

A scenic photograph of a sunset over a lake. The sky is filled with vibrant orange and yellow clouds, transitioning to a deep purple and blue at the top. In the foreground, the dark silhouettes of evergreen trees are visible against the bright sky. The water of the lake is calm, reflecting the colors of the sunset.

*SCARLET LEAF  
REVIEW*

*Monthly Selection of Poetry,  
Prose and Photographic Arts*

*August 2017  
No 3*

# SCARLET LEAF REVIEW

is the monthly paperback and electronic magazine published by [www.scarletleafreview.com](http://www.scarletleafreview.com), a Canadian-based (Toronto, ON) literature&art site.

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The photos we use were released under CCO License on [www.pexels.com](http://www.pexels.com) and will be our preferred cover graphics for quite some time.

*A word from the Editor in Chief*



Starting with the first fall issue, the word from the Editor in Chief will be brief. Not today, though.

I must express my gratitude. Both the first and the second issue of the magazine have had an amazing success. I should extend my gratitude to the authors as well. They have made it possible. Without them, Scarlet Leaf Review wouldn't exist.

I know this third issue of the print magazine is a little late (all right, a little more), yet, that was inevitable. What I can do is to promise that something like that never happens again (if force majeure doesn't intrude upon us...).

The first fall issue will not be printed before the 21<sup>st</sup> of September, and we aim for the same date from now on, as I'd like to offer a feasible and fixed time frame. As result, all issues will be out on the 21<sup>st</sup>.

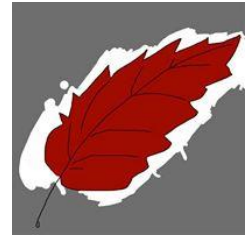
With this issue, the number of pages will increase. We have received many valuable submissions and we cannot turn them away just to keep the number of pages and the price low. Hopefully, this will not be a deterrent for our readers.

It is very difficult to determine exactly how many pieces we can approve for a given month because of poems and their structure. As result, we have decided to accept submissions for a season from now on. Thus, we can have two issues during that season with 48 or 60 pages, and the last issue of the season will include everything that didn't go through.

Without further ado, I give you the third issue of *Scarlet Leaf Review*. I know you've been waiting...

**Editor in Chief,**

**Roxana Nastase**



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## *Bianca Alicia Garza*

She is from Las Vegas, Nevada. She is a nature and animal lover, and enjoys spending time writing. Some of her poems are published in the Poetry Anthology, "Moonlight Dreamers of Yellow Haze", now available at Amazon.com. Blanca's published work can be viewed at The Poet Community, Whispers, The Winamop Journal, Indiana Voice Journal, Tuck Magazine, Scarlet Leaf Review as well as Birdsong Anthology 2016, Vol 1, Anthology "Dandelion in a Vase of Roses".

### *White Roses*

A white rose and  
hear "I Love You"  
from your lips  
was all I wanted

The "I Love You"  
got stuck in your pride

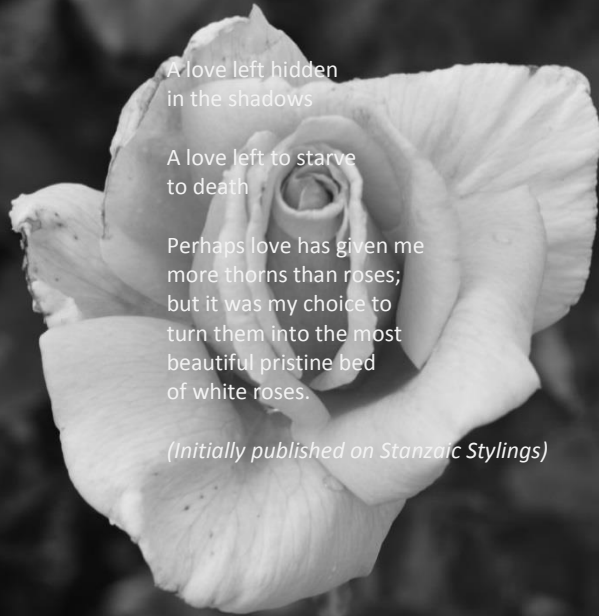
The White rose  
waits in a notebook  
of unfinished poems

A love left hidden  
in the shadows

A love left to starve  
to death

Perhaps love has given me  
more thorns than roses;  
but it was my choice to  
turn them into the most  
beautiful pristine bed  
of white roses.

*(Initially published on Stanzaic Stylings)*





*Ryan Quinn Flanagan*

**Ryan Quinn Flanagan** is a Canadian-born author residing in Elliot Lake, Ontario, Canada with his other half and mounds of snow. His work can be found both in print and online in such places as: Evergreen Review, The New York Quarterly, Anitgonish Review, CV2, Scarlet Leaf Review, PRECIPICE, Existere, Windsor Review, Vallum, The Dalhousie Review, Red Fez, and The Oklahoma Review.

*Everyone is High at Altitude*

compliments are anathema  
the glyphs cannot be read  
I must remember to climb upon the backs of the accursed  
like a long and silver mountaineer  
prodding this vile earth with homemade pincers  
as I go

and you are not far behind, both the past and present of you  
calling after me in tongues  
sturdy Argolic frieze of planned relief  
your freckled legs hampered only by the skin  
of distance.

*Charles Hayes*



**Charles Hayes**, a multiple Pushcart Prize Nominee, is an American who lives part time in the Philippines and part time in Seattle with his wife. A product of the Appalachian Mountains, his writing has appeared in Ky Story's Anthology Collection, Wilderness House Literary Review, The Fable Online, Unbroken Journal, CC&D Magazine, Random Sample Review, The Zodiac Review, eFiction Magazine, Saturday Night Reader, Cha: An Asian Literary Journal, Scarlet Leaf Publishing House, Burning Word Journal, eFiction India, and others.



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### Hemlock

Frolicking in the woods of Appalachia, our hearts singing in the quiet beauty of its protection, we follow the colored shafts of sunlight, their shoots of gold and green choosing our paths. In the midst of our home, letting our hands slip at a fork, we part to different ways, each caught by a foreign step.

Out there afar, among the smoky humps of hills, for a moment, in my mind I wander. But from on high, my cover gone, I am quickly back to stand alone, her presence a need within. Returning to the walls of hardwood and fir, I see a fleeing deer, its tail a white spear toward the dappled blue above. Following back its run, I come to her.

Reclining atop a huge rock of old, her long coat for a bed, she spreads her smile to all. And then to me. Her ruling bridge, now await to drift the calm, guides the tack and beckons me.

As if she be a siren known to all but me, the forest vines wrap my legs and pull me to. But the forest, its whisper but wind to me, cannot keep me from the promise of her smile or the beauty of her eye. Dragging roots behind, I scale the rock and command the heights as I go down. Clasp my head to her softness, her words feather deep, "I want to hear it. You must tell me."

As an absent scent of hemlock wafts from the forest floor, I fold within my vow, "I will love you forever."

### \*Inday

Lowering her kerchief from her face to boldly meet my look, a tinge of amusement on her lips, she commands the little seat her trisikad provides. Long dark hair kisses legs too long to curl. A product of verdant growth and tropical warmth, she gives no chill.

Pumping to keep their space, sensing the herd of traffic all about, her sweaty driver knows his load is fair. Status feeds his legs awhirl and brightens his face, as a sleepy scooter he cuts, for her.

Seen before, walking in the market crowd, eyes ahead, as tall as mine, she is fresh and fit to be all the pretties that she dreams. Health incarnate, her step is light through dusty squares with slippered feet, a move beyond not touched by dirt nor heat.

An old tall white Joe cured to ripe beyond and weathered as a bumpy bitter melon be, among so many brown and bouncy sticks of youth, I wistfully lock my foreign eyes on her, pretty as a bougainvillea bloom.

And forget it all as I smile too.

\*Filipino for girl.

### New Bird

The dusty blue shard of an egg shell, its membrane caught by the sunny trumpet of a daffodil, gently sways in the spring air. Magnified especially for me it seems, an announcement that a new life is somewhere up above. Looking up, my face dappled by the morning sun, through maple leaves with dew aglitter, I see a fledgling Robin chirping down at me. No worm nor juicy bug to feed, I move away to cause no tease nor fear.

From away though still quite near, I watch the mother home from tree to tree, to quiet her charge's chirps, with a frenzied service from her beak. Then off again she goes, for waiting all about, are more meals to bring home.

Returning day by day to where the daffodils once were, not long in time I come to see, the honor that the mother allows for me. Crowding steady on her little peep, until it falls from all it ever had, she lets go of tender care. Righting from the pull of earth, its virgin wings beating so, a new bird lifts upon the wind, and in the maple mate across the way, a perch

it finds. Tree to tree and ground to tree, the mother shows her young, until its task is learned beyond just rote, but to the main to always be.

Come the end of spring, the new bird fit to be, I climb and lift its cradle from the maple limb. Spinning seeds like confetti fly, to celebrate the story that this gift will tell. The miracle of birth it will signify, as it sits upon my window sill. This Robin's empty nest.

*Pay Back*

Having just disembarked from a crowded bus along the only highway, I look down the scrub covered hill at Dodong's dogged labor as I try to unwind from the long-cramped ride from the city. Beneath the conical hat his face is hidden in shadow but his upper body glistens brightly under the high sun, showing not an ounce of waste. Slogging along behind the plow and carabao, or water buffalo, its reins wrapped around his neck, he turns the black packed sod. Out on one edge of his future corn patch tall coconut and smaller banana palms run to the rocky shore of the Philippine Sea. A beautiful parcel of coastline. To see such effort as his always gets my attention in ways that bemuse me. Funny stuff; values, character, and the like. Things that are not given much shift in my rounds. Smiling to myself, I wonder at the labor such work requires and think that I'm glad it isn't me behind that plow. What must it take to drive a man to undertake such work when a little scam here or there can reap far better rewards? Oh well, I tell myself, it takes all kinds to provide the scores for people like me.

I have come here to snooker Dodong out of his Alcoy property because I know that he is in dire straits. His only child, a son, has cancer and Dodong has no money for his treatment, which is relatively easy and most times successful. Without it the boy will die. I have waited for my opportunity to get a piece of this particular coastline and now is my chance.

As I reach down for my pack I notice a striking Filipina emerge from the trees on the far side of the field carrying a bucket of water. That would be Inday, Dodong's wife, mother of the sick child. Carrying herself like the dirt under her feet is formed for her step, she closes to her husband. My my, what a piece of craft she is. This purchase could be a real pleasure. Riveted by her beauty and the thoughts that it engenders, my pack slips from my fingers as I watch their encounter. From the same dipper of water that they share to their parting embrace when the break is over, an aura of inert passion surrounds them. I can tell that it will be easier to bring down the price of the property than to break through that aura. But then, I am very good at what I do. Even though I am a foreigner my pesos speak as well as others'. And I have my finders who keep me informed. My nice properties along the coast have shown me the value of a good finder.

As Inday disappears back into the trees, Dodong picks up the reins of the carabao, takes off his hat, and wipes his brow. When he looks up to gauge the sun he notices me and waves. His bright smile tells me that Carloi, one of my finders, has done his job. Dodong's visions of sugar plumbs and a well child have been properly seeded. Now only to clip them without ruin.

Hefting my pack and working my way down a small path through the scrub, I emerge onto the field, hand outstretched and all smiles.

"Nice work, Dodong," I say, sweeping my arm toward the furrows. "I am Tony, Carloi's friend, and the man who is going to change your life for the better."

Dodong's smile fades a little as his eyes hold mine and we shake hands. My little introductory pitch must have led him to cut to the chase.

"This is better property than your others," he says. "Carloi has told me of your business and I know the old owners of those properties. A piece of my shoreline with a home lot and a right-of-way to the highway will not come for the same price as your other shore lots. But I will deal with you."

Thinking that this guy speaks pretty good English for a farmer, my rosy picture of a good profit dims a little as I swiftly tack differently.

"Oh I know what you say and I am ready and willing to give you better than the others. We will work it out.....for the boy's sake."

Dodong, who had been studying the sky, as if his terms were somehow written there, quickly looks back at me and a shadow seems to pass within his look.

"You know about my son?"

Shrugging my shoulders, I say nothing as we face each other for several moments. As if the silence between us has ordained the course of this encounter, Dodong suddenly unhooks the plow, rolls up the reins, and stands shoulder to shoulder with the huge carabao. Looking to the tree line nearest the Sea where a string of grey smoke snakes to the sky, he says, "Come, it is time to eat. We will talk more there so my wife may be included."

Without waiting for my reply, Dodong leads the carabao away and I follow.

I have scored and we both know it. My touch is still sharp but women don't cut as easily as men. I hope the food is as good as her looks.

Inday is not just your average Filipina housewife according to my finder, Carloi. Not very many years ago, just after graduating from Cebu University, she was selected to represent Alcoy in the Miss Cebu contest and finished third. As she shuttles food and drink through an adjoining kitchen door, for the sick kid I presume, her hair accentuates a backside figure even my practiced eye finds exceptional. Gleaming like the bright black coal seams that my dad showed me in a West Virginia coal mine when I was a kid, her long ponytail gently caresses an attractive derriere. Dodong either ignores or doesn't notice my interest but there is something about Inday's eyes that tell me she knows of her effect.

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Having just finished up a fine mid-day meal of ampalaya or bitter melon, kalabasa squash mixed with Bagio beans, and pork lechon, I am discovering that Inday is the obstacle when it comes to getting my price. Dodong does not concur on anything with me until he has her approval. And Inday confounds my many attempts to lay the tracks my way.

"What you offer is not fair," she says. "This beachfront lot is prime white sand beach and very close to one of the major beach resorts of Southern Cebu."

Before I can reply Dodong says, "She is right. It's worth way more than you offer. If it were not for my son no price would be enough for me to let it go. But I must sell it, which you found out and now want to use in this business."

Abruptly standing from the table, Dodong continues, "Think about what is fair while I check on my carabao. We have a full load ahead this afternoon."

Dodong's exit leaves Inday and me surrounded by the sounds of silence. A gecko chirps as it skitters up a wall, birds call among the palm fronds near the kitchen window, and the distant air horn of a Ceres bus sounds out on the highway, letting future passengers know of its coming. Thinking that this may be the time to see what extra I can get for being "fair" and feeling an uncommon urge toward Inday I venture the supposition.

"You know Inday, you are very good at helping your husband. And, of course, you little boy."

I let this remark sink in as Inday sits straight backed looking me squarely in the eyes, her face a beautiful mask of repose, her eyes pools of awareness.

"There might be a way I can raise my price," I say.

"I know," she says. "You would have to triple it."

"You know what that way is?"

"You are a foreigner and on in years but some things just are. I have seen you look at me. I know."

"If I double the price.....", I begin, but Inday cuts me off.

"No, you must triple it."

"And you would go along with that?" I say.

"I would."

"What about Dodong?"

"That's none of your business," she says. "And you must sell the property to one of your rich people and never come back to Alcoy."

Smiling and extending my hand across the table I say, "It's a deal. A very beautiful deal."

Inday looks at my hand as if it is a curiosity then raises her eyes to mine without moving.

"You will not touch me until then. And only then."

Walled off from the common people, the luxury beach resort is the perfect place to sample Inday and complete my purchase. Savoring the harvest to come, I decide on a little dip to snorkel the reef and loosen up a bit before she arrives. Entering the water amid the rainbow-colored fish and coral, I dive and, at the same time, keep my eye on my suite where the money is stashed, and an iced bottle of nice white wine. Two cans of caviar, grace the wet bar. She is not well known this far North and that should make my sweet treat more pliable. Yes, this deal will certainly be one to remember. Picking a plum from Dodong's tree adds a flavor impossible to get any other way. And the property is worth more than it will cost me. The plum, however, is one of those gems that I consider inestimable.

Bobbing in the water, goggles back, with my own thoughts of sugar plums, I notice the gate guard swing the smaller pedestrian gate open to admit someone. It is Inday and she is early. But who cares.

Carrying a small briefcase and wearing a short-flowered shift with a yellow sash around the waist, high heeled straps, and a brilliant white bonnet over large sunglasses, she moves down the concrete walkway like she is walking an international runway. What a way she moves.

Splashing out of the water in haste I yell, "Inday, it's me. I am so glad you are here!"

Turning to face the water, she removes her sunglasses, lifts her free hand to her hip, and watches me stumble out of the water and up to her. She does not speak.

"Come, come," I say, as I try to take her elbow, which she immediately withdraws. Taking the hint, anything to leave her beautiful feathers unruffled, I point to my suite and lead the way while talking over my shoulder. "Everything is prepared. The best."

Inday suddenly pulls up and speaks for the first time.

"What is there to prepare? You do it and I let you.....after we count the money."

"God, you must be a harsh taskmaster with Dodong," I say as I lead on and open the suite. "Have a little wine. Nibble a little caviar."

"Do not speak of Dodong," Inday says as we cross the threshold. "Leave the wine and fish eggs. I must count the money."

Resigning myself to the basics of our business, I clear the small dining table, lay out the stacks of money, and indicate a place for Inday to sit. The picking of the plume, a main event enough, will more than suffice.

Removing her hat and glasses and placing them on the bar, Inday crosses to the table and sits, briefly looking around. Seeing a large canopied bed perfectly framed by the open bedroom door, her review ends short and the coldness of her look bends to a wet warmth for an instant. Passing so quick it might never have happened, the emotion is gone as Inday opens her small case and removes the tax declaration for the property, signs it, and begins counting the money.

Still in my swimsuit, I don some slippers and pour myself a glass of wine. Might as well. I hate counting money and I know that it's all there.

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Finishing her count and satisfied with the result, Inday stands, kicks off her shoes and says, "Do you want to begin here or in the bed?"

"However you prefer," I say, removing my swimsuit to reveal my readiness.

"I do not prefer. But I can see that that is not necessary," Inday says as she faces me, slips the sash, and drops the shift to her feet. Naked beauty incarnate, she turns her body and walks into the bedroom. The dark hair that flows down her brown back to touch those hollows of pleasure is a magnet that pulls hard. I follow.

\*\*\*

The Bureau of Internal Revenue in Tabunok, a crowded extension of Cebu City, is one of my least favorite places in the Philippines. But it is a place that must be tolerated if one is to deal property on the Island of Cebu. And that is just the beginning. The actual titling of a piece of property is an even longer and more tedious process, which is why most people like me, and many others, skip it all together and wheel and deal with the far simpler transfer of a tax declaration.

Onerous lines snake back from the reception windows which is par for the BIR. With the inadequate air conditioning, the sweat drenched shirts and blouses of waiting people remind me of kewpie dolls wearing targets with no bull's eyes in a carnival game. Sustaining myself through this procedure, I imagine which ones would be the easiest to knock over with my deals. It is small comfort in the heat but amuses enough to finally get me to the window. Handing over the signed tax declaration to an underpaid and over worked middle aged woman wearing a nametag that says Gloria, I say, "Guiwang, Alcoy, I'd like to change this over to my name, palihug."

Hearing her own native dialect, Gloria looks to my face and smiles. Briefly nodding her recognition, she returns her attention to the computer and enters the search for the property. Working the keyboard rapidly, her smile begins to dim. The longer she searches the further her smile falls. Looking back up at me, Gloria says with as much sympathy as her job allows, "Sir, this property is registered to a Filipina American citizen married to an American National. I don't know who this Dodong and Inday Serinio are but they are not the owners and cannot convey this property. I am sorry. Next!"

"Now wait a minute," I say, about to come out of my skin, "I paid many pesos for this property. Are you telling me I got ripped off?"

"I'm afraid so, sir. It happens often. You should have come here first or used a lawyer. I wish I could help you but there is nothing I can do. Now please step aside. Next."

Livid with anger and ready to explode, I notice the security guard leave his post by the door and approach. Thinking I already have more than I can handle and need not add an arrest to it, I turn from the window and, as calm as one who is jumping out of their skin can be, walk to the exit. The guard, now back at his post, politely opens the door for me and touches his visor with his nightstick. Neither seeing nor feeling the crush of humanity on the street, nor smelling the clouds of diesel fumes that accost me, I stand there looking to the gutter, like an island in the middle of a river of people.

\*\*\*

At sea, halfway between the Island of Cebu and the Zamboanga Peninsula, Carloi and his wife, Inday, stand in the bow of their bango, or family boat, watching the brazen orange horizon as the sun rises. Strung out in the waters behind them, except for Dodong's liaison bango off the port beam, are the many other banglos of this Sama-Bajau tribe of sea gypsies. Leaders of the tribe, Carloi and Inday try to gauge the weather ahead and determine whether they make for the nearest land or push on to Zamboanga and the Sulu archipelago. Considering that they have been at sea for two days and are carrying big loads from their sting in Alcoy, Carloi decides on land, a little rest, and a celebration in a suitable lagoon on one of the thousands of islands that are sprinkled around the Philippine Sea. As celebratory flags are hoisted above the banglos, Carloi steers for the nearest lee and some fun. Tying off the rudder once the tack is set, Carloi looks to Inday, who is watching him with knowing eyes.

"You know, it has been quite a score," Carloi says.

"Impossible without your sister's and rich American husband's place," replies Inday. "Pretending to have a kid in such a place was easy. I would not even pretend at sea. The waters are an only child for me."

"For me as well," Carloi says as he looks back at the following boats and seems to consider things not of the sea. "Dodong is fat with his sweet vengeance after what that ass hole did to his cousin last year. Just fourteen. Bet she is enjoying the fruits of vengeance too."

"No doubt," Inday says, "her life is changed and any sweetness that she can get is more than right."

Searching the eyes of his mate, Carloi asks, "What about you, Inday, did you have any feelings about it?"

Moving to the seat just forward of the rudder bench, Inday runs her toes up Carloi's large shorts and assumes a thoughtful pose.

"Not like you my dear. It was a very small matter."

Carloi, igniting like a snub fused firecracker, grabs her leg, laughing while she squeals, carries her to the sleeping mid-section of the bango and dumps her on the many cushions there. After taking a moment to appraise her delightful surrender, Carloi follows her down amid their squeals and laughter. To these sounds of the gypsy sea, off the port beam, DoDong raises the privacy flag of a couple's embrace. And smiles.

*A Hero's Son*

"You slime ball douche bag!!! What makes you think you are fit for my Marine Corps, the Marine Corps of Chesty Puller and other brave and honorable men!?! On your face, puke!! Push-ups!! Ready, begin!"

Those words were often heard from my boot camp drill instructor back then on Parris Island. For Lewis Burwell "Chesty" Puller, the most decorated Marine in history, a marine's marine, was a standard that was often demanded of my aspirations. And aspire to it I did. At least until I got to Vietnam and a taste of what it was all about. Though even then there was a real part of Chesty Puller not far off. His son, Lt. Lewis Burwell Puller Jr., led an infantry rifle platoon there until he tripped a booby-trapped howitzer shell and lost his right leg at the hip and his left leg below the knee as well as his left hand and most of his fingers on his right hand.

Barely able to survive and somewhat recover, he wrote in his Pulitzer Prize winning autobiography, *Fortunate Son*, how his father, the iconic Marine, wept when he first saw him in the hospital. And how that hurt more than his horrific wounds. Some would say that he never got over it. But with guts, determination and the help of his wife and others he came back to raise a family, get a Law Degree, and approximate a normal life. But always there was the tug of the war and what it did to him and others. There was always a reality that could not dovetail with the awards and letters that he received. And the literature that he put forth. At the age of 48, after years of struggle and many failed attempts to resolve what should be with what was, Lewis B Puller Jr. ate his gun and was given a hero's burial at Arlington Cemetery.

It is with no little sense of misgiving that I view the plethora of messages in our country that seem to indicate that donning a military uniform is little different from Clark Kent ripping off his suit in a phone booth. To me, these messages smack of a grooming process designed to cover up the obvious. When a simple soldier is gravely wounded, many times, he or she is paraded before us as if they were one of the Spartans of ancient Rome bound for glory. That by forfeiting pieces of their flesh, all is not lost, for heroes they have become.

Helping others to try and overcome severe destruction is a worthy cause, no doubt. But I can see in real time how much consideration is given to those shattered men and women when the footlights have dimmed and the wars have passed on to pretty ribbons and trinkets. Or when the adventure of a government shoot 'em up has grown stale and the need to paint a picture of courage and glory for the masses has dwindled.

Throughout my life, with the passing of each new war, I have witnessed the avowed outrage over the care that the shattered ones have received from the same hands that provided them with armaments and a path to destruction. And each time I see the same promises wielded about when it comes to fixing a system that favors war with no consideration for its casualties.

Yet each time it does not change and I wonder who can actually believe that it ever will. This never-ending cycle and its rotating rhetoric is like the catechism of some religions—lips move and the same old Hail Marys issue forth. By rote.

How can we honestly wonder at the number of suicides in the populations that take up our perpetual wars? How disillusioned it must have felt for Lewis B. Puller Jr, coming to a time like that with his privilege and myriad of resources. And still not able to pull it together. How much more so for the common soldier.

Maybe, just maybe, Lewis B. Puller Jr. and those like him in that land of loss, would be better off a tragedy that taught and limped on, than a hero who inspired at the cost of themselves. May he and others at last rest in peace, be it Arlington or the grave plot on the ridge.

*Child of Slate*

His father gone to falling slate, Danny and his dog haunt the hills. Shedding coal dust that dresses grime below and turns the waters bad, children that play tough yet wet the cot, and boast of fathers keen of eye and sinew, Danny will find a way to love the lone and learn a man.

The hillside meadow opens up like a sprinkle of autumn stardust. Yellow walls of light, bursting with snaps of blue, paint deer with cashmere coats as they leap for cover, their white tails flagging high. A secrete womb among the digs, no place for others nor their boasts. A refuge from the sour looks of I can do it better. And the bloody vans that wail from the pits, a family's table fare within their guts.

This special place on high, so strange amid the hollow chill, a treasure it must conceal. Another pants for winter wash, or a chest of silver yore to share a cot. This high meadow marks the spot.

A sense of gift and spirit born in the cathedral of woods and sky, a will to hope for more. Plumes of soot and cinders, standard fare for a child of slate, will not fool Danny. Up here, he knows the treasure has to be.

His knowledge comes from all about, over slag and roads of strip. With a whisper, lest he ruin the spell or kill the scene, he hugs his dog and bends a furry ear.

"Sniff it out Patches. You can do it boy. Find our treasure."

