and yet never alone as they chattered and gamboled with the empty air. Animals regarded passersby with far too much serenity in their countenance, allowing them impossibly close so long as they kept their respect. And joggers of the mountain paths knew all too well the figure of the thin man who stood sentinel as they picked their way through the winding woods. They knew better than to be unnerved; there wasn't a creature dead or alive who hadn't heard of the lucky branch that dropped over the shoulders of a young woman's pursuer or the small avalanche of stone blocking off an icy path too close to a crumbling cliff. They cohabitated as best they could. It was as any small town deeply entrenched in their own nature came to be: superstitious and deeply wary of the woods' wild and ever-pervasive presence. Respect was given where it was earned, and yet children were warned to always come home whenever they were called. Linger too long in a realm that isn't your own and you tempt it to take a liking to you. Or worse, you to it.

No one had warned the new boy, who did not wait for the introductions of neighboring children before tearing off for the safety of the trees. It was not his first move—it was not even his third—and he regarded his new house with the same disinterest as he had his former. The house, he reflected, was the focus of his parents' latest arguments and, therefore, the cause of their fighting. They seemed determined to be unhappy in every home they tried, never acknowledging the underlying commonality, and he was determined to be as unhappy with it as they were.

He could not, however, manage to hate the woods. They proved a wondrous playground for him, a maze of towering trunks and hidden caves, with bright-eyed animals and peculiar whispers in the breeze. Past the tree line, quiet could settle over him like a blanket, a quiet he could seek nowhere else. He was alone, and, by this, he was unbothered—until he was not.

The fire that had eaten the house had long since died. It had raged years before the boy would ever stumble across it, years before his parents would meet and settle down into their first home with high hopes and little foresight. What remained now were only scorched black walls and empty doorways, vestiges of ceilings, and an abyss where there had once been a basement. From this abyss grew a thin, scraggly-looking tree, too slender for the canopy of branches that it stretched over the ruins. And in this tree sat a young boy.

"That's an ash tree." The boy who was new to the forest found that his voice echoed strangely through the quiet, like a giggle in an empty church. He gripped the book his father had given him tighter and pushed the open page closer to the boy in the tree. "You can tell from the clusters of leaves and the patterns on the bark. And also..." His voice faltered as the boy leaped from the tree's boughs to land lightly, too lightly, on the ground before him. He gestured the book closer to him. But the boy only cocked his little head and stared at the newcomer.

He shut his book with a snap and stuck out a grubby hand. "I'm Paul," he said, staring with open interest at the newfound stranger. His hand hung untouched in the air between them, the new boy making no movement to take it. After a moment, Paul let it drop back to his side. "What's your name?"

The boy looked at him for a moment, then turned to point back at the ruin. He was very pale, with dark hair that seemed to cast unsettling shadows across his face. In the light of the sun, Paul thought that it almost looked as though the hand he pointed with was clear. He followed the path of the finger, missing the ruin and settling instead upon the canopied tree.

“What, Ash?” He looked again at the boy, who’d let his finger fall, and continued to stare. “Is that why you were climbing it?”

The boy again said nothing.

“Wish I was named after a tree.” Paul looked pensively at the thick branches above. “I was named after my grandfather, and my mom hates it. I don’t, though. I just hate him. He makes my mom cry.”

Ash cocked his head to the other side, his dark eyes wide with interest.

“Want to play hide and seek?” Paul said suddenly. “You hide; I’ll find. I’m good at finding.” And the book was left behind, at the door to the house that was no more.



Paul no longer journeyed to the woods alone, and, with the addition of a companion, he seemed to spend markedly less time at home. Some nights, when the shouting was too loud, he would sneak out through his window, drop quietly on the muffle of grass, and run for the forest, where Ash would be waiting. He was always waiting. The two boys would stretch out on a bed of leaves and look out at the starlit sky, blanketed by the warm summer winds and the quiet hush that fell around the forest like rain. Ash never shivered, and Paul wasn’t quite sure that he slept, either. He was awake when he would drift off, and he was awake when he opened his eyes, his body still and peaceful in its reminder that he was never quite alone.

And so it was not so unusual when Paul gestured for Ash to follow him, claiming he’d discovered an entirely new part of the forest. It certainly seemed as such. But Ash knew without quite knowing that this was only because it was unfamiliar to him. In reality, he knew that this part of the forest was old, very old, entrenched in a way that unnerved him. Paul led them to a clearing, at the center of which a bizarre sight met their eyes: a spiral staircase, metal and worn, climbing up to nowhere.

“There must have been a house going to be built here.”

Paul drew closer, put his hand on the staircase’s rail, and Ash felt the discontent in him grow. “Or some other kind of building. But they stopped. Adults are always doing that.”

“You shouldn’t touch it.” The voices seemed to come from nowhere, giving Paul a thrill of fear before he determined its source. Two little girls stood on the outskirts of the clearing. They had identical rosy cheeks and bright eyes, identical tufts of dark curly hair, and looked at him with identical frowns on their faces. One hid behind the other.

“Why not?” Paul’s voice rang petulant and a touch too defensive at the dismissal of his find.

The girl hiding behind her sister peeked her head out.

“Those are Wishing Stairs,” she said accusingly. There was far more bite in her voice than the name should have deserved. Paul was unimpressed.

“So?”

“So, they’ll grant whatever wish you want.” The braver one put her hands on her hips. “Whatever the wish, you have to take one step up the stairs for every wish. But, no matter how they’re granted, you always come back to take another—and another—until there are no more steps left to take and you fall.”

Paul stared for a moment, then shrugged. “I’ll just take one step then. I can’t fall from just one.”

“Didn’t you?” the girl protested.

But Paul cut her off. “You can’t tell us what to do. I found them, so they’re mine. Me and Ash’s.”

The braver girl’s eyes darted over the clearing, passing twice over the place where Ash stood. She frowned.

But Paul took no notice.

“I know what you’re trying to do. You’re mad that we found it first, and you’re trying to scare us away so that you can have it for yourself. Well, you can’t. We’re not stupid, you know.”

“That’s not—” the shyer one said. But her sister waved her away.

“Fine,” she said coolly. “Have the stairs, if you want them, then. See where that gets you.” She took her sister’s hand, and they melted away, fallen leaves

muffling their soft footsteps. Paul glared at their receding backs, then looked back to the stairs. It was a moment before he remembered Ash, who he looked to a little sheepishly.

“I actually have taken a step already,” Paul said, an embarrassed grin on his face. “Just one. I found these the day I met you. I guess I was feeling kind of lonely and, well, I met you, didn’t I? So they can’t be all that bad.” He took a deep breath, once again facing the stairs. “But I understand them now. I know how they work, and I know what it is that I want.” He stepped up the stairs, then again. “I wish that my parents would stop arguing. I wish my house could be quiet again.” He took another deep breath and held it as though waiting for something. Nothing happened.

Paul jumped down, trying and failing to hide the disappointment written across his face.

“Better go home and check,” he said, false optimism hollowing his voice. “It’s nearly dinnertime, anyhow. Are you coming?”

Ash shook his head, and Paul shrugged and took off at a run. Ash was alone in the clearing, staring at the winding stairs to nowhere. He remembered so little of his life before he met Paul, a haze of smoke clouding the rest of his mind. But if he could make a wish, just one...



Ash was still in the clearing when Paul came tearing back, tears streaming down his face.

“You weren’t there,” he said accusingly. Ash blinked. When had it gotten to be night?

“It’s all ruined,” Paul was saying. “Ruined. My mom and dad, they’re—they’re splitting up. They’re selling the house. We’re not going to live together anymore, and I’m not going to—I’m going to have to leave. Again.”

Ash felt, for the first time, a flutter of fear in the pit of his being. He had been nothing but smoke and ashes before he met Paul, but Paul had called him from the ruins and given him a name. He couldn’t lose Paul; he’d be back to whatever it was that he’d been before if he did. Paul was looking up again at the stairs, his hands bunched into fists.

“We have to go up again. Just one more step. If we both wish for it, we’re sure to get it right. Do you

want me to stay?”

Ash stared for a moment at Paul, then nodded. He was sure of so little, but he was sure of this.

“Let’s do it, then. Together. I’ll take my first two, then you’ll take yours.”

Ash nodded. Paul hesitated a moment, wrestling down some unseen battle, then stuck out his hand. He felt babyish asking for the support. But he was scared and desperate, and he barely even noticed the icy chill of Ash’s hand in his. Together, the two boys faced the staircase to nowhere. Paul took his two steps, stretching their linked hands as far as they could reach before looking back and nodding. They each took the final step.

Paul dropped as though the step had never been there.

He dropped clear through the gap where the third stair should have been—had been—and his hand tore through Ash’s as if he’d been grasping a cloud. The earth that he should have landed upon below opened to swallow him up, and then it was whole again. Ash was alone, one step on the staircase. And then he was not.

The boy on the third step had every look of Paul, except that he was not. He was too pale, and the staircase played strange shadows across his face that looked almost clear in the waning moonlight. The boy who was not Paul looked around, frightened, then looked down.

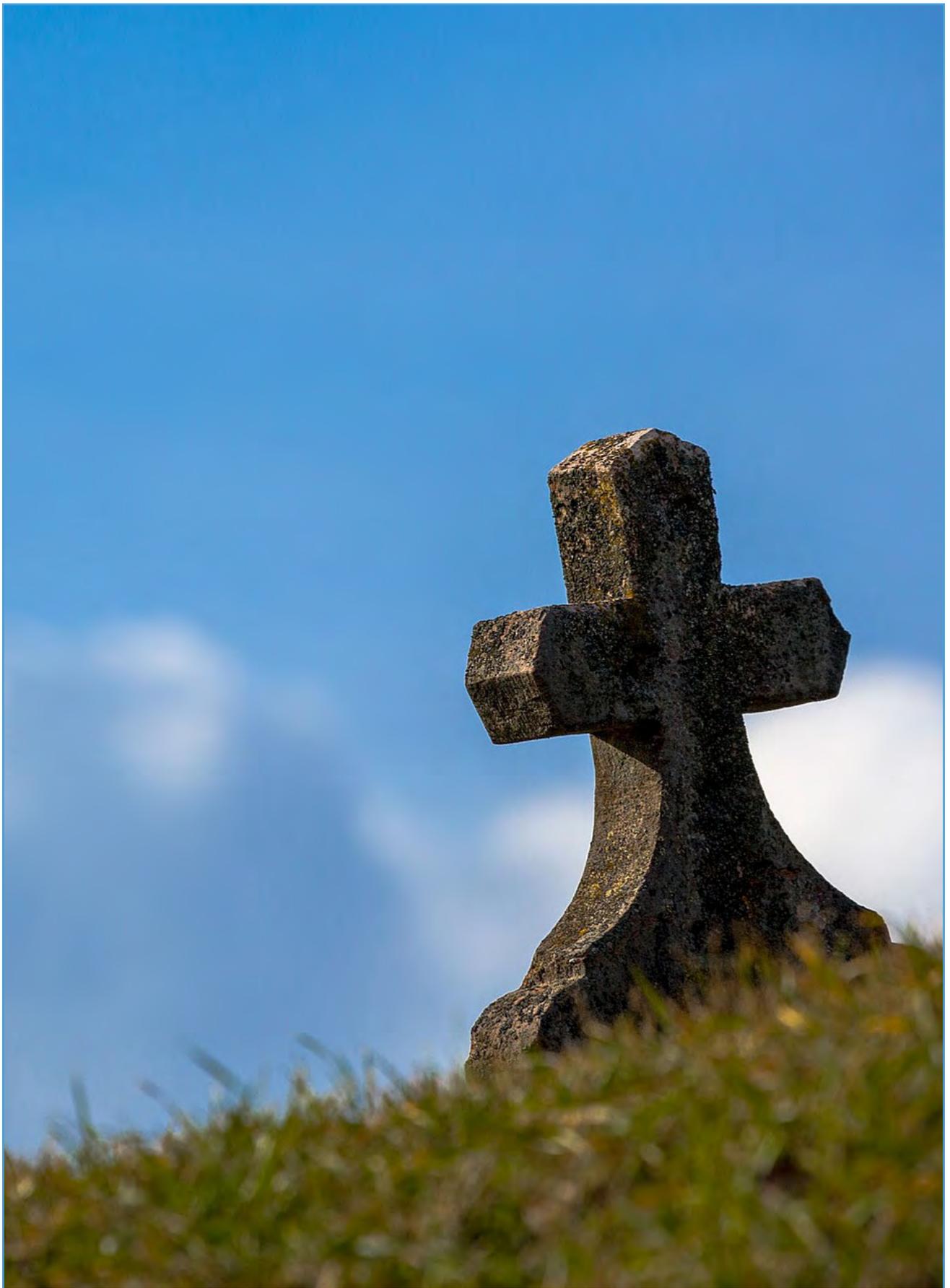
Something was wrong—something was terribly, horribly wrong—but his mind was too full of mud to think clearly.

“Ash?” he asked, recognizing with relief the boy on the first step. “Ash, what’s wrong? What’s happened to me?”

Ash reached out his hand to take his friend’s and found it pleasantly cool to the touch. He opened his mouth, knowing finally that if he spoke, he would be heard.

“You get to stay.”





Angel of Light

By: Richard Jacobs

Richard Jacobs's short fiction has appeared in the *Sewanee Review* and the *Penmen Review*. He is at work on a novel.

By half past noon, Helen had cleaned every pane of her downstairs windows so thoroughly that the glass no longer seemed a barrier to the outside world. She sat with her lunch at the kitchen table and decided to carry a vase of roses to the cemetery.

She hadn't visited Linda's grave since Will's return. She could go feeling lighter in care than usual.

She stood to fetch the vase but halted two steps short of the white cabinet. *Lighter in care*. Though not given to flights of fancy, she envisioned herself rising into a serene blue firmament, delivered not from her sorrow but from the nameless foreboding which had intruded on every hopeful thought she'd had since her daughter's death.

She could name the foreboding now. It was the fear that she would lose, in time, the final torment in Linda's eyes; that if she did not honor that memory with a constant vigil, she would see the torment repeated in the eyes of a second loved one—Will, their son Dan, Helen's younger sister Ada.

Well, she'd honored that memory. She'd kept that vigil.

Turning away from the cabinet, she let her eyes fall on the solitary plate on the table and her empty teacup.

"Oh, this lonely house," she whispered, commiserating with herself. For, here, she'd let herself be bound. Here she'd borne her sorrow. Here she'd bent her hands toward the ceaseless work of scrimping, cleaning, mending old linens and clothes, producing quilts and lesser fancywork to sell at Ada's shop, and raising in virtual silence a son who would one day (oh, soon now) discover his need to leave her.

As she looked out through the screen door at her yard, where light and the shadows of clouds battled over the tufts of grass, Helen marveled at how much it had cost her. She opened the door, stepped across the porch into a patch full of sun, and sat on the bottom plank of the stairs. Warmth and the wind stamped her cheeks. Her eyes watered. She tilted her face toward the sky, which was deeply azure between the clouds and as wide as a thousand fields. Branches of the horse chestnut and the lilac, which grew side by side at the rear of the yard, quaked and clattered against each other, then fell still.

She had endured her dream last night. Will's homecoming had not put a stop to its visits.

As always, she had entered the forest alone and crossed over a gurgling creek into a thicket of pines. Passing under the boughs, she heard the sprays of needles lift and sway and begin to whisper her daughter's name.

Her steps quickened; the ground softened beneath her shoes, and a mist swirled into the woods. Hackberries, swamp white oaks, sassafras trees with sweet-smelling leaves, and creamy pearl blossoms mingled with the pines. Sparrows and blackbirds plunged from their limbs to gutter and shriek before her.

Insects—oh, she couldn't see them; they were hidden either in the marshy ground or amid the rustling leaves—interrupted the birds, chanting, "*Hel-en, Hel-en*." A squirrel skidded to a jerky halt at her feet, cocked its head up at her, and chuckled. "*Mommy*," the insects sang. Helen thought, *She's here, she's here*, and looked behind a wall of rhododendrons, whose flowers were fat and white and tinged with rose.

A fawn, lying back against the stalks, lifted its sleepy eyes toward her. A throb of light suffused the mist. She opened a trail through a clump of pussy willows toward its source. Then a voice, surely Linda's, stabbed the forest air, "Mommy!" Mire swallowed Helen's ankles.

"Linda!" she cried, over and over, each cry a plea, until she realized the sounds of the forest had ceased and she was sinking into a swampy cleft in the earth, into the everlasting surrender which, night after night, awakened her to her darkness. Helen's throat tightened. She wondered how her mind could torment her so. She placed her hand over the emptiness she felt in her abdomen and began to sing so softly that a next-door neighbor standing at the fence would not have heard her—

"I am an angel of light.

I have soared from above.

I am clothed with Mother's love.

I have come, I have come

To protect my chosen band

And lead them to the Promised Land."

The voice in Helen's head was not her own, but that of a young boy who had sung the hymn in a concert broadcast on the radio some years ago. She'd heard it that one time only, but her heart, or the small portion of it which resisted devastation, had grafted the lyrics to her despair. In her memory, the boy's fragile soprano seemed one with Linda's voice. Helen had failed to keep her baby daughter alive. If she could not forgive herself for it, how could God? When she heard Linda in the hymn, or in her memory or dream, endeavoring—so Helen divined—to intercede for her, she could not hear the waking world.

There were moments, still—moments which could blend into hours—when the delusive thought that the world was wrong, that despite the evidence before her own eyes, it simply could not be true that Linda was dead, and that a future Helen could believe in had been expunged, all her pleasure destroyed, would wend its way to her trustfulness. And then she would feel that Linda was with her or within her, not in her womb a second time, but fused with her and that Linda stood—hovered, loomed—a hair's breadth away from a caress. And then Helen could talk to her in her mind, attempting to reassure her.

Helen recognized the thought for what it was: a seductive invitation to a certain kind of madness—a mist like the one in her dream—but she could not bear to turn it away. She had been so often immersed in her visioned life with Linda that she could find herself surprised at Dan's presence in the house. The reality of others never failed to remind her of the unalterable truth.

In the glare of this truth, she wondered at those intercessions of Linda's, wondered why Linda was not angry at her. From the beginning, there had been no one she could talk to about it, not because Will or Ada would have been embarrassed or distressed by such revelations, or would have met her with stony silence, for, dear hearts both, they would have met her with a tender consideration, a desire to ease her pain. But because she herself felt a repugnance at the thought of confiding to anyone, loved or not loved, she had entered this half-real, half-veiled existence. It was her secret knowledge, hers and Linda's. Part of her sorrow came from her repugnance.

Now Will was back—six years gone, three days back—with his hangdog face and wary eyes, out looking for work this very minute. Because she'd never found the words to explain her anguish to him, her need to seek solace in remembrance, she'd watched him leave her for it, had waited (Yes, she told herself, it was true.) for him to depart. She did not know if she could find the words now. Sorrow was her work, not Will's. It would remain her work. Given that, could she help him live a life with her?

The wind yielded its breath. The air was fragrant with honeysuckle. A rug of white petals lay wrinkled under the horse chestnut. She rose and entered the sun-swept kitchen and saw, in a picture hung in her mind, her husband slumped at the table, dressed in the white shirt and gray necktie he'd worn to Linda's funeral. His head was bowed, and his hands were empty. His suit jacket sagged from the back of the chair where he'd flung it after they'd returned from the service. She watched before her, as though it had been preserved on a reel of film, his own anguish at the time, his fervent attempts to console her, the desperate hope on his face that she had managed to sing a little each day until the day he left her.

"It could not have been helped, Helen," he'd cried that morning, imploring her from across this table. By then, it was an old argument.

She had known he was wrong.

“I love you. I want you. Dan and I need you.”

She had shrunk from his gentle, grasping hand. There had been no intimacy between them but the daily sharing of their loss, then even that she pushed away.

She might have consoled *him*.

Reaching for the cupboard door, Helen felt she knew herself utterly, all which lay locked within her and all a mirror could proclaim. She stopped again and, with the tips of her fingers, touched her brow, her cheeks, her neck. Then she located the vase and a pair of scissors and walked out into the brilliant afternoon.