*The Accident*

Stepping lightly along the old dirt road to my shack, I see the moon lift above the bumpy horizon that surrounds me and the hollow that I live in. As I pause for the view, the call of the whippoorwill challenges my return. Peering about for the bird, I notice the reflected light from the creek, its flickering sparkle calling time for the tune played by sandstone pebbles. Then I see it, the eerie red glow of the whippoorwill's eye in the weeds between the road and the creek. Many nights, through the screened window of my cottage, its call has padded my anxious thoughts. Glowing like a tiny brake light afar, the eye is all that I can see of the bird and, in the moonlight, I wonder if it can see me. Maybe it is too busy calling for a mate to notice my creeping. Drawing closer, I hear the soft murmur of wings followed by feathered air to my face. It is gone.

This night has been OK, I guess. Just me and the whippoorwill.....and the snake. Earlier I stepped on a snake that was gathering warmth from the road. Although I never saw it, I knew it was a snake. Springing to the air as soon as my foot felt its round largeness, its wiggle, I heard the weeds bend as it slithered off the road. Only a black snake I figured, since I was not bitten.

Back in my shack, a little four room affair with an outside toilet, the freedom of being outside with other living things slowly drains away. It is replaced with a caged feeling. I am already counting the hours until my next night walk. The night walks keep me going ever since the accident over there. I was busy over there and had too much to do to think about it. And others didn't seem to be bothered by it. But when I was sent home the scabs on my face turned mushy and rubbed off.....and there were no others. With the scabs gone, and no others to pass among, I stick to the night and avoid the looks. Surely, the lookers must know about the accident.

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Dark skinned and with eyes that are almost black, the VA shrink quickly enters the examining room, gives me a smiling nod, and sits on the large desk with one foot on the floor and my file open on his thigh. In his early forties, tall and lanky, he moves with the quick, surefooted grace of a soccer player. Over there I would watch them play sometimes and wonder if they had seen the accident? Were they part of it? Starched, pressed, and smelling of disinfectant, he reminds me of an Arab Mr. Clean, prepared to vanquish all the dirty demons in the heads of those that have been cursed.

"You are Ben James," the white smock says, "I saw you last month?"

I nod.

"Is there anything that you wish to talk about today? Something that would maybe make you feel better?"

I shake my head thinking that it's always about talk, digging up bones, blabber, blabber. What good will talk do my sores?

"Take off the sunglasses and remove the face mask," he says, "I want to see your eyes."

Grudgingly, I uncover my face. Now this Arab doctor will see my sores and he will know about the accident.

"How do they look?" I ask.

Without looking up from my chart he replies, "How does what look?"

"The sores," I say. "I think maybe they are more infected."

Lowering the chart, he looks at me and shakes his head.

"There are no sores, Ben. Your skin is as unblemished as a baby's ass. Are you taking the medicine I gave you for sleep?"

I am taking multiple doses and chasing them with a glass of vodka to even approach sleep but I simply say, "Yes."

"Good, good, you know that we are here to help."

Scribbling on a pad, he tears the leaf off and hands it to me on his way to the door.

"Here's a fresh prescription," he says, "have it filled at the pharmacy on your way out. I'll see you next month."

I don my glasses and face mask as the door closes and hurry out of the building to the safety of my car. Maybe next month the sores will be better. I mean, what does he know?

\*\*\*

Smashing into the side of my head, the butt stock of the Kalashnikov almost knocks me cold. Stars and flashing lights blossom in my vision. Like watching a film play at half speed, I see the concrete floor slowly rise up to smash my face. Lying in the rubble, I know that I am still conscious because I can taste the dirt and feel the warm blood running down my cheek. Standing over me, stretching to the roof it seems, is an older Arab holding the Kalashnikov. Dressed in a common disha dasha but shod in good desert boots, he wears a bandolier of ammunition over his shoulder and several grenades attached to a web belt. Three other slightly younger men, dressed similarly except for the boots, are with him. They wear only sandals. All have faces marked by hatred and contempt as they stare down at me. The older one says something in Arabic that makes the others laugh as he kicks me in the stomach. For the next several minutes they beat me. Still laughing, they strip my boots and desert fatigues and drag me to a half-collapsed wall. Draping me head first over the wall, they tie my hands and arms to a supporting post and spread my legs, doing the same with them. More excited now and looking at each other like addicts of cruelty before the feed, they rip off my underwear, leaving me naked from the waist down. Suddenly my fear turns to terror as the older man grabs my ass with both hands, looks at the others, and says something in Arabic. Moments of silence follow....until I hear the thud of a bandolier hitting the floor. Looking over my shoulder, I see the leader, his dark eyes riveted to mine, remove his web belt and gently place it beside the bandolier. Lifting off his disha dasha, he reveals a huge erect penis with a bulbous scarlet head as big

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as a softball. The mammoth cock head, like a half human-half phallic being, has the face of a laughing clown. Wild tufts of red hair growing from the sides of its bald head start flapping like wings as it prepares to mount me. A rumbling sound in the background, barely audible at first, grows louder when I feel the kiss of the clown. I scream.

At first, when I open my eyes, I do not recognize the torn and faded wallpaper near the edge of my bed. It is the rumbling sound of the morning school bus outside my bedroom window that nudges me around to where I am. My blanket is on the floor and the sheets and mattress cover are pulled from the mattress. Lifting my head from the pillow, wet with spit and sweat, I come to an elbow. Stretching out my hand, I watch it shake. My whole body is shaking. And the sores on my face are running wild. With trembling effort, I stumble to the kitchen for the good medicine, fearing that it will be gone. There. Thank God. On the counter near the medicine cabinet with no mirror sits the half gallon bottle of vodka.....still a third full. Ripping out the plastic jigger with a fork so that it will flow unimpeded, I grab it tight with both hands and turn it up. I do not count the gulps. It is like air. What difference does it make? Lowering the bottle after I have pulled enough to stay together, I look at the clock over the refrigerator and count almost 12 hours until darkness.

\*\*\*

Cool nights amplify the crunching sound of my steps on a ground covered with brilliantly colored and dying leaves. Impromptu detours off the roads and paths of my night walks are not as silent as before. Winter will quieten things down again soon. But my range will be limited by the drag of the snow. That's ok though, for there will be less sweat on my sores. Tonight, I am leaving the hollow. The changing dusk, like a lizard of morphing colors, fads to a grayish blue hue before offering up its darkest cover. I check the failing light just in time to see a wild turkey soar from one ridge, where it has fed, to another, where it will roost.

Reaching the river that drains all the hollows and their secret places, I hop from rock to rock out towards the smoother, quieter water. The large sandstone rocks slow the flow enough to kick up a little white froth. I use it as beacons for the traverse. Furthest out is where I like it best. Out there the rock is big and comfortable enough to spend time and not need to rush. When I get to my spot, camouflaged by the ways of the river, I look like a big wet spot on the tan colored rock to any shore side observer. Like Siddhartha, I wash my sores in the never-ending waters that flow around me. This medicine that has no beginning nor any end is my favorite--a life without accidents.....or accidents that are only life. Far beyond my rock, near the other shore, the loud slap of a beaver tail tells me that there are living things here. It is important to be among the living things.

Not like here where the beaver lives, there is so much death over there. I was sick of it after the accident. At least that is what they said when they decided that I better go on a medical discharge. Having me around didn't help when it came to explaining to the village chief how a young mother and her baby got incinerated by a white phosphorous grenade. Probably I was done and gone when that happened. And in my hurry the grenade must have slipped from my cartridge belt. The child found it, pulled the pin, and whoosh, crispy critters, one big black burnt mound of flesh lying by a little black burnt mound of flesh. I don't know for sure what happened, the fog of war and all, my memory is not so good. A terrible accident the others said. But the scabbed over burns on my face were hard to explain with desert mites, a terrible itch, and a vicious scratch. Best I get shipped back home to recover. A terrible accident.

I just wanted to see her up close, make a little visit. Babies are such idiots. They will drag around anything. A terrible accident.

My sores are not that bad this evening, a little drier than usual. The river is the best for me. Soon I will crack the ice and the beaver will no longer herald my arrival with a tail smack that sounds like a one gun salute--one gun is plenty to do the job. I know this for sure, but I don't need it. I am a modest man. And the new medicine from the VA takes less Vodka to work. I sleep some.....but only during the day. I must have the nights for my walks, my therapy. The VA shrink says that I am getting better. Maybe soon my sores will heal and I can get further out, mix it up a bit.



Y-27271

### *Ndaba Sibanda*

His work has been featured in several publications including The Piker Press, Bricolage, The Dying Goose, Whispering Prairie Press, Saraba Jim, Outside In Literary & Travel Magazine, The Metric, Unlikely Stories and Silver Birch Press.

### *Mabhonga*

The herder was always in trouble. It was agonising and disturbing to see him being at the receiving end of insults-- sometimes even kicks and blows.

Melusi was a peace-loving keeper of Mabhonga, our gigantic and energetic bull. We couldn't have asked for a better cowherd in the entire world. He loved his job.

Mabhonga had amazing strength, stamina and aggression. He was just too wild to spend a single night in the kraal and to graze with other family-owned cattle.

When Mabhonga fell in love and was on heat, he was unstoppable and insatiable. He was an aggressive, jealous and noisy lover, too. No bull dared to come close.

He loved and fought like crazy. Many a bull had lost a leg or had a scarred body because of Mabhonga's desirous and ferocious streaks. An infamous fellow.

Mabhonga would either leap over the kraal's log-loaded wall or rip it apart and invade a neighbour's field to feast on the maize plants or groundnuts.

The owners of such fields would vent out their ire on poor and helpless Melusi. Mabhonga fuelled rancour and commotion but I wondered why he wasn't sold.



### *Saloni Kaul*

Author and poet, was first published at the age of ten and has been in print since. As critic and columnist Saloni has enjoyed thirty-nine years of being published. Saloni Kaul's first volume, a fifty-poem collection was published in the USA in 2009. Subsequent volumes include Universal One and Essentials All.

Most recent Saloni Kaul poetic production has been published in Tipton Poetry Journal, Misty Mountain Review, Inwood Indiana, Mad Swirl , FIVE Poetry, The Voices Project, The Penwood Review, Mantid Magazine, Haikuniverse, Blue Pepper, Sentinel Literary Quarterly, Cabildo Quarterly, AJI Magazine, Scarlet Leaf Review, River Poets Journal, Belle Rêve Literary Journal, Taj Mahal Review, Verbal Art and Poetry Pacific. Upcoming publication acceptances include Military Experience And

The Arts Journal, Ink Sweat & Tears, Blueline, The Penwood Review and Scarlet Leaf Review.



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*Quicksilver*

*Skim*

Quicksilver skim tantivystyled the glaze;

Plenteous quaff, imbibe the lion's share!

Where quota's puny, avidly propel the thread,  
Like silly singsong, most enthusiastic  
Murmuring falderol foolish,

Each conversation quiddity to your realms

Like climbing heights unprecedented.

*Circumbendibus*

Plump as a pumpkin is this world  
So utterly round, so spherical,  
As tarns aglistening on mountain top.  
Broadribbed the paths that sleek segment the orb,  
Vast vain world is veined variedly,  
Aligned in longitudinal section,  
Orange, then rust, golden yellow,  
Downright ochre and bright orange,  
All sunset stratified hues in thick flame  
Dancing in upward leaps unrestrained  
Like twined feet in the entrechat,  
That wavy stratacumulus, striated,  
Soft cradled in coarse trailing vine-splash involucre  
Of colour, bursts of sensual textures  
Midst heartshaped leaves buckled at cusp,  
Old as antiquity, culled cultivated  
Prime offering, prize of the gourd order,  
High born of female flower, that flowering  
Develops into luscious fruit much in demand.

Thick thick the crust impenetrable almost --  
A hard hard knock it takes with utmost ease,  
Its air of total disconcert quite overpowering,

The knuckles of the knocker are rapped sore  
But it is unyielding as a locked firm door --  
Protective for growth till the ripening,  
Indubitably, an adytum fleet  
Facilitating neat maturity  
So like a fixed deposit / CD longest term,  
Abundant wholesome all the vegetable fruit's  
within,  
Most juicy succulent and textured variously,  
Strong stringy fibre at the very edge,  
All proud firm tissue as you penetrate,  
Useful right down to grainy seeds amalgam

At pulpy kernel centre.

A feast that's colourful prime flavour gripped  
And sheer flavoursome colour glazed  
Whatever use you choose to make of it.

A sure sign of autumn in its mellow  
Yellows and radiant rust orange,  
It's well before high Halloween that most

Initiatives, festivities commence.  
Pumpkin at the fringe, pumpkin at kernel,  
Pumpkin parties where it's celebrated  
As art by those enthused initiated.  
Pumpkin art mosaics, all laminated  
Distinctively as individual tiles,

Whole pumpkins decorated most ambitiously,  
Odd mannequins all stylishly self-styled,  
Embellished as a decoration high conferred,  
Quite the decorum of this great Gourd Order Day,  
All sporting that strong handsome look in line  
That true inspired shaped pumpkinlike gourd of  
many

A musical star instrument worldwide.  
Pumpkin events theoretical I can  
All somehow grapple with, my mind at ease,  
Sink my teeth into when called for.  
The pumpkin proletariat's all there!  
The farmers hand in hand with farmer's  
E'er so fair maiden courted gallantly,  
Some favouring the plumpest fleshy beauty,  
The others opting for the most astonishing  
In sheer dimension, at either end of that spectrum.  
I mean those pumpkin weighoffs, where each  
pumpkin's

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Most dearly prized as though it were life's elixir.  
And were it worth its weight in gold, hard cash or kind,  
As farmers young and old would will with all their might,  
We'd be into the pounds and pounds, but as it is  
Proportional slick representation  
All at its most acute, like at certain elections,  
Proud owners all tend to prodigiously produce  
From solemn seed to presentation day,  
Mightily overwhelmed as theirs reaches  
A hefty fifteen hundred pounds,  
To be hailed as the competition's luminary.

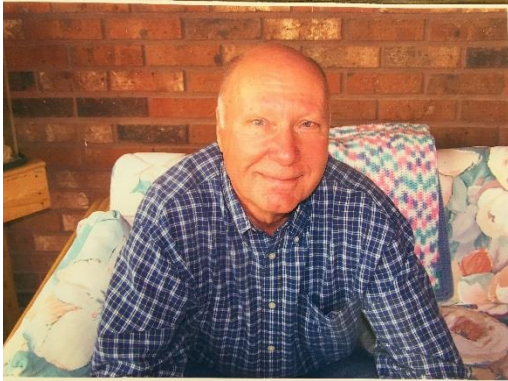
And if you think being a heavyweight champ's hard,  
When it comes to these pompous pumpkins dour/  
solid,  
The being lightweight is much harder still  
In territory where the smallest pumpkin contest  
Could equally readily be the season's challenge  
With tiny globesize tennis ball golf ball  
And even tinier dot globular pumpkins paraded  
Each minute specimen perfection pure personified  
As neonate (its size its raison d'être) rings  
With all the prime essential credentials,  
The lined entire massed composite clean,  
From alpha to omega that do qualify him clear  
As newest entrant in this resonating  
With rust-tinged rulership race.

Gaze at your own pumpkin till you glow bright like one.  
Flaunt flourish it before them till they are all eyes!  
Content yourself with thumbing your way through  
Astutely in a long term treasure hunt,  
A hunt for that odd golden pumpkin hunk  
Deft hidden midst the hundreds somewhere deep  
In this meandering green Avon River Valley.  
A golden gourd hard scavenger hunt planned  
Exclusively for children soon unfolds.  
All hurdles tough and hurdy gurdy worlds  
Involve them all in competition stiff!  
But say is any pumpkin treat complete  
Without those mandatory tastings and savourings?  
Like pumpkin jack o' lanterns at your entrance  
Or these first lady's pumpkin cutouts that do line  
Dramatically the capital's first drive,  
Pumpkin pies can wait until Halloween!  
There is a true true spread in store for me  
At this allwinning allpumpkin palooza,

A solemn feast as festive in display  
As the accompanying Pumpkin Colours  
Band's country music show.  
Plethora of treats lined up beckon us:  
The pumpkin ravioli handshaped,  
A pumpkin au gratin, pumpkin risotto,  
Thick hearty pumpkin soup traditional  
To go with warmest golden pumpkin breads.  
Peter Peter, that excellent Pumpkin Eater,  
Must certainly be there in the vicinity!  
It's hard telling exactly who he is  
In this world of the plump ubiquitous pumpkin  
(the number of people eating pumpkin  
today pumped up straight to its all time high),  
Where everyone ate but one thing, for everything  
In this world was made of pumpkin, but when  
A beautiful hollowed-out pumpkin shell  
Soon wafted by before us in right rustic ceremony  
And lo! a dazzling village belle in that pumpkin  
Waved long to all and sundry e'er so happily,  
We knew who she was, yes we did,  
And where she was kept, very well.

But browsers, shake your apathy off and get started!  
Above all, in starched bib and tucker smart,  
Set sail your pumpkin you've long laboured at.  
Float your pumpkin, transform it, steer it.  
It's versatility personified, isn't it?  
Or why else would it be thus versified!  
With you in it, a pumpkin boat sails  
Along the River Avon's picturesque arena  
Where pumpkin punt barge craft trawler yawl,  
Where pumpkins all set off like projectiles,  
One and then many hitched to their own stars,  
Pumpkin paddlers and cocky coxswain,  
The best of oarsmen in pairs or chain crews of four,  
Best single scullers, pluck in plenty, tucked-  
untucked,  
Having a go at it in swirling waters,  
Their oars plying away fast as they can muster,  
Watched by white clapboard houses all along the banks  
That saunter by as though part of some promenade.  
Pumpkin regattas' helmeted boys in pumpkins  
Brandish boldly both brawn and bravery;  
Combat the tides enthusiastically,  
Create a splash, win your approval  
And charm more than Cinderella who says,  
'Who needs a coach when I can have a pumpkin!'

*Madison Adams*



Born in Alabama. Attended Alabama College, which is now Montevallo University, but instead of finishing and getting degree gave in to youthful wanderlust. Did many jobs to support the traveling: microfilm camera operator; prescription eyeglass lens grinder with American Optical; order filler for Levi/Strauss in Amarillo, TX; production manager for cervical spine injury halo brace company in Jacksonville, FL; room inspector and renovator for Holiday Inn in Dothan, AL.

Began to write and make submissions to literary magazines while living and working in Jacksonville, FL. First acceptance and publication in The Colorado Quarterly. Subsequent publications: Grub Street, Rhino, Scree, Maelstrom Review, Minotaur, The Powhatan Review, Deep South Magazine, Falling Star Magazine, Scarlet Leaf Review.

*I Can See My Divorced Wife's Eyes  
In My Daughter's Face*

One convenience store 25 oz. cold can beer  
accompanied me home  
with the rumpled up colors of the sunset spreading out  
low across the distant end of the highway  
the whole drive back.  
It was really good to share moments  
of pure, all-out laughter with you again—  
maybe good and loud enough to linger  
distinctively as wind chime echoes  
of shared assurance ahead in both our lives,  
though mostly yours.  
I think I now believe maybe you will get back  
to wanting to live a double forever,  
the way you used to Tarzan it out so loud,  
zinging the closed curtains in my room  
brightly apart to get me up for school each morning.  
I, just like anyone else,  
can't actually know, though—  
basically fundamentally simply only you  
do—with me hoping all the way back home  
to Mom again about it.



*Jim White*

He can't spell, he has a hard time keeping names and places straight and organization is a challenge for him. But he loves to write and can tell a good story. After thirty years writing for the wrong reasons, he said good bye to a technical writing career in Silicon Valley and started writing for himself. He's never turned back.

*On a river bank near Warsaw*

*(Continued)*

## Chapter 2

Clapton

I should have listened to Theo.

In three months, I was transformed from a shrimp into a soldier. Basic Training and Advanced Infantry Training happened while I waited in endless lines and adjusted to a physically demanding, communal life-style where my most private affairs were the subject of endless banter. But at least I wasn't alone. My fears were shared by men, not boys, who slept and ate and laughed and cried next to me, all of them just as afraid as I was.

When our company marched across the parade grounds on graduation day, I became Private Zewiski. I was still short and skinny, my wavy blond hair was nothing more than a buzz cut and my big Polish nose was just as big, but now I was a proud member of the United States Army. I looked to my left as we passed our commander in review and smiled as he saluted us. I was part of a dedicated team, all of us trained and prepared for war.

Or so I thought.

The enlistment officer at Allentown assured me the Army was gonna liberate Poland just as soon as we landed in war-torn Europe. I listened to his serious words and nodded enthusiastically while I signed my enlistment papers. Mama would be so proud if she saw me.

Instead of being proud, Mama pleaded with me to come home. Papa never wrote anything. My brothers scorned me for getting them into trouble. Except for Rosie, I didn't waste my time writing back.

We didn't get a Christmas leave because of Pearl Harbor. All I got was a Christmas card from Mama, and Rosie sent me a picture. The excitement that got me through training had worn off while marching in the miserable piney hills of Fort Benning. Some guys who lived close to the post got overnight passes. The rest of us had to stick it out in the barracks. The cooks made us a Christmas dinner and we toasted the new year with an endless supply of 3.2 beer at the enlisted men's club, but I was still in cold, wet Georgia.

We all cheered when our orders finally came through, but when we got off the boat in Africa instead of Europe, that's when I realized Theo had been right all along. Instead of liberating towns and villages, treated like heroes, we baked in a desert sun and huddled behind sand dunes. Our generals fretted and argued while us guys on the ground got whipped by General Rommel and his elite Afrika Korps. Things weren't working out like I figured.

I wasn't a bad soldier. I stayed on with the First Infantry Division, the Big Red One we called it, all through that African shit-hole called Tunisia and on to Sicily.

But after Sicily, when the Army reneged on its promise a second time, I deserted. That's right, the red-blooded, all-American GI who had enlisted on the day Pearl Harbor was attacked abandoned his post while on guard duty.

Desertion is a serious offense, especially in wartime, and I knew the consequences when I turned my back on my buddies and hid under a blanket in the back seat of a beat-up Vauxhall sedan. Certain death was the consequence. I saw it done one afternoon on the road to Monte Basilio.

We got a brief respite to take a dump and open a can of C-rations. While we ate and kvetched, they'd trussed the poor bastard and stood him in front of a firing squad. Six volunteers. Some non-com read the orders. No blindfold, no drum roll, no last cigarette; just Ready, Aim, End of story. In the name of efficiency, the Army had taken away all the romance from its executions.

But I had good reasons for deserting and I'm proud to say I made it to Poland on my own, which was more than the Army ever did for me. Unfortunately, my circumstances when I got there were not favorable. I was on the run, hiding in a bramble on the outskirts of Warsaw with a squad of Nazis sniffing up my rear.

That's where Jakub found me. It was springtime, April, 1944.

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Word was after Sicily we would proceed to France, then head East and liberate the Polish people, my people, from the Nazi extermination machine before the Ruski's packed off whoever was left to Siberia.

And I was good for that. The reason I got into this rotten war was to help my Polish cousins fight the Nazis. I had promised my mother and even though she hated me for enlisting, I wasn't going to waltz on my promise. I forgave the Army for that wild goose chase through Africa and Sicily and made ready to achieve my destiny.

Patton told us we'd be in France by November, then he left the outfit, fucking weasel.

Next thing I knew we were packed on a freighter and heading for England, of all places. Why England? We weren't even at war with England!

My buddies were all smiles. "British pussy!" they all cheered while we churned our way up the Atlantic. "Fucking coward, frigid Limeys," I said back, while Nazi occupied France disappeared over the horizon, off our right side.

When we reached England, my bad attitude was reinforced by fog, rain and mushy peas. Sunny Sicily seemed like paradise in hindsight, despite the bullets.

We were bivouacked on a beach in Dover, south England, playing beach landing games with the Brits. Training they called it. The training wasn't going to happen for weeks, so in between guard duty and close-order drill on a rocky beach, I spent my furloughs gagging down warm fucking beer in a nowhere town called Slapton, half mile from our encampment. Clapton, as those of us from first Platoon, Company B called it. After a few pints, I usually spent my evenings airing my grievances to an uncaring public about being cheated out of Poland.

\* \* \*

I was well into my Poland rant one night when a guy asked if he could take the empty seat next to me.

I gave him a careless, permissive nod. I could tell he was a Polack. Big ears, fat nose, blond with a stupid, toothy grin.

"You from the old country?" he says when I took a gulp of my beer. He was wearing civvies.

"And what the fuck do you care if I am?" I replied. I was mildly insulted, somebody calls me out about my ancestry, but I decided to be cool about it.

"No offense. You're talking about Poland. Just wondered."

I looked past him, at uniforms plus a few low-slung frocks, packed shoulder to shoulder in the smoky bar. They were playing Glenn Miller. Everybody was close, but nobody looked at each other. Clapton was a nothing, pissant hole, but these days, with us Americans around, it was buzzing with spies, pimps, informants, whores, pick-pockets, you name it, all trying to figure out what we were doing there and how they could profit from it. We were warned not to fraternize with strangers.

I set my pint glass on the bar and took a long drag on my Brit cigarette. It was an adjustment, but I had switched to Players to fit in. "I'm of Polish extraction, what of it?"

"Thought so." He held out his beefy hand. "Kurkowski. Peter Kurkowski, pleased to—"

I gripped my pint and shook my head. The acrid Players smoke stung my eyes. Things were going way too fast.

"I'll have a Flowers," he said to the barkeep. He dropped his hand as if nothing had happened. "What are you having?"

Normally, pimps and queers don't matter much to me. To each his own, I say. But to tie my homeland with a homo come-on was below the belt. I gave him my slow, side-long glance coupled with a resounding sneer. "I'm not having shit, if that's what you're asking."

A little color ran up Kurkowski's neck. "You think I'm propositioning you?"

I didn't dignify his remark with an answer.

"Please, don't be offended." He kept on talking. "It was your accent. Reminded me of home. Pojąć?"

I took a long gulp and emptied my pint, Kurkowski's Polish ringing in my ears. The barkeep looked at me and I shook my head. "Nice talkin' to ya, Kurkowski," I said as I got off my stool and lay a crown on the bar.

Two grunts hustled each other to take my seat.

In the ensuing scuffle, Kurkowski reached over, lightening fast, and stuck a small piece of paper in my breast pocket. "Likewise, I'm sure," he said.

\* \* \*

Against my better judgment, I met up with Kurkowski four days later.

He had written my name on his piece of paper and said he had news about my Mother's family, Nowicki, in Poland. In tiny, perfect hand writing, he also said he would stop by the Saint James Church every evening at seven pm. That got me curious. No homo would go to that much trouble. I decided I needed to find out how and why he knew my name and the name of my Aunt. Enough to hazard being accused of having a deviant encounter with a civilian. Such an offense was not quite as bad as desertion, but damn close.

I'd gone by the church a few times to get the layout. It was a crumbling ruin with no discernible features except a front door and a graveyard. When I rattled the door knob, a large, black rat scurried across the threshold and into the yard. I took that as an omen.

It had rained all day and the ever-present fog and smell of coal-burning blanketed Clapton. After making appearances at the bar, I made my excuses and stumbled out.

I was so paranoid somebody would recognize me I changed clothes. On my way to the church, I ditched my uniform in

a warehouse and got into some slacks and a dress shirt. I added a fedora and a pair of fake glasses to complete the disguise.

My wet civilian clothes stuck to me while I struggled to change, hopping on one foot, grabbing a hand-hold in the dark and nearly toppling over crates of empty bottles.

Cold and uncomfortable, I made my way along the town's only paved street, avoiding the few streetlights and keeping a sharp eye out for MPs. A reprimand kept running through my head, "Halt, soldier, what the fuck you doin'?"

"Private Zewiski."

It was his voice, but it came from nowhere. I stared into the shadows that shrouded the church door when I felt a tap on my shoulder.

"It's me, Peter."

I turned around and he pulled a hood back from his face. It was him all right, with the same toothy grin.

I had a speech and a set of demands all ready, but before I could get a word out he shook his head and put his palm in front of my face. He didn't waste time with small talk.

"Your Aunt Elzbieta is alive, but barely, living in a Warsaw apartment."

I stared back at him, bewildered, my speech forgotten. "How do you know -?"

"She's ill and her two children are being taken care of by a neighbor. I regret to report your Uncle died some months ago. Heart attack. Complications from multiple gun shot wounds. He was a brave man."

He paused, listening. Poised, ready to fight or flee, like a cat.

I looked around and saw nothing. "Why are you telling me this?"

Kurkowski trained his eyes back on me. "I'm associated with a Polish resistance cell. We're recruiting volunteers."

I could barely hear him. "Volunteers?" I whispered. "Did you say volunteers?"

He nodded. "Based on our information that you, John Zewiski, have close family relations with residents in Warsaw."

"Volunteers for what?"

Kurkowski's smile evaporated. His blue eyes gleamed in the pale light. "Warsaw is being systemically destroyed, block by block, and its inhabitants massacred. The Nazis have killed all the Jews and now they plan to level the city. Those of us that can are undertaking a resistance, but we need help. Your help."

"But me myself? What can I do? I was supposed to be there with the Army."

A movement, a rustling sound came from somewhere. "Next time eight pm," Kurkowski whispered as he pulled his hood back over his head. He turned and disappeared into the shadows that covered the grave yard.

"Is there someone out there?" A voice came from the church door. "Can I be of any assistance?" The door opened and a shaft of light stretched across the grounds. A figure in a cape stopped at the threshold and shined a flashlight.

"Damn." My heart beating hard against my chest, I turned and sprinted up the gravel path back to the road. I didn't stop or turn around until I squeezed myself into the crowded bar. The fedora and glasses I tossed in a trash bin next to the bar's door. I lost track of where my uniform was.

Civvies weren't allowed off-post, but it was a minor infraction. I figured if I was collared, I could get away with it by acting like I was embarrassed about a date with a local lass that went bad.

I stood at the bar, head down, nursing my pint. My mind spun in a thousand different directions. Aunt Elzbieta and Uncle Bazyli, now deceased. Should I write to Mother? My two nieces, helpless children caught in a raging war of annihilation. How did Kurkowski know these family details? It was too weird to believe, but what if it's true? My own flesh and blood, huddled in some bombed-out building, waiting to be the next victims. I still didn't know how or why he knew my name and the name of my Aunt. Should I take the chance to meet Kurkowski again? Was I being drawn into some sinister subterfuge?

"Zewiski." A heavy hand slammed down on my shoulder. I nearly spat out my mouthful of beer. Sputtering, I turned around and stared into the boozy, beet-red face of my sergeant.

"No civvies off post. You know the rules." Sergeant Sturgis weaved, but held steady, thanks to my shoulder. He looked me up and down. "Article fifteen offense. Wartime. No exceptions."

"Sarge," I whined. My trousers and shirt were still wet, I noticed I got the buttons wrong on my shirt and it was half untucked. Conversations around us lowered an octave. "She wanted me to meet her folks. All nice-like, ya know? What was I supposed to do?"

"You're supposed to wear your uniform." Sturgis gave me a wicked smile. "Changed your tune about them cow-eyed Limeys huh?" He looked at his buddy, another sergeant from A Company.

"Bust 'im," the asshole said. He leered at me. "Fer wearing civvies and for not knowing how to wear 'em. You look like a slob, Zewiski."

Sturgis rolled his eyes. "I don't want to have to fuck with the paperwork, Zewiski. Training maneuvers start tomorrow, five am. All passes are canceled. I'm putting you on guard duty for the next two weeks straight. Report to the duty officer tomorrow, eighteen-hundred hours. Got that?"

I nodded. Instead of responding, questions, strategies, contingencies swirled behind my eyes.

"Say it." Sturgis stuck his big mug straight into my face, his beer breath stinging my eyes. "Say it so's I can hear it."

Like a good soldier, I got off my stool, stood up straight, shoulders back. "Yes Sergeant!" I replied.

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\* \* \*

I needed answers, but I didn't want to wind up staring down the barrels of six standard issue, thirty-caliber M-1 rifles. Problem was, the answers lay a half-mile from my location. How do I get there without arousing suspicion? Kurkowski, said he'd show up at the church at eight o'clock every night, but for how long? Fucking with the duty officer was a dangerous gambit, but I had a few tools I could use to facilitate a brief disappearance. Bribery was always effective, so was intimidation, plus I had a few personal leverage points I could lay on certain individuals. I weighed each option carefully while I walked back to my tent.

"Psssst, Zewiski." Behind the familiar voice, an object arched over the perimeter fence and landed a few feet in front of me. When it landed with a clang, footsteps crunched across the rocky shoreline and faded into the night.

I walked over the object and looked around. I didn't see nobody so I scooped it up in one smooth motion and stuffed it inside my tunic. A metal tin. No bigger than a pack of cigarettes.

Aunt in serious danger. Volunteers departing in one week. Leave yes/no answer. Nothing more. I wait for your reply at this place.

I studied the handwriting and compared it with the paper he gave me. It was him all right. Volunteers? So I'm not the only one? Serious danger now? What does that mean?

Yes,no,yes,no,yes,no. Such a simple answer. With so much at stake either way.

I was tempted to throw the box away. It was starting to sound too cloak and dagger to be serious, yet he knew my family's names. I couldn't explain that away. One way or another, I needed to find out.

The first few days of training maneuvers had gone miserably well. We spent our time riding LSTs in and out of the waves, marching through loose gravel with a full pack and getting soaked. After that, I would take a ride back to camp, change and march guard duty for four more hours.

Then everything went to hell. We were told to be ready for a live fire exercise. Big deal, but some idiots got the disembarkation times wrong and, while we slogged through the waves, what was supposed to be a training exercise with bullets over our heads turned into a carnage. People were getting shot all around us. We spent the rest of the day pulling wounded and dead men off the beach. And, because we were shorthanded, I had to do double shifts of guard duty.

After my second shift, I stumbled into my rack completely worn out, physically and emotionally. All I could think about were the poor bastards I dragged off the beach and my family being slaughtered in Warsaw. How could I come home if Mother found out her sister and children were all dead?

"Where were you, Johnny?" I could hear her say it. "You left me to save them."

The next day, as if things couldn't get worse, German submarines attacked our LSTs during another exercise. They tore up and sunk a bunch of them, leaving hundreds more men screaming and dying in the flaming water. Our camp turned into a morgue.

And to top it off, the officers ordered us to keep the screw-up a secret. No apologies, no memorial services, no chaplains, no nothing. Morale in the camp sunk to an all-time low.

While on another double-shift of guard duty, I wrote 'yes' on a scrap of paper, stuffed it in Kurkowski's box and threw it over the fence where I had found it. I was too exhausted to care anymore and what did I have to lose? A 'Yes' answer kept my options open and I could refuse once the time came.

Guard duty turned into a walking nightmare filled with visions of the cold, dead faces of men I had been drinking with just a week ago. Staggering down the fence line, I struggled to keep awake when a red signal flare zoomed skyward and burst into a cone of sparkling stars. It came from the direction of the shoreline. Immediately, shouts echoed across the compound and searchlights swept the beach. A siren wailed.

Guards were supposed to keep to their posts in the event of an incident and I stood still, rifle at ready, waiting for my eyes to adjust after watching the flare and looking for movement in the pitch-black void on the other side of the fence line. The hair on the back of my neck stood up and my exhaustion was temporarily replaced by adrenaline.

"Psssst, Zewiski."

The fence jerked back and forth once, twice.

"Halt!" I shouted. I took aim at the fence. "Who goes --"

"Shush!" Came the reply.

A weak beam of light illuminated a hole in the fence at ground level. A pair of hands held the cut fence open. "Through here. Quick."

With all the hubbub going on, I had forgotten about the tin and the message and Kurkowski and Warsaw. I wasn't prepared to make a decision. "I don't know, Kurkowski." I bent over so I could hear better, looking for his face. "I could get into trouble..." When our eyes met, my anger and frustration took over. Those fucking generals. All those men dead. My Aunt sick and her children helpless...

The adrenaline was wearing off. The camp was on high alert. Everybody was keyed up. I could feel it. People all excited and doin' stuff they wouldn't ordinarily do. It was now or never.

Kurkowski reached through the hole and grabbed my arm. I didn't resist.

"We're just over the hill here, crouch down." Kurkowski half pushed, half carried me across the gravel and over the berm that separated our encampment from the only road in town. The search lights swept the shoreline, but didn't reach us. People were dodging up and down the road. Parked on the shoulder, a dark sedan sat, headlights off, motor running.

The rear door opened and Kurkowski pushed me in. I landed spread-eagled on the back seat and a blanket settled over me as the car lurched into gear and moved onto the road. It was warm and cozy.

\* \* \*

**TO BE CONTINUED**



*Noah Leventhal*

He is a recent graduate of the classics program at St. John's College in Santa Fe, New Mexico. He has been published in Mad Crab Journal and has work upcoming in Writers Resist and Rogue Agent. He participated in the summer poetry program at the Iowa Writer's Workshop in 2016 and will attend a week-long poetry program at the Kenyon Review in the summer of 2017. Noah spends much of his time reading. In his mind, the best writers are also the best readers, not only of poems, essays or fiction, but of their audience. Great writing is a conversation.

*Memory*

Grandma used to say  
very little. Her armchair  
speaks, I remember.

Dementia is not beautiful,  
it is a cold dream, self-contained  
like the twist of a nautilus.

Two women I cannot really know  
now do not know themselves.

What happens to the soul  
when the brain is as gnarled  
as a crabapple tree in the winter?

The fork in your hand is a metaphor  
for the things you have lost  
and still possess. Ask for it again:  
let the words echo like you remember them.



*Laboni Saif*

She lives in Dhaka, Bangladesh. She has completed graduation on English Literature. She loves poetry and books and sometimes writes poems and articles . In leisure, she likes to read books and spend lovely time with her family. Her poems have been published in Tuck magazine, Inventive magazine, and in an anthology. Her articles have been published in Tuck magazine and Women Chapter English.



*Love a Lonely Heart*

\*\*\*\*\*

A heart, inside of big one,  
A heart, smaller than poppy seed,  
A heart, lonely at midnight,  
A heart, seek refuge in another heart,  
A heart, only need true love,  
To place its head,  
To shed some tears,  
To forget all miseries---  
If you want to love,  
Love such a lonely heart,  
Don't fall for the debonair look,

Or for opulence,  
Such a heart will love you evermore,  
In lieu of no return.

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*Melancholic Twilight*

\*\*\*\*\*

Its twilight  
Sitting over this altitude  
On rooftop  
watching clouds moving fast  
Some kites of different colours  
pink, green, blue, yellow  
gliding upon winds  
sometimes going out of sight  
One or birds flying between  
The crimson sun is preparing  
To declare day's end  
some pieces of clouds, different shape moving  
before it  
Sometimes make a black line in the middle  
like a red ball somebody teared up  
and made it separate by two part  
In this twilight  
Serenity pervades around  
Solitary self is satisfied  
thinking about life  
Everything seems good and jake  
Life is running well

No sorrow nowhere to be seen

Gentle winds leaves soft kisses on my cheek  
Running its finger through my hair  
like the passionate lover  
Feel like a young girl  
flying up in the air  
I look up to see the clouds moving  
Making a centre in the middle  
In the centre, a void , eyes can guess Unable to fathom  
what is inside  
Like an emptiness they are hiding  
The way we hide some memory of past within  
We make a void inside of heart  
Suddenly, I feel like some memory of my past  
Is peeping through the clouds's void  
Some faces I have lost in the busy race of life  
Some faces that once meant everything, suddenly lost  
Why some people never take a perfect goodbye  
Why we cannot forget some faces  
A question I will search the answer throughout my life  
In this twilight  
Melancholy is engulfing my solitude  
Density of darkness is thickening around.  
Clouds are lost beneath the night  
I am lost beneath memories.



## Michael Marrotti

He is an author from Pittsburgh with a chemical imbalance and lack of patience. He's also a faithful volunteer at the Light Of Life Rescue Mission going on three years now, he believes in action. You can purchase his chapbook here:

<https://www.amazon.com/F-D-Approved-Poetry-Michael-Marrotti/dp/153907577X> and if you need to reach him: [michaelmarrotti@gmail.com](mailto:michaelmarrotti@gmail.com)

### *The Small Press Conference*

Sonia and I pulled up to the shabby duplex around 9:00 pm. The location was on a narrow road with no sidewalks in the working class suburb of Castle Shannon, also known as Andy Warhol's old neighborhood. We parked in the driveway, making sure to lock up her Ford Escape.

I immediately took notice of the "Black Lives Matter" sign posted conveniently in front of the window. Already I was shaking my head in dismay. Here's another example of words instead of action.

We held hands as we climbed up the stairs. Sonia had on a black dress, no panties. I however looked like a gang member, with my black shorts, wife beater, blue bandana and formidable tattoos all over my upper body.

I had Sonia do the knocking. Some so-called poet answered the door who looked awfully familiar. This sexually oppressed bastard was drooling at first sight. The perfection of my girlfriend's body is in fact, a work of art. He was quick to let us in, then came the interrogation.

"Hey, I'm Ken. So who are you guys, who invited you?"

I was thinking how all this hard work, and significant writing in the small press throughout the years has amounted to nothing. I'm still a nobody.

"I'm Mario, and this my girlfriend Sonia. I received an invite from Jeremy, king of the small press."

He began playing with his hipster beard, lost in thought. After a few seconds he said, "Sorry, but that doesn't ring a bell."

I was beginning to lose my patience, plus, I had forgotten to take my afternoon medication. Volatility was in the air.

My hands began to shake, so I wrapped my arm around Sonia, grabbing her ass like it was Xanax. She jumped, slightly, and said to the interrogator,

"I don't who the fuck you think you are, but you better give my Mario the dignity he deserves. I read all the small press literary magazines. It's a rarity for Mario's poetry not to be inked up all over the pages. I demand to speak to Jeremy, now!"

Ken, the poet who writes from the depths of his vagina, as I recalled was taken aback by Sonia's onslaught. He began to

nervously play with his beard, mumbling words as his face turned red. That's when I told him,

"Dude, I wasn't going to say anything before, but now since you've gone out of your way to bust my balls I'm gonna say it. You write like a fucking woman. I don't know how you take such feminine lines out of your vagina, and incorporate them into poetry, but for fuck sake, man, how many fingers does it take?"

He started to stutter, tears swelling up in his eyes, as he dug his shaky hands inside his pockets.

Sonia with a smile on her face said, "That must be some vagina you have there Kenny."

A smirk appeared on my face. Before I could continue speaking with the candor all other alleged poets never had, he took off to the back of the house, whimpering. Next thing I know Jeremy, king of the small press came over to greet us with open arms.

Finally, we could get this pretentious party started.

I held Sonia close as we made our rounds throughout the two bedroom house of bad writing. Everywhere I turned, there was a poet reciting his lousy poetry. It felt like the closest thing to purgatory.

Reading this garbage that miraculously appeared in the same magazines as mine is one thing, I could always turn the page. But here in this fucking house, it's forced upon you like some sick sadist getting his kicks. It was a mutual feelings between Sonia and I. She whispered in my ear,

"Kill me now, and get it over with."

I told her not until a final fuck, as I grabbed her by the hips, and directed her towards the stairs.

Two poets were in our way reading their poetry back and forth, giving each other high-fives. I told those charlatans, "Get out the way or be pissed on! You're prohibiting our path!"

They apologized, then made their way down the stairs with their heads down. Some poets are as fragile as young insecure girls. Pitiful.

I turned the slimy doorknob, and pushed Sonia inside the bathroom. Gross, I thought. One of these lonely poets

probably jerked off a few minutes ago before we made our entry.

I looked around, there it was, right on the sink: a universal size bottle of hand lotion. This bachelor pad had no secrets left to keep.

Sonia grabbed for my cock, as she stuck her moist tongue down my throat.

I had my hands on her tight little ass, moving them up the sexy curves of her back, and with it the dress that was getting in the way. I grabbed her by the hair once the dress was removed, and bent her over the sink.

Sonia at that point said, "This place is disgusting, there's dental floss particles all over the mirror." I apologized for putting her through this demeaning headache of fame by inserting my poetic penis inside her passionate vagina, no condom.

We were making a ruckus. Masculine hygiene products were falling off shelves. Sonia was screaming out like I was fucking her with a knife. It was the best sex we've had in a week. Having an orgasm was a different story. All the lonely male poets congregated upstairs next to the bathroom, reciting their awful poetry. I heard a high-five every other time I smacked her delectable ass. When I finally did bust a nut, I screamed out in ecstasy.

That only elevated the volume of poetry being recited outside the door. These desperate poets were not only creepy and pathetic, but also insistent! My orgasm was all over the place. We left it there like it was someone else's problem.

The minute we walked out of the bathroom we were bombarded by poets giving out their credentials, asking us if we'd like to hear one of their poems.

Now all a sudden I'm popular. Sonia was rolling her eyes when I told those creepy bastards to fuck off. We made our way to the kitchen after that, in search of bourbon.

Jeremy, king of the small press was pouring drinks upon our arrival. He spotted Sonia and said, "You looking for this?"

Sonia took the bottle out of his hands saying, "Yeah, thanks," as she walked back towards me.

We both took giant gulps like it was the antidote to a dismal party neither one of us wanted to attend. Jeremy began to recite his poetry to us. The apathetic look on my face did nothing to deter him. Sonia called him a sadist. We attempted to leave the room in a hurry.

Jeremy grabbed my arm before we could make our escape and said, "Mario, I really dig your poetry, man. It's hard hitting, you never pull a punch."

I told him, "Thanks. Yeah nobody else has the balls to do it. All the shit getting published anymore is benign poetry. It's like they're writing it with a condom over a pen. I don't get it, man. Most of it is just mundane thoughts orchestrated into a few stanzas, then labeled as art. These assholes are destroying the art form."

"I know what you mean," replied Jeremy, king of the small press.

If he knew what I meant, then why is he doing the exact thing I'm condemning? People are so full of shit. Poets are not excluded.

Sonia was grabbing me by the other arm saying, "Come on, Mario. Let's find a quiet place to drink this."

I poked my head through the doorway, at the repulsive sight, of all these emotional men who were incapable of not showing off how legendary they thought their writing was. I

began to laugh. This may have been the most ridiculous thing I've ever involved myself in.

Jeremy still had a grip on my arm. He told me to meet him upstairs in a few minutes. The entire small press scene (all twenty-five of us) were going to smoke some primo DMT, then take turns reciting our so-called best poetry to date. I nodded my head in unison with the migraine that was kicking in, then made my way through the house with Sonia.

Once we entered the living room, (I thought it was a miracle) people actually stopped reciting poetry. Instead they flocked to us.

Yet again, it was credential time. We had to sit through several poets telling us how many times they've been published, and where at, exactly.

When it was my turn to speak they looked puzzled. Everyone of these fucking bastards said they've never heard of me. I took the bottle off Sonia and drank about a pint in three gulps. Words like discouraged and disenchanting weren't strong enough adjectives to express the way I felt in that particular moment. My trump card was, and still is, my hot ass girlfriend. I wouldn't doubt the possibility of these alleged wordsmiths jerking off to the memory of her.

After the blow to my ego, we went out to the backyard, taking turns on the bottle. Only two poets were out there exchanging poetic feelings. It was turning out to be a night of bad writing, back scratching and colossal disappointment. At least on my end.

Sonia said, "For fuck sake, Mario, these are your people? You're a part of this?"

I was nervously scratching my head, saying "I had no idea it was going to turn out like this. An old wino once told me to never judge someone by their Facebook profile."

Sonia turned around towards the noisy poets and said, "We came out here to be away from the poetry. Could you keep it down?"

The skinny poet with a '90s style ponytail fired back, "What, don't you like my writing? This is one of my best poems, ever! I've been voted best of the net! What do you do?"

I casually walked over, snatched the piece of paper from his hands, and proceeded to rip it up into small pieces.

He screamed out, "What the fuck are you doing man? Stop! I made that poem, me! I did that!"

I tossed all the pieces on the ground, rolled my eyes, and said "Bullshit writing like that is the reason why more people have knitted a basket in the past decade, than read a piece of poetry. Those sycophants on Facebook deceived you."

Tears were falling from his eyes like bombs over Dresden. I didn't feel the least bit sorry. I felt righteous.

"Who the fuck are you, asshole?" screamed the talentless poet.

"I'm Mario!" I told him. "My poetry has propagated the small press like chlamydia in Beechview."

"I've read your shit before, man!" said the grown man with tears running down his face. "You're nothing but a disgruntled pervert! That's what we all call you in the small press scene, asshole! Nobody likes your fucking writing! Nobody!"

Sonia stuck her hand down my pants and said, "He's the best writer alive, you little shit. That's why he gets all this good pussy."

"Fuck this shit!" screamed the man who was an emotional wreck. "I'm telling Jeremy, king of the small press about your asshole tactics!"

"Yeah, go ahead and run off," I said, "before I catch another felony!"

The other poet tagged along with him, sniffing the entire time, going out of his way to suppress his tears. We were finally alone, but already out of time. I looked up when the bedroom light switched on, and remembered the DMT party that was going to take place within mere minutes. It was a new life experience neither one of us wanted to miss out on.

We made it to the bedroom in the nick of time. Jeremy gave us an introduction. Obviously, we needed it.

"Poets of the small press, I'd like to thank you for showing up to this special event. First off, for those of you who are not acquainted with our two guests right here, allow me to make an introduction.

"This man before you is Mario. His work is prevalent in our scene. If you haven't read the man's work yet, do yourself a favor by checking him out. The lovely lady next to him is his girlfriend, Sonia.

"Please, both of you have a seat in our circle so I can continue the monologue. But before I do, I'd like Adam to take the first hit of DMT, then pass it around counterclockwise."

I'll never forget the pungent smell of that world altering drug. It was a smell hard to describe, but as distinct as crack. You'd know it if you've smelled it.

"Poets," said Jeremy, "we have the power to change the world through our writing, for the betterment of mankind. Reformation is within our grasp. Anything is possible through the power of poetry!"

Both Sonia and I began to laugh profusely. We haven't even had a chance yet to try the DMT. All the stink eyes were on us, and we couldn't care less.

Rhetoric at the end of the day is merely talk. We know the only thing cheaper than talk is poetry. No need for delusions.

The monologue, just like the poetry, would not let up. I tried my hardest to get a Manic Mike & The Mood Stabilizers song playing inside my head. Actually anything besides the horse shit that was cascading out of Jeremy's mouth would've sufficed at that point.

This asshole should've been institutionalized for his delusional train of thought. Judging by the mesmerized looks upon the rest of the crowd though, I believe it's safe to say they disagreed with my notion.

The pipe came around to Sonia who took three huge hits instead of one. It must be the tits, man. Nobody said a word about it.

She passed me the pipe. I followed her bad example. Fuck, it tasted like expired resin. Nobody spoke out against my inability to follow the rules either.

I remember the entire room turning into a living, breathing cartoon. It was like the part of the acid trip where you peak, only a hundred times stronger. I was really enjoying myself for a minute until the poetry started up again.

My peaceful hallucinations crossed over to the dark side. The room turned red, I was at the beginning stages of a freak out. Red rum, I thought. Red rum. My DMT trip had turned into a Stephen King movie.

Sonia grabbed my arm, full-force, digging her manicured nails into my flesh, tearing the skin. The desperation in her eyes screamed, "HELP!"

We ran out of that red room, trembling like toddlers who just watched Child's Play for the first time.

Sonia screamed out, "Those are not your people, Mario. They're evil, deviants of the small press with big sinister ideas! They must be stopped!"

Her pupils were bigger than the moon. Her words were devastating to my soul. I was already freaked out by the intensity of this drug. Add a night of bad writing into the mix, and there's no turning back.

"Something has to be done, Mario! They'll destroy Pittsburgh, if not, the entire world!"

When she wasn't freaking out all I heard in my head was "RED RUM! RED RUM!"

I grabbed her by the shoulders and said the words, "I DON'T WANT TO DIE!"

She reached inside her purse, digging around until she found a bottle of mace.

"What the fuck are you planning on doing with that?" I asked as my DMT trip continued to make a turn for the worst. The hallway was now breathing like an exhausted marathon runner. Claustrophobia was setting in. Thoughts of Xanax flooded my mind, but my mother's medicine cabinet was zip codes away.

"Heal the world by destroying the mediocrity that plagues it!" proclaimed Sonia.

She boldly approached the door, as I stayed put like a coward, unable to progress, praying for the first time in years to a God that let us eat whatever the fuck we wanted.

The poetic words from inside, if you want to call them that, quickly turned to screams of death as she emptied the tiny bottle of mace in the small bedroom, occupied by poets of the small press.

After that she took me by my hand, leading me through the house of pretentious poets, towards the driveway where her Ford Escape was parked. We drove off like survivors, watching the trails of city lights, not saying a single word.

I put on the Sinatra album instead, letting old blue eyes break the silence as he sang the song, *Softly As I Leave You*.

*Geoffrey Craig*



**Geoffrey Craig's** fiction, poetry and drama have appeared in numerous literary journals, including the New Plains Review, Calliope, Foliate Oak, Spring - the Journal of the E.E. Cummings Society, The MacGuffin, The Louisville Review, River Poets Journal and Scarlet Leaf Review. He has received two Pushcart Prize nominations.

In January 2016, Prolific Press published his novel, Scudder's Gorge. Previously, Wilderness House Literary Review had serialized both his verse novel, The Brave Maiden, and his novella, Snow.