Thirty minutes later, she hiked the hem of her skirt above her knees and knelt at the foot of Linda’s grave. She removed the jar of last week’s store-bought hyacinths from the base of the stone and felt remorse for the parched clusters of violet bells. She put the vase of roses in their stead.

Through the chatter of the thrushes perched in the pine limbs above her, she heard a sob. 20 yards away, a young woman in a maternity dress stood pressed against the side of a young man. Their eyes were yoked to a recently filled grave. A tin marker with a twisted stem had been hammered into the lawn at its head. The lilies in the crocks heaped upon the mound were withered and torn. It was the woman—oh, the *girl*, for she couldn’t be older than 20—who had sobbed. Her young man stared on in rigid silence.

Helen lowered her eyes. She leaned over her daughter’s grave and raked her fingers through the grass. She wept, and her tears dropped into the turf. The verdant blades she’d pressed to the ground rebounded. Wiping her cheeks with her grass-stained hands, she laughed at the sight she imagined she’d made of her face.

Then she cleared her mind and gave hushed voice to the words which formed her most devout wish, her single daily prayer. “Please keep Linda in your everlasting arms and call me to her when you see fit.”

She didn’t speak to Linda, and for once, she didn’t need to call back an image of her little girl when she was alive and healthy to ease herself through the present moment. So she took up the used jar and prepared to rise.

Two rows before her, the young man passed toward the front gate, his hands plunged into pockets, his footsteps falling sharply on the walkway. Still kneeling, Helen looked for his wife. The girl hung over the small grave like a shirt drooping from a clothespin on a wash line. A car door slammed shut beyond the grounds, silencing the birds. The girl remained at the grave. So Helen amended her prayer—“And bring comfort to those poor souls”—and spilled her stale flowers behind Linda’s headstone. She lifted the vase of roses in her arms, picked herself up, and limped toward the bereaved figure.

When she reached a spot about five feet away from her, she stopped and held the roses against her chest. The edges of the petals tickled her chin. When the girl turned toward her, her umber eyes, scarred with grief, alarmed Helen, so like her own in a mirror from the past they seemed. Shyly, Helen offered the vase.

The girl stepped back.

Helen said, “Please.”

The girl let the roses fill her gaze. Trembling, she received them.

Helen knelt again, careless of her skirt. She read the legend on the crooked marker: *Esther Kathleen Stone, June 14–July 5*. A daughter. She touched the absolute center of the grave with her palm. A few clods of dirt clung to her moist fingers. She removed the gaudily foiled urns from the mound, took the vase from the girl, and set it by the marker. The roses spread out a little above the mouth of the vase, like a larger single flower opening further.

Helen raised herself but lingered over the grave, her eyes on the infant’s name, for now, it was her turn to tremble.

“This happened to me,” she said. “Oh, ages ago.” She looked to the girl and risked a smile.

The girl was crying. She was thin and pale, a wisp of a grown woman in the tent of her dress.

Helen held still.

“Linda Mehring was my little one,” she said, pointing toward the grave she had quit, lost in view among the others. “My name is Helen.” Confiding her daughter’s name, first and last, with her own filled her with a joy

she had thought to be irreclaimable.

The girl rubbed her eyes.

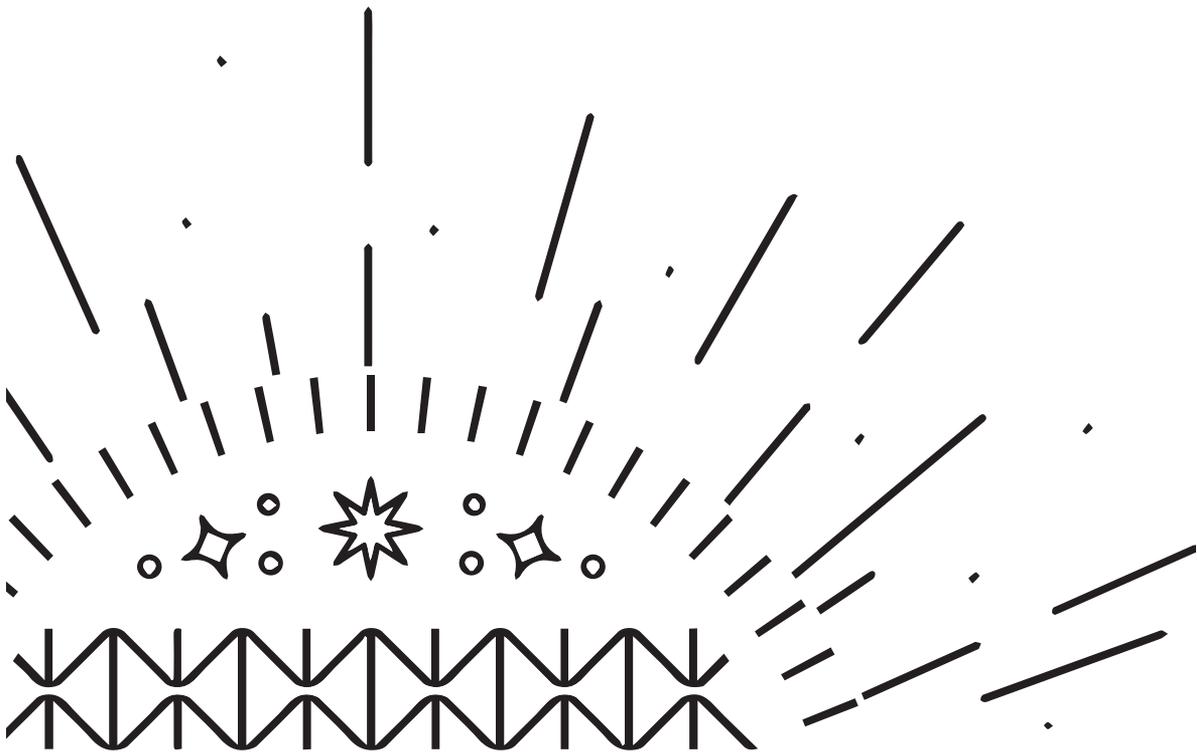
“I’m Carrie Stone, Mrs. Mehring. I’m so sorry for your loss.”

Helen saved herself from tears by laughing. Her raised arms hung before her like a gate opened toward heart’s ease.

Carrie saw and rushed into them. Helen accepted the weight, barely greater than a healthy puppy’s and just as difficult to hold. Again, she fought herself and won—no tears, though by now, Carrie had broken down and was shaking, her chin a sharp point pressed against Helen’s shoulder.

Helen studied the sky above the pine trees. In its cloudless breadth, a blue as dreamlike and untroubled as her memories of Linda’s first days stared back at her, steeped in the sun’s radiance.

She welcomed the sight.



The Trade

By: Stanley W. Beesley

The line of cars is long and does not move. Up ahead at the finish line—the student loading area—a child’s backpack falls and the many school-day necessities contained within it scatter and cause a holdup: pencils, markers, accumulated graded papers, notepads, notes, wadded-up Kleenex, lunch tickets, whirligigs, textbooks, and a phone. The assistant principal scurries in the wind, snatching handfuls like a mad Easter-egg hunter while this week’s loading monitor clutches the girl tightly around the shoulders, completely prohibiting movement.

Tom sees the Accord two cars ahead. Olivia stands at its open passenger door, chatting with another parent in the secondary line. When she notices Tom, she sets her chin and walks toward him.

She’s wearing short shorts, and her long, fine legs going all the way up give the fathers in line a pleasant distraction.

He knows she is dying for a cigarette.

“Who are you here for?” she asks when she stops at arm’s length.

“Belinda and Lankford,” Tom answers.

“No. No, I don’t think so. I believe I am here for them. Did you talk to Michael?”

“Nope. But I’ll pick up Ben and Tate, instead.”

“Yeah, that works. How are you doing?”

“Whaddya think?”

Stanley W. Beesley is an educator, coach, athlete, and Okie. He is author of *VIETNAM: The Heartland Remembers* (University of Oklahoma Press and Berkley Publishing Group), *SWEETWATER, OKLAHOMA*, and *THE LAST MAN TO HIT .400: A Love Story*. A combat veteran (75th Rangers), Stanley served in Vietnam and Cambodia.

“Actually? You don’t look so good. A bit puffy. You still see the nephrologist, right?”

“Yeah. Yeah.”

“Look, you can’t just blow that off like you do with other stuff. It’s serious.”

“I think I know. Are you back on my case?”

“Elizabeth is worried. You shouldn’t do her that way. Let her know things. She and I chatted this morning at Not Your Average Joe, just like old times. I am worried.”

“Don’t go busting my chops, okay?”

“Oh, you.”

She starts back to her car and then stops like something’s just occurred to her and walks back. “Say, I’ve meant to talk to you, Thomas. An issue.”

“Imagine that.”

“How about you get Michael home a little earlier on Tuesday nights from here on out? You know he absolutely cannot drink anymore the way you guys used to carry on back in the day. Plus, he’s got no business with the gambling.”

“C’mon, Liv. It’s fantasy football for cryin’ out loud.”

“Still, it’s money.”

Tom studies her as she sidles closer to his window. She has lost weight, not so much that casual friends would notice, but, to him, it gives her almost an entirely original look.

“You guys doin’ all right?” he asks. “Mike never mentioned anything. I can help. We can help.”

“Don’t worry about us, okay?” says Olivia.

“Sure, then. I won’t.”

“Sometimes, I think the two of you could live together. You and Michael. Forget Elizabeth or me.”

“Mike and I were friends long before I met you.”

“So he reminds me. You guys carry on like brothers. Closer, even.”

“Maybe,” says Tom.

“We appreciate you keeping up the payments on the car. You didn’t have to. That was nice.”

“The thing oughta been paid off by now.”

“Couple more months.”

“Well, I want my kids to have something nice to ride in.”

“Are you and Elizabeth still coming Saturday night?” asks Olivia. “Edward and Linda are going to make it, and the Andersons say that if they’re not too tired from their jaunt up to Lawrence, they will be there. You know Sandy graduated from the University of Kansas?”

“Yes, we sent a card. Count Beth and me in for dinner. All the old gang’s coming back together, huh?”

“Yes. Not much has changed, has it?”

“Nope. Except for everything.”

“We worried for nothing.”

“I don’t know. It is pretty radical.”

“Could hardly blame us.”

“Kids took it right in stride, I guess.”

“Children are adaptable. Resilient.”

“They have two homes now.”

“That’s a good thing.”

“Is it? They say that if you have two quarterbacks, you have none.”

“Who says? Your sports metaphors? Life isn’t a football game, Thomas.”

The line creeps ahead finally—the backpack contents have been retrieved—but Olivia doesn’t return to her car. She leans forward, practically atop Tom’s shoulder. He smells soap. Dial. And conditioner. Pracaxi oil. She does not wear a bra under her thin T-shirt, and her nipples create sapphire darts against the gauzy fabric.

Tom turns his head. “What should we bring?”

“Bring. What do you mean?”

“Saturday. For supper.”

“Oh, anything. Wine.”

“Sheraz? Zinfandel?”

“Oh, anything.”

“No. Not *anything*. You know you won’t drink merlot or malbec and some whites.”

“Well, I won’t be drinking.”

“Ah.”

“Don’t give me that look, Thomas. I can quit.”

Her breasts flatten the hairs of his forearm that is resting on the door. When her stance shifts, he eases his arm back inside.

Tom says, “Ben needs braces. I called Mike about it. Did he tell you?”

“He did, and he said not so fast. Michael says Elizabeth always used to overreact—always has, always will, he says. Says you guys need to pay if she’s so damn worried about the boy’s teeth.”

“We can talk about it Saturday.”

“We should be able to work it out like reasonable couples.”

“C’mon, sweetheart, I hardly think we are what anyone would call reasonable couples.”

Olivia snuffles like she always does when she laughs abruptly. He always liked that in her, that she felt free enough to sound silly. Her giggles originate in her nostrils—snorts in her snout, so to speak.

“You just said the ‘sweetheart’ word,” she says. “That’s funny.”

“Sorry,” says Tom. “I wasn’t thinking. It just came out. An unconscious reaction.”

She grins. “Like the bedroom snafu at the Hot Springs time-share?”

He shrugs. “I made a wrong turn. Honest mistake.”

“No big deal. Everybody understood, and I didn’t mind. It was funny. Michael made a joke. We all laughed.”

“Beth didn’t. I’m really sorry.”

“Don’t be. It’s fine.” She straightens, and her laugh ends. She twists at the hips and looks at the line of cars behind them. “I guess we must be all the talk, huh?”

“The butt of jokes, more like.”

“Surely it’s been done a time or two before.”

His turn to laugh. “In some tribes, maybe.”

Tom eases the car forward. Olivia comes along.

“Are you okay?” she asks. “With everything, I mean.”

“Fine.”

“Me, too,” she says. “It’s okay with me that you’re happy, because I am. I know Michael is.”

“Good. That’s good.”

Up ahead, Belinda bolts from the line of kids when she spots her parents. She has Tate by the hand. The monitor attempts to stop them. She waves her arms wildly, but she dares not leave the formation or all hell will break loose, and she will have a child jailbreak on her hands.

Tom watches as his daughter and stepson bob and weave across the inch-along traffic, their small heads popping up just above most of the vehicle hoods. He wants to holler, “Go back!” but they appear to

navigate just fine. He should look away but discovers his skull locked at its base when he tries.

Olivia says, “That’s so dangerous.”

“Maybe if you’d stayed in the Accord,” says Tom.

She gives him the look: the look that hangs in the air a mere second too long, the look that creates more distance than their physical separation, the look that he began to ignore 800 days ago until it lost its significance along with its message. “Can I ask you a question?”

“Since when have you ever needed my permission?”

“Okay, then, here goes. Did you love me?”

“Geez, Liv. That’s one hell of a question.”

“I’m serious.”

“I know you are. That’s why I said ‘Geez.’”

“Well?”

“Yeah. I loved you.”

“C’mon, Thomas.”

“I musta loved you. We had two kids—you and me—for cryin’ out loud.”

“Don’t get mad. Could it be that we just liked the sex?”

“Yeah, there’s that,” Tom says. He makes sure the car is in park, opens the door, and steps out. Belinda and Tate are only two cars away now. “Okay. I loved you at one time. Probably. No, not probably, of course. I still have a bit of love for you, even. Not something I can control. Like when I see you with Bee and Lank, the way only you can treat them.”

“It’s nice,” says Olivia. “It’s nice the way you say that.”

Belinda practically burns the rubber off her shoes, sliding to a stop between them. Always the happy girl—the intercessor—she laughs and holds her hands in front of her, palms up, and says, “Which?”

“You mean ‘Whom?’” Tom says and hugs her. “Go with Mom today.”

“Okay,” Belinda says and grabs Olivia’s hand. “Hi,

Ollie,” she says.

“Hey, kitten,” says Olivia. “Go to the car. I’ll be right there. I’m visiting Daddy.” Olivia catches the trailing yet sprinting Tate in her arms. His weight and momentum nearly knock her over.

Tom grabs the boy from Olivia and, in one motion, whirls him in the air. Tate squeals, and, when he comes back down, he lands on Tom’s shoulders. Tom takes Olivia’s arm in one hand to steady her. “Here we are.”

“Yes,” she says. “Here we are.”

“I got you, Tater,” Tom says. “Hang tight.”

Tate’s small fingers grasp for a hold, and, in his flailing, they poke Tom’s eyes, then cover them.

Tom groans, then laughs.

Olivia reaches out to maneuver the child’s hands down Tom’s face to rest around his chin.

“Thanks,” Tom says to Olivia. “So, me and Beth. Didn’t plan for it, you know? It materialized, came out of nowhere. Took her for granted for so long. Never really paid her much attention, I’m ashamed to say. She was always just around, you know? Her with Mike. Her with my friend. My best friend. And then one day, I looked at her, and I really saw her.”

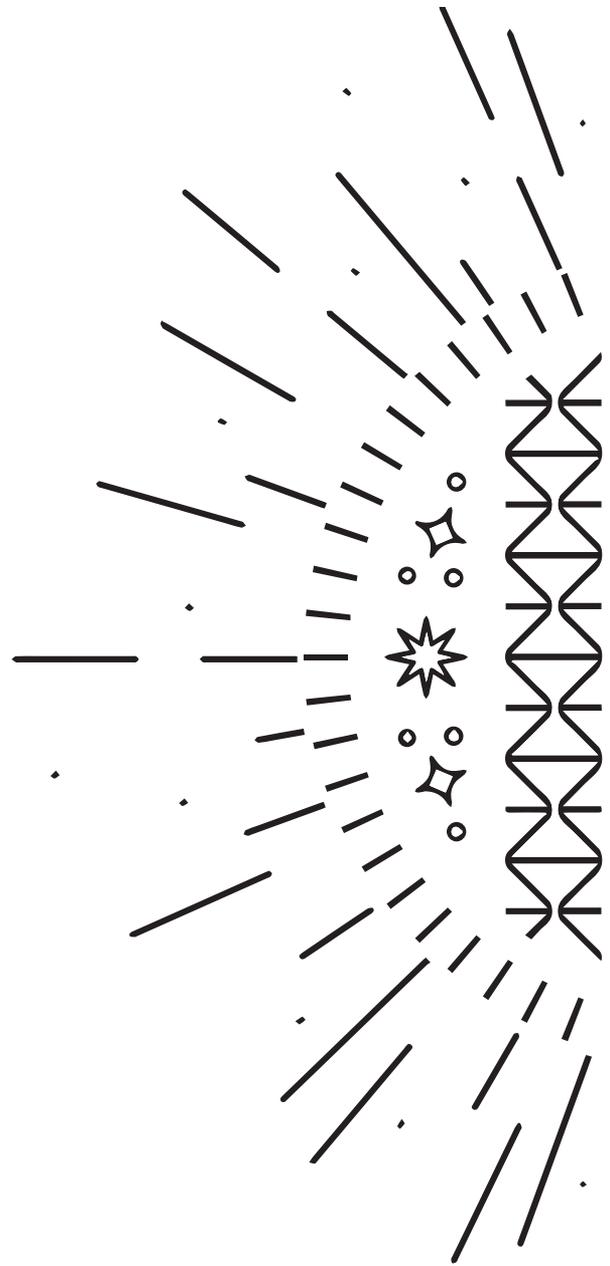
Olivia takes a step. The look softens. “It’s fine. I understand. Of course.”

“It is? You do?”

“Sure. It happened to me, too.”

“Yeah. Right, right. Well.”

“Look here, Tommy, it’s all right,” says Olivia as she smooths a wrinkle on Tate’s pants. “It is. It is okay to love more than one person. We are only human after all.”



To Wish Upon a Star

By: Corinne Rae

Corinne Rae is an avid runner, writer, and reader. She currently resides in Central California. She continues to write and share short stories with the Storytelling Project and various story slam competitions. Corinne shares her short stories, book suggestions, and writing advice on her social media platforms, Storytelling With Corinne Rae.

“Hey, Evan, been a long night?” Frank asks while stepping into the headquarters office.

“Not really—just the average kitten making its way into the heart of another child,” Evan answers without looking at Frank. Evan is sitting in the Operation Chair, wearing the Main Communication Headset.

The Operation Chair is where each Shooting Star Wish Committee employee sits to pull the levers. Calling it the God Chair is a little too on the nose. The Main Communication Headset is the only communication device that broadcasts to the Ground Teams from their station.

Frank bends down to read the Wish Maker Details Monitor over Evan’s shoulder, where Stacy Miller’s picture is shown with notes about her Wish.

Shooting Star Wish: wants a kitten

Wish Maker: Stacy Miller

Age: 5

Details: Stacy turned five today. She is an only child and was adopted by loving parents four years ago. Her parents were trying for years to get pregnant before they adopted her. Stacy witnessed a shooting star first, made her Wish, then blew out her birthday candles. Based on the timing of the Wish, The Birthday Wish Committee is tasking this Wish to be fulfilled by the Shooting Star Committee.

Evan jokes that having a bleeding heart is required to work at the Birthday Wish Committee. Apparently, Evan explained that the peculiar committee pushes for the approval of all Birthday Candle Wishes, even

the ones that are quite hard to fulfill. But the final say in whether a Wish is approved or denied is always determined by the Wishful Team. They oversee all types of Wishes: Shooting Star Wishes, Birthday Candle Wishes, Penny Fountain Wishes, and even the Fallen Eyelash Wishes.

The Wishful Team receives the Wish first and reviews the details about the Wish Maker and what the Wish entails. Once the Wishful Team approves a Wish, depending on what type it is, a particular committee must fulfill the Wish with their Ground Teams. A bright-green phone is on the desk next to Evan, and it is how they communicate with the Wishful Team. It rings each time a Wish is approved and is assigned to their station.

In their office, behind the monitors, there is a large diagram outlining the entire process for all the different Wish Fulfillment Committees. Every time Frank studies the diagram, he is amazed that there are hundreds of space stations floating in space, each fulfilling its own Wishes all around the world.

Currently, Evan and Frank are watching the other monitors. Evan is able to oversee the Ground Team’s progress through a live stream from the body cameras strapped to the outside of their uniforms.

The Ground Team is moving toward the Millers’ residence.

“It is the blue house with white shutters and a tire swing in the tree in front of the house,” Evan says into the headset to Joe, the Director of the Ground Team. “The snowstorm will start at 9:30 p.m. The kitchen door is unlocked. Open the door to allow the kitten to wander at 9:15 p.m. At 9:20 p.m., the local news channel on the Millers’ television will

broadcast an emergency weather notice, informing the public of the impending snowstorm. Your team will wait until 9:45 p.m., ensuring that the kitten has been accepted.”

“Affirmative,” Joe confirms.

Details are everything when it comes to fulfilling a Shooting Star Wish, and every employee needs to be very thorough.

“The Shooting Star Wish Committee’s main objective is to remain in the shadows,” Evan explained to Frank on his first day arriving at the station. “Our offices around the world are state-of-the-art space stations. We receive the Wishes through the satellite database. Each Wish is either approved or denied by the Wishful Team. If approved, further notes are provided about the Wish Maker. We are tasked to work with the Ground Teams to fulfill the Wish within 12 hours. That’s it in a nutshell.”

“Why would a Wish be denied?” Frank asks.

“A Wish is denied if it is not specific enough or it is too far-fetched,” Evan answers over his shoulder while they enter the headquarters office. “Wishes made by kids are the easiest. Kids often wish for a puppy or a kitten, so we orchestrate a scenario where the family rescues an adorable lost puppy or kitten. Kids wish for simple objects, and we are responsible for them to receive that object.”

“What about Adult Wishes?” Frank inquires.

Evan sits down at the Operation Chair, and Frank sits down in the chair in the corner.

“Adult Wishes are harder to fulfill. They are too specific. Most adults wish for things that can’t be provided without suspicion arising. We work in secrecy. Similar to Santa Claus or the Easter Bunny.”

“Santa Claus is real?!” Frank exclaims with wide eyes.

“Little do you know,” Evan chuckles, shaking his head.

Frank is shadowing Evan to complete his training. Evan is the captain of this station. No one knows how long he has worked here. There are rumors that he’s worked at other stations around the world, that he speaks over ten different languages, and that he’s fulfilled over 5,000 Wishes. But Evan neither confirms nor denies these claims.

“Our team is in the backyard of the Millers’ house. We are slowly opening the kitchen door. The kitten is entering. The time is 9:15 p.m.,” Joe relays to Evan.

“Great, your team is to retreat into the shadows until 9:45 p.m. In five minutes, the emergency notice will be broadcasted on the Millers’ television, informing the public about the snowstorm,” Evan responds.

Evan turns on the timer for five minutes. He leans back and patiently waits.

Frank silently sits in the chair in the corner. He learned to remain quiet during these times. It is imperative to get these moments exactly right. Acting too soon, or acting too late, puts everyone at risk of exposure.

“Don’t fail to fulfill a Wish after it is approved by the Wishful Team. Every approved Wish must be fulfilled. A Wish is approved during a 12-hour shift and must be fulfilled by the end of that shift,” Evan sternly informed Frank after they fulfilled a unique case together.

Billy Turner, age 12, wished for Milly, the family cat, to return home after it ran away. Billy and his parents spent the day putting up lost-cat signs. Later, Billy made his Wish in bed, while silent tears ran down his face, after he witnessed a shooting star streak across the night sky through his roof window.

Billy’s parents were standing outside his bedroom door, planning to have a serious talk with Billy about missing pets, when Billy suddenly burst from his bedroom with Milly in his arms. The Turner family was so happy to see Milly that they missed seeing the Ground Team retreating away from Billy’s bedroom window, back into the shadows.

Billy Turner’s Wish was a close call. Evan and Frank worked hard directing the Ground Team around the neighborhood in order to find the lost cat. They found Milly a few miles away stuck in a storm drain, and The Ground Team spent time safely retrieving the scared and dirty cat. They managed to fulfill this Wish with an hour to spare, and Frank was extremely exhausted after working intensely for 11 hours straight.

Evan’s timer goes off, bringing Frank back to the present.

“Broadcast is starting now.” Evan clicks a few buttons. “Stand by until 9:45 p.m.”

Evan mutes the headset and rubs his eyes. Evan is very good at his job. He has never failed to fulfill a Wish.

“The kitten has been accepted. The Ground Team is retreating and is leaving the premises,” Joe informs Evan.

“Confirmed. Ground Team, move out,” Evan says, then removes the headset.

On the Wish Maker Details Monitor, a green checkmark appears next to Stacy Miller’s name.

“Another Wish fulfilled. A billion more to go,” Evan jokes. He enters his code into a pin pad, filing away the Miller case. He turns toward Frank.

“Are you ready to take the reins tonight? Fly solo and become a certified employee of the Shooting Star Wish Committee?” Evan asks Frank.

“Yes, sir,” Frank says to Evan, giving him a salute.

“Okay, well, I am going to sign off then. Remember you are to ping me if you need anything. But let us hope you do not need anything. I need a hot shower. Tim is working after you. He will come an hour earlier to ensure the Wish is fulfilled. Any questions?” Evan says to Frank as he is making his way out of the office.

“No, not now,” Frank answers.

Evan nods his head and exits the headquarters office.

Frank moves into the Operation Chair. He puts on the Main Communication Headset.

“Testing. Testing. This is Frank Sing. Checking in with the Ground Team,” Frank says into the headset.

“Confirmed, Frank Sing. Welcome aboard,” Joe kindly responds.

“Thank you. Will check in after four hours,” Frank responds and mutes the headset.

Frank leans back and takes a deep breath. He feels jittery as his nerves are on high alert. He closes his eyes for a few seconds and focuses on his breathing.

This is his first solo shift.

Frank is ready for the responsibility. He was

interviewed multiple times throughout the course of a year before being assigned to Station #12, then another six months of being trained about the Wish Fulfillment Procedure, and then another six months of shadowing Shooting Star Wish Committee employees. After two years of intense training, Frank has become an official employee.

Frank still believes this is all a dream. Somewhere, he might be locked up in a loony bin, rocking himself back and forth in a straitjacket, most likely muttering about how Santa Claus and Shooting Star Wishes are real.

Frank’s first shift should be fairly easy. Evan and Tim reassured him that they each had an easy Wish. Evan’s first Wish was made by Meg Smith, age four, who wished for chocolate. The Smiths’ decided to watch a movie, and Meg’s mother announced she would pop popcorn. The Ground Team quickly entered the kitchen and placed a box of hot chocolate mix in the pantry. The mix was placed in front of the popcorn in the pantry, which caused Meg’s mother to make Meg a cup of hot chocolate. This fulfilled Meg’s approved Wish.

Tim is another Shooting Star Wish Committee employee at Station #12. He was brought on a few months before Frank, and his first Wish was made by Sam Winkle, age ten. Sam wished to be a superhero. Conveniently, the next day was Halloween. The Ground Team sneaked a superhero costume in his book bag before school. Sam arrived at class dressed as Iron Man. This fulfilled Sam’s approved Wish.

“Not every Wish is easy. Sometimes you need to be really creative. Think outside the box,” Evan told Frank. “Angela Brown, age eight, wished for a pink bike. The Ground Team pushed a Yard Sale flyer under the Browns’ front door. A bright-pink bike was staged in front when the Browns arrived. Her parents bought the bike from very confused neighbors. Luckily, the neighbors were soon distracted by another customer, and the whole exchange was forgotten.”

Frank considers himself to be fairly clever.

Two hours pass without incident. Frank is going a little stir crazy. His eyes are glued to the monitors. The bright-green phone on the side of the desk remains silent. It rings to signal when a Wish is approved by the Wishful Team. Frank is to answer the phone and confirm the Wish is received and will be fulfilled.

After the fourth hour, Frank checks in with the Ground Team.

Frank twiddles his thumbs. His fingers are itching to answer the bright-green phone.

Frank progresses to tapping his fingers on the desk.

Ring.

The ringing of the bright-green phone is deafening in the office.

Ring.

Frank rubs his eyes. He begins to clear his throat. He takes a deep breath. Then he answers the bright-green phone.

“This is Frank Sing. Ready to fulfill the Wish,” Frank clearly states.

“A Wish has been made and details are being sent,” a robotic female voice responds.

“Confirmed by Frank Sing, located at the Shooting Star Wish Station #12,” Frank says.

Frank hangs up the bright-green phone and turns toward the Wish Maker Details monitor. He begins to read the details.

Shooting Star Wish: wants company

Wish Maker: Pam Johnson

Age: 65

Details: Pam is a recent widow. Her husband died six months ago. She is retired and lives alone. She attended Stacy Miller’s birthday today. Pam made the Wish on the same Shooting Star that Stacy Miller wished upon. The Birthday Wish Committee confirms this Wish to be out of the Candle Wishing Zone. This Wish is tasked to be fulfilled by the Shooting Star Committee.

Frank is stunned. This Wish was made by an adult—an adult who is 65. Pam Johnson’s aged face appears on the monitor. Evan told Frank the oldest Wish Maker he had witnessed was a 17 year old.

Frank picks up the bright-green phone but only hears a dial tone. He hangs up.

Looking at the clock, Frank has worked six hours of

his shift. In five hours, Tim will be arriving to assist Frank. But Frank cannot sit for five hours, waiting for him. Frank needs to act.

“Ground Team, Frank Sing is checking in,” Frank firmly says. “We received an approved Wish. Stand by for more details.”

“Affirmative. Ground Team is standing by,” Joe says.

Frank is rereading the notes about the Wish Maker.

Wants company? What does that exactly mean? Frank frantically thinks. Adult Wishes are more complicated. There is no clear answer.

Frank needs to provide an update to the Ground Team.

“Sometimes, biding time is the best course of action. If you bide time, then you have more room to think on how to fulfill a Wish,” Evan once explained to Frank.

“Ground Team, please head in the direction of Stacy Miller’s house,” Frank states into the headset. “This Wish Maker is a neighbor of the Millers.”

“Affirmative. ETA is five minutes,” Joe replies.

Frank runs his hands through his hair. He closes his eyes to focus.

“Arrived. We have parked one house down from the Millers’ residence.” Joe’s voice startles Frank.

The time to act is now. Frank’s mind is blank.

“Frank Sing, there is a commotion from the Millers’ residence. It appears that the kitten delivered to Stacy Miller has gotten loose. The Ground Team is moving to get closer to observe what is occurring,” Joe relays to Frank.

“Proceed. Standing by for further updates,” Frank quickly responds. He laces his fingers and patiently waits.

“It appears Mr. Miller has gone after the kitten. The kitten has been rescued by a neighbor. The two are now conversing. Moving closer to hear the conversation,” Joe informs Frank.

“Yes. Proceed. If possible, hold out your communication device to capture the conversation,”

Frank says while watching the monitor of the Ground Team's body cameras.

The Ground Team gets closer to Mr. Miller and the neighbor. Frank recognizes Pam Johnson as the neighbor. The kitten is in her arms.

The audio of their conversation begins to come over Frank's earpiece on his headset.

"Such a beautiful kitten, and she is so friendly," Pam Johnson says to Mr. Miller. Pam brings the kitten closer to her chest and pets her with two fingers.

"Yes, she is. Apparently, she is an escape artist, too," Mr. Miller jokingly responds. "She came strolling into our kitchen earlier tonight. It was the craziest thing. Then there was an emergency broadcast about an impending storm. So we gave her some milk. Stacy was overjoyed about her. But come to find out, Stacy is highly allergic. My wife and I were just discussing what to do about the kitten right when she ran out the kitchen door."

"Oh no, that is terrible. I am so sorry to hear Stacy is allergic," Pam worriedly says. Soft purring occurs once Pam begins to scratch behind the kitten's ears.

"She seems to like you," Mr. Miller says. "Do you want her?"

"Oh, really?" Pam asks, surprised.

"Yes, Stacy is really allergic. It might be better to adopt something smaller. Possibly a guinea pig," Mr. Miller says while chuckling

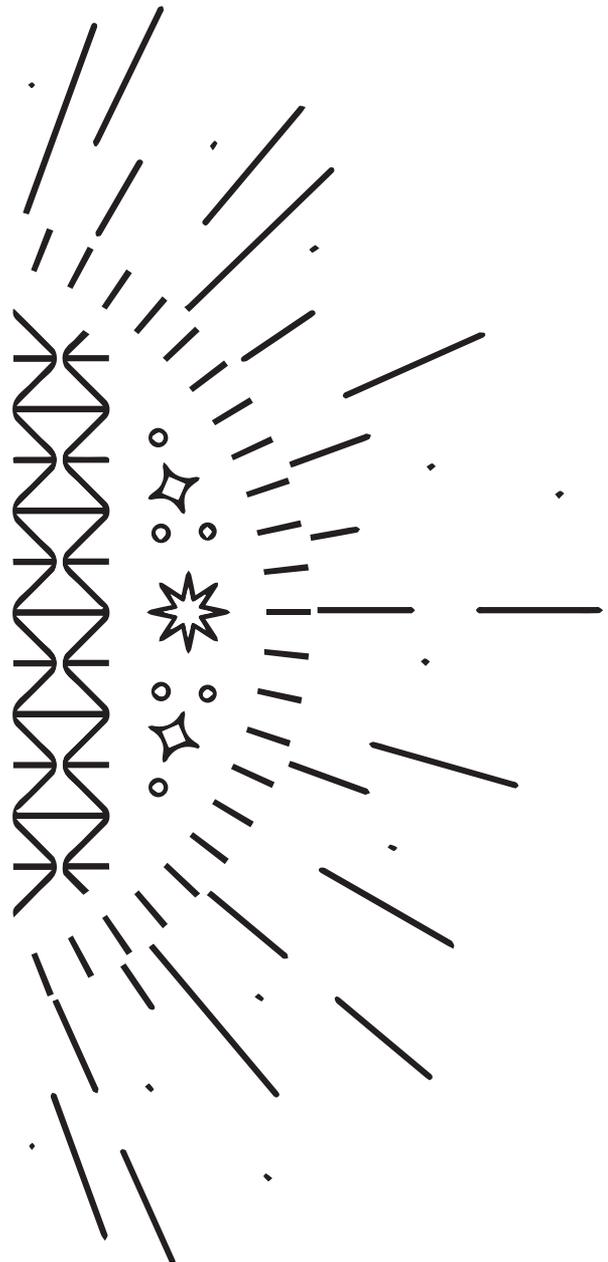
"Oh, well, thank you. I think I have some milk I can give her," Pam says, smiling at Mr. Miller.

Mr. Miller nods with a warm smile. They each go their separate ways. Pam carries the kitten into her home, overly joyed by her new pet.

On the Wish Maker Details Monitor, a green checkmark appears next to Pam Johnson's name.

"Ground Team, move out. The Wish is fulfilled," Frank says to Joe. He then mutes the headset.

Frank smiles and scratches his head. He can't wait to brag about his luck to Evan and Tim when fulfilling his first Shooting Star Wish.





Patricia Sáez

The Madness of a Single Maid

By: Andrew Armstrong

Andrew Armstrong won a regional poetry contest two years ago. His poems have gotten better since then. Andrew is also a cartoonist with hundreds of sales.

It was as if one wall of the house had given way. But the house had not fallen, and the resulting light revealed both emptiness and opportunity.

The death of Agnes O'Connell had been that kind of event, even though Mrs. O'Connell, at 92, could have died at any time, as her daughter Margaret admitted. And it was Margaret, 63 and without close relatives, who greeted the handful of mourners at her mother's wake.

She thought that she could read their nosy, pitying minds.

"Poor thing; she'll be lost without her mother."

"What will she do now? I suppose she'll go on living in the family home on Sheridan Street."

How many years had she lived on Sheridan? No one asked because everyone knew the answer: almost her entire life.

Margaret mentally reviewed those years as she mechanically thanked people for coming. Her childhood home had become her home as an adult, except for the four years she'd been in college and a brief, abortive attempt to find work in New York City. Then came an offer from the state transportation authority, and she'd stayed there, bored at times, until retiring three years ago. She'd hired a local woman to come in during the week to keep Agnes O'Connell occupied until she, Margaret, could return at night from her job.

"Your mother was a wonderful person," a birdy voice said, and Margaret looked down to see one of her mother's friends, hunched over with age. She squeezed Margaret's hand and walked away, leaning

heavily on her cane.

Someone else was speaking; the funeral director, Paul Mullins, was saying something about tomorrow's service.

Margaret forced herself to listen. Yes, she would be at St. Basil's before nine. Thank you, Mr. Mullins, for all your help.

She cried a little during Mass, but not as much as she had feared, and more at the cemetery. When all was over, she went home, made herself a pot of tea, and sat by the dining room window, looking at the thin mid-November snow, watching the birds at the feeder.

Then it came to her, not in the form of a heavenly command, but rather a small insistence, a voice that, once heard, proved impossible to resist. "Sell the house and move to Las Vegas."

Yes, that was what she would do. The thought made her feel more relaxed than she'd been in years. A complete change was what she needed, and she would be done with winter and paying men to come and shovel, or blow away, the snow.

That inner voice must be obeyed, she knew. But before doing anything drastic, she decided to consult her two oldest friends, Lois Hale and Barbara Patterson.

She invited them for coffee and cookies the following Saturday and was pleased to see their smiles as they entered.

"You're looking quite like your old self," said Barbara, squeezing Margaret's arm.

Lois, the quieter of the two, nodded in agreement.

When they were seated at the dining room table and halfway through the macaroons, Margaret sprang her idea on them.

“Moving across the country to a hotbed of vice and sin? Do you think that’s wise?” said Barbara.

“Change is good, don’t you think?” said Margaret, helping herself to a second cookie.

“Change is one thing—” began Lois.

“You’ll gamble away all your money and wind up on the street,” Barbara predicted.

“We’ll see you on the nightly news, drinking wine from a bottle,” said Lois.

Margaret laughed. “Don’t worry. I won’t blow my life savings on a slot machine. Anyway, Las Vegas has to be more exciting than here, and I’m sick of winter.”

“What do you know about Las Vegas?” asked Barbara. “It might cost a lot to live there, far more than here.”

“I can afford it,” Margaret assured them. “I’ve invested my money wisely over the years.”

“But you’ll roast in the summer,” Lois objected.

Margaret patted her friend’s wrist. “Didn’t you ever hear of air conditioning, darling? Besides,” she added slyly, “I know if I need to get away for a while in the summer, my good friends would be happy to put me up.”

The party concluded shortly after that. Barbara and Lois walked in stunned silence to Barbara’s car.

“Mad as a hatter, that’s what I think,” said Lois.

“She must be having an emotional crisis of some sort,” said Barbara. “It’s no wonder: Her mother was such a big part of her life.”

Lois hesitated. “That business about coming back here to spend the summer with friends. Do you think she means us?”

“Well, if she does, I don’t think that’s going to be possible, at least not for me,” sniffed Barbara. “Not with Bill and the grandchildren.”

“Oh,” said Lois, who had neither a husband nor extended family. She opened the passenger-side door and got in with an effort. “I’ll find some excuse.”