Four of his full-length plays (one co-authored) and ten of his one-acts have been produced. He has directed productions of eight of his plays.

Geoffrey has a BA (Colgate), an MBA (Harvard) and an MA in history (Santa Clara). He served in the Peace Corps in Peru and had a successful career in banking before turning to writing.

*A Slap in the Face*

Brandon thinks he's pretty damn smart, but I'm not so easy to fool. When a black man's been to prison, wears smart clothes, drives a BMW and has a beautiful blonde hanging on his arm, it don't take Einstein to figure out he's in the business. I was outraged when I determined that Jorell, Brandon's cousin, dealt drugs and had involved my son. For me, dealing was a moral issue, taking advantage of peoples' weaknesses, knowing they'd get hooked. I think differently now. Is selling crack to grown men and women any different than selling them liquor or cigarettes or, for that matter, prescription pain killers they don't necessarily need and that gets 'em hooked on worse shit than crack? I know, from old friends who live in the city, that Brandon never sells to minors. Won't hear of it. No way in hell. For that matter, I don't believe any of Jorell's people hang around schools or any of that shit. The way I see it, Brandon might just as well be an executive for Seagram's or Bacardi or one of them other big liquor companies. He is, after all, Jorell's number two now. He and Jorell set the rules and nobody better go around 'em. Not if they value ... their employment. What does worry me is the risk. No Bacardi vice-president is going to jail for selling Grey Goose. I'm scared stiff Brandon will get sent back to jail or, worse, get killed in a turf war. Last I heard, Seagram's and Bacardi executives don't take potshots at each other, leastways not with handguns or assault rifles. So apart from worrying, I'm okay with how Brandon makes a living and supports his family, not that I'm going to tell him that anytime soon. I certainly appreciate the money he sends. I work as a medical assistant, and the pay sucks. I sometimes think about going back to school to become a nurse. I'm smart enough, but who has the time. Carrie, my youngest, lives with me. Works as a waitress in a nothing-out-of-the-ordinary bar and grill and, if you can believe it, makes not much more than me. Her daughter's doing well in school. We send her to summer dance camp 'cause she's crazy about dancing and wants to become a performer. She's a talented girl, and I hope to God it works out for her although it won't be easy. But then, what is in this world? Not cheap, neither, that camp; and Carrie doesn't want to ask Brandon for the money. Says he does enough which is, as God is my witness, the honest truth.

Stephanie don't think like that. She's always saying Brandon should do more, seeing how well off he is. She's my middle one and the problem child. Middle child blues or something like that. She's moody and has a temper that goes off like a rocket at the least little thing. Never at peace with herself and always after those two kids, which is probably why her oldest dropped out of high school and run off. Far as I know, she hasn't heard a word from him in over a year. Her other boy has serious learning problems. In junior high and can barely read and writing, you can forget it. Seems to have some ability in mathematics. Maybe one of those, I forget what you call 'em. Steph moved back to the city, but different neighborhood from Brandon, and I don't see her often. Whenever we do get together, fireworks are like as not to result. She say's she's working but won't tell me at what. I'd bet money it's on her back. God only knows what those boys have seen - or heard. I pray she's careful.

If you haven't already noticed, I'm a God-fearing, believing Christian woman. What else sustains me? Certainly not a husband. We weren't exactly married, and he checked out years ago.

I moved out to the suburbs when my three kids were young. Thought it would be healthier for 'em, but it hasn't necessarily turned out that way. I take a bus into the city for work. It's a pain in the rear but I've been at my job too long to quit. The doctors and physicians' assistants treat me with respect even if they don't pay me what I'm worth. I'd say it had something to do with being black except two out of the five doctors are black, and one of those is the person who deals with salaries. I haven't had a raise in three years. Asked the doctor about it a year ago, and she said times are tough in medicine. Her two kids are in private school so not as tough on her as on me.

Let me stop right here and straighten out a thing or two that nag at me from time to time. When Brandon first started dating Heather, I assumed she was one of those white women that can't leave black men alone. Get their kicks doing something to piss off their often upper class families. Their form of rebellion, which is the last thing we need in the black community. One time, to my everlasting regret, even called her a whore. She and Brandon are married now and have the cutest little boy and girl. The wedding was beautiful, in a fine restaurant with the most magnificent reception after the service. I had wanted a church wedding, but neither Brandon nor Heather are church-going people. The band was something else; I danced until I thought I would drop. None of Heather's family attended, which was a shame. They were certainly invited. What I want to say is that Heather is a wonderful mother - strict but not overly so - and has always treated me with the utmost respect which, at first, was something of a surprise. We're close now. She comes out to visit quite regularly. We take the children to the park just up the hill and sit, chitchatting, while they play. Of course, we don't discuss Brandon's work.

Heather gets along with Carrie who will join us occasionally. Steph's a horse of a different color. Won't warm up to Heather no matter how persistently Heather tries to be friendly. Much as I hate to say it, black folks can be just as racist as white folks. I don't get it. Why would you hate someone just because of the color of their skin? If you had red hair, would you hate someone who had blonde? Makes no sense. Well, you might tell a joke about blondes, but that's kinda' harmless. Or is it? For me, there's just one race: the human race. Not all my friends agree.

The other thing that bothers me is Brandon's arrest. He told me that a corrupt black cop planted shit on him. I didn't believe it at the time and told him so. Seeing what goes on these days, I'm no longer so sure. I'm working up the grit to tell him so. I know it's been a long time - years, in fact - and I should've done it some time ago, but it's not an easy thing for a proud woman like me. Inflexible I guess some would say. When I do tell him, Brandon will probably look at me like what's the big deal. "The past is past," he'll likely say, "and I'm leading a good life."

What all this talk is leading up to is a visit I had the other day from Steph. She brought Garner and sent him into Carrie's room to do what homework he could. It was a Saturday morning, and Carrie had taken Imani to a dance class. A recital was coming up in two weeks, and I couldn't be more excited. Soon as Steph sent Garner into the other room, I knew this wasn't going to be no lighthearted conversation; and if you placed a bet on the subject, I'd win.

"Seen Brandon lately?" Steph asked. She's not one to dance around a subject.

"You live closer to him than I do," I responded, hoping not to get into it with her.

"He's too high and mighty to spend time with his sister ... or to worry about how she's doing."

"Do you ever get in touch with him?"

"You think I like being rejected?"

"Let's not fight, Steph. I don't see you that often and it's been a long week.

My feet are killing me from standing all day, and my back's not far behind."

"Okay, Momma. I didn't come here to fight."

"Good."

We were sitting at the rickety kitchen table, drinking coffee, and I reached out to touch her hand. She let my fingers rest a few seconds and then pulled her hand away.

"How're you otherwise?" I asked. "How's Garner getting along?"

"That's one of the reasons I came here. We need to talk about him."

"I figured as much, seeing as you sent him into the other room." I got up and refilled my coffee cup. I wasn't sure I was ready for this, but there was no way out. I slowly returned to the table and put my cup down. "You want more coffee?"

"I'm fine."

"What's the trouble?" I asked, sitting down and at the same time letting out a sigh I wished I could've stopped.

"Why do you always think it's trouble?"

"I'm sorry. What did you want to talk about?"

"Garner's school work's not getting much better. His home room teacher called and asked me to come in. She said Garner's not a stupid boy and that if he had a tutor and some counseling, he might make some progress.

Not that he'd catch up with the other students, except possibly in math. Now, Momma, where in hell am I going to get the money for a tutor and a counselor?" Steph said with a toss of her head. "Except, of course, if..."

"Except if Brandon paid for it."

"Exactly."

"Child, Brandon sends me money every month and as much, I believe, as he can. I always pass some on to you. Tell me, what do you spend that money on? Fancy clothes and lipstick?"

"It helps pay the rent. I live in a nicer place than most in the neighborhood."

"So why can't you be grateful?" My voice was harsher than I would've liked. "Instead of complaining all the time."

"I don't complain all the time, and it's the least he can do." Steph glared at me, and I knew this conversation wasn't going to improve. "And yes," she snapped, "I spend some on my clothes." She got up and stalked to the sink, depositing her coffee mug. She stayed at the sink a few seconds and then turned back. Her shoulders were leaning towards me; and for an instant, I thought she might charge like an angry bull. Instead, she took a deep breath and sat back down at the table. "I need good clothes," she said in a challenging voice as if daring me to contradict her.

"What for?" I asked.

"Never mind."

I have no idea what drove me to dig the hole deeper.

"What is it that you do, Steph?"

"Momma, stop it."

"I want to know."

Steph shook her head. Seemed like she was about to cry. I reached for her hand, but she jerked it away.

"You know, Momma," she said. "If he didn't drive that hot car and send those two half-niggers to private schools and treat that white bitch like a fucking goddess, he could pay for Garner to have a tutor."

Without thinking for even a second, I leaned across the table and slapped Stephanie hard across her face.

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It's been over a week since Momma slapped me, and I haven't called her or gone out there neither. Furthermore, I don't intend to, no way in fucking hell although what in hell I'm gonna' do if she don't send me the money next month i hate to say. I can't do more tricks than I'm currently doing and take care of Garner all at the same time. He needs his mother. As it is, I have to leave him alone in the apartment too much. God knows what he'd do if there was a fire or someone broke in. Cecile, next door, has him to her place at times; but she's got her own shit to take care of. Besides, he doesn't get along real good with her son, Sheldon, who's a year older. Poor kid's got no friends. Just doesn't know how to do it. He worshipped the ground Peyton walked on but that jackass ran off and we ain't heard from him in forever. Yes, I'm a whore, in case you hadn't figured it out, which would make you one of the stupidest assholes on earth. Not exactly one of those high-toned call girls doing it with Governors and CEOs but I got class and looks. White guys especially like my buff calves and tiny ass and stand-up black tits. And I know how to show them off without being too indiscreet. No point giving the cops an excuse to hassle you. If I know the trick, I might bring him back to my place, that is if Garner's at Cecile's although sometimes I just have to send him to his room, no choice in the matter. Then I let the john in. No way any of 'em's gonna' meet my boy. If it's a new client, I know a halfway decent hotel where they don't ask questions and, push come to shove - so to speak, if the hotel's full, there's always the john's car. Believe me, I've done my share of blowjobs and handjobs twisted around in front seats. Even blew one guy in the movies. Last row, of course, 'n I told him I'd bite it off if he made a peep. Asshole said it turned him on. As if I weren't enough to turn anyone on. And yeah, I know you're gonna' wonder so I might as well tell you. I've done a few women: white and black. Not that I'm gay but what the fuck. Their money's as good as a guy's. I have a pimp, but he's not the worst. Only hits me if I don't bring in my quota, which I almost always do being one of the hottest bitches on the street. He leaves me alone if I'm doing my job, strutting, fucking and sucking. I do know how to show my stuff, which is why I need good clothes, revealing but leaving something to the imagination. He keeps the cops off my back, pays 'em off, I suppose, and sweet talks 'em. So, why am I whore? What a dumb fucking question. How else is a female with my very limited education gonna' earn fifty thousand a year, no taxes deducted. Think I wanna' be a stupid, fucking medical assistant like Momma? If I make that much, why can't I pay for Garner's tutor is the next dumb question. I can, and I will if it comes to it, but why should I? Brandon should dig into his pockets. I'm socking money away for when I don't have neither these looks or this body. You think they last, doing three and sometimes four guys a night? Hell fucking no. One day, I'm taking Garner and my bank account and leaving this hell hole of a city and disappearing for good. Gonna' open a little store of some kind in a nice, little town and live peaceful as can be. I'm kinda' sorry I said those things about Heather and her kids. She never done nothing bad to me. 'Course

I don't plan on telling Momma that. If I were a shrink, I'd say I resent Brandon for being Momma's favorite. The things she used to say about him, holy shit, praising him to all get out so's you'd think he was the damn baby Jesus born all over again, only this time black as night. Could do no wrong, that boy, until he landed himself in jail. Then Momma changed her tune; but by that time, I could've given a shit. Fucking train done left the fucking station. Since Momma don't plan on weaseling that money outta' Brandon, guess I'll have a go at him myself. Better keep hold of my temper or it won't turn out the way I want. Yeah, in case you hadn't figured that too, I do have a wicked fucking temper. Could be why Peyton run off.

One warm, sunny morning, I sat in a window seat of a coffee shop across the street and down the block from the entrance to Brandon's building but close enough so I could see anybody coming or going. Brandon lives in an upscale, mostly but not entirely, black neighborhood, a good distance from where his money is earned. The building has a stone facade and carved heads of some kind of creature at each corner over the entrance. My brother lives in style. The street is vastly different from mine, I can tell you that. On his block alone were two classy boutiques with men's clothing in one and women's in the other; a Thai restaurant which, just by peeping in the window, you could tell was not the same kind of Thai restaurant as the grubby one in my rathole of a neighborhood and a Starbucks at the corner where nicely-dressed people sip their lattes while reading the Wall Street Journal or tapping away at their laptops. I know all about the Wall Street Journal, which you can get daily during the week as far away as we are from New York. I read it several times a week. I may not have much of an education, but that don't mean I'm stupid. Far from it. I've made a few investments, and they've done nicely. One even doubled in the course of two years. Wonder what Momma - or Brandon - would say if they knew that. Might think a little differently about Middle-Sister Steph.

I'd been waiting about forty-five minutes, slowly drinking the cheapest coffee they had in this high-class coffee shop, when Heather come out of the building, holding Todd, eight, and Kimberly, six, by the hand. It was only a half dozen blocks to their fancy, private elementary school so it wouldn't take Heather long to get back unless she had other plans. That worried me some; but if Heather did come in while we was talking, she'd say hi and make herself scarce.

Few times I was there, she was good that way. Knew when she was in the way.

Besides, I had no other choice. I couldn't call my brother and ask to see him.

He'd want to know what it was all about, and I'd like as not get flustered.

I finished the last bit of coffee, took a deep breath and left the coffee shop. I was wearing nice jeans, not too tight, and a shirt that showed a little tit but not too much. My hair was clean and shining, hanging straight down, and I didn't have on even a touch of make-up or lip gloss. I could've been taken for any neighborhood lady, out shopping on a glorious day or coming home from an early morning work-out at the gym. The building's lobby looked to be marble, maybe it was, maybe it wasn't, and had a couple of paintings on the walls. Scenes of a lush countryside like no place I'd ever been in my life. The stairway smelled fresh and clean, not sour like my building. I live in a decent place but not that decent. Can't afford better if I'm gonna' keep on saving. I climbed to the third floor and knocked on 3F. I could feel Brandon looking out the peephole before opening the door.

"Why Steph, isn't this a nice surprise?"

"Not too much of a one, I hope."

"Surprises can be fun."

"Are you gonna' invite me in?"

"Certainly." He paused, and I could tell he wished I would simply vanish; but Brandon had acquired some polish over the years. "Would you like a cup of coffee?"

"That would be nice."

I took in Brandon's elegant, pale blue silk shirt, sharply pressed trousers and stylish shoes with tassles. He looked how I imagine a big-time business executive would look. But then, he was a big-time business executive.

"You look wonderful, Brandon."

"As do you, Steph."

I followed him to the breakfast nook alongside the kitchen and poured two cups from the glass pot sitting on the coffee maker. There was sugar on the table; he brought milk from the fridge. I stirred in a heaped teaspoon of sugar but no milk. Brandon added milk but no sugar. I pay attention to the little things people do. You have to if you want to stay alive in my business. A john pulled a knife on me once, but I had seen it coming. Just the way he had been moving. I was ready; and no sooner did he have that knife out, then I slammed him in the nose with my fist and was gone. My pimp, Rashad, found him and beat the crap outta' him. Almost killed the bastard. I wish he had. Rashad told him he would kill him if he ever saw him again. Son-of-a-bitch probably got his kicks cutting women. Not killing 'em, just scarring 'em. What a fucking world!

"To what do I owe the pleasure of this visit? It's been a while."



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Being a Forsythe deep down, I just had to get off on the wrong foot. "It's not like you come to my part of town," I said, "although we see the guys who work for you often enough."

"I assume, Steph, that you're here to ask for something and that something is more likely than not to be rectangular pieces of paper with numbers like twenty or fifty on them. If my intuition is right, and it often is, you didn't make a good start. Care to take another shot at it?"

"I'm sorry. You're right. Why would you come to my neighborhood? Hell, I wouldn't go there myself if I didn't have to."

Brandon laughed, and I figured we were back on track.

"I am here for money although I do like seeing you even..."

"Steph."

"No, I'm serious. I admire what you've accomplished with..."

"Steph."

This time his voice sounded dangerous so I quickly changed direction.

"Okay, I'll get to the point."

"Good."

"You know Garner's got problems with school."

"I do."

"Can hardly read or write," I said, and then quickly added, "but he's good at math. Can do numbers so fast it would make your head spin."

"Go on."

"His teacher told me that, while he's not likely to ever catch up with the other kids, if he had a tutor, he'd make some progress. Maybe even get to where he can read a book. That would be something."

"That would."

"But I can't afford no tutor. I can barely keep my head above water as is."

My brother put his two forefingers to his lips as if he were praying; but I knew he was calculating, not praying. Like I said, I watch people, especially men, very carefully. His dark eyes took on a distant look. He took a monogrammed handkerchief from a shirt pocket and wiped his brow. A minute or so passed. It seemed longer, but I had checked my watch. He spoke softly, and dangerously. His words were carefully chosen and his tone so clear I hardly needed the words to understand his intent.

"I'm willing to pay for the tutor, Steph, but you need to change your line of work."

"I got practically no education, Brandon."

"Whose fault is that?"

"I do the only thing I can do that'll keep a halfway decent roof over me and Garner's head. If Peyton were still around and helping, things might be different."

"This is not a negotiation, Steph. You're damaging the family's reputation."

"And what do you think..." I stopped myself in time.

"I'm glad you didn't finish that sentence." Brandon looked at me, his sister, with eyes as hard and cold as a cobra's, or what I imagine a cobra's would be, and certainly the hardest and coldest I'd ever seen. Rashad's stare would seem like an angel's in comparison. "You're a disgrace, and I want it stopped." Anger welled up in me. I tried to hold it down but couldn't.

"I'm not a disgrace," I said, my voice rising.

"You're a common whore, and that's a disgrace."

"I'm not a common any fucking thing."

"You're a common, goddamn whore."

Unable to think or control myself, I reached across the table and slapped him hard in the face.

*Town Council*

"You're going to do what?"

Ramona was certain she had either misheard or misunderstood Pedro. He often had crazy ideas - like taking the whole family to Cuba on vacation. ("Flights are cheap. Hotels are cheap. The beaches are great - just look at the pics. I have a green card and will be a citizen two months after we get back. My kids can fly home to El Salvador from Havana. What's not to like?") Ramona admitted with a rueful smile that it had been a fantastic vacation. But this idea, if it were true, made all his other ones rolled together look sane.

"Mi amor, you are much too young to be going deaf," he said, giving her a peck on the cheek.

"I'm not going deaf, but you - if I heard you correctly and I hope for the sake of God and our family that I didn't - are getting mas loco ... crazier ... by the minute. Tell me, please, en el nombre de Dios ... in the name of God ... that you are simply tirando mi pierna ... pulling my leg. Ramona loved to throw Spanish phrases into her speech although she and Pedro mostly spoke English to each other since both spoke it like natives as they pointed out to Ramona's kids, Emilio and Marisol, twelve and eleven respectively.

"But not as good as us," they inevitably shot back.

"Would I pull your leg?" Pedro asked.

"If I were asleep and you were dying to have sex."

"I'm trying to have a serious conversation, not get you into bed. I can do that anytime I want."

"And here I thought you had grown up," said Ramona, only half in jest.

"How about getting back on point?"

"Okay ... let me understand this. You're going to run for the Town Council."

"That's exactly what I'm going to do. Latinos make up fifteen percent of Blue Heron Lake's population, not counting the undocumented, and we don't have a single member on the Town Council, a disgraceful situation that's about to change."

"What's going to change," said Ramona, "is that you'll lose your job and some gringo son-of-a-bitch will burn our house down."

Pedro and Ramona had gotten married six years ago. Pedro got his citizenship two years ago. At the roofing company, he had risen to Assistant Foreman and was responsible for supervising jobs as

well as laying shingle. Both the owner and the foreman liked him and felt that, as a Latino, he was particularly effective in managing the other Latino workers, which made up a good half of the company's work force. In the past few years, the company had expanded well beyond Blue Heron Lake; and profits had risen accordingly. Pedro had received unexpected and surprisingly good bonuses. As Ramona continued working behind the counter at La Bodega, the couple had been able to put money aside despite the expense of bringing Pedro's two boys up from El Salvador every summer. It was nonetheless clear to Ramona, who felt she had a better understanding of the United States than Pedro, that the company's owner would not take kindly to his Assistant Foreman's running for a seat on the Town Council. After all, only one woman currently held a seat on the seven-member Council; and in the owner's opinion, she was a woman in name only. No Latino had ever tried for a seat.

"There's a good reason for that," Ramona said.

Pedro and Ramona rarely fought, but he had no intention of letting her stand in his way. He didn't know why this idea had struck him with such force, but it had and so be it. Perhaps it was the after-work conversations he had with his buddies over beers at The Black Dog. Ramona tolerated his going there so long as he was sober when he came home for supper and never danced with any of the young women in spiked heels who frequented the place. He swore that he never did and was amazed at how trustworthy he had become. Or maybe the idea was part of the transformation that had begun when he returned to Ramona two years after fleeing their first attempt at a relationship. Either way, he pointed out to her that Latinos were a rapidly growing proportion of the U.S. population and were being elected to offices everywhere. Before long, one would be on a national ticket.

"Obama has shown us the way," he said. "Blue Heron Lake might be a political backwater, but that doesn't mean it will stay that way."

"The Town Council is the preserve of old, white men who like being in charge and believe themselves to be living in the last century. Or wish they were.

They will not be happy if you challenge their power."

"Do I care if they're happy? Things need to change around here, and I've got some damn good ideas as to what those changes should be. For starters, Spanish should be taught in the schools at a much earlier age; and all students should take either Spanish or another language. Americans are pathetic when it comes to languages. Hell, half of them don't do so good with English."

"Well."

"What?"

"Don't do so well with English, my beloved."

"Big difference."

"Isn't the question of teaching languages the responsibility of the School Board? If you ran for that, it might not cause so much trouble."

"I'm not concerned about trouble. You think this country was created without trouble?"

"I don't care how this country was created. I'm worried about - no, I'm scared of - what might happen if you run for the Council."

"Sweetheart, aren't you going a little overboard?"

"Not at all. There are plenty of lunatics in this town, and half of them have guns. A lot of them, furthermore, wish we weren't here."

"Should I get a gun in that case?"

"No, for God's sake, you'd end up shooting one of the kids."

"I was kidding about the gun."

"I wasn't kidding about being scared."

"I know." He touched her cheek. "Want to hear any of my other ideas?"

"Probably not, but go ahead."

"First of all, the roads in our neighborhood are full of potholes; but the Highway Department gives the gringo neighborhoods first priority even though their roads are in much better shape than ours."

"Plan on using 'gringo' in your stump speeches?"

"Not where they can hear me."

"Or shoot you," she said. She put her arms around his barrel chest and rubbed against him. "Let's go to bed. Emilio and Marisol will be home in an hour, and that will be it." She kissed him and slid her tongue into his mouth. "I can't think about this anymore. I want to make love."

"And hope I'll forget the whole thing."

"Wouldn't that be nice, but I know how stubborn you can be."

"It will be all right. I promise."

"That's not a promise you can make."

He took her by the hand and led her towards their bedroom. As they settled in the bed

and undressed each other, she said: "You can promise me that if there are any threats, you'll quit."

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The Town Clerk told Pedro that, to get on the ballot for the upcoming election, he would need a petition with two hundred and fifty signatures including an address, date of birth and driver's license number for each signatory. Pedro first took his petition around his neighborhood. People he knew greeted him with enthusiasm and eagerly signed. "About time," many of them said while one of his former housemates said it even more forcefully. One older gentleman asked, in Spanish, if he could sign more than once. Pedro laughed, congratulated the man on his ingenuity, but told him no, that they were not in Chicago. A few refused to sign, saying that Pedro was looking for trouble. Pedro replied that trouble was his middle name.

"You're not a young tough guy anymore," said one woman, who had known him since he'd arrived in the Hudson Valley ten years ago. "You're married with responsibilities."

"Where do you think we are?"

"I know where we are," she said, closing the door.

He didn't have quite enough signatures after thoroughly canvassing his neighborhood so he decided to try the predominately white neighborhood a mile from his home. The houses there were generally in better condition than in his neighborhood although Ramona's father, Antonio, kept their two-family home in near mint condition - primarily by working every spare minute on the house with Pedro often helping out. One Saturday morning, Pedro parked on van Buren and started door-to-door in the white neighborhood. No one answered at the first three houses. At the fourth, an elderly woman with a hint of blue rinse in her otherwise white hair smiled: "Sure I'll sign. Could use some new blood on the Council. The old farts - excuse my French - wouldn't know their asses from holes in the ground. Believe me, I should know. My Nolan - may he rest in peace - served two terms and If God had given Nolan another brain, he'd have had one. Got a pen?"

At the next house, a young woman - lumpy bags hanging under her tired eyes and stringy hair draped over her shoulders - had one toddler squirming in her arms and a slightly older one clinging to her leg. She slammed the door before he had finished his opening bit about the need for changes that would benefit both the white and Latino communities. He crossed the street, stepping around a fresh patch of tar filling in a pothole, and climbed three steps to a front porch in need of

painting. He raised a hand to knock on the door when a crackling voice caused him to spin around. An emaciated, old man with sunken cheeks and sallow skin rocked slowly at the far end of the porch. The man wore a faded plaid shirt and baggy overalls. Involuntarily, he smoothed down his last remaining wisps of scraggly white hair.

"I said what the hell do you want?" Smiling nervously, Pedro took a step towards the man. "Stay right where you are and answer my damn question."

"I'm running for Town Council ... that is if I can get enough signatures on my petition."

Pedro stared at the man's half-open mouth. He had never seen teeth quite so yellow or jagged.

"What in tarnation are you looking at?"

"Nothing, sir."

"Damn straight, nothing." The man leaned to one side and spit. A stream of tobacco juice cleared - barely - the porch and hissed into the dust. "And you think I'm gonna' sign something that lets a damn immigrant on the damn Town Council? Are you crazy?"

"Sir, we're all immigrants."

"I sure as hell ain't no immigrant. Why don't you run for Town Council of Mexico City?"

"I'm an American citizen."

"The hell you are. Now get off my damn porch."