Margaret smiled, watching them from the front window of her living room. She knew that they were talking about her. Well, let them talk. She knew what she was doing.



The next morning, Margaret called a local real estate agency and discussed putting her house up for sale. A woman who unpleasantly reminded Margaret of Phyllis Diller came two hours later.

“Why, I think it’s a darling house,” said the agent after touring 10 Sheridan. “Not too big, not too small. It’d be perfect for a young couple I know. The husband’s working two jobs— very ambitious—while the wife minds the children, a boy and a girl.” She paused. “Of course, they might not be able to offer top dollar. You could wait and possibly do better. I don’t know. The market’s very good right now, a real seller’s market...”

The young couple came, looked at the house, found it perfectly satisfactory, and offered Margaret more money than she’d expected. The next week, Margaret O’Connell made the first of two trips to Las Vegas. The city was exciting—and oh so busy compared to her sleepy upstate village—seen from the back of a taxicab. She visited several condominiums and decided to purchase one in Centennial Hills.

“You’re moving here at a perfect time,” the sales lady assured her. “Las Vegas is overbuilt right now—a lot of condos for sale—and the high rollers have mostly left town. I’m sure you’ll be happy at Cobblestone Court. There are tennis courts, a swimming pool, and a golf course not far away. Are you a golfer?” Margaret shook her head. “Well, if you ever decide to play, be sure to take a cart. It gets hot quickly around here.”

Margaret wrote a check to cover the deposit on her new home and pledged to send the rest once the sale was concluded. Things were moving very swiftly indeed.



One last Christmas on Sheridan Street. The movers would come after New Year’s. She would miss 10 Sheridan Street: the 14 steps—she had counted them

aloud as a child and silently as an adult—from the first floor to the second, the view of the schoolyard from her bedroom window with the children playing, and the claw-footed bathtub. But she never wavered. She was determined to travel light. She gave away, to a local women’s shelter, most of the older, heavier furniture. The many religious items that had belonged to her mother, she donated to St. Basil’s, with one exception: the large blue and white statue of the Blessed Mother that had stood for years on the console table in the upstairs hall. “She’ll watch over you,” her mother had told her as a child, and maybe her mother was right. She wrapped the statue in a bathroom towel and laid it carefully in a box.

Another long flight across the country—she was in good health and would have preferred to drive but was afraid of winter storms—and she was back at McCarran International Airport, a day before the movers arrived. The following morning, there came a knock at her door. She opened it to find a slightly older woman, dressed in shorts and an orange tank top, standing at arm’s length.

“I’m Linda Carling,” she said. “I live across the hall.” Margaret nodded, waiting. “I wanted to welcome you to Cobblestone Court.”

“Nice to meet you,” said Margaret, extending her hand. “I’d ask you in for tea, but my chairs and dishes are God knows where.”

Carling laughed. “I know all about it. When I moved here from Pennsylvania, it took almost a week...” She paused, then hesitantly said, “Where are you from, if you don’t mind my asking?”

“New York. Upstate New York.”

“Why, we were practically neighbors before! Adjoining states and all that. Toodle-oo.” A smile and a wave.



The furniture and the furnishings did come, and, after a few days, 32 Cobblestone looked more like home. Margaret spent the first week exploring the city, swimming in the pool, and taking the occasional phone call from well-wishers back home. She ran into Linda Carling frequently, and, although the woman’s chattiness did bore her, she got to learn things, both true and possibly untrue, about the other residents of the complex.

“There’s John Renwick. He must be ninety and lives across the way,” Linda informed her. “He says he once worked for Howard Hughes—you know, the nutty billionaire—but who knows if that’s true. A retired minister, Ed McAllister, and his wife, Jeanne, live next door to you. Very nice, not judgmental at all.”

“That’s good to know,” said Margaret, sardonically.

Linda looked a little puzzled. “Oh, I see,” she said, although she didn’t. “A former prizefighter lives down the hall—poor man, his daughter is taking care of him—and two sisters, the Moons, are on the other side of my place. I’m sure you’ll get to know everyone in time.”

Two days later, Linda stopped her to say she was going downtown.

“Would you like to have lunch?” she asked. “I know a nice Italian place. We could go to the casino next door when we’re done,” she added, confidently. “I never gamble much. But, when I do, I often win a little. Say you’ll come.”

Margaret went. The food was average, the conversation tiring, and, when she went into the casino—*my maiden voyage*, she told herself—she felt claustrophobic, almost panicky. She had little interest in, but some pity for, the people at the tables.

“All these widows, spending their late husbands’ pensions,” she said to Linda.

“And having a very good time,” Linda answered. She gestured at the row of slot machines. “Let’s have a go.” The women spent a few frustrating minutes and very few dollars pursuing instant wealth. Margaret soon had enough and turned to go.

“Why, Sailor Sam! You old son of a sea hag.”

Linda had stopped a tall, broad man with close-cropped gray hair, someone a little younger than the two women. The man smiled—*his teeth need fixing*, Margaret thought— and gave Linda a show-business hug.

“Sweets, it’s been forever,” he bellowed. “How ya been? How’s your luck?”

Linda shrugged resignedly. “Well, you know...” She introduced Margaret as her new neighbor at Cobblestone Court. Sam Bottomley smiled and showed his bad teeth again.

“Pleased to meetcha,” he said.

“You were in the Navy, I assume?” Margaret said.

He nodded proudly. “Twenty years under the flag, almost all of it spent at sea.”

“What ships did you command?” asked Margaret, disingenuously.

“Me? Command a vessel? That’s a good one.” He threw back his head and laughed. “Just a common seaman. But, without us, ships don’t sail and wars aren’t won.” He tipped an imaginary cap. “Ladies,” he said and left them.

“What does this Sam do for a living?” Margaret asked Linda on the way home.

“Sam? He’s a bartender at the Lion’s Mane. He’s almost religious about gambling. He told me he sets aside ten percent of his pay to play, kind of like tithing for church.”

“Church sounds like a better investment,” said Margaret, dryly.

Linda looked disapprovingly at her new friend. “Oh, don’t be such a stick,” she said merrily. “Sam’s just like most people here, waiting for one lucky turn of the card or fall of the ball. That’s all.”

That Friday, Margaret went downtown after dark. The day was rainy—a rarity in Vegas—and she needed to go out and walk around. She passed the Lion’s Mane, with its neon feline sign, and peeked inside. There was Sam Bottomley, at the end of the bar, pouring a beer for what looked like an unlucky customer. She was about to go when Sam saw her through the glass and beckoned. And she did go in.

“Carol, right?” he said. “I remember you from the other day.”

“Well, actually, it’s Margaret.”

He snapped his fingers in self-disgust. “Here, I’ll buy you a drink to make up for my faulty memory. What’ll ya have?”

“Just a soda. It doesn’t matter which kind.”

Before she finished it, Sam looked at the clock above the bar, and took off his apron and threw it atop a stool. “I go off duty at eight,” he turned and shouted

above the noise to the other bartender. “What do you say we make the rounds?”

“I can’t stay.”

“Oh, come on!” The bad teeth again. “Lady Luck beckons.”

They visited two casinos that night, neither well known, with Margaret hurrying to keep up with Sam’s long strides. *He does walk like a sailor*, she thought, *his legs splayed like he’s trying to keep an even keel on a sloping deck*. All the while he talked, she listened patiently as he explained his system, which varied according to which game he was playing.

“A successful gambler has to be disciplined,” he said as they walked through the windowless rooms, barraged by flashing lights.

“Are you a successful gambler, Sam?” Margaret said, hesitantly.

“At times. I never bet more than I can afford to lose. Never.” He shrugged and smiled. “With the kind of work I do, that’s not a lot.”

She thought—almost hoped—that Sam would flirt a little with her, or at least feign more interest in the woman by his side. His eyes revealed all; they seemed fixed on the distant horizon, waiting for the sun of wealth—a bright, golden disk—to appear. Finally, she took him by the elbow to slow him down.

“Sam, say you won big. Really big. What would you do with the money? See the world?”

“Well, as a sailor, I’ve seen a lot of the world already.”

“What about Monte Carlo? Ever go there?”

“Never got to Monte Carlo. Yeah, that would be worth seeing.” He saw the smile on Margaret’s face and understood. “Aw, you’re kiddin’.”

Margaret accompanied him for more than an hour. Sam won at blackjack—a few dollars—won a little more at craps, and lost it all at roulette.

“My weakness,” he said, indicating the wheel. “Around and around the little ball goes, and where she stops...” He smiled and shrugged, then unexpectedly held out his hand. “It’s been fun. We’ll have to do it again sometime.”

Margaret thought about Sam Bottomley a lot during the short drive home. Linda Carling was right: There were a lot of people like Sam in Las Vegas—a lot of people like him everywhere, people fantasizing about a big score, one big enough to see them through to the end of their days (if they didn't gamble it away, as so many do). There was a lot of boy in Sam, Margaret concluded, as there was a lot of boy in nearly every man she'd known. He was like a child on Christmas day who discovers an empty stocking but still thinks that Santa Claus, in the form of Lady Luck, will come through next time.

In the following weeks, Margaret got out her old wooden tennis racquet and hit a few balls unsuccessfully. She tried golf once and hated it. She thought of adopting a cat from the local animal shelter but didn't; the cat she'd had at 10 Sheridan Avenue had not been a success. Her friends, Lois and Barbara, wrote to ask if she was happy or if she regretted her rash decision. (Margaret noticed that neither mentioned offering her a refuge during the hot summer months) She wrote back to say she was very content and promised to restrict her gambling to no more than \$100 a day. *That'll get them talking*, she thought and laughed as she dropped her replies in the mailbox.



Margaret was on the second-floor balcony of her condo one morning in February when she saw Sam Bottomley, dressed a little better than usual, in shorts and a passably clean shirt, coming up the walk. He didn't see her—she drew back into the shadow to make sure— and, a little later, Sam emerged with Linda Carling. They got into Linda's car, an ancient, square Mercedes-Benz, and drove away.

Margaret tried to go back to her book, a predictable thriller, but found she couldn't. What was the real story, she wondered, between Sam and her neighbor? Old friends, or something more than that? Old friends who'd briefly been lovers and decided it was best to be friends again? She chided herself for being nosy. But the question wouldn't go away, and she put down her book.

She went to downtown Vegas sometimes at night, just to marvel at the palms and dancing fountains, and never again peeked into the Lion's Mane. But Las Vegas, while busy, wasn't that big of a place. One Sunday evening, she saw Sam and Linda walking toward her, chatting like old pals. She would have avoided them, but she couldn't cross Fremont Street

in time.

"Margaret!" Linda waved. "It's been forever, at least a day." She and Sam laughed, and Margaret also laughed, politely. "Listen," said Linda, stepping closer. Margaret smelled some kind of alcoholic drink on her breath. "I've got to go, so be a dear and be Lady Luck for Sam."

"Well..." Linda walked away, and Sam held out his arm.

If Sam had been lucky with Linda, he wasn't lucky with Margaret. He consistently lost, not much, but still lost, at craps, blackjack, and his favorite game, roulette.

"Go red you're dead, I guess," Sam said after the wheel had come up black five straight times. He looked almost pleadingly at Margaret, and, once again, he reminded her of a disappointed boy on Christmas Day. She braced herself for the appeal she knew was coming. Sam, his voice dropping, murmured, "I don't suppose you'd be interested in making a small investment for what could be a very rich return? Statistically, I'm due to hit it big."

She squirmed, she hoped, convincingly.

"I'm sorry, Sam. I can't right now. Money is so tight for me. It's costing me far more to live out here than I ever imagined..."

He smiled resignedly. "Oh, well, in that case, I'll call it a day, or a night." He bowed away his embarrassment. "Farewell, fair lady."

Margaret went back to her car, knowing she wouldn't see Sam again. If she did, it would be an accident. He would be fine, she told herself. He'd find another Lady Luck. She turned and saw her reflection in the window of a pawnshop, stopping to smile and think about the crazy turn her life had taken. The casino lights blinked endlessly behind her; palm leaves brushed each other overhead. Beyond them loomed the vastness of space, sprinkled with stars, like candles on a birthday cake. She turned away, reminding herself that you don't always have to win; sometimes, it's enough just to have played the game.





A Midnight in August

By: Harrison Kim

Harrison Kim lives and writes out of Victoria, Canada.

My friend Frank and I camped on Marella Lake one August night after I turned 16. It stayed hot and muggy well into the evening. We got a campfire going and roasted some hot dogs on willow sticks. Close to midnight, Connie, a slender, red-haired girl I had a year-long crush on, walked along the beach with her friend Sharon. They pointed at boat lights on the lake and threw a few flat rocks across the water. The night was so quiet that I heard the splashes and could almost count how many times the rocks skipped. In school, Connie sat beside me in English. When she looked up from her work, her green eyes glanced into mine. It felt like I was plummeting into deep water. I'd never fallen into anything so beautiful and fragile. I wanted her to look at me like that, again and again.

The two girls laughed with each other by the shore.

"I think they're pretending we're not here," I said.

"We should talk to them," Frank grinned.

"What can we say?" I asked.

"We could offer them a cigarette," Frank replied. "If we had any."

He still had a high voice. I called him "the blond-haired joker."

We're like scared little kids, I thought.

As we whispered, a truck rolled in off the road and onto the sand behind the girls. Rick Sundby and Brodie L'Heneff jumped out, two young guys about 21 who'd dropped out of school to work in the mill. They strode down to the shore. Their confident voices made the girls laugh and pay attention. I'd

never been confident enough to tease a girl, to tell her how sexy she looked. Rick had no problem.

The girls turned away, though, and walked up to our fire.

"You guys got some wieners for us?" asked Sharon, and they laughed together, as Rick said, "You boys look scared. Something scaring you?"

I told him, "No, I'm fine."

Brodie asked, "Are you guys straight? Are you straight?"

I wasn't sure what he meant. I looked sideways in Connie's direction. Her face was in darkness.

Frank said, "No, we're not straight."

Brodie gave Frank the "thumbs up."

"Yeah, that's cool," he said. "Then you don't mind if we drink."

He pulled out a bottle and uncapped it.

Sharon lit two cigarettes with the tip of a red-hot stick she pulled from the coals and passed a smoke to Connie.

I decided to say something—to let them know I had a voice.

"I like the water," I said. "It's great to be out here."

Brodie sat down beside me.

"Fuck the water," he said. "What do you think about

the vodka?"

"I don't drink," I said.

I didn't move as the campfire smoke billowed right into my face.

"I can take it," I told everyone. "This smoke means nothing to me."

Everyone chuckled.

What I wanted to say was, *The vodka means nothing.*

I wasn't into sitting around a fire, smoking, and getting drunk. Connie stood across from me, outlined by the space between the lake and the sky, her back to the stars.

Frank laughed.

"Jackson's very straight," he said. "He's different from most people."

I jumped up and walked toward Connie. She turned, and I looked at her and then beyond.

"Come with me into the water," I said. I paused and continued, trying not to make my voice shake. "We should walk in right now at midnight." Connie giggled and passed her hand over her face.

"Sure," she said.

Rick laughed.

"There's no moon," he chuckled. "We want to see your moons, Connie."

She shook her head and left him sitting by the fire with his vodka. We stepped across the pebbles toward the shore. Connie stood by the edge, took off her shoes, and pulled down her cutoffs, revealing her white swimsuit underneath.

"You're in great shape, Connie!" yelled Brodie.

"It's a fine night," she said to me. "Let's go."

We moved straight into the water, Connie in her bikini and T-shirt, me in my jeans. It took a while to advance up to our waists. We moved quietly and slowly together, watching each other from the corners of our eyes.

"I always think that, in the middle of this lake, there's a passageway," Connie said. Her voice sounded wispy, mysterious. "It's a portal, you know, to another world. A better place where everyone's happy. All you have to do is swim deep and search."

I couldn't stop myself.

"When I looked into your eyes at school, it felt like I was going into that world," I told her. "I saw something beautiful."

Connie lifted her head and glanced away.

"There could be animals swimming around out here," she said and laughed. "Like snakes."

"I'd like to swim with them," I answered and moved forward to touch her.

She laughed again, flipped herself away, and did a backstroke toward the shore. I watched her body shimmer in the water, her face upturned before the tall, shadowed trees and the flickering fire. Then I followed.

When I got back to the beach, Frank was burning some marshmallows.

"You pull off the black," he said to Sharon, "and eat the creamy part underneath."

He demonstrated. She snorted and turned her head away. Brodie offered her the vodka bottle. She took a big gulp.

Connie stood by the flames. I handed her a towel. She accepted without a word and wrapped it around her shoulders.

"Come for a ride with us, girls," said Brodie.

Sharon laughed. "Maybe, as long as you drive us straight home."

"I'll get your truck wet," said Connie.

"It's no problem," Rick answered. "No problem at all."

"Don't ride with them," I said.

"It's none of your business," Brodie replied. "You're just a kid." He walked over to the truck and pulled something out of the back.

“Why don’t you think we should go?” Connie asked me.

“You came into the water with me,” I said. “That story you told...” I paused. “I’d like you to stay here.”

“I have to dry off by the fire.” She nodded and looked at Sharon. “Maybe we can go when I’m dry.”

“Come on, Connie,” Sharon told her. “The guys are gonna leave without us.”

“These boys are camping out and having a wiener roast,” Rick said. “They’re kids.” He grinned and put his arm around Sharon. “You’ve gotta get with the grown-up program, girls.”

Brodie staggered up from the lake with a bucket. He stood over the fire and poured out the water. Steam roiled up into the night.

“Wow, that’s hot!” he yelled.

“Geez, you didn’t have to put it out,” said Rick.

Connie backed away from the steam and smoke. She dropped the blue towel. “I guess we’ll go with them, Sharon,” she said. “I’m gonna get cold standing around.”

“Here,” said Rick.

He draped a blanket around Connie’s shoulders. She walked with him and climbed in the crew cab with Sharon. I saw her bare legs tuck back before the door slammed. The truck reversed from the beach, its headlights streaming out into the lake.

Frank said, “Connie’s not your type of girl, Jackson.”

“Who’s my type of girl?” I asked.

“Someone straight,” he told me. “Someone who doesn’t play games.”

I picked up the blue towel. “I don’t know what that means.”

“Connie goes with older guys who have money,” Frank said. “She’s using those two for a ride home.”

“Why did she walk into the water with me?” I asked him.

“You’re growing up,” he said, “but you’re not grown-up enough.”

“What do you want to be when you grow up, Frank?” I asked him.

“I’m gonna join a biker gang.” He picked up some sticks to relight the fire. Then he grinned. “Nobody’s gonna push me around then.”

“I should have kissed her out there,” I said. “In the water.” I walked toward the shore.

“You’ll be a virgin ‘til you’re thirty,” Frank laughed. “Too scared to make the moves.”

“It should have been tonight!” I yelled across the water.

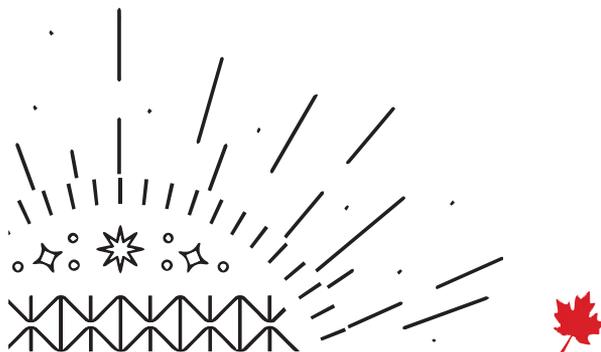
I heard a rasping call. A nighthawk flew by. Its white wing bars moved up and down as it flapped overhead.

“It’s tomorrow morning already,” I told myself. I looked over the lake to the east, searching for the dawn light.

If it never happens with Connie, it’ll be with someone else, I thought.

I saw again the depth of her green eyes and heard her voice above the dark water as she told me about her secret world, only a short time before.

With someone else would not be the same.