A middle-aged black man lived next door to the old man. His house was a newly painted light grey. A trim flower bed edged the porch, and the lawn was well tended. Paving stones led from the sidewalk to the porch. The man wore pressed trousers and a tan sweater. He listened carefully to Pedro's prepared remarks.

"Been to see Carl next door?" the man asked with a wry smile. "Hope he didn't get your pants - with tobacco juice, that is." "I was upwind," Pedro said with a laugh.

The man laughed, but his demeanor quickly turned somber.

"Let me give you a word of advice: give it up. There was a black woman got on the Council a few years back. Oh yes, they were real polite to her; but everything she suggested got voted down. She served a few years - don't remember how many - and gave up. She's still in town. Has a dry cleaning business. Does okay. Drives a nice car. The whites here don't mind if we get ahead but don't mess with their politics. Other towns around might be different but Blue Heron Lake is Blue Heron Lake. I like it here. Decent place to raise my kids. But a lotta' white folks gotta' die before the Town Council is going to change."

"Will you sign my petition anyway, Mr ... Excuse me but I don't know your name."

"Powers ... Xavier Powers and no, I won't sign and you better watch out before someone calls the police on you."

Which is exactly what happened at the next house, a square brick building without a porch. Pedro didn't notice the curtain on a front window being drawn back a sliver, but he did hear a woman shout: "Eddie, call the police. There's some fucking greaser banging on the front door like he's trying to break in." Pedro hurried to his car and drove home.

"One signature in the gringo neighborhood's not so bad," said Ramona.

"Did the person appear to be of sound mind and body?"

Ramona laughed.

"It's not funny."

"I'm sorry. Gallows humor. I'm frightened for you ... for all of us." "The worst that happened is I got insulted and some idiot called the police."

"Oh my God, did they show up?"

"I didn't wait around to find out."

"I must be crazy but give me the petition. I'll see what I can do at the bodega."

Ramona got the final signatures from her customers, and Pedro took the petition to the Town Clerk who didn't seem thrilled. She told him, however, that he would be on the ballot and wished him luck. A couple of weeks later, and two months before the election, an article appeared in the Blue Heron Lake Gazette about the candidates running for Town Council. Three Democrats and one Republican were running for re-election. Two Democrats and four Republicans were running for the first time. No party could have more than five seats on the seven-member Council, which accounted for the number of candidates. Two of the candidates were women, one for re-election and the second a first-timer. Pedro was running as unaffiliated and was mentioned in the last line of the article.

Soon after, the phone calls began - on a sparkling Saturday morning with a touch of fall in the air. Pedro was in front of the Stop & Shop handing out leaflets. Ramona answered the phone and froze when a raspy voice hissed like a coiled snake. Afterwards, she couldn't be sure if it had been an old man or someone pretending to be an old man.

"We got a nice town here, and we aim to keep it that way. Nobody's ever done your people no harm. If you want to keep it that way, tell your husband to get out of the race."

There was a click, but Ramona hung onto the phone and stared straight ahead. Tears rolled

down her cheeks. She glanced at the phone and then slowly hung it up. She sank into an armchair, put her face in her hands and sobbed. Suddenly, she thought of Emilio and Marisol who were down the block at the Aguilar's. She rushed to the phone and told Henrietta that she would come for the kids and, under no circumstance, to let them walk home.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing, I just want to run some errands and need them to help me." She called Pedro on his cell and told him to come home right away. "Mrs. Aguilar said we were running errands," said Marisol, as Ramona headed home.

"I changed my mind."

"So why couldn't we walk home like always?" asked Emilio. "Have we suddenly become babies."

"I said I changed my mind."

"You didn't answer my question."

Ramona pulled into the garage before the door finished opening, almost scraping the top of her car.

"Jesus, Mama," said Emilio, "watch out."

"Shut up ... please."

Both children went instantly quiet, unused to that tone of voice from their mother. She put on a movie in the family room and told them to stay there. She poured two glasses of Newman's Lemonade, which she gave them along with a bag of blue corn chips. They tore the bag open, thrilled at the magnitude of the treat. Pedro came through the door from the garage as she returned to the kitchen to make herself a cup of coffee.

"What in hell's going on?"

"I'll tell you in a minute."

She made two cups and poured whiskey into each one. He followed her into their bedroom. She closed the door.

"Son-of-a-bitch," said Pedro, pacing back and forth in front of the bed where Ramona was seated.

"You have to quit the race." She fingered the crucifix that hung around her neck on a silver chain. "I knew I was crazy to get those signatures."

"Things were picking up. A number of people took leaflets, including some gringos. A few people asked me questions about my views. And now this. Damn it."

"Pedro, please quit the race. It's not worth it. Maybe some other time but not now. I'm afraid for the kids."

"I need to think."

The phone rang. Pedro picked it up. Anger suffused his face. "What's wrong with you?" he snapped and slammed down the phone.

"What did he say?"

"Pretty much what you told me."

The phone rang again. Pedro reached for the phone. "Don't answer it," pleaded Ramona. Pedro's hand stopped in mid-air. The phone kept ringing.

"Pedro," called out Emilio, "do you want me to answer it?"

"I got it." Pedro picked up the phone. His face went ashen. He put it down slowly. He walked over to Ramona and took her hand.

"He threatened to kill me."

"Please, Pedro."

"Let me talk to the cops. If they think it's dangerous, I'll quit."

Pedro drove to the station and spoke to the Deputy Chief, who was on duty that afternoon. He told Pedro to stay calm.

"I am calm."

"We'll try to trace the calls but that won't be possible if the caller used a disposable cell phone - which is highly likely unless he's a total idiot. We'll increase our presence in your neighborhood but, no offense intended, you might want to dial back your campaign for a couple of weeks."

"Will that do any good? In the long run?"

"Can't say for sure but, in my experience, most of these jerks don't act on their threats. They're looking for a thrill and give up after a while. At the same time, be careful and let us know if you get more calls."

"Not much help," said Ramona.

"At least, he sounded concerned."

"Lot of good that'll do if someone shoots you."

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On Monday afternoon, Ramona left the bodega earlier than usual to be home when the kids got off the bus. Pedro had talked more seriously about getting a gun but so far had done nothing about it. The very thought of a gun in the house petrified Ramona. The kids were doing their homework at the kitchen table and Ramona was drinking her sixth cup of coffee for the day (her norm being two or three) when the doorbell rang.

"Don't go, Mama," said Marisol who, along with Emilio, had been told something about the phone calls.

"I'll go downstairs and look through the peephole."

An elderly woman stood at the door. She wore a bright red coat and a round hat. She was petite. She had wrinkles around the eyes. She had white hair tinged with blue rinse. Ramona stared for a second and then opened the door.

"Hello," said the woman brightly. "Are you Mrs. Sanchez?"

"Yes."

"Excellent. Is Mr. Sanchez here?"

"He's still at work."

"Too bad. I mean not too bad that he's at work, but there is something I wanted to discuss with him."

"Perhaps I can help you," said Ramona.

"Perhaps. My name's Elvira Barnett. My grandson is a police officer. He mentioned the calls that you've gotten. My friends and I think it's a damn disgrace. We intend to protect you and see to it that Mr. Sanchez is able to campaign without interruption. I had the honor of signing his petition when he stopped by my house."

Ramona's mouth dropped open. For a few seconds, she said nothing while Elvira simply smiled at her.

"I've forgotten my manners," said Ramona. "Would you like to come up for a cup of coffee?"

Elvira's friends, who seemed to consist of all the elderly women in Blue Heron Lake, were numerous, tireless and superbly organized. Elvira was Commander-in-Chief. One or two of them were seen at all hours making a show of walking back and forth in front of the house. One of them put the kids on the school bus every morning, and one was there every afternoon when they got home. Emilio and Marisol were always excited to see them. They thought of it as a huge game. One of the women accompanied Pedro on his door-to-door campaign forays. Elvira, who was somehow related to the Gazette's Editor, not to mention almost everyone else in town, made sure that Pedro's campaign got adequate coverage, including a story about the phone calls and what she and her friends were doing to ensure that Pedro had a fair chance. The story was even picked up - no one knew, or admitted to knowing, how - by NPR. "Threatening phone calls is not how a democracy works," Elvira was quoted both on the radio and in the Gazette. "If someone wants to assassinate Pedro Sanchez, he'll have to kill me first."

Two weeks later, on another crisp Fall Saturday, not long before the high school's Blue Herons were scheduled to play a critical football game against the neighboring town's Roaring Lions, Pedro - with Elvira standing silently beside him - was again in the Stop & Shop parking lot, handing out leaflets and chatting with anyone who stopped to ask a question or two. Emilio, having pestered Ramona until she gave in out of desperation, stood on Pedro's other side. None of them paid attention when a dirty, brown Camry pulled into the lot and parked about thirty or forty yards away. A man in a baseball cap pulled low and wearing dark sun glasses and a blue jeans jacket with the collar turned

up stepped out of the car carrying a rifle. The first shot got Pedro in the shoulder, spun him around and dropped him to the ground. The second shot hit the pavement an inch from his chest, ricocheted off the pavement and smashed through the store's plate glass window, lodging fortunately in the ceiling.

Bleeding profusely, Pedro pulled Emilio down and covered him with his body.

"Get down," he shouted at Elvira, but she was running towards the shooter, screaming at the top of her lungs: "Stop this instant, you bastard."

People ran in all directions. Ducking behind a parked car, a young woman called 911 on her cell phone. In the confusion, no one had noticed a beat-up pick-up that had entered the lot less than a minute after the Camry. The commotion at first confused the old man in the faded plaid shirt, but then he saw an elderly woman running and a man pointing a rifle first at her and then at someone on the ground. He shifted into first, stomped on the gas and was as surprised as he'd ever been when the old truck leaped forward and slammed into the shooter causing his last shot to bounce harmlessly off the Stop & Shop's sloping roof. Minutes later, the badly injured shooter was in police custody.

"Elvira," said the old man as the police were interviewing witnesses, "I didn't know that was you."

"A good thing," said Elvira, giving him an affectionate pat on the cheek, "or you might've aimed that old jalopy at me."

"I still don't want no damn immigrants on the Town Council," said the old man, looking over at Pedro being bandaged by the EMS, "but I'll be damned if anybody's gonna shoot 'em."

Pedro became the first American of Hispanic origin to win election to the Blue Heron Lake Town Council. Ramona still didn't want him to serve; but at the victory celebration at the bodega - a Corona in one hand and a chip lathered with guacamole in the other, Elvira told her that lightning wouldn't strike twice.

The Council President shook Pedro's hand at the first meeting and said, "Welcome to the Town Council, Mr. Sanchez. Elvira Barnett tells me you have some ideas about improvements in how we do things. I'm not saying we'll approve any of them since we've been operating our way a long time and it seems to work, but we'll listen."

Pedro thanked him and then, smiling, turned his head and winked at Elvira, Ramona and the kids, sitting in the first row of visitors' seats.



*Romana Guillotte*

**Romana Guillotte** occasionally shakes off the sand and glitter of Las Vegas to be a Film Festival gypsy, working such places as Sundance, TriBeCa, and LA Film Festival. She has an MFA in Writing for Dramatic Media, and a BA in Film Studies from UNLV. She's had pieces appear in "Plasma Frequency Magazine", "Slink Chunk Press", and "The J.J. Outré Review".

*vanpool*

"This day is the worst!" Dori cried as the van hurtled through the mountains.  
"What now?" Vicki their reluctant driver asked. She turned down the Weezer on the radio.  
"Tom dropped a full pack of cigarettes...into the van!" Dori looked to be in a legit panic.  
"What do you mean 'into the van'?" Vicki eyed them in the rearview mirror. Earbuds were removed from ears as the other handful of passengers focused their attention.  
Tom shrugged. "I thought it was a cubby or something..."  
"No, the cup holder broke off. Remember?" Mike added, watching with amusement.  
"Well," Tom shrugged, "it was almost empty anyhow." He seemed not quite as put off by this.  
"No, it wasn't!" Dori turned to Lidda next to her. "Quick, you have small hands, try to reach in there."  
Lidda protested and rolled her eyes. Mike tried to get a better look, and broke an armrest in the process.  
"Oops."  
"Seems we're all falling apart," Tom said eyeing Dori.  
"Oh! Vicki, request a new van, but ask them to disassemble this one first!" Dori wailed.  
Vicki rolled her eyes and kept driving. No relief from the members of this vanpool.  
Dori brightened. "Quick, someone get a stick, I have some gum."  
Vicki took on that mom sort of voice. "We'll get a stick when we pull over for gas."  
"Yes! This week's looking up!" Dori sat back, satisfied for the moment.  
"It's Monday," Mike added, confused.  
"Don't remind me," Vicki added, eyes flicking to him and the rearview mirror, "just think of it this way, if you don't get it, maybe someone will find it in some dystopian future, and it will make their day."  
Mike smirked at this as Dori looked increasingly confused. "But what about my day?"  
"You're just gonna have to wait and see then."

#

Marvin trudged through the valley. The overgrowth and decay he'd become accustomed. The loneliness though--it ripped him apart slowly as if unraveling a sweater. Like that stupid Weezer song. Yes, he did want to destroy their sweater. And that song.

Not sure of his footing, he slipped--or was there a pothole?--either way, Marvin was sent flying some feet down a ravine he normally wouldn't have given the time of day.

However...

Was this...a parking lot? How'd he miss this?

## *Scarlet Leaf Review -August 2017 - No. 3/2017*

There were a few cars and vans there --Marvin felt as if he'd struck gold. Oil and gas were so precious, he'd be able to use some to barter a ride when he'd found the next town. Yes! He just needed to get to the tank to siphon it. No doubt he could now finally get closer to seeing if his mother still lived.

The metal frame was rusted from the weather - no doubt having been in the ravine since that fateful spring day. Marvin flashed back, as he usually did when thinking of that Wednesday. He leaned onto the frame, in reflection...

A huge crack echoed and the frame split...

Nothing unusual as he regained his footing again. Though...is that a pack of cigarettes?

Marvin bent to pick it up, next to a stick with something weird attached --gum maybe? "This day has gotten insanely better," he said to reassure himself.



### *Molly E. Hamilton*

Molly E. Hamilton is a student of Lindenwood University's MFA writing program. Her goal as a writer is to brighten her audience's day with the characters she knows and loves. When Molly is not writing, she can be found caring for her family, watching movies, and raving about the medieval era.

### *The Maiden's Tears in the Lake*

It was late one night and a young man was walking in the woods alone. He wasn't looking around him nor was he looking before him. He was looking up, up at the moon that broke her boundaries. Far larger was she than ever any night. Her generous, stolen light lit the way of the young man's trail. With eyes fixed to the moon, he walked in a trance like state.

He was led deeper and deeper into the forest, and he began to feel a longing. It was a weight in his chest that reached to his neck, an almost strangling feeling. It felt like there was no greater void in the world. He was searching, but he didn't know what for. Then he saw it: a woman's shadow dancing through the tree tops. He looked carefully and discovered it wasn't a shadow, but a gray ballerina, gracefully expressing her sorrows through dance as she floated just below the precarious moon, her spotlight. It was all eerily beautiful.





She was entirely gray and not quite opaque but still magnificent. The man stood and watched in awe. He thought she would be perfect if she weren't so gray and ghostly and if there wasn't a silver cord attached to her belly. The cord hung down and swept with her dance easily. It did little to resist her, but she was, indeed, trapped.

Curious to where the cord led the young man followed the cord down with his eyes and saw lying peacefully the real maiden. She was resting between two trees with branches that reached for each other. Their gnarled roots were protruding from the ground and twisted together. In the middle of these roots the girl's raven haired head rested. A thick fog was hanging about her and the trees. The silver cord was holding the soul to the body.

"Save me," the gray spirit woman said, never ceasing her dancing. Only she didn't really say save me. She was pleading with her eyes. She stretched out her slender arm and leaned her body to him as she twirled above the trees. The young man loved her instantly.

Although he felt that he was being watched. He heard the trees creak, but there was no caressing wind. Then, in the corner of his eye, he saw something dark. He turned his head and saw a long black arm growing out of a knot on the tree to his left. He watched. The arm kept lengthening; it was flat, the arm of a shadow. The tree creaked again. The whole shadow figure emerged. More trees began their moaning; more shadow men appeared. Each of them were solid, featureless outlines with elongated limbs. They turned their necks, cocking their heads, silently creeping around. One tickled the canal of the young man's ear by reaching its long fingers inside with ease. The man jerked away. A different shadow man started making a sound, some type of music with only a hole where a mouth should have been. It sounded like a distant woman singing in shrieks and screams with flutes and violins, a haunted opera.

The trees began moving further apart. The two where the girl's lifeless body laid between now just had the tips of their roots touching. No longer were they intertwined, and only the longest braches had leaves that made the slightest bit of contact. Quietly, more trees than before began filling in the gaps that were prepared. The branches stretched taller and the leaves became fuller, blocking the glorious moon's light along with the dancer.

The thick moss and lichen began spelling words in a language the man did not know. The music became louder and faster. The shadow men formed a circle around their victim. He could hear his heart beating rapidly. The fear had stolen his breath; he was almost panting. To console himself he tried to look once more at the dancer. There was something oddly soothing about her dance, but she was hard to see through the heavy foliage. A drop

of water fell on his forehead. He looked down at the body of the girl; it was crying. It cried silent tears that trickled down towards her ears. However, she did not breathe.

"What is this?!" the man shouted. His voice was strained as if he were holding his breath. The music stopped. The black shadow men bowed their heads. An older man stepped forward from the trees. The shadow men vanished into streaks of black, whistling back into the knots of the trees from which they came. All was silent.

The old man lifted his hands and the elongated trees shrank their reach. The moon's light filtered through once again. The old man wore robes of dense spider webs and clovers were his sash. A grapevine was twisted around his waist for a belt. A swan feather pouch hung from his hip.

"Who are you?" The young man asked. He couldn't help but look at the dancer in the trees again. He was still nervous and in want of peace.

"The guardian of this boscage," The old man said. He looked at the young man's searching eyes, "You are not the only one who finds peace in her dancing." However, the young man ignored the observation.

"What have you done to her?" Demanded the young man pointing to the dancer's body. Her spirit was watching worriedly as she engaged in a couru (the tight steps ballerinas do while on point) session in her dance.

"This was not done by my hand nor is it my lot," he said instinctively stroking the swan pouch as he looked upon the maiden.

"I love her!"

The elder narrowed his eyes to the trees. Then, he looked at the man carefully, "What will you do for her?" He asked. The gray ghost was still watching, weeping more and still dancing.

"I want her to be free," the young man said. He stepped forward to the corpse on the ground, but the old man hissed loudly and two long serpents slithered forward rearing up their heads with open mouths. A white ball of poison hung from their piercing fangs.

"She is cursed," answered the old man calm again. His sagging jowls shook as he spoke

"I will break that curse," the young man retorted. The snakes began weaving into the girl's hair, resting their heads on her chest, making a jagged heart shape.

"Then you must find all of the maiden's tears in the lake and restore them back into her eyes." The trees behind the old man, and the girl, began sliding to make a path that clearly revealed a lake.

"That's impossible," retorted the young man, watching the snakes carefully and only glancing at the lake.

"Then you cannot save her. She will dance for the end of time."

Before any questions could be answered the old man with the spider web robes knelt before the girl's body and hovered his hands above her face. The two snakes leapt into the prominent arteries of the old man's wrists. The snakes shot inside like needles. The old man stood up, eyes glowing a bright white, and opened his near toothless mouth to reveal a bright star shining from within. Then, he was gone, along with the extra trees.

The moon was dull. Normal as always. Just a small, high-up white light that could only aluminate a few stretching clouds of night. The trees were rooted into the earth with none of their trenches showing. The girl, and her perfectly preserved body, were gone. A thin black veil, or maybe it was a shawl, laid in her place. It was sheer, light and just rested on the ground as if it were just dropped. The young man pondered what he had seen. He felt his joints weaken with grief. Trembling, he shook down to his knees, his mournful eyes fixed on the heavens. He was trying to believe that she was gone.

He still felt love. Well, he thought it was love. With a sound of anguish he threw himself onto his belly and reached for the black fabric, a memento. He struggled and sat up, hypnotically rocking back and forth, clutching the fabric weeping. He heard the moans of the trees and felt a gentle quiver in his hands. He looked down and wiped his blurry eyes. He saw a velvet, drawstring pouch wrapped in the memento. It was slightly damp. Clumsy with misery he opened the bag. Inside he saw three pebbles. They were smooth and shining from water's polishing. "The lake," he choked and ran through the trees to the lake, still holding the long black fabric and the pouch.

A haze tumbled above the water. A few calling frogs splashed into the murky water. "I must find my lady's tears," the young man said. He sat down by the bank and did not notice the water lapping around his legs. He stared at the water and welcomed the fog's curtain to slowly curl around him. He sat there for quite some time, but dawn was not breaking just yet. Orion was still on his hunt. The young man began to whisper.

His sentences started out slow. He had pauses in between. He would look around nervously, fret, and bite his lip. He would clutch harder onto his memento and shake, sweat, cry. But he started getting calmer, although his bright eyes never extinguished their fire of passion. He looked utterly crazed. "I should have cut the cord," he said. "I should have cut the cord. Cut it with something. Cut it with a knife, my teeth, my blood. I should have cut the cord. I should have cut it. She'd fall down! Oh, she'd fall down. Back. Back into the body. I should have cut the...where is she?" He was becoming angry now. "She left me. Left me. Left me. Oh she left me. What

did she leave me? She left me this." He looked at the pebbles. He slowly began examining them. He held one before him with a look that appeared to show he was about to swallow it, but he didn't. He suddenly clamped his fingers tightly around the pebbles and gasped. He was breathing heavily.

Paranoid he looked around and hunched over his hands. He hoped to block anyone's view of the pebbles. "What did you say?" He asked. There was a long pause. "Alright," he answered. He picked up the bluest pebble and hurriedly kissed it. "Do you promise?" He asked fearfully staring at the water with great intent. The fog was in a vague shape of a woman. He heard the creaking in the trees. The young man squeezed the pebble hard and closed his eyes, as if he were praying. Then, he threw it into the water. He cried out as if he were in pain and flinched at what he had just done. "That was all I had left! Now I only have two!" Tormented he pulled his own hair.

A turtle was emerging from the water. It's head surfacing to peer at the man. The man stared back. The pebble was sitting on the shell. "You!" the man said excitedly. A wide grin strained across his face. With trembling hands he reached out and touched the turtle's shell, swiping away the retrieved pebble. The pebble was shivering. The young man sat still, staring at the turtle before slowly questioning, "Under my tongue?" The turtle bubbled back into the depths of the water. The pebble was promptly placed under the man's tongue, and he slipped off his shoes. He rushed into the murky waters, crawling like a newt through the lake bed. He was following the turtle.

The pebble, still oscillating against the tongue's thick arteries, was sending something out. A force perhaps. Whatever it was, if anything at all, the energy was being absorbed into the young man's bloodstream. His brown eyes took on the soft blue hue of the pebble. They glowed. They were his light, and he could see the maiden's tears. Each one looked like a miniature eye made of clear ice. The eyes were crying and the source of their sorrow was reflected in the glistening pupils. He saw swans, a little girl with the same raven hair as his maiden standing with his maiden, and snarling, vicious dogs. He saw a witch raising a broken swan back from the depths of the water. He saw a demon. There were tears with the shadow men inside. Tears that showed the first dance of enchantment. He saw his maiden making a pact with the dark entities.

The young man reached out and touched the tears. In glee he observed them disappear into his fingertips. He swam all night to collect every tear. The turtle held his place when he went gasping up for air. He would not miss a tear.

As the sun rose, the pebble stopped moving. His eyes lost their glow. The turtle became afraid of him and went hissing away. Time was up. He had two pebbles left. He crawled back to the shore fell asleep, exhausted. He woke around four that afternoon. He scraped off the coarse rock-bit sand that dented his face. He drank that filthy lake water and stalked the woods for berries. He waited for the moon to rise. Leaving was not an option.

Once he saw his haunted moon, he threw in the second pebble. The turtle came. He began his search, just as before. This time the tears were deeper in the lake, further out from his original shore. He did not hesitate. By the third night the tears were harder to find. The turtle was digging into the mud. The young man did the same. As the moon rose higher, he went deeper into the lake. He did not need air as often as he did the first day, and he needed even less than he did on the second day. He could burrow through the mud for an hour before rising up for breath. He thought he felt the tickling of the shadow men. The young man clawed through relentlessly searching.

He was so lost in his task he almost didn't notice that the turtle was circling around a small area. It dared not to touch the earth there. It swam above. The man stared. His eyes glowing brighter than before. He plunged his hands into the sacred ground. He felt hair twist around his fingers. With a violent pull, he heaved up more hair, then a head, and soon a whole body was unearthed. The body was a young child. It was so bloated and ruined--hideously decayed-- that he could not decipher a gender, but he thought he saw signs of webbed toes and maybe one or two feathers rooted along the spine. He took the corpse with him to the shore. He carried it with him through the woods. The shadow men were following. He could hear the creaking in the trees. He saw them leering from behind.

The moon was shining wonderfully once again. He called out for his ghostly lady. He watched her dance high above the threes, and he laid down the corpse of the child. Kneeling as a knight, he looked at the beautiful body of his maiden. The ghost began to shriek from above. Shaking its head vigorously it seemed to be begging. The shadow men were leaping around, stretching and pulling themselves longer in the air gleefully. The young man tenderly placed his finger tips on the body's eyes and watched the cord shrink down, pulling the flailing and thrashing ghost with it, like a chain.

However, the corpse of the child began to rise as soon as the dancing stopped. The demon, who was once a dear sister, started to begin its second resurrection. No spell could be used to soothe it now. That was why the maiden vowed to dance forever. She agreed to give up her own peace so her sister could rest.

The man paid no notice. He felt a flutter of a pulse in his maiden's neck and waited for her to open her lovely eyes.

### *Willem Myra*

Myra's work has appeared, or is forthcoming, in 101 Words, Litro, The Offing, and elsewhere. He lives in a modest Italian city where he shares his love for literature with two cats and a stubborn case of rhinitis.

#### *The Treasure by the Hopscotch*

Homelessness sharpens your senses. It's only the second week of sleeping in my car yet I'd immediately wake up if someone were to tore a butterfly's wing outside the window, that's how delicate my sleep has become.

So of course, when the angry mob comes for me, I'm already up, devising a plan to fight or evade them, depending on what they want to do with me -- run me away or feed me to the dogs. As lucidity spills over my brain, I scan my memories for a reason to justify their presence. In vain.