Brian Michael Barbeito

The Handmaiden

By: Mehreen Ahmed

Mehreen Ahmed is widely published and critically acclaimed. Her short stories are winners, shortlisted, and finalists. Her works are three-time nominated for The Best of the Net Awards, nominated for the Pushcart Prize Award, and two-time nominated for Aurealis Awards. Her book is an announced Drunken Druid's Editor's Choice.

Eliza stood in front of her bathroom mirror and squeezed the end of a nearly empty tube of toothpaste. Between her thumb and her index finger, her fingernails turned an inconsistent color of white pink, the plumpness of the tip of her skin diminishing. Breathing short and tight, her lips were thinning like hard-pressed dry petals. She tried to push some paste up through the nozzle. It slid in and out, light and white, tantalizing the bristles of her handheld toothbrush.

A decent amount came out after much effort and fell over the tip of the brush, leaving almost all of its bristles dry. She brushed her teeth, rinsed her mouth, and washed the toothbrush under the running water tap. She put it away in a glass by the sink and came outside into the garden with a scowl.

A bird chirped. It sat on the clothesline and pecked at the clothes, looking for food in the wrong place. A few bats hung under saggy, mega-jumbled electrical street wires. A few cotton masks airing on the clothesline had clown heads printed on them. One got unpegged and flew away in a sudden blast of wind. Eliza looked at it but didn't catch the vital mask. It landed on a morning's bloom of an unfurled petal's dewdrops.

The dawn had broken beautifully, but she sensed an ending closing in. She decided to visit her mother's grave. The graveyard wasn't far. She took a stool and walked over one block. She found the grave among hundreds and sat down on the stool close to a grassy patch, her legs splayed. She had a séance with her mother every morning, the good spirit silently absorbing her spilled words like a ghost's diary.

This morning, she was telling her mother how she'd been implicated in vicious office politics, which cut

her out of a dream job she'd applied for. A promotion she knew she would have certainly bagged, for she had far surpassed everyone in qualifications with all the experience for that position. But no, she didn't get it. "Mother," Eliza said, "at the interview, they asked me all the wrong questions, and, after the interview and a few days of deliberation, this rejection letter arrived. I'm not sure how to take this, but the job was snatched, I think, by a mere twenty-four-year-old without many qualifications; she got it."

Eliza finished with a sigh, catching a dot of a potent black fly midair, which had just pinched her nose on its tip; it itched as it flew away. No matter. She would not give up, not so fast.

Although she moped, she also hoped that her bosses would come to their senses. They would smoke out the snitch: They had made a mistake in selecting the girl, who was not worthy of the position. They would then ask her to leave promptly, the position freed up for Eliza to fill in. She waited for the moment and counted her days. The numbers were perfect. They never deceived. No calls came.

After the séance, Eliza went to work. No one else had come in yet. She was rummaging through her things on the table. Her coffee mug sat by the computer. She picked it up and walked into the kitchen to make herself a short black coffee. She heard shuffling sounds coming through the back office file room adjacent to the coffee machine. All ears on the closed wooden oak, she heard the shuffle grow louder from behind. She held the full mug of coffee in one hand, and her other held the nobby knob as she opened the door with a thrust. It had a squeaky hinge and a few character marks.

The room was large and semi-dark. On the far

side, she saw something zap past like a flash of light through the back door. Knuckle-white and petrified, she stood still for a few jarring moments. She looked around the room and saw a filing cabinet, a drawer of which was slightly ajar. Her fingers clutched onto the mug like wet clinging hair. She took out a file labeled “higher management position.” The file only had a few handfuls of papers relating to the job’s description.

Staff chats had alluded to the fact that there were others who were more deserving and better-qualified candidates. But Eliza hadn’t paid heed. She’d treated them as gossip memes, fantasy churned out of a lame factory. After 55 years of waiting, Eliza had been inching toward this dream, loading her resume with experiences and qualifications. There were no age barriers as far as she knew for this senior management position. In the fine print of the contracts—implicitly stated—every aging staff member was a tarnished statistic who came with an expiry date, regardless of the staff’s mettle. Only she hadn’t considered that this expiry date was applicable for this job as well.

Indeed! A 24-year-old girl’s resume would have looked pretty scarce compared to those of the others. The ghost was her guardian angel, Eliza’s mother and best friend, who had given her the mental support and a shoulder to cry on every time she was distraught from a failure on a school exam or in a broken romance. Now, even in death, she was still with her, alerting her to something plish; information that was perhaps quite obvious, only she didn’t see it.

A fresh day was issued; another mask flew away in the bluster. She saw it on her way to the séance but had not picked it up. She sat on her stool again at her mother’s grave and told her about the incident: How someone or something, a ghost, was leading her to the secret filing cabinet. But she found nothing there. She wondered what was going on.

Back in the office, she went early as usual. She heard the same shuffling of papers from the file room. She entered and walked up to the cabinet. The ghost lingered in the dark for a while. This time, Eliza turned on the light and opened the drawer all the way. She felt something touch her hair and give it a strong ruffle. The drawer nearly slid all the way out and down on the floor, but she caught it and placed it down gently. She found another folder here, but it was unlabeled. A shiver ran through her. A thin line of sweat beads sat on her upper lip. She opened

this secret file. It held all the staff’s biometrics, which were super confidential.

There was a commotion outside of the door. Eliza quickly put everything back and came out. The office had gone into a quick shutdown. A senior staff member, Jane Rushmore, had become ill. An ambulance was waiting downstairs to take her away. Eliza remembered her from the interview panel. She stood in the passageway and let her through as she was wheeled out in a chair, an oxygen mask on her face. Eliza looked through Ms. Rushmore’s glass office walls as the 24-four-year-old snitch went through her belongings. It looked suspicious. However, since there was a lockdown, the staff rushed out of the office block.

Eliza heard that after being taken into the hospital, Ms. Rushmore’s condition worsened, and she had not made it through the night. But she was not the only one. Whoever had come in contact with her fell ill. Many of the younger staff survived because of their age, but many of the elderly had not. The snitch’s job now hung in the balance. She’d raged when she had engaged the staff in a Zoom meeting that was held the next day.

Bodies were buried straightaway, Eliza lamented at the séance. Those who grieved for the departed couldn’t perform a proper ablution. They could neither be purified nor readied for divinity. Some were buried in mass graves in caskets. Others were burnt in hollow baskets. Eliza described how a towering inferno rose over each funeral pyre, long firewood group-hugged each body within its crumbling prickly chips. In the throes of it, dismembered bodies looked as though they were at the behest of a medieval Queen. Out of the ashes, some bones looked rock-solid, as the ashes were taken and spread across gardens and oceans. A ballpark figure of deaths was reported. No one stood tall but Death. The formidable Queen of the heretics had drawn a trump and had aced. “Mother dearest” was what Eliza had called her when she was on this living plain.

At night, she continued to commune. Her mother stood at the foot of her bed, looking down at her. She looked grim, slightly nonchalant. The spirit revealed lights, too trite of the foul play on planet Earth. A portal opened like a hologram. On a unique sphere called the fourth dimension, all Earth’s departed souls woke up. Eliza saw her bosses. Biometrics danced before her eyes through artificial intelligence. She even saw Data, the character from *Star Trek*. Disjointed glimpses were random, and they often

faded, but they were dates of birth, nationality, names, fingerprints, and iris, which could compromise the confidentiality of the staff.

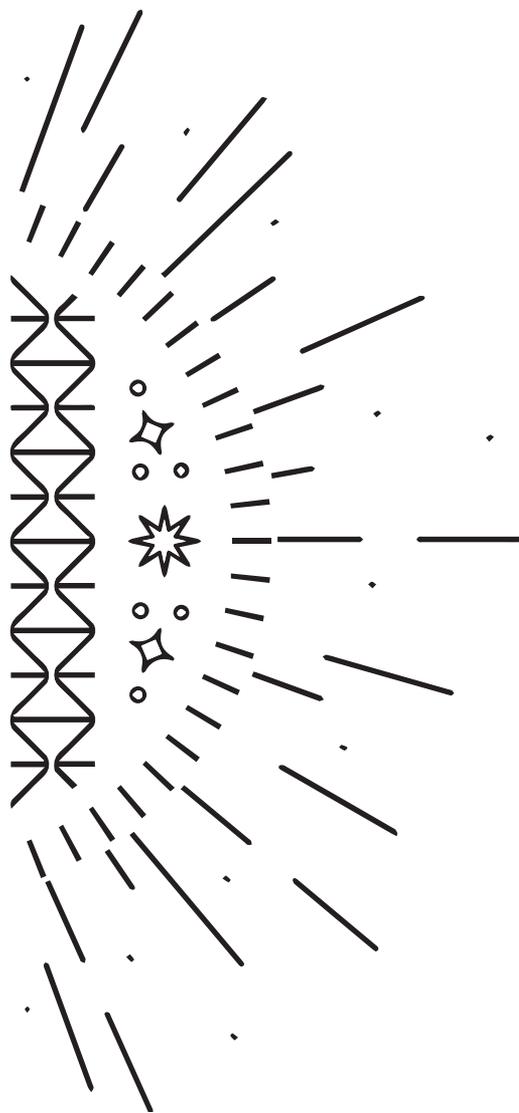
The disembodied sprite, the entity she communed with, her own mother, then somersaulted in colored Borealis. In a primordial whale song—the lyrics of the deep blue seas—it spoke about what was unheard of. That after death, the first thing it did was stare at a seemingly innocuous globe. It watched the manifold plays, of playing and being played, continue to be hatched and staged under a blue canopied sandpit. The sprite then left without a trail.

Séance was the handmaiden to unveiling unsolved mysteries. Mother readily dissipated in the night sky. Eliza thought how time had eluded the players of all times, of its own sly endgames, that it was deployed to play everyone big time. Who played whom in these games? The mundane bickering, spun out of the threads of life, was largely controlled by the unseen Moirai.

Existence, after all, was a passing reality. Who wrote this narrative? Billions of years in processing, these metamorphosed fossils were an illusion, a conundrum of plays, full-on deadly swings of lies, lures, and profiteering. Love giveth and taketh away in death. Only the blind seers had perceived, never the Queens nor the Kings of the day. Alas! When was a full moon ever seen from the surface of the moon itself? Only from this mortal world did its beacon glimmer. Hamlet had caught the King's conscience in his play.

What came out of the séance was the half-formed pensées, the machine-character Data, and the biometrics. That was all. But she had to flesh it out, the alleged crime to what this breach was going to do. Why would that file be hiding there? Why was it removed in the first place and not put back with the others? Why would someone try to hide the biometrics of valuable data? Ah, yes. Data the machine triggered a thought—a data manipulation rort? How and why? All these questions were buzzing in Eliza's head. They had to be really good hackers to do so digitally as well. The records there were well protected by strong passwords for the almighty precious intel unless someone was trying to use the threat to an end. Maybe a data breach? That was it! This led to the fact that blackmail was a possibility for money or something else? By far, the girl's missing links, the puzzle pieces, fell right in place to secure the job she had not deserved.

The snitch had perhaps stolen all the staff's biometrics and hid it there so no one could ever find the file. Worst case, she would be charged with file misplacement only, without any hint of theft or forgery. Clever, she then blackmailed the panel for a serious data breach of the biometrics. She even found additional information about some of the interviewer's secrets, tantamount to bribery or perjury, threatening to reveal personal information. That was how Eliza worked it out in her mind. Now it was up to her how she wanted to expose this rotten play: Go public to the police or give the girl enough rope? Either way, this surely made Eliza's day.





The Mermaid

By: Mitchel Montagna

Mitchel Montagna has worked as a special education teacher, radio newsman, and corporate communications writer. Publications include *Amarillo Bay*, *Leaves of Ink*, *CommuterLit*, *Freedom Fiction*, and *Spillwords*. He is married and lives in Florida.

Having spent decades in the grip of corporate life, upon retirement, I decided that I had managed to beat the system and thought, *You can't fire me, I quit!*

In large part, my career had been a matter of trying to leave on my own terms before they could sack me first. Over the years, on a weekly, if not daily, basis, I had seen numerous colleagues suddenly disappear, as if they had been snatched by the secret police. On a given morning, I'd come into the office and find bare cubicles that, the previous day, were full of vital people with their phones, computers, and family photos. Those of us still standing exchanged ominous looks: We knew that the disappearances were due to events called "downsizing," "rightsizing," and "restructuring," among other bullshit terms, and the organizations we worked for implemented these actions as nonchalantly as they took out the trash.

So, if you were a mid-level manager like me (and most were), you expended a certain amount of energy ducking for cover and engaging in misdirection in order to avoid the secret police, also known as Human Resources. The randomness was especially unnerving—there seemed to be no criteria for selecting the employees for termination. Sure, there was some deadwood. But victims also included a number of highly skilled professionals. Ultimately, most were "average:" competent, short of stardom, and not deserving of having their lives so casually wrecked.

To be candid, I was in that category myself. My official title was marketing manager; in fact, I was a marketing lackey. The younger folks, with their full heads of hair and sturdy backs, dreamed up the department's vision and strategy while I got stuck with the grunt work nobody wanted to do. For example: Did the exigencies of the business require

us to beg a vendor for more time to pay the bill? Plow through a hundred Excel spreadsheets to find who led a vague project someone heard about once? Buy a birthday gift for some executive's wife?

If a chore might engender stomach bile, tedium, and/or eyestrain, I was the go-to guy.

My boss, Pete, was 20 years younger than me. He was an energetic, exuberant fellow who seemed unaware of the body snatching around us. Or the fact that it was unhelpful to condescend to subordinates old enough to be his father. During my last few performance reviews, he had said things like:

"Mike, everybody likes you. We value that you're such a nice guy. Why, you should have heard what Dan (or Celia or Steve, etc.) said about you just the other day. They said, 'Mike is a great help. Any time you ask him to do something, he responds with a smile!'"

Ahem. "But..."

And there was *always* a "but." "Mike, you need to step up when it comes to seeing the big picture. You need to be more *strategic*. You gotta make things happen! Focus on closing the deal!"

Then he'd pause and get reflective. "You know, the best advice I ever got was from a former manager of mine. He said, 'Pete, make yourself so invaluable around here that if the company ever reorganizes, they have to reorganize around *you*.'"

Pete told me that same story every year. "Mike," he'd close with. "I'd like to pass that same advice on to you. I *really* need you to attitudinize this way. Can you do that for me?"

I'd sit there grinning and nodding, a beggar groveling for scraps. Small wonder I spent my days terrified.

So, as I approached retirement age and could finally visualize a dignified exit, I was beset with paranoia, sweating over every message from Pete, Human Resources, or anyone who might do me harm. When I produced something that wasn't met with rousing acclaim—which was practically everything I did—I couldn't sleep. I felt like the troops Captain Quint talked about in *Jaws*, adrift in their life jackets and menaced by sharks as they awaited rescue—like the captain said, “That’s when I was most frightened.”

It's not like I had any place to *go*. I had two failed marriages, no children, a few friends, and an empty home. (No grandkids for *me* to spoil.) I understood the risks of an aged, isolated life. But my decision was easy: Anything was better than prolonging the nerve-racking charade of my career.



During my last day in the office, on my way out, I paused at the second-floor balcony that overlooked the lobby. That morning, I had received a clock with the company logo, a few handshakes, pledges to keep in touch, questions about what I'd do, etc. I don't think anyone gave much of a damn. I was a timeserver in their eyes, at best a canny survivor, and, in a couple of days, it would be like I had never been there. This would be my final time perusing the lobby in this familiar way; I felt maybe a twinge of regret.

Otherwise, I felt very little. I watched employees walk across the floor and navigate the wide staircase past the security desk near the glass entrance doors. As it was late spring, women were getting away with relatively skimpy clothing. Men wore short-sleeved polos tucked into khakis. Hauling laptops and phones, with badges affixed to their clothing, they all seemed lifeless to me, as if they were inside a terrarium, remote as stuffed animals.

Then I noticed two young women walking together, one with long, flowing dark hair and bare shoulders. She moved in a smooth, unhurried way that, from the angle I had, looked like she was floating. The sun streaming through the window framed her in a soft golden mist. Roused from my stupor, I leaned heavily into the railing as if tempting gravity.

I slipped into a daydream, transported to a very hot afternoon long ago.



I guess I *had* to get away, and here is where I went: back more than 40 years ago, to a lake in upstate New York. On this day, I was on a break from my job as a summer camp counselor, where co-workers included lots of young people like me. Naturally, I had serious crushes on a half-dozen girls and more than a passing interest in many others. Like many young men, I walked around in a perpetual state of arousal. When the weather was especially hot, my desire took on a dazed quality, detaching it from reality.

I remember doing a brisk crawl stroke, pulling through the water, feeling the sun on my back like fire. The park was crowded, but I was moving away from everybody toward a small dock at the center of the lake. When I reached it, I climbed its ladder, satisfied by my exertions. I stood and let my muscles settle as I looked at the oaks and pines surrounding the lake, dense foliage shimmering like a mirage.

I had the dock to myself. I sprawled onto my stomach and rested on the hot surface. Quickly, perspiration bubbled up on the back of my neck and in my underarms. I felt the sweat itch and slide and smelled its salt. I closed my eyes and listened to the squealing sounds of people's summer fun.

Gradually, the noise receded, slipping away until it was as small as a distant glint of light.



A deep breathing sound intruded. As I was half asleep, I thought it was me but then realized it came from below. I peered through the narrow space between two of the dock's floorboards. The water, a couple of feet away, looked greenish: a rippling, murky drink with hints of sunlight. Then, along its surface, a couple of hands appeared, followed by arms, and then a lustrous patch of long, flowing dark hair.

To my wonder, a lithe female figure was breast stroking beneath me, gliding parallel to my body from my feet to my head. I could have touched her if there had been no dock. She wore a two-piece suit in a bright, vibrant color—scarlet or purple, I think. Her movements had a slow, mesmerizing ease, her arms circling, head gently bobbing, and long legs propelling what felt like a dream. Though she drifted in shadow, her body gathered what light it could and glowed as if from within. I watched her pulsing muscles climb a steep, ecstatic curve to her rear end. The lake's odor—ripe flora, mugginess, and human

skin—grew so pungent that I tasted it. What kept my heart racing, and my breathing beyond control, was the gravitational pull enticing me toward the girl's body. I imagined the thrill of dropping onto her, like a tree busting through a roof.

It was as close to having a genuine, carnal encounter as you can get—without actually touching someone.

By the time her feet had slipped from my sight, I was paralyzed with the kind of excitement that churns your blood and sends that deceptively cool tingle through your nerves. It took me some time to recover. When I lifted my head to look around, nobody was nearby.

The girl's abrupt absence felt intolerable—I decided I *had* to find her. I leapt off the dock and swam to shore; my energy was boundless, and I reached shallow water in what seemed like seconds. I emerged, swiveling my head and hunting with the gut-level need that enables absolute focus. I looked past clusters of white, damp bodies waving towels and tossing balls. I finally saw her, or thought I did—the long dark hair with the bright swimsuit, walking with another girl near a stand of trees. I dashed toward them, spraying sand all around.

I caught them on a grassy patch as the intense sun yielded to shade.

"Excuse me!" I insisted. "Excuse me!" My head started to buzz—no doubt from my exertions.

She stopped and fixed violet eyes on me with a respectful, if uncertain, smile.

I noticed that she wore heavy pink lipstick. Then, the trees dissolved. I blinked at a wall with framed photos.

Just then, I was damned if someone didn't slap me hard on the back.

"You in a hurry to get out of here or what?"

"Pardon?"

"The way you took them stairs."

He was a big young guy with short, sandy hair, in a polo and khakis, a very familiar-looking fellow.

In fact, he was Pete. I recognized him through the bloodless, air-conditioned reality of the present.

"Can't wait to enjoy all that downtime, huh?" Pete added.

My head throbbed as if something was trying to bang its way out. I stood awkwardly between Pete and the dark-haired girl whom I had seen from the balcony. Her smile was wavering. (Well, why not? I was just some old fool.)



Back at the lake, 40 years ago, I had confronted a smile that was equally as uncertain—if you could even call it a *smile*—with kids back then being so much less polite. It was more like a grimace. That younger version of myself had been raging with passion and a sense of triumph. "Til the girl in the scarlet bikini's eyes went dead, and her mouth curled with scorn.