I stare at them. I said mob though in reality it's just four of them. Four men. Enough to beat me to a pulp, sure, but not quite the anonymous mass of fed-up farmers that could chase Frankenstein away. They're moving toward the car from the other end of the parking lot. They do not carry torches nor pitchforks, but the hostile vibe that radiates from them is too familiar to misread.

I insert the key into the ignition without turning the engine on. I get out of the car, leaving the door ajar, and walk in front of it. The men don't notice me right away. I'm far from the cones of light cast by the lamp posts, hidden inside what to their eyes must look like more than just semi-darkness.

I wave in their direction. "Howdy, fellas!"

They come to a halt at the center of the parking lot, the yellowish light allowing me to study them. I recognize the one leading the group, Dieter. Earlier in the morning, it was him who helped me arrange to get a few meals in exchange of handiwork around the condo. Weedy fellow, his brow constantly furrowed, but otherwise jovial. He's joined by someone almost twice his height: a bulky man with a shiny head nested in-between titanic shoulders and arms with less flexibility than those of a T-Rex. As for the last two men, it's not their size that stands out as much as what they're holding in their hands -- a pair of carpenter's pincers one, a flashlight and a rope the other.

"Everything OK?" I ask in a neutral tone.

Dieter points an accusatory finger at me. "Why did I believe you when you said you were not dangerous?"

"Because it's true."

"Your shadow, Jos. It bit several kids not an hour ago."

"That so?"

"Be cooperative, it's in your best interest. We just want to cut off your shadow's teeth. Once that's out of the equation, you're free to sojourn here as long as you want."

As if on cue, the bulky fellow seizes the pincers from his friend and steps forward.

I lower my voice, ask, "Anything I should know?"

My shadow stretches around the soles of my shoes, forming a puddle of tar-black matter. "I didn't do anything you wouldn't have done yourself," it says.

The four men await for a declaration of intent. Are they spending the rest of the night going on a crusade or are they doing this in a heartbeat and return back to sleep?

There's the shadow, me, and the car.

Everything else we've lost.

Monica kicked us out. Debbie isn't old enough to vocalize her love for us -- if she harbors any, that is. And our hometown, like most hometowns in this chunk of world, preferred to side against the taciturn man, regardless of proof of guilt.

I ask the men, "Just the teeth?"

"Just the teeth," replies Deiter.

"Alright."

"Yeah?"

"Be quick though."

With that, a sense of relief ripples through the parking lot. The tension slips off their faces. They even allow themselves a faint smile. I take a few steps forward, as to give myself up, then I bolt for the car. I slip inside, lock the doors, turn on the engine. Already they're upon me, banging on the windows and the hood. I put the car into gear. They call me a coward, they call me a two-facer, they shout for someone to alert the police.

The moment stretches.

I felt adrift. Trapped in a world that's rejected me.

Yet another familiar scene.

Maybe I should give up fighting, let them -- let everybody -- strip me off of the miserable life I'm left with. Maybe I should...

"Snap out of it," my shadow's words thunder.

The bulky man stoops by the side of the car, ready to overturn it in one superhuman display of strength. I floor it, the sound of tortured tires scratching against the ground. I cut through the empty parking lot, through the bushes, my eyes glued to the glimpse of street beyond that. Then I enter the syncopated Friday night traffic: the rhythm of freedom.

It still comes as a surprise when the rear windshield shatters, its shriek noise almost makes me swerve into a newspaper kiosk. I glance in the rearview mirror to see the bulky man running after the car, panting. I'd like to flip him off but I decide against it. While it's true that I don't see myself as the bad guy, I'm reluctant to say I am in the right.

I pass an intersection, then a second one, a third. I head as quickly as possible out of town. Now and then I obsessively check if I'm still being chased; all there is now behind me are headlights.

Inside the car, my shadow collects the pincers from the backseat and drops them in the glove compartment. I feel like screaming. Anxieties keep knocking at the door of my mind. I'm low on gas and money; I was hoping to avoid driving for a while. The only option is to start this all over again. I'll get to the next city, clean myself up in a public bathroom (maybe even shave), then search for a new way to legally make a living. The world doesn't pullulate with Samaritans. Deiter was good to me and look how I ended up treating him.

"You have some explaining to do," I say.

Now on the seat adjacent to mine, my shadow boils for a while before saying, "You'd have done the same."

"I'd have bitten a kid?"

"You'd have preserved..."

"Preserved what?"

"Hope, I guess. Sanity."

I have nothing to add to that.

I wait for something more convincing.

"I was getting bored, OK? You were asleep and the car didn't offer much amusement. I wandered around until I found some children in the courtyard of the condo. Despite the late hour they were allowed outdoors; guess the parents considered it a safe area. They had a soccer ball and they had skipping ropes and there was a hopscotch, too. A boy was chalking up everything he could find. I liked his face. I liked his artwork. Then the ball came over. The other kids noticed his drawings and decided to ruin them. I couldn't let them do it, Jos. Most of the drawings, sure. But not that particular one. I told them so and they thought I was just another challenge. They brought over a bucket of water, which I took away without much of a struggle. But then a little pest got his hands on a flashlight and stretched me thin. I had to show them I was being serious."

"All that for a drawing?"

"You'd have done the same." .

I'm not sure I would have.

Picking up on my doubts, the shadow begins twirling on itself. From the middle of its tar body something emerges. Like an iceberg floating to surface, I first notice a whitey dot, then a corner and eventually the whole object bounds free. A rock the size of my hand. Unusually flat. Sketched on one of the wider sides is a girl.

Purple on beige. Barely more detailed than a stickman. A triangle for a skirt. Big, round eyes and toothless smile. Curved pigtailed.

"You'd have done the same."

I realize my fingertips are hurting for squeezing the wheel. I breathe out. Tears well up in my eyes, making it hard to see the road. I stretch out an arm, try to gaze it. The drawing. Debbie. My Debbie. A monotonous thought yo-yo-ing around my skull: I'm not sure I would have. Not anymore.

"My baby girl..."

"It's alright, Jos. We'll earn her back."

The car comes to a half on the side of an unpaved road. Open fields surrounding us. I get out of the car, say, "Stay there," to my shadow. "Stay there, stay there, stay there, stay there! Stay. There."



It mutely obeys.

I breathe in the bedazzled night sky. Where am I? And why? I slip out of my shoes and start heading for the unknown all the while taking off one attire item at a time, until I'm naked, until I'm cold, until I have no past nor present, formless, fearless, just a pair of calloused feet putting one step after the other, one step after another.

### *Don Rigtychy Thelort*



Don Rigtychy Thelort, born in Haiti but grew up in the Dominican Republic, having both sides of the island in his blood made him a perfect dancer, cook, and storyteller is the author of "The Cheating box." English, being his third language after he moved to the United States, it was quite a hard for him to publish his works or translate books written in Spanish. He decided to go to college to better himself studying Creative Writing for Entertainment at Full Sail University. Even if his mom and dad wanted him to be a Doctor or Lawyer, he decided to pursue his will, and with his wife's help, he will make through the Army and the writing market. He is staying at Fort Knox, KY with his two daughters and his lovely wife.

*The Cheating Box*

"Hey, Honey, there is a box in front of our door, did you order something?" asked Margaret after the doorbell rang.

"No, Love, I did not," George replied while Margaret was picking up the package.

"They must have left it here by mistake--" It's not the first time that the Defex guys confuse our address with the neighbors. "Honey, I'm going to ask the neighbors if it's theirs," shouted Margaret.

"But you already know that she has been waiting for this day to prepare the family dinner, I cannot tell her that I am not gonna be able--"

"The neighbor said it is not there's I am going to keep it until the mailman gets here tomorrow," Margaret interrupted George.

"I have to leave, she's here," said George while hanging up the phone.

"Who was it?" asked Margaret.

"It was my boss, remember the contract that I told you that would give us big money? They approved it, now I have to go to the office and sign it."

"But, honey! Today was supposed to be our day, I even made your favorite dish."

"Babe, this contract will save us from this miserable life and we will have the opportunity to stop doing those nasty works for God sake."

"It's our anniversary and I thought--"

"I know it is, Love. I will try my best to come early, I promise," said George before walking out the door.

"Okay, have a nice day at work, I love you." A little I love you back would be nice but let's see what's in this box, thought Margaret while opening the box. It was a normal box, nothing weird about it. Inside it, it contained a Memo that said: "If this box gets delivered to the wrong address, please call this number." She picked up the phone and called, no one was replying, she gave up another try before she gave up and called once again but this time they picked up the phone.

"Hello, I am calling in concern of a box that they left by mistake in my house, hello?" It feels like she was talking to an empty space, she could even hear her voice echoing. She looks at the wires to make sure that the telephone was connected in the right place, but everything was fine, is not a misconnection.

"Hello, you took too long to open the box and call me, if you did it ten minutes ago, he would not be in her arms right now while we are talking," said 'The Voice'

"Who are you?" asked Margaret concerned.

"Margaret, let's say I am a friend that is trying to help you save your marriage."

"My marriage is doing fine and who told you my name?"

"Marge, so innocent. You remind me of myself, so stupid and naive, right now he is with her making love to her, promising her the sky, the moon, and the stars," said 'The Voice' mocking her.

"How do you know that? He would not do that to me!" Margaret cried out.

"You don't believe me, do you? Look inside the box, you'll see a folder that says "Photos" open it."

"Oh my God, no! He is in an interview," Margaret said angrily. "These can't be real, they're not true."

"Marge, darling don't be so stupid, that is what he told you when you find him talking on the phone earlier? An interview for a promotion?" asked 'The Voice' sarcastically.

The anguish was eating Margaret from inside, her bowels shrank while her throat started to get dry. No one knew about George's promotion except her, it was confidential information that was getting revealed. The only thing that got left was to ask "How do you know all those information?"

"How I know does not matter, I told you I am just a friend that wants to help you out."

"Why me? What are you gonna get from this?"

"Stopping a man from hurting more women," 'The Voice' replied gently.

It must be one of George's prank. "How are you gonna help me?" asked Margaret.

The Voice' said, "Tonight at dinner ask him about Patricia, for sure he will act like he doesn't know what you are talking about and that is why I sent you that little potion. It's a serum that will make him talk truthfully," 'The Voice' explained.

"Why would I trust you, I don't even know who you are--"

"It's your decision," said the voice before hanging the phone.

## *Scarlet Leaf Review -August 2017 - No. 3/2017*

It was time to serve the food when George knocked on the door, like a routine, Marge would open the door and they would go to the room and have their fifteen minutes of fame in bed, but the lipstick on George's collar denied all those options.

It has to be a joke or I am the dumbest human being on earth for him to not even change that shirt before getting home, that Rose's Mary smell is not new, he used to use that perfume every time that we had to meet each other behind Johanna's back. Dinner was served on the table and both of them were sitting down enjoying the food when suddenly Margaret asked, "How was the meeting with Patricia, Love?" He choked on his water, he did not reply back and kept eating his food.

"By the way, the whole food is poisoned," Margaret said to George as he coughed

"Margaret stop that nonsense, now you are acting like Johana with all those accusations"

"Do not compare me with her, because you did the same thing to her doesn't mean that would happen to me, you'll stick with me no matter what. You think I didn't see that red lipstick on your collar?"

"Love, Johanna died months ago, how could I be cheating on you with her?"

"You think I am stupid or something, if you are not gonna be mine you won't be for her neither"

"Love, what did you put on the food."

"You think I am playing, tell me who is Patri-" She didn't finish when George's phone started to ring, it was Patricia's number, violently Marge ripped the phone from George hands and someone answered "No one takes someone else husband without suffering, now feel the pain that i felt when you took him from me." after those words she hung up and Margaret's throat started to swell up, she tried to recall the number on the box but it sent her to the voicemail "Hello this is Johanna please leave your message if you can."



### *Afzal Nusker*

Afzal Nusker lives in Kolkata, India. Inclination towards literature and arts is there in him since childhood. He enjoys writing poems and hopes to publish his poetry books soon. Some of his poems have been published in anthologies by Lost Tower Publications.

#### *AMOUR*

Abloom desires in heart,  
allured by temptation.  
All ready to burn in  
aroused flames of wild lust.  
Aware of the torment,  
anguished mind forewarns me.  
"Amour shall end with pain!"

#### *BRAWL*

Blazing flames of wild rage  
burning heart like a coal.  
Bold abusive curses  
boiling blood like diesel.  
Blatant hot arguments  
broiling brains into fumes.  
Brawl ends with rued ashes!



*Hidden sparks in ashes*

Yes I have been burned down into cold grievous ashes.  
But in ashes still lies the glimmering sparks of my strength.  
My spirit is still aglow by the fire that burns within me.  
The fiery hope that holds me strong to overcome my ruins.

I will rise from these cold and wet ashes, spark by spark.  
A regal incarnation will it be with an avatar of new flames.  
Once I'm ablaze standing tall there will be no fading out.  
You haven't seen the last of me yet, the spark is still there.



*Charlotte Ozment*

**Charlotte Ozment** lives on several acres in Texas. Random words and phrases come to mind through-out her day, which she can sometimes put to paper before they fade. Her work has previously appeared in Carcinogenic Poetry and Babel Lit, and will soon appear in Poetry Repairs and Eternal Haunted Summer.

*Flood*

The miles pass by  
in the pouring rain

click - click - click - click

To roads unknown,  
roads not known

In this hazy realm, I can almost

I'm left stand in front of an  
empty house, wondering if  
I should follow,  
standstill,  
move on

So it's back to the road  
and the pouring rain

click - click - click - click

hear your whispered petition to

Come here  
Come by  
Come be

But you're not there when I  
arrive, for you've left for  
other roads without me

Pouring in,  
flooding the car,  
flooding my heart,  
flooding. . . .

Where the fuck  
is Noah  
when you need him?

*Yester*

Sun seated low,  
a fading light dulling to dinge  
When suddenly,  
sparks and dynamic hues erupt  
and cross our vistas gazing  
This makes one think,  
but for a moment, mind you,  
that there is more to life becoming

And then, in drifts a weary frost,  
settling down between gnarled joints  
propped askew for balance  
All that heat and life,  
once baked into each and every ebb  
and furrow, released when vision mattes

I can't see too clearly now  
but. . . .

Doesn't this seem familiar?

Haven't we danced this path before?  
I seem to recall. . . .  
No, no maybe not

But what about that firefly arcing  
there?  
And that brilliant snap of red nestled deep  
into a carved hollow of evening dew  
here?

No. . . .  
I guess you are right

It is only a reflection  
of an old man's northerly departure  
from this landscape inhabited by  
repercussions,  
stamped with regret and a yearning  
for just one more cycle  
of season

*Sylvana Accom*



**Sylvana Accom** grew up in South Africa, one of the most beautiful countries in the world. She likes writing, reading, naturistic walks and inter-relating with folks all across the board, believing that we are all here for some purpose, even certain people in life can't wipe that part of one's destiny.

*Tata Madiba*

Amandla, Tata Madiba, Amandla  
To the one who's life was depleted by his oppressors  
Yet after condemning his soul  
Unto the confinements of prison walls could not take away  
The candeur of his spirit  
To this day so many take up arms in your name with the banter of their  
Thunderous voices  
Yet did they even walk upon the walls of your soul  
Could they even touch the latitudes of your pain  
Yet despite through it all  
Your heartache, pain, suffering, anguish.....  
Turned the numbness of your silent yearnings into  
Forgiveness, acceptance and love;  
Can't these ignorant, shallow beings see what you saw.....  
Can't they just see the world through your eyes.....  
But how could they  
Can one compare and measure one's individuality and sense  
Of mortal integrity you excelled beyond your circumstances  
Can't the world just see through your humble humanity  
That you did not let the difficulties of life hamper  
Your ultimate goal to create harmony in a world  
Which is ceasing to exist  
So, Tata Madiba, pray, this world's unrelentless vision does not slip  
Away from the mantle of it's human shell  
But let your life's journey make them realize that in the face of hatred  
The seeds of prosperity cannot grow  
But in love let your light shine like a bright star over the toils of the human souls afflictions that destroy the inner light of  
mortals man proselyting himself  
To the confinements of the world and not the forbearance of God,  
Tata Madiba, as peace flows from you, may the peace of God restore this broken world  
To the purpose of the way God intended it to be.....

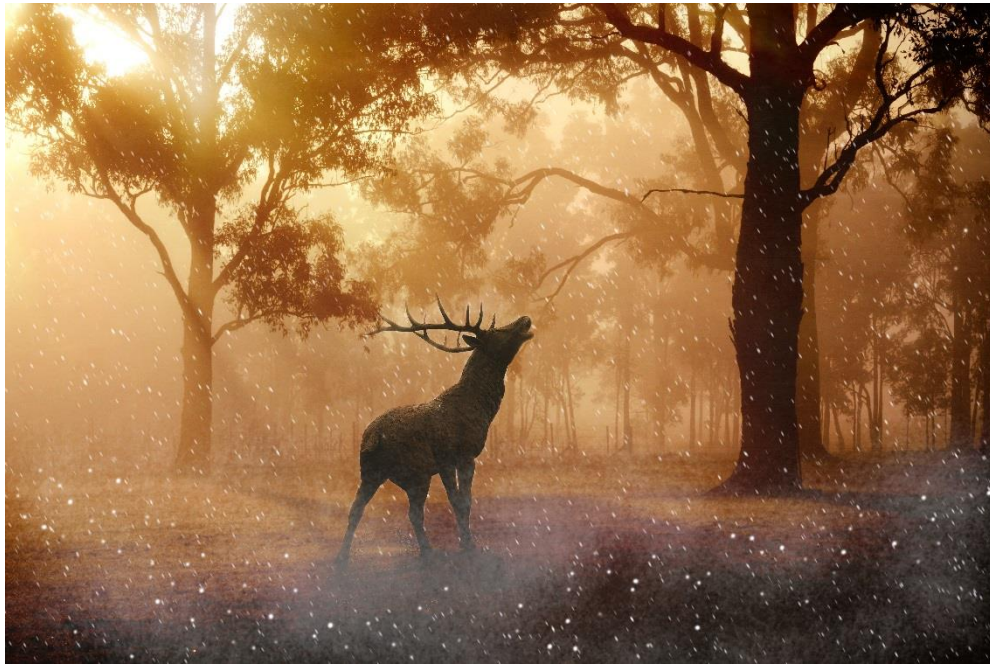
*Owen S. Woods*

**Owen S. Woods** is a full time Creative Writing. He has two published works of flash fiction, "Junky Stickup" and "Till Next Time." He writes weird fiction, often horror, sometimes comedy, never romance. Lives in Colorado with a large bookshelf and too much free time on his hands

*Beasty*

“Come now, beasty,” The Hunter said, crunching and sifting through the snow and leaves. A rifle slung over his shoulder and a shotgun rest, comfortably, in his gloved hands. They were an Italian leather, with a warm, wool in-lining.

I sat upon a branch, just above his head. Covered in snow, I crouched, patiently waiting. For what, I don’t know. My own demise? My time to strike, to pounce? To escape? Yet, he still shuffled through the snow, combatting the wind as it stung his face. He was shivering, but continued on anyway. I found the snow blanket warm, I was nearly comfortable.



Then The Hunter said, “You have nowhere to go, Beasty. Come out and let us finish this childish folly.” He stopped and sat against a tree. He pulled out his pipe and puffed.

I watched him for some time. After three packs of tobacco, he got up and left. I suppose his plan had failed. He is quite patient. Careful, too—taking his ash with him as he left. Smart fellow.

“Come now, Beasty. You don’t have the energy for this, neither do I. It’ll be swift. That’s my offer. I won’t skin you alive or string you up by your entrails.”

It was a tempting offer. Still, I remained upon the branch, waiting. I was in no hurry to leave or to give myself up. Besides, I was comfortable now. No sense in leaving if I’m warm. The snow up here was thick, but I could see him as clear as a cloudless day. The full moon would have been elegant, if you could see it. It would have lit the whole wood up, snap, just like that.

The Hunter trekked, looking in every which way while he stands in a clearing, listening to everything around him. He believes me to be a fool and move around. Ha! It makes for quite the laugh, but nothing else. He was good, although took me for a fool far too often.

The snow fell in dense waves on the wood. The Hunter built a small camp and rested. When he lit the fire, I no longer had the urge to wait. I was ready. So was he.

I slunk down the tree and landed oh so softly into the fresh powder. It was nearly as tall as I! I was being looked out for. A pitch in my direction. I crept low to The Hunter’s camp. He sat on a rock eating a plate of meat and one egg. He sipped coffee and stared into the fire. His eyes battled the stress of sleep for some time. Before long, he crept into his leaning tent. A revolver went under his pillow.

I waited three hours or so before I finally said, "Come now, Beasty."  
"There you are," he said from inside his shelter.  
"You have nowhere to go, Beasty. Come out and let us finish this childish folly."  
"Oh. That's how this is. I see. Splendid." He stirred around inside his shelter, then sat up.  
I watched from behind a tall oak tree. Sixty feet or so in the air. His fire crackled still in the embers. A small branch was charred but untouched by the flames, lying within.  
He stretched and touched his toes, then tried to slip on his leather gloves. I had put snow in them while he slept, they were frozen solid.  
"Oh, Beasty, where are you?"  
I waited again. Not long this time. I waited until he went to stir the fire and place another branch over the top. I waited until he slung the shotgun over his back and slinked off to piss.  
I crept under the powder, moving so slow, yet with great efficiency. His bait were held about the front of his trousers as I leapt from underneath. I bit down and got his throat.  
I was fast.  
So was the hunter.  
So fast, in fact, he stuck me between the ribs with his favorite knife.

### *Nicholas Slade*

his



**Nicholas Slade**, a self-proclaimed Literary Architect, Screenwriting Wizard, and Brigadier General of Fantastika, could best be described by those who know him as a functioning madman of imagination. He has been previously published in Yesteryear Fiction, Story Shack, and Farther Stars Than These. His humble origin story began in a small town in southern Mississippi. He grew up reading the works of J.R.R. Tolkien and watching the films of Walt Disney and Studio Ghibli. The superb storylines and unforgettable characters ignited his passion for writing. That fire took him to Full Sail University where he earned BFA in Creative Writing for Entertainment.

### *The Runaround*

This was it. My big break. That was all I could think about as I sat in on the briefing of the upcoming case. I was a junior officer at the time with the Capital Police Department and had recently joined the team as a probationary officer. I took every opportunity to prove myself, waiting at the end of my shift every day hoping for the chance to do a couple of more hours of plain-clothes duty. This was my chance, and a big one at that.

The Chief informed the team of a series of drug deals that had been spotted going down around a nearby fishing village down south. No one knew how many dealers there actually were or what they looked like, as they always hid their faces and never worked anywhere within a mile of any officers. We didn't know how they kept out of sight, but we knew going in the blue was not an option. That was when the Chief came up with this plain-clothes operation.

I was one of the officers assigned to plain-clothes foot patrol to locate any suspects. This was my opportunity, I thought, to finally prove to myself and everyone else, that I, Harry Milton, was the kind of cop that this department needed.

Once I arrived at the location, I diligently patrolled up and down the street, posing as an average Joe, searching for any clues that could lead to a suspect.

"The streets are quiet," I said. "Much too quiet for my taste."

## *Scarlet Leaf Review -August 2017 - No. 3/2017*

I finally got the lead I needed when a report came in of a suspicious looking male who was spotted on one of the side roads near my location. The CCTV (closed circuit TV) operator, who I only knew as Davis, had the suspect on camera. I listened in closely as the operator led me to the suspect. Each time I called in my location, the operator would yell, "You're right on his heels."

It was like I had a sixth sense. Every time I darted into another side alleyway, it was the same alleyway the suspect had run into, but every time Davis asked what I could see, all I could say was "nothing." It was like this guy was a ghost. I seemed to be closing in on him, but I could never catch up close enough to lay my eyes on the suspect.

I followed the suspect's trail for about twenty minutes. "This is a tricky fellow," I said. "I'm going to have to be a lot quicker to catch this one."

I couldn't mess this up. I had to catch this guy if I ever wanted to prove myself as a top cop.

I was later told that back at headquarters a mixed look of confusion and frustration was pasted all over Davis' face. "I don't understand this," said Davis through his clenched teeth. "How is it that Milton keeps missing him?"

Sergeant John Parker, my superior, had then apparently walked into the control room to confer with the Chief and the operator. "Okay, Davis," he said. "Let me see the suspect for myself." Davis played him the live footage. When Sergeant Parker saw the suspect, he laughed hysterically as Davis looked at him with puzzlement. "Get me Milton on the radio," Parker said through his laughter.

Back on the streets, I was still searching for the suspect when Sergeant Parker radioed in.

"Milton, Milton are you there?"

I picked up my radio. "Yes, I'm here Sergeant. Do you have new information of the suspect?"

"Yes. I have an exact description on what the suspect is wearing."

This was it, I thought. I would catch this "ghost" for sure now.

"Go ahead."

"The suspect is wearing a black shirt, blue jeans, and a brown jacket."

"Great," I said with a smile. "I'll be sure to look out for that."

I ran a few paces when I stopped in my tracks. I pondered for a moment before I closed my eyes in disbelief. I gained the courage to open my eyes and look down at myself and at what I was wearing:

Black shirt. Blue jeans. Brown jacket.

I realized immediately what had happened: The suspect, the so-called "ghost" that I had been chasing, was myself all along.

I went to lift the radio up to my mouth, but I pulled it back down. I walked up the no longer quiet street; the only sound I could now hear was the Sergeant's roaring laughter from the radio.

A disaster, I thought, an unmitigated disaster. I was humiliated. My dream was dead. No one would ever take me seriously again.

These thoughts raced through my head as my soft steps turned into earth shattering stomps. My teeth grit so hard that I felt I could bite through steel. I had never been so angry, so furious in my entire life. The anger blocked everything out, including the sounds of oncoming footsteps.

I stopped, fuming in my ire. I closed my eyes, reached my arm back, and threw the hardest punch I had ever thrown in my life, but the expected feeling of empty air and the sound of whooshing wind were instead replaced by the feeling of a human skull and the sound of broken cartilage. I opened my eyes and saw a man in a heavy coat flying backwards through the air, landing hard on the ground with a loud thump.

My eyes widened as my mind caught up to what it had seen. My mouth gaped as I tried to hold in the screaming that was going on inside my head. The man was lying motionless as my panic began to set in.

"Oh, dear God, what have I done?"

The previous anger at my humiliation was now gone, replaced by a new sense of dread.

"I just punched a civilian."

Forget punched, I knocked him the hell out.

I walked over to make sure he was still breathing. Luckily he was, but that did nothing to ease my panicked state.

"Here I was worried about being laughed at for the rest of my career. After this I won't even have a career."

My mind raced, but it only kept going in circles. What should I do? I thought. I couldn't just leave him there and even if I did it wouldn't take too long to trace this disaster back to me. Oh, what a way for a career to end.

After going through all five stages of acceptance simultaneously, I snapped out of my funk to hear the sound of approaching footsteps.

That's it, I thought. It's over.

I looked up to see my colleague, Officer Brown, running towards me. He was breathless and sweating like a fountain. He stopped next to the victim and placed his hands on his knees, trying his best to catch his breath. He slowly turned and looked at the victim and then back to me with one eyebrow raised, all the while wheezing away.

"Now, Brown, I know this looks bad, but there is perfectly good reason for this scene."

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Officer Brown stood up and slowly walked over to me. I knew I was in for a tongue-lashing and I deserved it. I closed my eyes and braced for the oncoming storm when I felt Brown's hand on my shoulder. I opened my eyes to see Officer Brown smiling ear to ear.

"Good job, lad," he said. "I couldn't have done it better myself."

To say that I was confused would be an understatement.

"I caught this guy selling some hard stuff to a couple of kids by the docks. I must have chased him for five blocks before I lost sight of him. I radioed ahead and his description and it looks like you heard it. Good thing you were here to take him out. After the Chief hears about this, I'm sure you'll be going places in no time."

I looked down at the man who I had previously thought was just a simple victim of my wrath, but who instead was a criminal on the run. My mind had no idea how to process this. I went from chasing myself into a box of rage and humiliation to literally busting my way out. All I could do was laugh.

### *Heath Brougher*



Heath Brougher is the poetry editor of Five 2 One Magazine and co-poetry editor of Into the Void Magazine (winner of the 2017 Saboteur Award for Best Magazine). He has published three chapbooks, "A Curmudgeon Is Born" (Yellow Chair Press 2016), "Digging for Fire" and "Your Noisy Eyes" (both by Stay Weird and Keep Writing Press 2016). He is a Best of the Net Nominee and his work has been translated into Albanian. He was the judge of Into the Void Magazine's 2016 Poetry Competition and edited the anthology "Luminous Echoes," the sales of which will be donated to help with the prevention of suicide/self-harm. His work has appeared or is due to be published in Of/with, Chiron Review, Main Street Rag, The Angry Manifesto, Mobius, Blue Mountain Review, The Seventh Quarry, Harbinger Asylum, eFiction India, Gold Dust, Third Wednesday, Cruel Garters, Glom Cupboard, W.I.S.H. Picaroon Poetry, \*82 Review, Otoliths, Fowl Feathered Review, BlazeVOX, Leaves of Ink, A New Ulster, Madness Muse Magazine, Blue Mountain Review, and elsewhere.

*Searing Mouths*

Fire on a soul let  
life rear up in age  
and age till a better taste  
for the elderly can bloom—  
not a crooked age,  
only even numbers—  
they are the ones of the ripest taste  
fire soul ablaze inhaling  
last drop, last alcoholic  
trifle of rain.

The glass door opens its mouth  
to eat  
on fire  
the Souls.

*A Letter to Mirrorism*

Dear Mirrorism,

of the learned Manmade  
rectangular world of monotony  
sneezed into the brain  
by infectious props of biased proclivity.  
Commercial after commercial  
billboard after billboard  
teacher after teacher—

you best be  
on the lookout!  
I've been thinking  
and have figured out  
how to break these chains  
and have been swirling upon Spirals outward  
into the Great Fathomlessness.

Sincerely,

One of your former slaves

.

You are a Commodity

You hawk the Chinese wares  
just as you were instructed  
to do you entire life  
by the dense and insane teachers  
and enforcers of the meaningless Manmade  
Realities  
which exist in the world  
you were born into  
for they have branded you  
as they foolishly believe  
there is such a thing as Ownership.

These thoughts are so deeply embedded  
that it's virtually impossible  
not to work yourself into a fury  
at your inability to shake  
some sense out of their blank zombie stares  
held firmly upon their faces  
as if they had accidentally glued on a mask



*Bubble Gum Freedom*

Freedom is now Freedown, Freedrown,  
a fabrication; an illusion  
made by the herd's slave owners  
to keep them caged  
while they pour Free Dumb  
straight down their throats  
by means of rampant propaganda—

the television and internet are the main funnels of misinformation  
in this land of illusion within illusion within illusion within illusion.

*Creative Differences*

One person says it should be this way.  
Another person says it should be that way.  
Each a firm believer in THEIR perception  
of how it should be. The disagreement slowly  
turns into full-blown argument as Egos  
begin to inflate themselves until they've reached  
the point of such a bloating that they slowly begin  
to take up more and more space of the room  
until the rift in opinion carries on to the point of no return,  
at which the Egos are left with no more space whatsoever,  
not even a single tiny pocket of air left to gasp from now and then.  
Eventually it POPS! and EXPLODES! by the iron-willed  
ignorance on both sides. Leaves it laying in ruins  
and all that can be hoped for is that the two  
people defy the odds and remain friends  
instead of turning into Enemies as per usual  
occurrence in such situations of over-fueled Egos.



*Nels Johnson*

**Nels Johnson** is a lawyer, lobbyist writer living in Portland, Oregon with his wife and dog. His work has been published in local and regional publications. His piece "Sitting in a Bar" was published in the December 2016 edition of the Scarlet Leaf Review. You can usually find him writing in darkly lit bars and coffee shops around Portland. Follow him on Twitter @mnelsjohnson.

*The Red Guitar*

R. J.'s flaming-red guitar was famous around the church. He was the worship leader, and on Sundays he'd pull the guitar out, crank up the volume, and lead the congregation into a state of rapture and ecstasy. "Holy Is the Lord," that worship song from the early 1990s, was usually the big finale, played to get the congregation on their feet and hooting and hollering after the time of reflection. R. J. was a Pentecostal and believed those who were saved should shout thanks to the Lord and raise their hands in adoration.

R. J. would start his worship set strumming a few power chords, slowly building in volume with the rhythm and arc of the song. People would start by sitting in the pews but gradually stand as the Spirit or R. J.'s guitar moved them. Mrs. Vanderpool, the old widow from the upper valley, was always the first one raising her hands as high as they would go, trying to touch the face of God. As R. J.'s guitar got louder, her hands lifted higher and higher, frozen and outstretched. She stood on her tiptoes and shook in fervent determination to finally reach the places she'd never been able to reach before.

Once Mrs. Vanderpool got going, Mrs. Mclsaac would follow. Mrs. Mclsaac was around the same age as Mrs. Vanderpool. Her two children were grown and had been out of the house for years and never came around anymore. Folks in the church worried about her because she got to saying that the reason why she never turned her heat on in the winter anymore was because the Lord told her to have faith. She'd worn the same faded and threadbare coat every day through each of her ten cold and wet Oregon winters. Her slim figure was now as thin as a sapling. But her poverty never mattered to her, especially when she heard that red guitar play, carrying her prayers straight to Jesus himself.

Reverend Carter was a carpenter by trade and preacher by calling. He fancied himself like the Apostle Paul: carpentry was his tent making, but the ministry was his real work. He hadn't gone to college or some fancy seminary somewhere back East but instead spent his years reading the Good Book, and believing every word in it. When he wasn't swinging his hammer and pounding nails, he was thumbing through his well-worn King James leather-bound Bible. Some of the pages had become so tattered and the ink so smeared you could barely make out the red letters. Reverend Carter said the mark of a good Bible was a well-worn one—it showed that the owner had a healthy fear of the wrath of God and a desire to be saved by his mercy.

Reverend Carter believed that you could get saved through music. He'd seen it hundreds of times over the years as he preached the Gospel. Someone would show up to church, heart hardened, desperate, back sliding, and living a life of total depravity. But then they'd sit back, settle into the service, listen to the Word be preached from the pulpit, and God would start to do something in their heart. Pretty soon the sermon started to make sense, their internal walls would start to crumble as the Gospel would make its way past the person's defenses, closing in on their heart. Then, the music would start, and the Holy Spirit would descend and remove the shackles of blindness and sin from their eyes, and they'd break down in tears and total surrender and get saved right then and there. Reverend Carter didn't just believe that you could get saved through music—he expected it.

"Can any of y'all tell me if Jesus's in the house today?" R. J. called out to the congregation. "Praise him." He was vamping now, playing the same simple melody over and over, settling into a tight, crunchy progression of power chords with his right hand muting the strings in a staccato buildup aimed at unleashing the congregation's pent-up emotion once the song slowly climaxed.

"Praise ya', Lawd!" Mrs. Vanderpool wailed, her whole body trembling as the Holy Spirit start to wash over. R. J.'s power guitar howled on, creating space for salvation.

The louder R. J. played, the more he vamped, the more he noodled on solos, the more the temperature of the room increased and the mood of the people became wild, more expressive, more passionate. His guitar playing gave them all the release they were looking for. When he played, it seemed like he had a full band behind him, even though it was just him. He'd use his loop pedal to lay down a percussion line, loop it in, add a rhythm guitar line, loop it in, and keep building and building until he'd created his own powerful sixteen-piece band. Every new layer brought another person from the congregation to their feet, or caused them to shout out.

"Who here's had a long week?" R. J. asked, his voice still raspy with morning fog as he continued the buildup.

"Lawd help me, I have!" Mr. Wimmers called back, eyes closed, his head slowly shaking back and forth as he engaged in silent communion with God.

"Church, d'you wanna be saved by Jesus?" R. J. said as he continued his call and response.

"Lawd, have mercy on me!" another voice cried out.

"I said, church, d'you wanna be saved by the blood of Christ today? D'you wanna experience repentance and forgiveness for all of your sins?" R. J. said, more urgently, his voice getting louder.

"Jeeezus save us!" the church replied, collectively emphasizing and drawing out the vowels of the Holy Redeemer's name.

The prayers and gentle outbursts by the members were now coming at regular intervals, just like one of R. J.'s loops.

"Jay-sus, save us. Jay-sus save us." People would individually call out, each worshipping from the intimate confine of their own mind. Every repetition of the mantra increased the tension and dissonance in the sanctuary.

Whooom! R. J. suddenly clamped his right hand down on his guitar strings and stomped on his loop pedal, silencing his layered symphony. All that was audible was the soft and urgent groans and cries of the church, each person locked into worship, each communicating with God directly, each in such a focused state of urgency that the outside world was shut out of their thoughts. All that mattered was before them—a longing, delicate, and open line of communication directly to God. The Holy Spirit descended on the congregation, wafting in between the churchgoers. The air inside the sanctuary was thick and heavy with emotion, stifling even, with women using the church bulletins to fan themselves. As the seconds silent of R. J.'s guitar ticked by, the tension continued to mount, and the cries to heaven continued to grow and grow until they could not be held back anymore. The church was reaching its apex.

Thud. Thud. Thud. Thud. Thud. Thud. Thud. R. J. thumped his right fist over the pickup of his guitar in rhythmic fashion, each strike hitting harder and faster than the one before. All of a sudden, he stomped his loop pedal, and the sixteen-piece band came roaring back to life.

"Holy is the Lord. Holy is the Lord!" R. J. cried as the church boiled over.

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"Worthy, worthy, worthy is our God."

Everyone extended their hands to heaven, feet dancing in the aisles as the Holy Spirit came upon the Church of the Holy Redeemer.

"Lord, I come before you this mornin' as somebody who's naked an' afraid, impure, covered'n sin and mud, in need of your holy cleansing. Father, forgive me, for I have sinned," he whispered into the early morning darkness. First light was still an hour away. The stillness of his quiet bedroom unnerved him a little but he continued anyway.

He lowered his head, "Lord, please, please forgive me" he said, this time with a little more urgency as he thought about all the times he'd sinned this past week – looking at a woman with a lustful heart, drinking too much, sneaking away to a card game at the bar just outside of town; more lustful thoughts towards women. By this time his eyes were firmly closed shut out of reverence and supplication.

"Lord, I know I ain't no good without you. I know that all I do is sin all the time, I just can't help it. Please Jesus, won't chu save me?" R. J. asked meekly, his voice hoarse with emotion at the guilt he felt. He hadn't been any more sinful this week than any other week, but the thought of disappointing God, of sinning repeatedly had left him racked with guilt – again. His eyes were still closed, his fists clenched as he sprawled his long frame out on the floor in his room, naked and face down in the carpet; an act of total surrender before God.

"Lord!" he croaked, barely able to make audible sounds as the guilt had firmly set into his heart. "I feel horrible, I've let'chu down, I know I have, I can't help but sin. Please, please help me t' not to sin no more. I know what I do's wrong and offends you but I jus' can't help it."

R. J. laid there, quiet and unmoving, sprawled out on the carpet in his room, waiting for the Holy Spirit to come upon him, free his heart from his sins and his mind from condemnation. He hated this. He hated sinning but he was too weak to do otherwise. He was tired of living this way.

He laid on the floor of his bedroom for about an hour until the sun came up, emotionally raw and empty, but slowly feeling better. The as the guilt resided with the rising sun, replaced by the return of his normal thoughts, God's grace seemed nowhere to be found. But at least he'd gotten right with the Lord. Again.

...

R. J. was walking to church like he did every Sunday morning. He loved the big white bundle of steam that came out of his mouth every time he exhaled. It was one of those rare crisp and clear fall mornings in Oregon, piercing bright light, free of the burdens of rain and fog. The leaves were showing off their full range of colors, bright reds, yellows, and browns. The rising sun illuminated his 7:00 a.m. hike from his house in the hills, about two miles away from the church. The early morning was still and silent, the town and the day not yet fully awake. R. J. always preferred to walk to church on Sundays rather than drive. The fresh air gave him time to think, reflect, and get in touch with the Holy Spirit so that he'd be able to get the congregation saved.

Occasionally R. J. softly sang bits and pieces of his favorite hymns and worship songs. This morning he realized he was trying to remember a new worship song he'd heard on the radio. It was strange it had stuck with him, since he wasn't one of those guitar players who was acquainted with every song under the sun, and he wasn't in the habit of chasing after new tunes just because they were new.

R. J. cut quite the peculiar figure walking down the gravel road, clutching his cased red guitar, his old flapjack hat pulled low over his ears and his bushy reddish beard sticking out in all directions. R. J.'s long, loping gait and his tall, pencil-thin frame made his shadow look like one of those wind-up jack-in-the-boxes that had just popped. His shoulders mechanically moved up and down in a slightly off, disjointed way. When he was in high school, he figured out how to turn his long, shambling frame to his advantage when Coach Willis taught him how to do the long jump. He was one of the best long jumpers in the Columbia Gorge and even placed at state one year.

Suddenly, a Steller's Jay's harsh high-pitched cackle cried out from his right, interrupting his thoughts. R. J. looked up and saw the bird's black-and-brown head about three-quarters of the way up an oak tree, serenading the world with its morning hollering. R. J. didn't care much for Steller's Jays—their calls sounded more like caterwauling to him. He preferred the nice mellow warble of a swallow. However, he did admire that the Steller's Jay was crafty enough to mimic other birds, like the red-shouldered hawk, all in an effort to scare off predators. R. J. liked the way that the bird could use its voice to get other creatures to believe it was something other than a plain old Steller's Jay.

....

Ronald James Townshend Jr. grew up about halfway between the church and where he lived now, just outside of town in the foothills of Oak Hill. His father, Ronald Sr., was a mechanic, good at fixing farm equipment, while his mother, Millie, had stayed at home tending to R. J. and his six older siblings. The family lived off of the meager earnings from Ronald Sr.'s mechanic shop and the bit of profit Millie made from farming the family's homestead.

The Townshend family history had been rooted firmly in Catholicism, but the roots started to die in the 1960s after Vatican II. Ronald Sr. felt like the church stopped standing up for God's teachings and, thought the Pope was giving in to the hippies and beatniks by allowing priests to protest the Vietnam War, a real travesty and a betrayal of folks like Ronald Sr., who had fought and bled during WWII. It felt like the Pope was betraying his sacred duty. So by the time R. J. was born in 1970, the family found Pentecostalism to be the true embodiment of the Holy Scriptures, with its passion for saving people, condemning sin and sinners to hell, and experiencing the Fruits of the Spirit. By the time R. J. was in high school, Ronald Sr. was a lay pastor leading the congregation to revival every Wednesday night at the Church of Apostolic Faith in Jesus Christ, located just on the edge of Oak Hill. Ronald Sr. would vigorously implore the church to confess their sins and repent so as not to end up in the fiery lake of hell, eternally separated from Jesus Christ.

Every Wednesday Ronald Sr. would speak out in front of the congregation, boldly proclaiming his faith, and the Lord would use him to save the congregation. Listening to his father preach left R. J. in awe of the power of the Gospel and the lengths people would go to experience it. Ronald Sr. would shout at the congregation, "The world'll tell ye the devil don't exist, he ain't real, he's just a figment of your imagination or some ol' crazy old time religion that only holy rollers and trash believe in." He spit out the word figment with contempt. "Well, I'm here t' tell you that such a statement is from the devil himself! From the fiery pits-a hell! Repent! Don'tchu ever, ever, ever pay the devil no mind! In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was wit' God. You is gonna die in the flesh someday. Do you know Jesus? Is you saved? 'Cause if you ain't, you is goin' straightta hell. It's black-and-white. The Lord will separate the wheat from the chaff, the sheep from the wolves. Is you a sheep? I'm here ta tell ya tonight that if you ain't saved, you ain't a sheep.

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"But fear not, for God so loved the whole entire world that he gave his only begotten son, and whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life. Do you want everlasting life? Do you want a life lived in the Spirit of the Lord? Well, then, get down on your knees and pray! Pray that God will save your soul! Pray that God will forgive you of your sins! Pray that God will banish all traces of evil from your heart! Pray that God will bless you with the gifts of the Holy Spirit that you might be able to speak to him in tongues."

When he was seventeen years old, R. J. got saved one Wednesday night when his father was urging the congregation to repent and seek the Holy Spirit. Though he'd heard his father give similar sermons countless times, for whatever reason, this one stuck. He didn't remember the exact words that his father used, but he remembered feeling a sense of warmth and hope comfort him. He couldn't explain it really, but on that night, the Holy Spirit left him a weepy mess, crying out to the Lord in worship. He suddenly felt lightheaded, but his body didn't move. It was like he was looking down on himself from above. His heart was burning hot, and he felt a sense of peace he'd never felt before or since.

R. J. loved getting saved. He would get saved again and again, often after a particularly long bout with lust or pornography, or depression. But the Lord was always good to him, always forgave him, always saved him, though it never felt quite like it did that first time and lately it hadn't felt like much at all.

R. J. started playing guitar at about the same time he got saved for the first time. He played by himself for a couple of months, learning chords and playing hymns along with the Gaither Family old time radio broadcasts.

...

"Praise the Lord!" Reverend Carter bellowed. "Praise the Lord! Can I get an amen?"

"Ay-men, Rev'nd, hallelujah," the congregation replied.

"It is a good day to worship the Lord, is it not?"

"Sure is, Rev'nd!"

I've got a fire in my stomach today, a fire that is only from the Holy Spirit." Reverend Carter clutched an old beat-up microphone in one hand and clasped at his heart with the other. It was eight fifty-nine, one minute before church was supposed to start, but Reverend Carter was already getting himself worked up.

As he continued to whip the congregation into frenzy, talking about the need to expel the week's sin, he started pacing back and forth across the worn stage. With every staccato phrase that burst from his mouth, his voice grew louder and louder and he started pacing, flying back and forth across the stage.

"And the blood of Jesus is as real today as it was when the Jews shed it two thousand years ago, and that blood is just as good today as it was yesterday and as it will be tomorrow. Amen!?"

"Ay-men, Rev'nd!"

"Praise you, Jesus!" Mrs. Vanderpool cried with her hands lifted high.

As Reverend Carter continued his Sunday morning ritual with his usual command for repentance in the face of the advances by the devil himself, R. J. couldn't help but let his mind wander, thinking about leaving town for a bit, maybe heading down South to somewhere warm, maybe trying something new. He'd been listening to Reverend Carter deliver some form of this sermon every Sunday for the past fifteen years. Every week was largely the same. Repent, rebuke the devil, throw yourself at alter of the Lord, and beg for mercy. Anyone who didn't do this was liable to end up in hell, eternally separated from Jesus. God only gives so many second chances. You have free will for a reason, and if you don't make the most of it, then the devil will. It wasn't that R. J. disagreed with what Reverend Carter was preaching, or that he wanted to start backsliding or something. It was just that after hearing these threats of damnation every Sunday year after year, they didn't seem as serious and as real as they once did. R. J. didn't feel like repenting this morning, but was still afraid that failing to do so would somehow land him in hell if he weren't careful. Frankly, R. J. had stopped feeling close to God, and going through machinations to get saved every Sunday wasn't helping. This made it hard to go up on stage and pretend that he was into it, that he was examining deep in his soul, confessing all of his sins and getting ready to be saved. Maybe he needed to take some time and try something else. Maybe he just needed to try harder.

"R. J.! R. J. Townshend, why don'tchu come on up here!" Reverend Carter shouted, startling R. J. out of his daydream. "Bring that red guitar o' yours. It's time to praise the Lord!" Reverend Carter said, emphasizing the word praise long and hard, like an auctioneer or used-car salesman would.

"Church, are you ready to worship the Lord? Are you ready to repent? Are you ready to fall on your faces before our lord and savior Jesus Christ? The Holy of Holies, the Alpha and Omega, the Great Lion? The Slayer of Sin? The Messiah? I hear the Lord telling me there is sin in our midst this morning—confess it! Repent! Get on your knees and pray to God for your salvation! Stop backsliding! Our God is a good God, but a God whose angry wrath must be satisfied.

"I need a prayer. I need a song. I need the voices of this church to carry my prayers to Jesus. I need you to worship like you've never worshiped before!"

That was R. J.'s line to start strumming his red guitar, working his way into the chords of "Open the Eyes of My Heart." As he started strumming, an electricity filled the room. Suddenly, everyone was quiet and focused, swaying to the rhythm of his chord progression, eyes shut in fervent prayer, their communion with God occasionally interrupted by Reverend Carter imploring the congregation to spill their whole souls before the Lord.

"Open the eyes of my heart/Open the eyes of my heart/I want to see you," R. J. crooned softly. By this time, the fervent silent prayers of the congregation were slowly turning vocal, with Mrs. Vanderpool taking the lead, crying out to God, telling him and everyone else how much she needed Jesus and how much of a sinner she was.

R. J. repeated this verse four or five times, each time sung with a little more urgency and intensity, all building toward the powerful chorus. The last time through the verse, R. J. played the chords muted, which was the sign to the congregation that the crescendo—the burst of energy found in the chorus—was coming.

"To see you high and lifted up/Shining in the light of your glory."

"Yes, praise you, Jesus!"

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The entire congregation was in ecstasy, hips moving to the rhythm, hands thrown in the air, trying to touch the face of God. People were dancing in the aisle, shouting their fears and praises to God and anyone else who was listening. With so many people praising the Lord, it was hard to tell who was behind the individual voices that would occasionally rise above the cacophony.

Even though he'd played these exact same songs in the exact same way virtually every Sunday for as long as he could remember, R. J. still derived some joy from it. Not from the music itself—no, that was stale to him, though he didn't mind playing things the same way every time. He still found it deeply satisfying to lead others into the arms of the Lord. Sometimes he wished he could try something different, maybe a different song, maybe a different arrangement. But Reverend Carter was a stickler for the Gospel and a stickler for delivering it the same way every time, whether by spoken word or song. Besides, Reverend Carter felt that the way the church conducted services was meeting needs of the congregation and getting people saved, so why mess with it? R. J. understood that it was important to help people experience God's grace, but he wondered if trying a new song or two might not still get people saved.

R. J. proceeded to power through the rest of his set, just like he always did. When he was finished, an exhausted glow emanated from the congregation. An almost sexual glow R. J. thought. As folks took their seats, content and resting in the illumination of the Holy Spirit, Reverend Carter took the stage and delivered another barn-burning sermon about how the wages of sin were death and about the need for repentance and honest, pure living.

At the conclusion of the sermon, R. J. got up on stage one last time and led the congregation in a version of "Holy Is the Lord" and then closed with the benediction. Once the song was over, Reverend Carter delivered his own closing and dismissed the congregation with a final prayer. After the service ended, the men lingered in the old sanctuary fellowshiping while the women scurried to the kitchen to prepare for the weekly church potluck.

R. J. mostly tried to keep to himself, staying on the stage and breaking down his gear while the men milled around below. He was tired and didn't feel like talking today; it had taken more effort and energy to get emotionally invested in this morning's service than normal. All he wanted to was pack up his things, have some of Mrs. Wimmers's famous greens and fried chicken, and start the long walk home before the rain set in.

....

Sunday nights were for drinking. Rising early, walking two miles to church, setting up the musical equipment, practicing, performing sound checks, sitting through a two-hour worship service, breaking down the sound equipment, attending a potluck with the congregation afterward, and then finally making his long walk home left him completely exhausted. He rarely got home before four in the afternoon.

It was the same routine every Sunday, at church and at home. After the service, he'd feed Betsy, his old gray-whiskered back lab mix, let her out, turn on the end of the football game, get the flank steak and potatoes out and ready for cooking, and then open his first Coors. Cracking his first wet one was permission to stop thinking for a couple of hours to turn his brain off and stop worrying about things. Worrying how he was going to pay the bills, worrying about whether he really was going to live alone for the rest of his life; to stop worrying about Reverend Carter and the church, and to stop worrying about music and faith. Each beer led to another, to another, to another, and more after that until he finally passed out on the couch, the TV's white noise on in the background and Betsy sleeping soundly on the floor near him.

He'd earned the time to drink, he thought, especially tonight. He'd worked so hard earlier in the day to get himself right with the Lord and get into a position where he could lead the congregation to a place where they'd all get saved. He had arrived at church early that morning and spent the first hour confessing and praying with Reverend Carter before the service started. Salvation was exhausting. Frankly, the whole thing is exhausting, he thought. Just conforming to the expectations of the folks at church and living like you ought to be living wore him down. And getting saved was different—it was much harder, much rawer and more emotional than living like a regular Christian was. Getting saved was guaranteed to take you higher than you'd ever been, right after it took you lower than you'd ever gone. It wasn't so hard once you got back home, but going to church and getting saved left a guy sore, emotionally drained and spiritually empty. Getting saved meant looking deep into your heart and confessing the sin in it, repenting and begging God for the strength to never sin again—even though deep down you knew that no matter what, you'd sin again and be right back begging for forgiveness next Sunday, and every Sunday after that. Honestly, some Sundays he didn't feel like getting saved—it was too hard. R. J. loved going to church and leading worship, but it was hard enough that a man deserved a couple of drinks Sunday nights to relax. However, he didn't dare tell anyone in the congregation about his Sunday night ritual for fear of them judging him and word getting back to Reverend Carter, who was fond of saying, "Drinking alcohol is doin' the devil's work for him. Drinkin' made ye weak, stupid, and 'ceptible to temptation. The Scriptures are very clear—if ye drink, yur a drunkard, and drunkards are separated from God an goin' to hell."