I was like a punctured blimp, the air rushing out of me. Sticky sweat spilled over my face.

"What do you want?" the girl said in a Bronx-harsh voice.

I flinched, stepping backward into the scalding sun. "I'm sorry," I mumbled. "I thought you were someone else."



Now, in the office, I was mumbling the same damn thing. The girl I'd seen from the balcony gave me a blank look, then she and her friend walked on.

Once again, Pete slapped my back. "Ha," he barked jovially. "You never could close a deal, could you?"

I know he was kidding, but his words froze my blood like he had pronounced a life sentence. I rallied enough to offer my hand. We shook, and I hurried toward the exit. I needed to get home before I cracked up again.

But as I stepped outside into the sunshine, I realized that I needed something else, something far deeper.

To do it all over again. *All* of it.

Suddenly, I breathed in ripe flora and mugginess, and greenish, dark water swirled along the rim of my mind.





The Warmest Room in the Home is the Kitchen

By: R.F. Mechelke

R.F. Mechelke was nominated for The Best American Mystery and Suspense Stories. He holds a masters from Cardinal Stritch University. His short stories have appeared in or are forthcoming in the *Blue Lake Review*, *Loch Raven Review*, *Sci Phi Journal*, and elsewhere.

I remember the house being large. The path to the house was worn cobblestone. My shoes clicked as I walked. The front doors stood like soldiers of oak decorated with brass. I reached for the tarnished doorknob. It felt cold. I turned it and pushed my way through to the foyer that reached for the moon. I took off my shoes and socks. Sunlight poured through windows the size of monoliths. The light reflected off the marble and scattered into nearby rooms. I wandered. Within the rooms were shapes that looked like animals and people and unknown things. The carpet under my bare feet felt like earth covered by moss warmed by the noon sun. The staircase stood waiting, pointing its way to the large, round stained glass. On sunny days, at the stroke of three, I would race down the stairs. I stood at the center of my make-believe cavern. The glass above would send broken rainbows in all directions. In my head, I attempted to reconstitute the rainbows. I cried out and listened to my voice bouncing off the stone.

It was through this foyer, and at 3 p.m., where my husband, Stephen, carried me after our honeymoon. We were bathed in a kaleidoscope of color. We met at college, and he would spend his summers sitting at the kitchen table that still stands in this large house, listening to my grandparents telling stories about when I was a kid. Stephen loved the one in which I built a treehouse in the woods behind the house. It was still there, and Stephen and I fixed it up. We would lay on the floor in sleeping bags, listening to the evening bird calls as we talked about *us*. I imagined my parents having the same conversation after a movie in my dad's car.

I was five years old when I walked into that foyer for the first time. I arrived with my grandparents as we waited for my mom and dad to come the following week: something about their business. I didn't

understand then. All I knew was that they were not there and that I missed them. The house was average size, but, for me that day, it was a mansion.

In the garden behind the house, I found a puzzle of rose bushes and hedges with limbs reaching in all directions. I spent hours exploring what I would come to call "The Wild." The border in the back of The Wild was marked by a tall wooden fence. I peered through the cracks to see what was on the other side. I could see trees—tall trees—with wide trunks. Nothing more. Later, I would find out it was a county forest with many trails and hidden places. I found most of those hidden places as I grew older. The trails were mostly carved into the earth to help firefighters.

Stephen and I spend weekends with our children in The Wild. We watched Lilly and Henry plant the seedlings they grew in the house, teaching them about spacing and when to water. Afterward, we all played hide and seek in The Wild, with Lilly and Henry giggling behind bushes as Stephen stomped around, pretending not to hear them. And when the sun disappeared, we all curled up under blankets and watched a movie from a projector on a large white sheet hanging between two trees.

At bedtime, Lilly and Henry would jump on their beds, begging their dad to read them a story, and, as I stood in the doorway, watching Stephen act out the parts of the story, I remembered my dad tucking me into bed. I missed his voice, his smell, and the way he smiled when he looked at me, brushing my hair with his rough hand.

My parents never arrived the day they promised. I lay in my bed with my face in my pillow, wishing they would come. I must have fallen asleep. I remember

waking to a sound that I never heard before. It scared me. I tiptoed into the hallway. It was lit by glowing sconces on both sides. The faint yellow light did not hurt my eyes. I listened for the sound and found my grandma lying on her bed sobbing. I shook her arm and called for her. She didn't answer. She didn't even know I was there. I felt frightened.

I left my grandma crying in her bed to look for my grandpa. I called for him. No answer. I called again. Still no answer. I began to panic. I sprinted down the great stairs. I called again. No answer. I circled around to the family room, and I found my grandpa standing by the big window, looking out at the garden. I could see his face reflected in the glass. It looked like stone. I called him, but he didn't hear me. I took his hand and tugged his arm. He tilted his head down to me. I could see tears trailing down his red cheeks. His face softened when he saw how scared I was. He bent down, and he picked me up with his strong arms and carried me to the sofa. He held me. He was still and did not say a word.

After a few minutes, I asked him what was wrong. His big hands held my arms, and he looked into my face and said, "Carol, you have to be brave now. We all have to be brave and strong. Your mommy and daddy will not be coming home. They are in Heaven now."

I thought Grandpa was playing a mean joke. I hit his chest with my fists. I refused to believe him, but I also felt guilty for thinking that. I thought about my grandma upstairs on her bed crying, not knowing I had been there shaking her arm. I remember seeing my grandpa's tears and red cheeks, and I knew he was telling the truth. I screamed. My scream tore a hole in my grandpa's heart. I buried my head into his big chest and cried. Grandpa held me close, rocking back and forth, saying, "I know, sweetie, I know," and he cried with me. I learned later they were struck by a drunk teenager from a party not far from our new home.

My mom and dad had bought the house, and we moved from a rented trailer home. My parents had worked long, hard hours for four years building a landscaping business. They had 20 crews with many large commercial customers. They had a big property where they grew trees, bushes, and flowers. The house would have been their first. All they had known was trailer parks and being treated like nothing. I know all of this for the same reason as my mom and dad. They became something, only to be killed by some teenager whose parents got him off.

The funeral was a blur, a sea of black and tears. Grandma and Grandpa lost their Emily, their only child. She was 28 and beautiful. I used to run my fingers through her soft, thin strawberry-blonde hair. She would look at me with her deep blue eyes as she told me mom stories. I loved mom stories, especially the ones where she and her friend played in a creek and built treehouses. My mom did not have much growing up. But my grandparents showed her what it means to love and be loved. My mom was a protector. Sitting in the kitchen, with the fireplace providing warmth and the only light, Grandma told me that my mom would come home often with bruises and sometimes a bloody lip. The trailer parks can be filled with unloved children who took their anger out on smaller kids. Although my mom was small for her age, Grandma said she never backed down.

Grandma said the worst was with a boy named Tommy. He was picking on some kids by the swing hanging from a large oak. Tommy's father was well known by everyone in the trailer park. He was a mean drunk who was often heard shouting and whipping Tommy. But my mom did what she had to do. She stepped in between Tommy and a younger boy. Tommy threw a fake punch. Mom didn't flinch. Tommy looked confused and tried a new tactic. He made loud, scary threats, but Mom stood her ground. Finally, Tommy threw a real punch, and my mom ducked it and punched him square in the stomach with all she could muster. Tommy fell down, gasping for air, with tears rolling down his cheeks. Once he regained his breath, Tommy ran off into the woods. Mom made all the kids promise not to say anything because she knew Tommy's dad would beat him for losing a fight to a girl.

My mom was my hero, and, every night at bedtime, I would beg Dad to tell me how he and Mom met. He always began with, "It was love at first sight." I laughed, but I had no doubt that it was true for him. My father had moved into the same trailer park as Mom, and he didn't have any friends. He was 16. He was used to moving a lot. He saw Mom as she walked up to the 7-Eleven, where Dad was sitting on the curb in front of the store drinking a Coca-Cola. My mom was also 16, and she had never had a boyfriend. My father claimed she smiled at him. Mom claims she was smiling because he looked young and goofy, sitting there all alone. As my mom walked up, looking at Dad, she missed the rock lying on the pavement and tripped. Dad caught her as her knee struck the ground. He sat her down and handed her his Coke. She looked at him as he talked and went to work on

her knee. He used a wet napkin on her scraped knee, moist from the ice-cold bottle she held in her hand. After Dad wiped her knee, he reached for the Coke, touching her hand. He held the bottle to her knee until the pain waned.

Dad kept on talking, and she never responded, just nodded, as she watched him hold out his hand to help her stand. He told her his name was Bobby. He walked her home with his hand on her back, guiding her and always talking. He talked about anything that came to mind, such as his old neighborhood and school. He talked about how his father left him and his mom when he was three. He talked about how hard it had been for his mom trying to make it on her own. He spoke about his one memory of his father, standing in his work boots, amazed by how big they were and how he would fall each time he tried to take a step. My mom always said that Dad would go on to fill those boots better than his father, whoever and wherever he was.

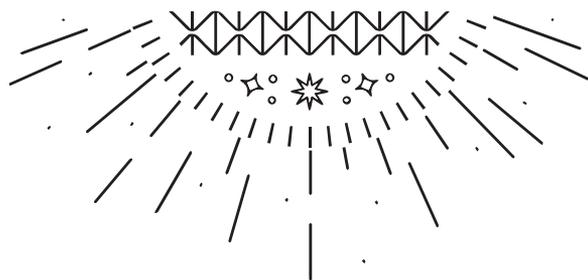
Dad spent a lot of time at Mom's trailer, and my grandma and grandpa were there for Dad when his mother died in his sophomore year. Grandma and Grandpa took Dad in. My grandparents loved him like a son.

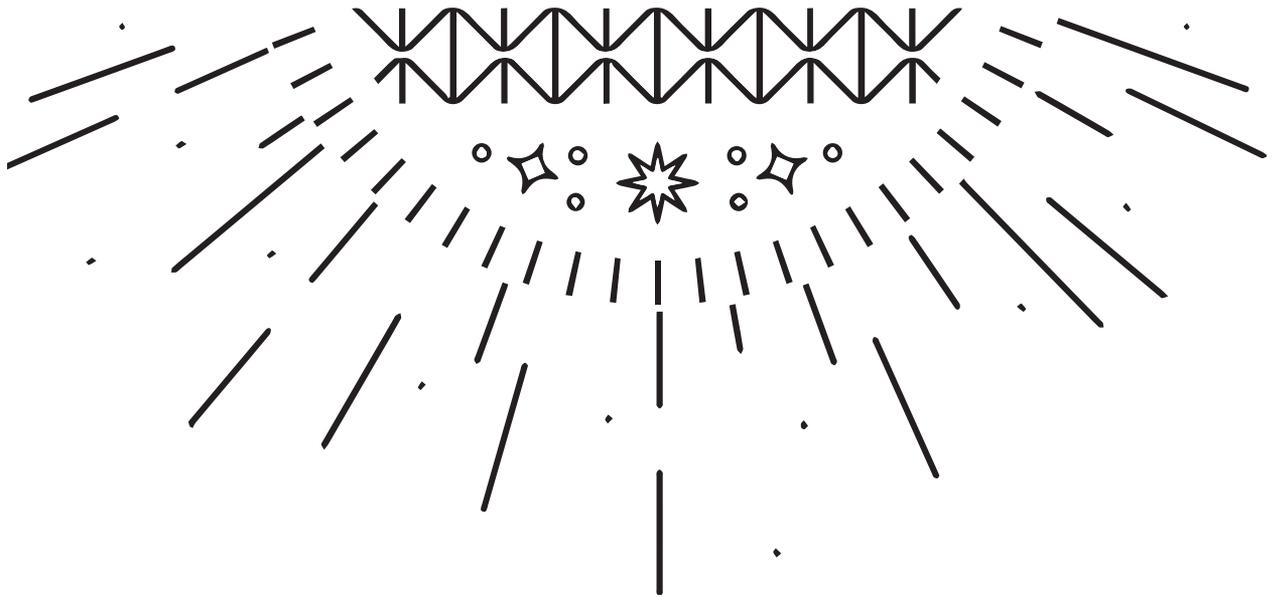
Dad always told stories about spending evenings in Grandma and Grandpa's small kitchen—how they talked, played board games on rainy nights, and did homework together. Grandpa helped Dad catch up in school, and both Mom and Dad graduated with honors. The day they both received letters from university, they celebrated in that tiny kitchen by eating pizza, singing, and dancing. Grandma and Grandpa were so proud of them both. Everything important happened in that little kitchen, so when Dad saw the room, he knew the house was meant for Mom and him.

Dad adored the massive fireplace in the kitchen. I was told all the cooking used to be done in that fireplace a long time ago. The house was old. Grandpa would light the fire every winter. The house had a large kitchen with a long island with cabinets and a countertop with pots and pans hanging over it. There was a table with enough room for six people. While Grandma cooked dinner or baked, I sat at the table, asking her for mom and dad stories. We ate dinner at that table, and Grandpa and Grandma would have coffee as I did my homework. They both quizzed me and helped me with my lessons.

I had my mother's strawberry-blonde hair and my father's green eyes. I think my resemblance to both Mom and Dad helped my grandparents. As I grew up, every event brought back memories of their Emily. Mom lived within me. I think that is a secret people don't talk about for some reason. Memories of your children will fade over time, only to be rekindled through your grandchildren. I now understand the looks my grandparents often had, with their faces smiling and glowing for seemingly no reason, eyes focused somewhere I couldn't see. For my grandpa, taking over Mom and Dad's business was an act of love and selfishness. Keeping the business going and thriving was for Grandpa and Grandma, a way to keep their Emily and Bobby alive, as an everyday presence.

My grandpa ran my parents' business until I was able to take it over after college. My grandparents are gone now. But I tell my children about them often in that same warm kitchen. I tell them stories about my mom and dad, the grandparents they never met. Stephen and I named our children after the man and woman who had been parents to both my mom, my dad, and me. And like me, Lilly and Henry will grow up in this kitchen learning about family and that love is in the doing, and, in the end, it is the doing that is remembered. And I remember it all.





Short Story Book Reviews



So's Posthumous Debut Is a Vibrant Portrait of Cambodian-American Life

Title: *Afterparties*

Author: Anthony Veasna So

Print Length: 262 pages

Publisher: Ecco Press

Pub Date: August 3, 2021

Rating: 5/5 stars

Review by:

Julia Romero



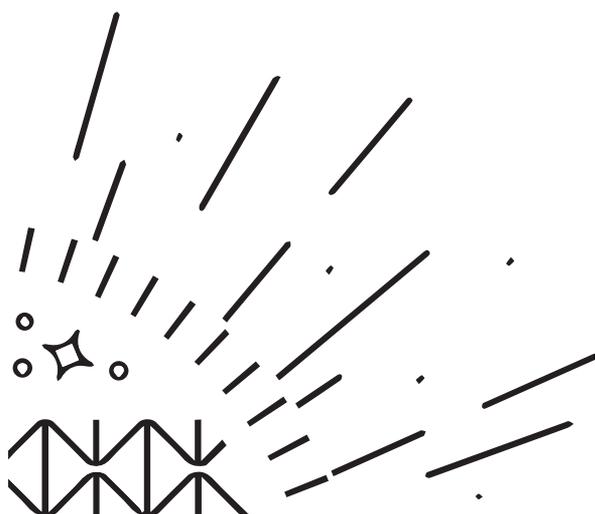
In this insightful and dynamic posthumous debut collection, Anthony Veasna So offers a detailed examination into the lives of Cambodian immigrants living in Central Valley, California. Haunted by memories of the Khmer Rouge genocide, the children of refugees must shoulder the weight of their parent's expectations, all while radically reshaping what it means to be Cambodian. The collection is at times sharply funny but, at others, strikingly moving. So's wry humor and incomparable attention to detail allow his characters to jump from the page and live in the mind long after the reader has set the page down.

Each of the nine stories in *Afterparties* follows a member of the tight-knit Khmer community as they discover something new about themselves, their histories, or the persistent nature of family. In "Maly, Maly, Maly," we see how a family prepares for the reincarnation ceremony that will place the spirit of a deceased relative into the body of the family's newest member—a baby named Serey. In "Somaly Serey, Serey Somaly," Serey, all grown up, reckons with the determined spirit inside her when memories of the Khmer Rouge begin to haunt her dreams, all while caring for her dementia-ridden Great Aunt—the woman to blame for her sleepless nights. The protagonist of "The Shop" finds himself working at his father's failing car shop after graduation, despite a lingering fear that he will be stuck in his hometown forever. And in the resounding "Generational Differences," a mother writes a letter to her then-infant son as she watches him make sense of the tragedy that killed five schoolchildren in Stockton, California.

So kinetically embodies the self-deprecatative humor and dramatic verbiage of teenagers struggling with issues of self-belonging, sexuality, and race, all while effortlessly moving between subjects of queer romance to the tentacles of cultural trauma with a sensitivity that always feels genuine.

So kinetically embodies the self-deprecative humor and dramatic verbiage of teenagers struggling with issues of self-belonging, sexuality, and race, all while effortlessly moving between subjects of queer romance to the tentacles of cultural trauma with a sensitivity that always feels genuine. And what truly stands out about So's storytelling is his poignant and lavish endings, guaranteed to leave you breathless. What makes this collection so richly felt and explored is So's dedication to the intimate and the familial as the key to beauty, forgiveness, and, perhaps most importantly, healing.

Ecco's editorial director and VP, Helen Atsma, issued a statement following So's sudden death in December of 2020. The publisher is hoping to use the release of *Afterparties* to celebrate So's life and highlight all that he's accomplished in such a short time. In April 2021, the literary magazine *n+1*, where So had previously published two stories that appear in *Afterparties* ("A Superking Son Scores Again" and "The Monks") established the Anthony Veasna So Fiction Prize in his honor—an annual \$5,000 award to an outstanding fiction writer previously published in *n+1* magazine.



Anthony Veasna So was a graduate of Stanford University in 2014 and earned his MFA in Fiction at Syracuse University. His writing has appeared in the *New Yorker*, *The Paris Review*, *n+1*, *Granta*, and *ZYZZYVA*. Born and raised in Stockton, California, he taught at Colgate University, Syracuse University, and the Center for Empowering Refugees and Immigrants in Oakland, California. He was a Kundiman Fellow and a Paul & Daisy Soros Fellow.

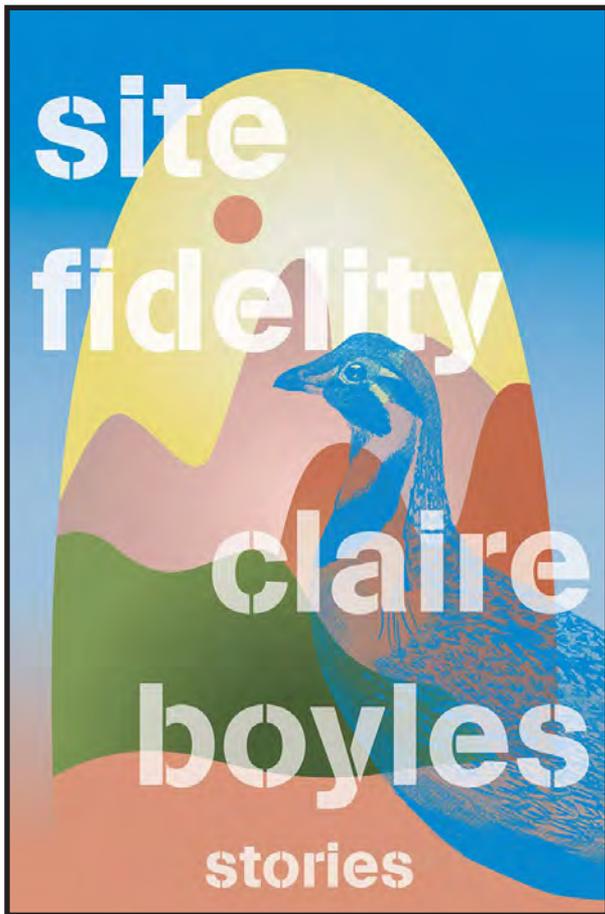


Julia Romero recently graduated from New York University with a Bachelor's in English. She has a keen interest in speculative fiction that tests the limits of reality and offers new insights. She was a prose editor for *West 10th*, the NYU creative writing program's undergraduate literary journal. She's written about art, theatre, and music in *Encore Magazine*, and she recommends and reviews her favorite books on her instagram [@_booklopedia](#).

Boyles' Collection Shines a Light on American Stories Often Overlooked in Fiction

Title: *Site Fidelity*
Author: Claire Boyles
Print Length: 208 pages
Publisher: W.W. Norton

Pub Date: June 15, 2021
Rating: 4/5 stars
Review by:
Julia Romero



Set in the North American sagebrush steppe and spanning multiple decades, *Site Fidelity* is an intimate look into the lives of Americans burdened by the 2008 housing crisis, economic inequity, and impending climate catastrophes that threaten the fragile and lush ecosystem of the American West. This collection embodies our instinctual desire for a place to call home and the lengths that we will go—or should go—to protect it. At the root of *Site Fidelity* is our species' need for connection with one another, with ourselves, and with this green planet we call home.

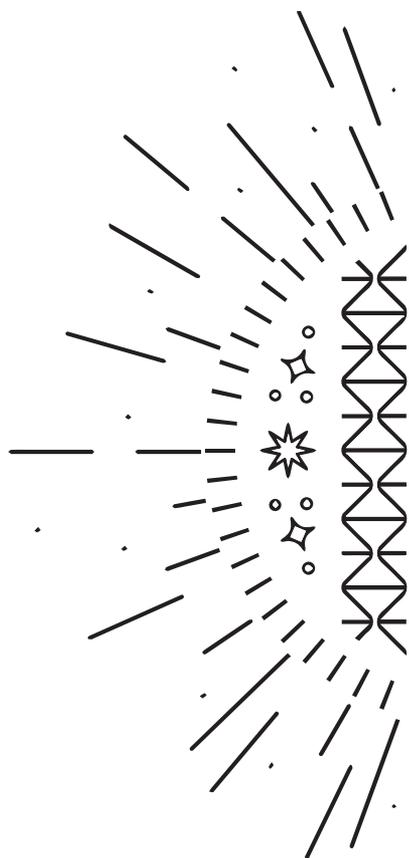
Boyles takes the unknowable—a mother's love, lingering guilt, a sense of responsibility in the wake of injustice—and makes it knowable, tangible, as clearly read as it is felt.

Boyle weaves together ten interconnected stories. Burdened by the illegal actions of her police officer husband, a young woman and her prone-to-temper-tantrums son must face the collective ridicule of a town betrayed. In the wake of a massive fishkill, a woman working at the water treatment facility will do anything to uncover the truth about what's poisoning the water—even at the expense of her job. A 74-year-old nun questions her faith when a fracking project sets up shop right behind the school's playground. A daughter is forced to reconcile with her mother's harsh judgment when she herself becomes a mother.

Site Fidelity shines a light on American stories often overlooked in fiction with an authenticity that really conveys Boyles' compassion for her fellow human. Bursting with dynamic and rhythmic prose, Boyles crafts quaint portraits of ordinary yet difficult lives, each refreshing and moving in their relentless desire for meaning. Boyles takes the unknowable—a mother's love, lingering guilt, a sense of responsibility in the wake of injustice—and makes it knowable, tangible, as clearly read as it is felt. Juxtaposing the beauty of the West with the cruel agendas of those who would wish to destroy it, Boyles shapes resilient and unforgettable characters who would stop at nothing to protect their families and their homes.

While many of the stories are engaging throughout,

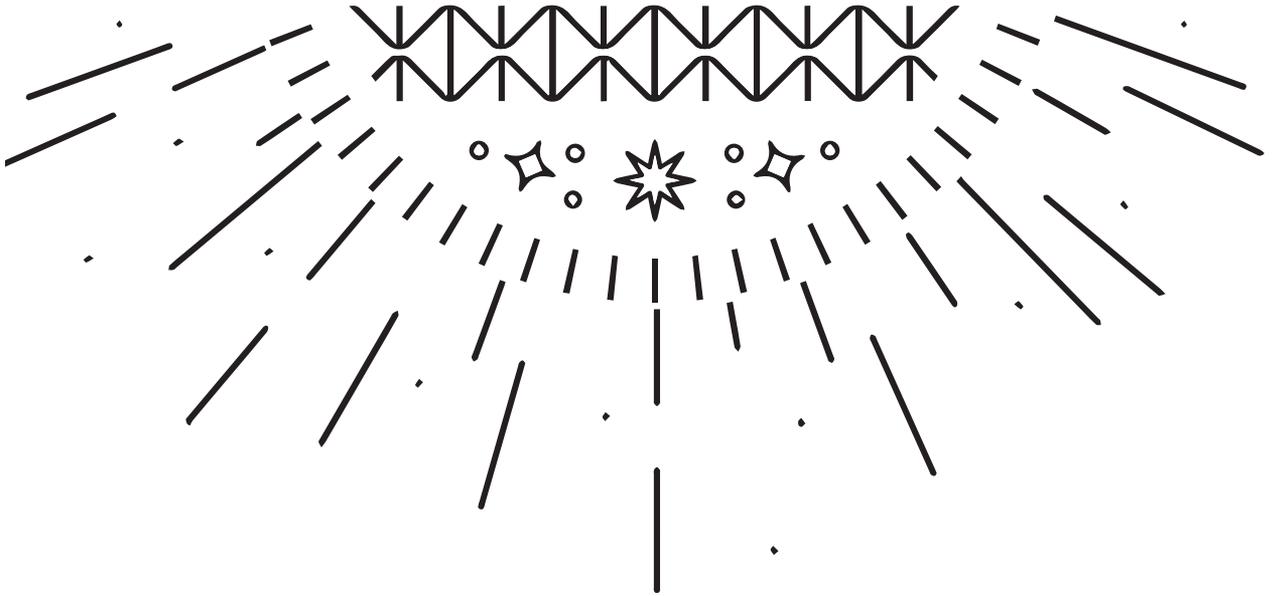
some fell short of an adequate and fulfilling conclusion—notably, the opening story “Ledgers” started out strong but lacked a gripping and well-rounded ending that soured the emotional weight of the story. Also, while Boyle has perfected the badass feminine lead, she somewhat falls victim to that formula. The three sister characters that Boyles centers a number of stories around do overcome unique external circumstances, but they blend together in similar and predictable emotional arcs.



Claire Boyles is a writer, mom, and former farmer who lives and writes in Colorado. She received her MFA from Colorado State University in May of 2018. Her writing has appeared in *VQR*, *Kenyon Review*, *Boulevard*, and *Masters Review*, among others. She also writes movies for the Hallmark Channel and is a proud member of the WGAW.



Julia Romero recently graduated from New York University with a Bachelor’s in English. She has a keen interest in speculative fiction that tests the limits of reality and offers new insights. She was a prose editor for *West 10th*, the NYU creative writing program’s undergraduate literary journal. She’s written about art, theatre, and music in *Encore Magazine*, and she recommends and reviews her favorite books on her instagram [@_booklopedia](#).



Poetry



Two Poems

By: John Grey

John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident, and was recently published in *Orbis*, *Dalhousie Review*, and the *Round Table*. His latest books, *Leaves On Pages* and *Memory Outside The Head*, are available through Amazon.

HEADING HOME

Boats moored,
catch hauled off to the fishery,
feet resound along the pier,
not just the ones tramping home
but echoes of other fishermen,
buried in ocean or ground,
or in their own barely living bones.

In harbor dusk,
they're like an old film,
rolling at the same time every day,
features blurred,
no glitter in the eye,
and blustery sea-wind
like the rattle of a projector.

They separate in near-silence,
some headed for the lights in the hills,
others to the bar,
or just the nearest place
that doesn't smell of fish.

Some of them
have been doing this for years.
Even the younger ones
feel as if they have,
weighed down by the ballast
of the fisherman's lot,
factoring the years to come into it.

THE BEACHCOMBER

Between the flight of the laughing gull
and all the sand in the world
the beachcomber is there
by the shell stand,
selling necklaces and bracelets,
his hair gray,
his face and hands like tarnished nacre.

And wallets and purses open up
to his royal scrawniness,
the keeper of the ocean offal,
support his unwillingness
to be anywhere else
but on his favorite beach.

The grief of a life spent elsewhere
is long withered out of him.
And his eyes have a sparkle
from seeing nothing but what they love.



Two Poems

By: James Piatt

James Piatt, a Best of Web nominee and three-time Pushcart nominee, has had four books of poetry, and over 1,500 poems published worldwide. He earned his BS and MA from California State Polytechnic University, SLO, and his doctorate from BYU. He lives in California with his wife, Sandy.

THE EGRET

In the wetlands bordering
the softly flowing
Santa Ynez River...
shallow...tepid;
I glimpse woven nests on green platforms of sticks...
greenish-blue eggs...transitory residents under
domed shells.
Feathery white mothers
with long, slim bills like spears... a feathered lancer...
collecting fish, crustaceans, frogs, lizards, its stick
legs shuffling along with stilt-like movements...
majestic birds with angelic plumage, living in a
woodland where tiny birds warble their sing songs,
small timid animals sneaking through wildflowers...
grabbing insects
in flowered meadows, beautiful hawks
soaring high above the land,
searching for snacks moving in fields far below, and
this wanderer, looking for solace in the serenity of
the woodlands.

THERE IS STILL TIME

When the old clock in the library
Hesitantly strikes the late hours
Of the night,
We are nodding in our chairs
Trying to remain awake,
Trying to elongate our precious hours together.
Two elderly people with few years to spare,
Trying to slow down the remaining
Borrowed hours given to us from vanishing too
Soon.

Even though we are aware that time
Is incapable of being stopped from
Dwindling into the simmering corridors
Of time,
We continue to build new memories together,
For, we know there is
Still time
For holding hands,
Still time
For us
To hold each other closely,
Still time
For us to watch
The huge moon rising in the East, and
Still time for us to watch stars
Sparkling in the sky
Like Chinese lanterns.

Even though we realize
That there may not be time
To pick the warm apples and apricots
From our fruit trees this next summer,
Or savor the tomatoes, squash, cucumbers,
And bell peppers from a summer garden,
We will still be able to dream,
Plant our garden,
And gather baskets to pick our fruit
Just in case we can.

And of course, there is always
Still time, to laugh, and recall all those
Wonderful times we have had together
In this funny little orb floating in the sky,
Called Earth.



Summertime Dreaming

By: Dominic Windram

Dominic Windram is a poet/personal tutor from Hartlepool in the Northeast of England. Currently, he is collaborating with a German musical composer who is adapting several of his lyrical poems into song form. He is now a resident poet on P.N.N. (Progressive News Network): hosted by Rick Spisak.

SUMMER LIGHT

Summer light gleaming
On rose gardens in languid
Moments of dreaming.
Vintage days of gold and green
Flood my consciousness.
Slowly, the world cascades
Like snow-white swan dives.
And it moves like Debussy's
Fluid arabesques
In detailed, textured patterns.
Sweet birdsong transforms
Into epic symphonies.
Time flows like a stream
Forever meandering.
Simply being is
Eternal delight. Fleeting
Darkness is fading
Like shadows amidst this bliss.

SUMMER'S REVELATIONS: (2021)

Turn your gaze skyward,
In streaming summer madness:
Where birds soar so high
Like blazing symbols of fire.
Turn your gaze starward
And let the night's vivid dreams
Bathe you in moonlight,
And drown you in sweet delight.
Be awestruck, not by
Crude, arbitrary orders,
But by rich Nature's
Verdant ways that cost nothing.
Paint endless poems.
Perceive with a million eyes.
Let true genius
Break through prisons of selfhood!

REMEMBER

Remember when we were content under the sun:
When we were one with the warm world and the wild birds;
As we merged into the blue and green of dream time.
Remember when golden days were filled with endless
Possibilities and nights were studded with fiery stars.
Remember when summer's vintage wine flowed through
Our veins and through the leaves and trees and fields.
Remember when blood-red roses bloomed in youth's garden
And we were as free as the wind; so long ago.
Remember the dove-like whiteness of innocence,
Before it was tainted by darker, wounding experiences.
Remember now, as we grow gray and old and weary,
How we clung to each passing moment like a talisman.
Alas, all that remains is a trail of haunted absences.



To Be in Love with Emily Dickinson

By: Emma Laurent

Emma Laurent is a former (and sometimes) Democratic political operative. Emma is focused on writing timely pieces on culture, punk music, and spooky run-ins. After writing hours, Emma can be found mouthing off, watching baseball, and reading Stephen King. She is currently located in an antelope-laden field in Wyoming.

To be in love with Emily Dickinson,
but not myself
To wish for meaning in agony
night after night
To trust No One but to die wishing I had
for a moment forgotten No One's follies
The locusts are nigh
and me in their pigeoned sight
The Blood Moon is posted at my door
under the stained arched
Stretching desire over the Loom of Breath
the tight weave snapping
To be in love with Emily Dickinson,
is to love Death.
And have Her desert you
for One more enticing.



Lamentation

By: Kathryn Sadakierski

Kathryn Sadakierski's micro-chapbook *Travels through New York* was published by Origami Poems Project (2020). Her work has also appeared in *Capsule Stories*, *Critical Read*, *Halfway Down the Stairs*, *Northern New England Review*, and *Yellow Arrow Journal*. She holds a BA and MS from Bay Path University.

The sky is a coffee-stained page
Of an old paperback book.

Tree branches are lined in a row
Like pencils, emerging from the tree trunk
As though they were the teeth of a comb.

Before the day expires,
And the stars huddle nearer,
Shoulder to shoulder
By us as we sit next to each other,
Let me hold your hand,
Or let me remember
What it was like to draw from the same air
As you,
When I believed time was infinite,
The sun reflected in your eyes would never set
And we'd always be
Shoulder to shoulder,
With the stars,
A voice a whisper
Of springtime light in the winter.

Hours pass lightly
As the shadow of a dragonfly's wing
Passing over a sunny pool deck.

As a child, in the backseat of the car,
Feeling the heavy blanket of sleep
Pulling over me,
I fought to stay awake,
Holding more tightly
To the novels and notebooks in my lap,
Traveling companions more loyal than a teddy bear,
But, inevitably,
As I drifted off,
They slipped from my hands,
Thudding softly to the floor,
Easily as water in a stream.

I woke up to a pen underfoot,
Perhaps a book rolled under the front seat,
Thinking about what it means
To let things go.

People pack up so quickly,
Leave so quietly.
How can you walk off
With a life's worth of memories
So easily,
As though you were just clearing dust
Away from the windowsill,
Leaving a place for the sun,
Letting it cleanse what once was?

You can never pinpoint just when
Bars of light turn to shadow;
The sinking of the sun always takes you by surprise,
When your head is turned, and you least expect it,
Suddenly feeling night's cool grasp on your shoulder,
Telling you it's time to go in.

The sun-softened snow, melting like margarine,
Has lost its resolve,
My boots plunging through it easily
As I walk,
Leaving prints behind me.

One last streak of sun shines through,
A tear for Lazarus,
Kissing your cheek in farewell.

Harmony

By: Kathleen Chamberlin

Kathleen Chamberlin is a retired educator living in Albany, New York with her husband and two rescue dogs. Her poems have appeared in *Open Door Magazine* and *Lothlorien Poetry Journal*.

Seek me in the early dawn
When shafts of light drift softly to the ground
And far and near they gently wake
The saffron air, the emerald leaves,
The reddened mounds of clay,
Mountains glazed with sparkling snow
Piercing through diaphanous clouds.
Breakfast with me as the sun grows bold
And beams a smile across the sky,
As rivers swell and raise their song,
Tumbling over twigs and pebbles,
Slipping past boulders,
Caressing the fingertips of
Half-submerged tree limbs reaching up,
Pooling in cooling ponds
That shelter against the rock-rimmed shore.
Stay with me while we watch
Chipmunks chatter clinging to tree trunks
And eagles spread their wings to soar aloft
Emboldened and majestic,
As elk pause, backlit along the ridge
Gloriously shaking their antlers
Or bending to drink,
Shadows elongated, stretched along the paths untrodden.
Walk with me under ancient trees,

Towering thickly overhead
Light dappling through their canopy,
Gnarled roots as sinuous as snakes,
A nest of coiled pythons,
But silent and still, untraceable
As they burrow underneath
The cool black soil and mossy earth.
Stay by my side as the sun exhales its final glory
Sinking beneath the horizon
In splendid display
As crickets chorus all at once
Bidding the evening welcome,
And owls hoot from perches unseen.
Pristine stars peer out of the night's darkening sky
Brilliance unequaled by any painter's brush
A Sistine Chapel arching across the dome of the heavens.
Breathe in the peaceful serenity of
All that is
And all that might be,
A glimpse of vast eternity
Unfolding in the solemn beauty
Of this place.



Bat Flailing in the Backyard Shed

By: Matthew Johnson

Matthew Johnson is a former sports journalist for *USA Today College* and *The Daily Star* (Oneonta, NY). His poetry has appeared in *Maudlin House*, *The Roanoke Review*, and *New York Quarterly*. He's a Best of the Net Nominee and has published the book *Shadow Folk and Soul Songs* (Kelsay Books).

A bat, flying with all the poetry that the birds sing of,
Gets lost following the bread crumb trail of fleeing
meteors and faded stars,
The dust that God sweeps up before going to bed.
The sailing, rusty clouds on this night
Dim the shining beam of a sickle-sliced moon, and all
heavenly bodies.

The sensitive vision is obscured,
And leads the flying fox through an open tool shed
window,
Where the scat of screeches and frantic fluttering
Are heard by no one,
Except the lawnmower and brooms for the stoop.

The weekend chores will not begin on time
For the homeowner who opens the shed's door
tomorrow morning.



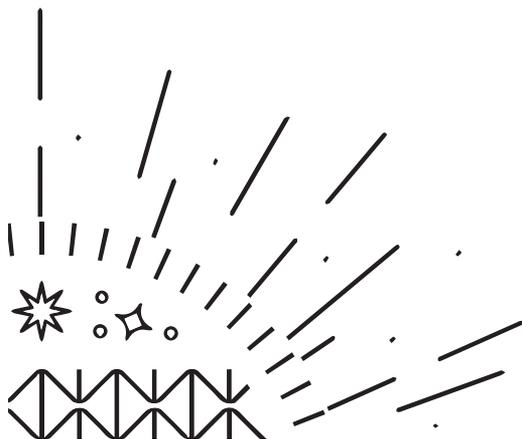
The Ghost Writer Prays

(for Josef)

By: Lee Chottiner

Lee Chottiner is a poet and journalist. His poems have appeared in *Poesis*, *Loud Coffee Press*, *Poetry Super Highway*, *Pokeberry Days: A West Virginia Literary Collection*, *Journeys*, *Brink Zine*, and *Jitterevien*. He lives in Louisville, Kentucky.

Looking oh-so authoritarian,
I rode by my Austro-Hungarian
emperor, side by side, my uniform
stiff, my mustache waxed.
My monarch watched me, alert
to the dirt on my horse's blinders,
alert for any discrepancy, and that
moment made me happy, even free.
I traded the parade for a butcher shop
in Braddock, PA, beneath the steel works'
long shadows, smoke from its stacks
hung over the valley like a gallows.
I can't say why I left my home, if it was
for love or lost favor of my kaiser.
I cannot even say from time's thick vapor
that what is written here is true.
I can only touch my great-grandson's
shoulder, rub his imagination, keeping it
warm. Holding his heart in my hands, I pray
with his words: I want to be remembered.



Take Love, For Example

By: Michelle Matz

Michelle Matz has been writing poems for over 40 years. Her chapbook, *Atill*, was published by Finishing Line Press. Her poems have appeared in *The Berkeley Poetry Review*, *Rainbow Curve*, *Natural Bridge*, and *Cider Press Review*. She was a semifinalist in The Ledge Press Manuscript Contest.

I stumbled
on an uneven sidewalk,
taught myself to adjust,
and now I say too many things
twice. It's as close
as I can get to not disappearing.
I try to line my days up
straight as gravestones
but there's too much leftover
sadness. To-do lists help.
Last night at the 2nd grade play
I sat next to a mom who mouthed
all her son's lines. Her timing
was excellent, pauses exact.
The summer I turned 7,
my parents bought me
a Russian nesting doll.
I was certain the smallest one
would open one day. I didn't memorize
any of my daughter's lines.
After my dad died, I took all his socks.
I wear them to sleep, which means something
I can't understand. Even now, 2 ½ years on,
there are days the grief is dense as fog,
days I put my words together
as if typesetting, picking each letter
from its case. Fog scatters light,
disperses sound. Sometimes
when I hear the mail
fall through the slot
I stop what I'm doing
but it's never clear
what I want to fall.



Two Poems

By: Rob Piazza

A classical guitarist, Rob Piazza recently completed his MFA in Creative Writing at Fairfield University. He teaches literature and composition at colleges and universities in Waterbury, Connecticut. His poems have appeared in *Mystic Blue Review*, *Halcyon Days*, *Society of Classical Poets*, *Haiku Journal*, *Poetry Quarterly*, *Founder's Favourites*, and *The Lyric*.

SQUIRREL

When I fall from this tree and die,
I only hope some kiddies and their dad
lugging hockey sticks on a walk
will scoop me out of the lonely road

and measure a plot of barren earth
between the granite curb and maple trunk
where my entrails won't get squashed
beneath the tires of delivery trucks.

I only pray that little girls
who read Louisa May for pleasure
will cover my smoky tail with leaves
and covet me like buried treasure.

RAKING LEAVES

The autumn when his father left
he started making poetry—
Auburn leaves fell from the trees
and died upon the ground— Bereft
and lost, he raked the leaves
from yards on Kilmer Road—
The piles he made became the odes
of one, so young, who grieves—

Without a friend to whom to turn
he raked within himself to learn
oaks turn pumpkin against the sky—
Leaves as copper as rusty knives,
maples darken red before they die—
he cannot shake his dad's goodbye.



Sad Fairy Tales

By: Liliya Gazizova

Liliya Gazizova is a Russian poet of Tatar origin. She was born in Kazan, Russia and graduated from the Kazan Medical Institute and Moscow M. Gorky's Literature Institute (1996). Gazizova is the author of 15 volumes, published in Russia, Europe, and the US. She teaches Russian literature at Ergies University (Kayseri, Turkey).

Translated by Olga Karasik

There will be Tatar decorations,
Cold skies of Stockholm,
Winding stairs up to the third floor
Of the four-storey building.
That is very important!
Johnny, swimming in the pool for hours,
A bright-colored book of Arthur Rimbaud
On the edge of the table on the right.
The table is covered by brown leather.
A lot of snow, a lot of love,
And sad Lindgren's fairy tales...

There won't be any reason
For my hysterics in this book,
Or a joyful insomnia,
Or the eyes passing by me
And boring discretion.

This book will be without you...



Nirvana, Yes or No

By: Stephanie JT Russell

Stephanie JT Russell is an interdisciplinary artist, author, and cultural worker. Her most recent book, *One Flash of Lightning*, is a treatment of the samurai code (Andrews McMeel). Some of her publications include *Glint*, *Winter Anthology*, *Silver Birch*, *New Museum*, and others. Stephanie was a 2019 Poet Laureate Nominee, Dutchess County.

All my changes were there.
-Neil Young

Don't ask me how it happened.
One day, right on your stoop,
outside-looking-in showed itself
the sad cartoon it is. Like your
freshman colic that first trip home,
towing nothing but an extrinsic new
haircut and bigger changes no one
wanted in their stocking. One foot
tucked into a spiny shell that already
swallowed your pride. The other foot
never left the vestibule, familiar ropy
rain yeast holding the ether of you all.
You're nineteen or so, right?
When aroma and memory begin
disclosing themselves, custodians
of the real.

And you want to believe it's easy
now, returning to the abandoned
house. The haircut's cut, barely
a footnote in your morning toilette.
The goatee doesn't even pretend
to mitigate a long-softened jaw.
You're upright, both feet docked
at port, where you've got used
to dropping bits of yourself into
the cog of endless pelagic eclipse.
Above all, there's no one waiting
at the door, steaming pottage
of star-crossed, guilt-laden love
for you in their hands.

Point is, would you now
step round to the back lawn,
inch down the fern spoilage,
nose up the crawlspace
trim lodged under the tract?
Then press a nostril
to the fungus-bloomed lamina
between you and whatever you
left untouched inside?

The door's wedged in a reef
of thirty-year silt. From here,
there's no hedging how you once
thought secrets made their way
into the light: the naïve graffiti
of imagined, undelivered
punishments, scrawled behind
what ended up as guiltless forgotten
vapors, passed from nitrogen-soaked
sod to shredded baseball cowhide,
fomenting a dahlia bulb that burst between
splinters, then withdrew before anyone
could unearth it at the frost.

*This poem is a response to a suite of
images by photographer David Kulik.*



Where Are You?

By: Joe Cusack

Joe Cusack is a working journalist and TV producer; he has ghost written several best-selling memoir books. Joe is originally from Liverpool, though is now based in Manchester, UK, where he lives with his wife and three sons.

I'm a whisper in the snowflakes.
All around the falling ether.
I'm here with you in breaths and shivers
To take away the chase

What are you?

A painted flower, a faceless instance
A staked claim to now
Your honest brow a teardrop hastened
A silent searing page.

Can you be seen?

A single drop in a sea of rain
Deserted brimming need
A sparkle in a fragment smashed
Glistening flecks in smithereens

Which one are you?

I'm here on winged floating ride
A tiered bend of highs
Softened touch, a wizened look
A made ethereal line

When will you return?

Entered realms impassioned kind
A delicate touch and floated core
To hearts and minds and treasured lines
For yours and mine are all

How will you arrive?

I don't know.



In Observance of Positive Energies

By: Jeremy Szuder

Jeremy Szuder's poems have been published in *Harbinger Asylum*, *The Hungry Chimera*, *Fine Print Literary*, and *Visual Arts Publication*. Jeremy lives in Glendale, California.

In silence as in chaos;
the joining crash of sweet words
on everyone's lips,
the combing hair of eyelash.
Percolating emotions becoming ripe
with an overwhelming sense of self,
and even more so,
the sense of love for the ones
within and without our
aural ranges.

Determined to embrace an entire
race of humanity, and doing so
with these two arms employed
as wings, as stilts, as receptors
of indefinite energy.
We've been asked to use our
bodies as welcome mats
before the revolving doors
of God, and to somehow mesh
ourselves, to learn in doing so
that we need weave tightly
a tapestry fit for the holiest
of holies.

In time, each one of our
presence shall be accounted for,
as if we are the brick and mortar,
and we shall build not buildings,
nor shrines, nor statues of
portrayed flesh on bone... no.

What will permeate the skin
of this planet, and the possible
life which echoes beyond it,
will in all accounts be
the vacuum effect;
recorded as the cosmic
work of black holes,
but a black hole made
with the language of human beings.

Unfortunately,
such descriptors will fail against
the observance of positive
energies.

And it will be because of our
continued lack of understanding
that this vacuum will consume
our best efforts light years
better than how we consume
amongst ourselves now.



At the Poet's Last Reading

By: Anne Whitehouse

Anne Whitehouse is the author of five poetry collections, most recently *OUTSIDE FROM THE INSIDE* (Dos Madres Press, 2020); three chapbooks, most recently *SURREALIST MUSE* (Ethelzine, 2020); and a novel, *FALL LOVE*.

In memory of Mark Strand

In his poems, the drama is elemental:
There was no pain. It had gone.
There were no secrets. There was nothing to say.
The shade scattered its ashes.
The body was yours, but you were not there.
The air shivered against its skin.
The dark leaned into its eyes.
But you were not there.

Those poems light as air
that used to want to fly away
are now trapped between the covers
of a book three inches thick
and hundreds of pages.

Thoughtfully taking in
its heft and size,
the poet balanced the volume
in his open palm, allowing
himself the comment,
“Not bad for a life’s work.”

I was waiting for him to sign
the copy he was holding.
He didn’t notice me at all.
He was looking at the young man
ahead of me about to leave,
as if he were willing
some youthful part of himself
to plant its seed in him
and go forward into
that new life.

I remember
the moment so clearly,
as if I could actually observe
the flight of one soul
into another, and the youth,
radiating his own glow,
unsuspecting.

The poet
was lean as a razor,
his once handsome features
craggy as a rock face.
I thought “ill,” but not
“dying.” Yet in two months
he was dead.



Andreas's Fault

By: Elizabeth Miller

Elizabeth Miller has been writing personal projects for eight years with pieces ranging in genre from horror to fantasy. She is currently working on two books: *Edith*, a fantastical social commentary, and *Novel-19*, a poetry collection about the pandemic. *October Hill Magazine* will be her first publication.

I run underneath
California, my dear,
You cannot forget.
I hold it above
All of your heads, the Big One.
Surely you recall?
No, I will not stop.
The game is just beginning
And you are my pawn.



Growing Pains

By: Carolina Worrell

A New York City native, Carolina Worrell has a journalism background and has been writing and editing for 13 years for a myriad of publications. Her work is featured in both technical and lifestyle magazines, and, in 2015, her story was featured in *The New York Times*' *Metropolitan Diary*.

The grass is finally growing.

For so long, I've looked to the tiny blades poking through the muddied yard as hope of better times ahead. But like me, they are much too small, their voices much too muffled beneath the weight of the earth's heavy burdens.

They sway and silently scream for attention, thirsty for someone to hear their cries. But like me, they are business over pleasure, consumed with the goals that have been set for them.

Two to three weeks. That's what they said. How long it will take? But can progress be made in such a short time frame? Are not the measures of our success determined by how much we accomplish and by when?

For so long, I've looked to these tiny blades of grass to shift the cosmos, alter the winds of my course. But like me, they are far too busy focusing on what they do not get enough of. The sun does not stay high enough in the sky long enough for them to feel its warm embrace. And like me, they yearn for the time to soak it all in. For the patience to bloom on their own accord.

For so long, I've looked at these tiny blades of grass as a sign of perseverance and strength. But like me, they have muted out the background noise. Able only to keep blade above ground. Head above water.

I will check on them tomorrow. Maybe they will listen then.

At long last, the grass is finally growing.



American Lady

By: Kate Wylie

Kate Wylie (she/they) is an MFA candidate at Pacific University and a 2018 Webster University alum. Kate reads fiction for *The New Southern Fugitives*, contributes to the Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome society magazine *Loose Connections*, and has previously published or forthcoming work in *Canary*, *Sport Literate*, *The 2River View*, *Sublunary Review*, and *Visitant*.

In Champaign, the churches gray
and roads become long rivers

running fast with ghosts. The time-dusted
hardwood floors lament. Cold beer

bottle shards were swept into careful piles
then left behind. Each corner's shadowed over by cobwebs

while jewelry-box gems shine byzantium
and wine. Where graveyards used to be,

there's only daffodils. The whippoorwills
have disappeared. We knew they would.

American ladies stand in for them, reclaiming
empty doorframes with their bright wings,

beating the air into a hazel-fire fury,
antennas whispering an ancient worry,

one minute here, then gone.
They find another town to bury.



In Vitro

By: Megan Cartwright

Megan Cartwright is an Australian teacher and writer who began pursuing poetry in earnest during the 2020 lockdown. Her published works include “Options for the Afterlife” in *October Hill Magazine* and “Ocean,” which appeared in online literary journal *Authora Australis*.

“Count down from 100,” says the man in the white coat.
I remember 98, then wake,
stumble to a room lined with plastic chairs
littered with listless women.
The air is soupy, time a protracted exhalation.
The inside of my left forearm bears a circled number 23
blatant as bruising in black permanent marker.
Self-conscious, I cradle it against my chest.
The surgeon has seeded us like pomegranates,
noting the harvest yield on our flesh.

Blastocyst, five days old and suddenly mature
after they thawed you on day three.
Implanted in monochrome, viewed on a monitor:
An alien insemination straight out of a B-grade film.
Silver speculum invites speculation of who you might be.
I prayed to a god I do not believe in that you would stick,
stay close.
Having met you I never needed to doubt it,
little wildling.



A Blank Page Until Midnight

By: Richard LeDue

Richard LeDue (he/him) has been writing for almost 20 years, but he only started having success with being published in 2019. His first chapbook, *The Loneliest Age*, was released by Kelsay Books in 2020, and a second chapbook, *The Kind of Noise Worth Writing Down*, is forthcoming in early 2022.

Days feel trapped on plastic forks,
as you wonder why no one notices
how fake your laughter has become,
or how you save your voice
for a blank page at midnight,
all because there's nothing else left
to say
after thanking them for another birthday
cake that isn't yours,
only to remember a failed
surprise party before you even met them,
where the awkward silence
between friends (old ones you haven't seen in years)
and family seemed to whisper
more wisdom about death
than any candle blown out
to great applause.



Valentín de las Sierras

By: Esteban Cisneros

Esteban Cisneros (Leon, Mexico) is a writer, teacher, and musician. Immersed in pop music and its culture, he has published numerous articles, reviews, interviews, and short stories online and in fanzines, magazines, and compilation books.

Bruce Baillie
and his camera
and his urge
and his idea of the American vanguard
colonial, yes
post-hippie, yes, with all those implications
with all that baggage
heavy
chaotic
replete/colorful/fascinating, yes

in Chapala, Jalisco, 1968
the sierra/the agaves/the animales
the exotism
of those people who talk strange
high
with short shortest words
like quacks
with long longest words
like prayers
they drink tequila and water from the river
they sing songs with only one note
a note that goes low and high and low and low in volume
depending on the pain they want to express

Bruce Baillie
and his camera
in Chapala, Jalisco, 1968
and a song
a folk song, says he
Valentín de la Sierra
Valentín de las Sierras, says he
and Valentín, hero or traitor?
of the Revolución that

Valentín de las Sierras (cont.)

Bruce Baillie
without his camera
read in a book by John Reed
about that Revolución
he read a book by John Reed
about la Revolución Mexicana
and he felt eager
smoking a cigarette in his flat in Frisco

Bruce Baillie
and his camera, but most of all
Bruce Baillie
and a microphone
in Chapala, Jalisco, 1968
and a song
a folk song, says he
Valentín de la Sierra
sung by José Santollo Nasido
in Santa Cruz de la Soledad in Chapala, Jalisco
in all of its exoticism
in all of its simplicity
the story of a hero
or a traitor
in the lout years of la Revolución!



Self-Caricature

By: John Maurer

John Maurer is a 26-year-old writer from Pittsburgh who writes fiction, poetry, and everything in-between, but his work always strives to portray that what is true is beautiful. He has been previously published in *Claudius Speaks*, *The Bitchin' Kitsch*, *Thought Catalog*, and more than 50 others magazines.

I liquidated my organs and skeleton
What I earned wasn't worth anything by the time I got it
That's what artistic success feels like in your life portrait
It's hung in a museum but you can't get across the threshold

How did you take your most prized and find a way not to appreciate it?
I am nothing without the pen, the pen is still plenty without me
An array of acquisitions teaches you only that they are replaceable
I've never known such a state of mind, a glass of whiskey for every loss

I started years ago and haven't gotten there yet, the glass is never empty
It is only half full for a moment, and the editor reading this will look sourly
Upon me using self-medicated depression as a metaphor for optimism



Unexpected Pregnancy

By: Giada Nizzoli

Giada Nizzoli has been writing for six years, although she wrote a few pieces as a child, too. *Will-o'-the-Wisps* is her debut poetry collection. Publications include “A Thread of Sunlight” (*The London Magazine*) and “Monsters and Humans” (*Pangolin Review*). She won the WriteUp Short Story Competition in 2018.

Italy is my mother,
but she had me by mistake.
A stunning single parent
who got pregnant at sixteen
and decided to keep me,
even though deep down she knew
she could not give me the world.
She rocked me in crystal waves
and brought me up amidst the scent
of ripe yellow citrus fruits
to distract me from the reek
of hazy unemployment
and the gas of corruption.
As I grew, she realized
that I was far too much work.
'Maybe I was wrong,' she thought.
'Maybe I just wasn't ready.'
So, when she gave me ripe lemons,
I made my own lemonade
with the juice of the sour tears
that I cried when I left her.
Italy is my mother,
but she had me by mistake,
and we love each other,
sì, but only from afar.



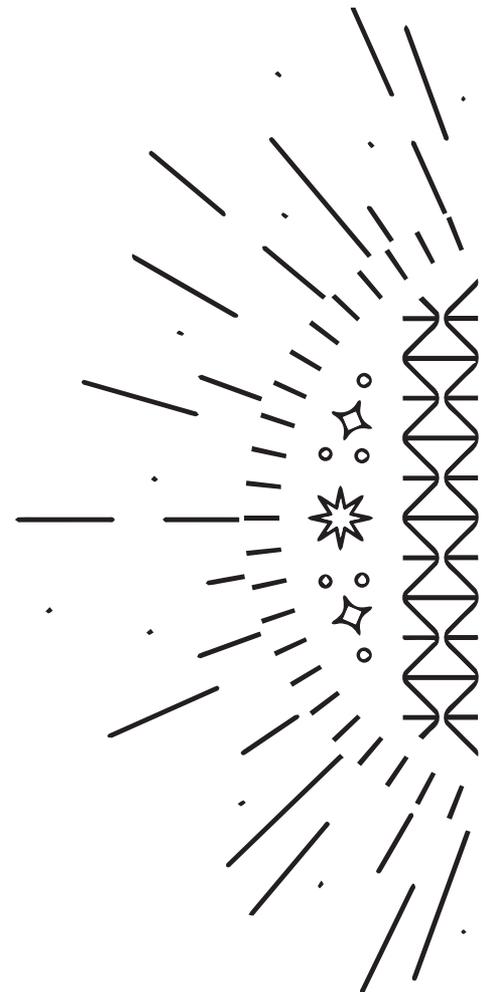
Agronomy

By: Rick Rohdenburg

Rick Rohdenburg has been writing poetry for more than 50 years. He did not begin publishing until past 60. His work has appeared in the *Chestnut Review*, *Laurel Review*, *Raleigh Review*, and others. Now retired, he lives in Atlanta, Georgia.

This poem is a seed.
Harrow the wide field.

Warm, the turned earth.
Now, rain.



What Tomorrow Will Bring

By: Carli Lo Cigno

Carli Lo Cigno is currently studying Creative Writing and pursuing a career in editing for a publishing house or a newspaper company. She enjoys reading mysteries, as well as contemporary romances. Carli writes short fiction pieces and has written several works of poetry, in addition to a play.

As I walk up the porch
with its wooden, creaky steps
the feelings flood over me.
Although the steps are old
They are able to hold
not only me but
all of the memories:
playing with my siblings in the yard
coming inside just before dark
on summer days, taking a dip in the pool
in the fall, playing in the leaves when it was cool.
As a kid, I felt I could do anything
without ever worrying what tomorrow would bring.
We moved around a lot
And this house was small and tight and there were five of us kids
Sometimes I drive by
Did they change anything?
I didn't really walk up the steps
that day
But I pictured myself walking up the steps
Like I used to
Here I stand on the anniversary

five years since it has sold,
If only I could go back
to that little home
that used to be all I'd ever known.



The Intersection

By: Mindy Ohringer

Mindy Ohringer writes politically charged fiction, poetry, and essays. She was a “Writer in Residence” at Byrdcliffe Arts Colony in 2018 and 2019. Her work has appeared in *Terror House Magazine*, *Hot Flash Fiction*, *The Thieving Magpie*, *The Greenwich Village Literary Review*, and *The Times of Israel*.

Don't tell me I am white.
Don't tell me I am rich.
Don't tell me I run the world.

You look at me.
You think you know.
You do not know.

dead people made me possible.
dead people are my people.
dead people speak my ashen truth.

shorn of voice and name,
shorn of hair and home,
shorn of shoes and skin

I am a lampshade.
Do not tell me what I am.
Do not tell me what I am.





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