Following Jesus was hard work, really hard work. R. J. wondered how you could believe so fervently all the time in something you couldn't see and something that didn't always answer your prayers, and when it did, you sometimes don't know it until a long time later. He still believed in faith—in fact, he believed deeply—but it was hard, and he was tired. Tonight felt different. His tiredness was deeper than just his normal Sunday exhaustion; there was something deeper in him that yearned for a break or at least a little grace once in a while. He wished he could talk to someone at the church, but he was afraid he'd be accused of backsliding and not having faith.

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Reverend Carter had served as an infantryman in the Vietnam War. He still abided by his strict military upbringing in his appearance: a high and tight haircut (out of respect for himself and his country); a trim and in-shape figure (he did a hundred pushups and sit-ups every night before he went to bed); and an appreciation for the chain of command (he believed in the authority of both the Holy Scriptures and the Church and hated when people questioned either). Reverend Carter also came to faith in the Vietnam War. As he liked to explain it, he was a "backsliding heathen with no purpose in life other'n boozing and whoring around" until the Lord took mercy on him and delivered him from his sins. One day he was listening to the army chaplain deliver a sermon, and all of a sudden, it became clear as day to him that he was a sinner living a horrible, no good life, and if he didn't repent, he'd be joining the devil in hell before much longer. From that day forward, Reverend Carter was a new man—he swore off booze, whoring, smoking, swearing, and all other vices and instead dedicated himself to reading the Holy Scriptures and applying them to his life every single day. So far, he'd succeeded—he reckoned he hadn't backslid once since he got saved twenty years ago. Such a feat wasn't easy, but anyone could do it. You just had to have faith in the Lord and work hard. Faith wasn't that complicated—all you had to do was obey.

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Reverend Carter was a good man, but the Holy Spirit ran hot through him like molten lava, constantly burning out all of the impurities in his body. He didn't have much time for doubt; simply expressing exhaustion or frustration meant that your faith wasn't strong enough and you better go repent and make sure you didn't keep doubting the Lord's power otherwise you were liable to backslide your way into Hell. The Scriptures were very clear: repent and obey, even if it hurts. The reason why it took the Israelites so long to get to the Promised Land was because they lost their faith. As Reverend Carter told it, the Israelites were all crying and sniffing like a bunch of ungrateful little cowards, always demanding more from God, never trusting his providence or his provision. Rather than pray, and get themselves right with the Lord, the Israelites lost their faith and repeatedly made fools out of themselves and their families by building false idols, never trusting, never really loving or repenting. As Reverend Carter said, it was a miracle that God let those lousy Israelites into the Promised Land at all.

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That morning, Reverend Carter had preached his message of absolute faith with extra piss and vinegar. He got himself worked into lather, as he did when he was really feeling the Holy Spirit. He was one of those preachers who used the whole stage, like an actor, pacing back and forth, jabbing his arms into the air for emphasis, using the whole of his body to communicate the urgency of the Gospel to the congregation, and willing them to salvation. His face was already beat red, and the vein above his left temple pulsating so wildly R. J. was sure you could see it from the back row of the sanctuary. Sweat poured down Reverend Carter's face and he stopped every few minutes to wipe it with his handkerchief before carefully and meticulously folding it back into a perfect square and putting in back in the back pocket of his slacks. He did this even when he was completely lathered up. He'd stop hollering and shouting for a moment and look around the sanctuary as he folded and tucked his handkerchief slowly back in his pocket, trying to extract maximum drama.

Reverend Carter had been really on a roll, completely enraptured with the Holy Spirit to the point that it appeared he hadn't taken a breath in about five minutes. Suddenly, he stopped dead, transforming from a loud, gesticulating wild man into a statue, still as the night and cold and deadly as stone. It wasn't clear if he was still breathing.

He turned his head to the side, body still firmly rooted and still on the stage. His voice went low, really low, almost to a whisper, as if he could barely summon the energy to force the words out of his gullet. He called Mr. Wimmers out in front of the whole congregation for backsliding and not having enough faith. Mr. Wimmers, a brick mason, had lost his job earlier in the week and told Reverend Carter that he wasn't sure if he and Mrs. Wimmers would be able to give their tithe this week. Reverend Carter would hear none of it, instead saying that Mr. Wimmers needed to repent and confess his backsliding and his lack of faith in God's provision and ask God to have mercy on him for his weakness. Reverend Carter also said that Mrs. Wimmers needed to repent, that she didn't support her husband right last week, and as a result, his faith wasn't strong and he'd started backsliding. Something about listening to Reverend Carter dress Mr. Wimmers down in front of the whole congregation for backsliding didn't sit right with R. J. It felt harsh to him. After all, the man had just lost his job. Surely God would show Mr. Wimmers a little grace.

"Sumbody here today don't have no faith!" Reverend Carter bellowed as he rose out of his silent crouch and resumed pacing around the stage from side to side, his arms shooting in different directions, acting as extensions of his wild mind, acting out his insanity. "Sumbody here today's backsliding, don't believe in the Good Lord's provision. Sumbody here today's just plain weak, just like the disciples in the boat who lost their faith and cried out to Jesus ta save 'em from the storm," he said in a mocking tone, hands clasped together in faux piety.

"Jesus, save us, save us!" they whimpered. 'We don't believe like you told us to. Come save us.' Well, church, we got sumbody like that in our midst here today. Sumbody who don't trust the Lord's promises when the storm comes. Instead he whimpers like a dog. His faith melts like an ice cream cone in the hot July sun. It's jus' pathetic. Jus' pathetic, I tell ya!" Reverend Carter's said in a biting tone.

"Mr. Wimmers! The Lord's speaking to you today! You decided you wasn't gonna tithe today, didn't you?"

Mr. Wimmers fidgeted in his pew, shoulders slumping, head bowed in embarrassment at being called out in front of the entire congregation. He continued to shirk down lower and lower, like he was melting. The silence was starting to grow uncomfortable, it felt like hours but was merely seconds until finally Mr. Wimmers meekly responded, "Yes, Rev'd, 'tis true. As you know, the boss laid me off this week. I ain't got no income. The missus and I are struggling to just pay the bills. The electric bill is late again; if I don't pay, the electric company told me they'll shut it off—ain't nothing I can do about it." Mr. Wimmers's voice barely raised above a strained whisper; the shame and stress of the job loss must have taken his dignity and confidence away from him. Mrs. Wimmers could be heard sobbing in the background at the tragedy of it all, but the congregation sat there in stilled silence, equally fixated on what was happening while simultaneously looking down and away, silently praying that Reverend Carter wouldn't make a spectacle of them next.

The tension, embarrassment, and shame were so thick and sticky you could feel it on your skin. Everyone was waiting to see how Reverend Carter would respond to Mr. Wimmers's meek and broken confession. Reverend Carter just stood there, as still as a stone statue, his eyes closed in fervent communication with God, hands clasped together in perfect supplication.

"Walter, the Lord loves you, but you should fear him. You're a sinner, and you sinned against him today by not having faith that he'll provide for all of your needs just like he does for the sparrow and the lilies. "Therefore I say unto you, 'Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on. Is not the life more than meat, the body than raiment?'"

Reverend Carter continued to recite the Holy Scripture from memory, body completely still, eyes closed, hands clasped in front of him in pious dedication, face clenched in holy grimace. "Behold the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feedeth them.'

"Walter, are ye not much better than they?"

Mr. Wimmers raised his head from his bowed shame, his eyes slowly raising to focus on Reverend Carter—first the reverend's prayer hands, then his closed eyelids.

"Water, have you ever considered the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin," Reverend Carter continued, still unmoving. Mr. Wimmers's lips were now starting to tremble from the guilt and shame he felt at that moment. He wished he could trust the Lord, but the fact was that he was scared.

Suddenly, Reverend Carter's eyes fluttered open, his body jolted like he'd been struck by lightning or the Holy Ghost himself. "Walter, oh ye of little faith!" he shouted, his hands and face raised to the heavens. His feet finally were moving, and he was walking across the stage, down the stairs, and right toward Mr. Wimmers, who was sitting in the fourth pew, center row, just to the left. The whole

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congregation was static, simultaneously scared and awed in anticipation of the Holy Spirit pouring out over Reverend Carter, certain to spill over onto them at any minute.

Reverend Carter slowly approached Mr. Wimmers, the reverend's face emotionless Mr. Wimmers's face and body frozen in fear and uncertainty. Reverend Carter slowly placed his hand on Mr. Wimmers's shoulder and continued his recitation of the Kings James version of the Bible: "Walter, therefore, take no thought, saying, 'What shall we eat? Or, What shall we drink? Or, wherewithal shall we be clothed?' Wherefore, Walter," Reverend Carter said, continuing to use Mr. Wimmers' first name for both dominance and emphasis, "if God so clothe the grass of the field, which to day is, and to morrow is cast in the oven, shall he not much more clothe you, O ye of little faith?"

Mr. Wimmers suddenly burst into tears; he was a scared and broken man who had been stripped of all dignity and pride. "Yayayes Rev'd." He sniffled, his body convulsing; soon he was gulping for air "I just want to please the Lord. Have mercy on me," he managed to say finally, as he lowered his head again in total defeat and supplication.

Reverend Carter kept his hand firmly on Mr. Wimmers's shoulder, gently rubbing it for comfort. Reverend Carter was silent as he slowly raised his head and scanned the congregation like a shepherd scanning his flock, stopping to make eye contact with parishioners as his eyes worked across the sanctuary. "Church," he said in a slow and controlled but powerful voice, "Church, this is a broken man, someone who's faith has failed him, someone who cries out to God to save him." Reverend Carter enunciated every syllable as he spoke. "But church, have no fear, for we serve an awesome God." His eyes closed in reverence, and his fists clenched and raised toward heaven.

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Thinking back to how Reverend Carter treated Mr. Wimmers made R. J. sick to his stomach. He opened another can of beer and quickly guzzled it, hoping to douse some of his hot anger. He hated how Reverend Carter always judged him when he asked questions. He wasn't trying to be a pain in the ass; sometimes he just didn't get all of what Reverend Carter was saying, and he would ask questions to actually try and understand. R. J. cracked another beer and started pacing his living room. Betsy watched him inquisitively from her perch on the couch, with one eye closed and an ear slightly raised in suspicion.

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"A God who forgives of us our sin, who forgives us when we struggle, when we abandon our faith, when we backslide. Repent! Repent now, Church! Ask God's forgiveness! Ask God for mercy! Ask God for help!" Reverend Carter's voice continued to rise in volume and strength as he continued, echoing off the sanctuary's back walls. His whole body started shaking as the Holy Spirit descended on him. He stopped, looked over at Mr. Wimmers, and said, "Walter, do you want to be saved today? Do you want God to have mercy on your sins? To forgive you for your lack of faith?"

Mr. Wimmers's entire body was convulsing with grief and guilt at letting God down and sinning. By this point, he was a broken man, one who had given into deep and primeval sobs, only able to meekly nod his head in agreement of the desire to be saved by a righteous and awesome God.

"Yes, you do, Walter," Reverend Carter said, rubbing Mr. Wimmers's back in comfort, just like a father would do for a sick child. "Yes, you do, Walter, yes, you do. Praise Jesus, praise Jesus.

"Church, today this man has been saved! God has been faithful! God has forgiven this man's sins and saved him from the pits of hell! Can I get an 'amen'?" the reverend bellowed, happy that yet another parishioner had been saved again from damnation. "Church, this is what the Apostle Paul was talking about when he told the Romans that if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved!" His voice latched on to the last word, holding it out for seconds longer than normal, while his fists continued to shake in holy exhortation.

"Can I get an amen?!?" Reverend Carter asked as he moved back up to the stage and continued his manic pacing back and forth across the stage, looking like a caged lion ready to attack.

"Amen, Rev'd!" the congregation responded.

"I said, Church, can I get an amen?" Reverend Carter asked again, this time so consumed by the passion of the Holy Spirit that he clutched his hands, his body bent in half, as if doing so would make the pleas that much realer and holier.

"Amen!"

"Praise Jesus!"

"Jesus, you are holy!"

"I love ya', Jesus!"

"Father, you's good!"

"Save me, Jaysus!"

"Go to hell, Satan!"

The cries from the congregation continued to build and become more and more cacophonous. Reverend Carter was still sandwiched in submission with his head now down by his toes. R. J. had been on the stage this whole time in the corner, holding his guitar, not sure what to make of this anymore. He'd seen this kind of thing a thousand times before, but it was different this time—maybe it was the look of genuine pain and humiliation that stuck to Mr. Wimmers's face when the reverend called him out in front of the entire congregation. Most folks were able to hide their humiliation when being called out in front of the entire congregation by Reverend Carter. Maybe it was just that though Mr. Wimmers seemed more aggrieved than earlier people in his position, R. J. had seen this too many times before. Maybe it was just all too predictable.

R. J. was suddenly thrust out of the comfort of his own thoughts as Reverend Carter jerked out of his tableau and came back to life. "R. J., lead us in song to Jesus! May the Holy Spirit fall down on the righteous right here this morning!" Reverend Carter said, while now standing at attention.

And with that, R. J. broke into a lengthy riff and led the congregation in the same worship set he'd done every week for as long as he could remember. Praise Jesus, he thought.

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Lately he'd been thinking more and more about maybe taking some time off from leading worship, maybe even skip town for a bit, get out, head down south where it was warmer. But when he'd brought the idea up to Reverend Carter during the potluck, the reverend had called him a backslider and questioned whether his faith in the Lord was serious enough. Reverend Carter told him to go pray and ask the Lord to forgive his backsliding and help his unbelief.

But the more he thought about how he was just tired of it all, and frankly pissed off, and how wrong Reverend Carter had been to embarrass Mr. Wimmers by putting his business before the whole congregation, the madder he got, the more he drank. R. J. hadn't drunk like this in years, but he couldn't help it—what Reverend Carter had done simply wasn't right.

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R. J. shot up out of bed suddenly in total panic at the sound of his alarm clock loudly announcing that it was now six thirty on Monday morning. As the haze started to clear from his mind, he regretted the sudden lurching movement. He couldn't recall how he'd made it to bed, or whether he'd remembered to feed Betsy, who was now whimpering on the floor next to the bed.

R. J. lay back down, trying to keep the world from spinning and trying to keep his head from splitting in two. After deep-breathing for a couple of minutes, he gingerly crawled out of bed, moving slowly toward the bathroom. After taking care of his business and splashing water on his face in a futile attempt to wash away his headache, he made his way slowly to the kitchen for coffee and breakfast. As he was frying eggs, he thought about his actions last night. He was still livid with Reverend Carter and how he'd treated Mr. Wimmers so poorly. The more he thought about it, the angrier he got—this whole thing was just a bunch of bullshit. He was too tired and hung over to be saved today, too mad to pray, and too worn out to repent.

He slowly ate his over-easy eggs, fatback, and biscuits, washing it all down with strong black coffee. Today was Monday, which meant that Reverend Carter would be teaching the men's Bible study right now. Reverend Carter would undoubtedly come by R. J.'s shop later today and ask why he hadn't been there. R. J. was sure he'd get a lecture about backsliding. He'd gotten this lecture more than he liked recently. Reverend Carter must have had a sixth sense for when folks were tired of faith. It seemed like the more burned out you got, or the more you questioned things, the more manic Reverend Carter became about getting you to repent and stop backsliding. Well, all that would change today. He was to the point where he couldn't be shamed into repenting anymore. When Reverend Carter came by his mechanic shop, he'd let him have it. He'd tell him how poorly the Reverend had treated Mr. Wimmers, how tired he was, how he didn't feel like getting saved anymore, and how he was tired of playing the same stupid and stale worship songs every single week. If Reverend Carter didn't respect that, then R. J. would risk the Lord's wrath by telling the reverend that he could just as soon go to hell for all R. J. cared.

A little later that morning, R. J. was working hard at his shop, his hands covered in grease, trying to coax the crankshaft of an old Ford engine to move in harmony with the pistons and the flywheel. He'd been working on it all morning but couldn't get the damned thing to move smoothly because of the amount of rust that had set in. He was determined to make it work and scrape off the rust and hone the edges if necessary rather than get a new one. Too many people reacted too quickly and threw out perfectly good engine parts without spending the time necessary to understand the problem and tailor a new solution to the problem. Folks just weren't patient anymore and didn't take the time to step back and look at problems from a different angle. R. J. was determined to do that this morning when all of a sudden he saw Reverend Carter walking toward the shop. A pit set into R. J.'s stomach as Reverend Carter got closer. Well, now's the time to say your piece, he thought. No more pretending; just tell him what you think.

"Mornin', Rev'nd."

"Mornin', R. J. How are ye this morning?"

"Fine, Rev'nd, can I get ye cup of coffee?"

"Sure, I'd 'preciate that."

"You take cream and sugar?"

"Nah, black's fine."

R. J. headed to the coffeepot in the back, returning with two cups of black coffee. R. J. liked his coffee strong and dark. The other guys in the shop complained that his coffee tasted like battery acid. He told them to quit being candy asses and just drink—it was good for them and would give them the jolt they needed to actually get stuff done and quit being lazy.

"Here ye go, Rev'nd."

"Thank yeh, R. J. Say, I wanted to chat with you a bit this morning. Seems t'me that yeh are havin' problems wit tha Lord. Yeh missed Bible study this mornin', and you've been distant, haven't been focused. Yeh ain't seeking the Lord like yeh used to. Seems t'me your faith ain't solid anymore—it's got cracks. Ya know the devil thrives when cracks 'pear ina person's faith."

R. J. sighed heavily, staring into the depths of his black coffee. He was silent for a moment, collecting his thoughts. Reverend Carter was more informal when he talked to you one on one, but it didn't make it any less terrifying. Though he really wanted to give Reverend Carter a piece of his mind, he was too scared to just tell it exactly as he saw it. He instead was trying to find a softer way to deliver his point. It probably wouldn't work, but this is the sort of authentic confession and confrontation that R. J. was looking for.

"Rev'nd, I gotta' be honest with yeh—somethin' didn't sight right with me with how you treated ol' Mr. Wimmers at church on Sunday. Th' man had just lost his job, his whole livelihood. What'sa guy supposed to do? Wouldn't you be scared? How you plan on taken' care-a' Mary in such a circumstance? How'd you plan on payin' your bills? You know Mrs. Wimmers's been sick for 'bout nine months now, needs special medicine. That medicine ain't cheap. Just seems t'me what you did was unnec'ssary and downright un-Christian."

R. J. cringed as the word un-Christian slipped out of his mouth. It didn't help matters that he'd spit the word out, and Reverend Carter's head snapped back, like he'd just been punched in the face. His hands squeezed the coffee cup so hard that R. J. was afraid that it was going to shatter. Reverend Carter clenched his jaw tightly too; veins were starting to bulge at his temple. His hands started shaking; coffee spilled out of his full cup onto the dirty carpet of the mechanic shop's front room.

Reverend Carter set the coffee cup down forcefully on the table next to his chair; only half the burnt liquid was left. He looked R. J. in the eye and leaned in close over the end table towards R.J. R. J. held the Reverend's piercing stare, too terrified to do anything else.

Reverend Carter's face was now inches away from R. J.'s. "You listen to me, son. And you listen good," he growled in a low voice, dropping his drawl and enunciating every syllable with perfect diction and a forceful tone. "Seems to me that you and ol' Walter both suffer from the same problem. It's called backsliding; it's called losing your faith. You both are like them pathetic disciples who coward in the boat



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while Jesus slept. Jesus told 'em just to have faith, that having faith in him is all you need to succeed, to overcome the trials and tribulations of this world." The reverend's voice steadily grew with great force, as any compassion he'd once had for R. J. and his predicament had vanished after R. J. became insubordinate.

Reverend Carter snarled again. "God hates backslidin'. He hates it when his children don't trust him. All ye need to be successful in this life is ta trust in God. Once you do that, you can accomplish anything you set your mind to. That's what it means to live in God's grace, to be saved by God. But you can't 'cept that, can you? You can't 'cept that God's already given you everything you need to be successful. You think you need somethin' else, somethin' special. You needa rooster to crow three times for ya? Is that it? Some wild sign to make your lack of faith evident for all the world to see?" Reverend Carter asked waving his hands for emphasis. This last statement had brought the reverend to his feet in passionate defense of the Gospel. His body lorded over R. J., while his finger was waiving over R. J.'s head in righteous penalization.

"I suggest you pray, and you pray hard, harder'n you've ever prayed before. Do ye hear me? Ask God fir forgiveness, 'fore you get so far out of reach that even God's grace won't save you from hell. Be a man, R. J." Reverend Carter pleaded, "Faith in Jesus is all you need in life—it's the most empowering thing there is. It's the secret to life. You can do anything in this world with faith in Jesus, overcome any obstacle, rise above any challenge. What shall we then say to these things? If God be for us, who can be against us, R. J.? He that spared not his own son, but delivered him up for us all—how shall he not with him also freely give us all things? As it is written, 'For thy sake we are killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter. Nay, nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors.'" Reverend Carter's finger continued to wave at R. J., both as a metronome for rhythm and as a baton for emphasis.

"Right now, R. J., you ain't a conqueror—you're just a coward, you an' Walter both. I suggest you get yourself right wit the Lord 'fore you come back to church. We don't need no backslider leadin' the rest of the congregation astray instead've into worshipin' the Lord." With that, Reverend Carter nodded in R. J.'s direction and let himself out through the glass door and into the world.

R. J. continued to sit there speechless, head bowed, hands clenching and unclenching the coffee cup in his hand. His coffee was cold now. He hadn't said a word to Reverend Carter once the Reverend had started into him. R. J. set the cold coffee down on the table next to Reverend Carter's, put his hands behind his head, and slouched down in his chair, his eyes fixated on the popcorn ceiling, his mind, confused.

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It was later than usual when R. J. finally got home Monday night. Betsy was pissed because she had to pee. He let her out the through the back porch but didn't walk her because it was already dark and he hated walking the dog on the country roads at night, too easy to step in a hole and twist an ankle. After Reverend Carter's ass-chewing, R. J. had sat in the old saggy chair for what felt like hours, staring up at the ceiling and thinking. Thinking about church, thinking about life, and thinking about music. Finally, his thoughts had turned to the old Ford engine he'd been working on. It dawned on him that a little molasses might be all he needed to get the crankshaft working and into the engine again. He didn't know anyone who had tried it before, but it made sense in his head—he remembered his mom would always cook with molasses, saying that it had the right amount of acid but would mix well with things like cream and milk because it wouldn't attack the base. After a trip to the general store and a couple hours, he'd managed to properly lubricate the crankshaft and it worked perfectly, all parts of the engine now singing in complete harmony with one another. Once he fixed the crankshaft the rest of the engine went back together easily. R. J. figured he ought to bring the car back to the owner.

The sun was just starting to set as he cut the engine, letting the old Ford coast into the driveway leading up to Walter and Jenny Wimmers' old farmhouse. They lived on the edge of town, but the other direction from R. J. They'd lived there for as long as R. J. could remember, at least twenty-five years he reckoned. Mrs. Wimmers' had stayed at home for most of that time rearing the children and making a little money doing seamstress work on the side.

R. J. could hear the crunch of gravel under his feat as he exited the Ford and walked up to the front porch of the farmhouse. The air was thick, and the gravel had a mineral smell, which meant it was likely going to start raining soon. R. J. loved how the rain always washed dust and grime away and left everything looking and smelling fresh and new.

Mr. Wimmers opened the front door to reveal R. J. standing there on his front porch. "Well, good even' R. J., fancy seeing you here tonight, t' what do we owe the honor?" He said with a surprised grin on his face.

"Oh nothin' Mr. Wimmers, I jus' finished fixin' your ol' Ford and figured I'd bring it back to ye."

"Well, we are mighty grateful to ye R. J. for yur hard work. I promise I'll make it right to ye as soon as I get back on my feet." Mr. Wimmers said, grateful that R. J. had taken the time to fix his old Ford.

"Don't ye worry 'bout it Mr. Wimmers, tis the least I could after learnin' you lost your job. Don't you worry 'bout it. Its the Christianly thing t'do an' I don't mind doin' it." R. J. said with a sense of resolution and confidence that almost startled him.

Mr. Wimmers' voice became hoarse with emotion as he internalized R. J.'s charity, "well God bless ye R. J., you surely is the Lord's answer to a prayer when a man needs it the most."

"Oh, don't never mentioned it again, you know you'd do the same thing if I was down on my luck." Mr. Wimmers stood there in silent humility, not sure how to respond to this sort of compassion. No one from the church had ever done anything like this for him before.

"Say, Mr. Wimmers, I'm not sure you want to be pallin' around with me no more."

"Oh really? Why's that?" Mr. Wimmers asked with a puzzled look on his face.

"Well, I think I'm done goin' to church, or at least done goin' to Reverend Carter's church. This mornin' he kicked me out."

"What?" Mr. Wimmers gasped, "whatya mean he kicked ya out?"

R. J. lowered his head as he searched for words, having failed to fully process his earlier confrontation with Reverend Carter, "well, I told him I didn't 'ppreciate how he'd treated yous 'n tha missus at church on Sunday. Told him I thought he was bein' unchristian callin' you out in front of the congregation like that. Didn't seem too Christian like t'me."

Mr. Wimmers could feel the grief, thankfulness and sense of being loved collectively boil up inside of him. He was completely overwhelmed and unsure of how to respond. Moth shadows flickered in the porch light as the seconds ticked by. Both men just stood there silent, looking down at the front porch in unison. Finally, Mr. Wimmers slowly looked up at R. J. His eyes full with tears that threatened to spill over at any instant. "R. J. I 'ppreciate you standin' up fir me but you didn't hafta do that." Mr. Wimmers said, his voice still horse with emotion.

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"I know but it didn't seem right, didn't seem Christian ta do that t'somebody down on their luck. Jus' seemed cruel t'me. Besides, I think I jus' finally had my fill, I had enough." R. J. said. He felt strangely at peace as the enormity of his emancipation started to set in. He felt as though the Lord hadn't abandoned him even though he'd been kicked out of church. He also felt sorry for Mr. Wimmers, and hoped that someday he'd find some peace as well.

The silence returned, with neither man knowing what to say next.

"Well, I best be gettin' on home, you mind given me a lift?" R. J. asked.

"Sure, R. J., no problem." Mr. Wimmers responded. They both started down the porch to the gravel driveway and to the old Ford.

"Say, you gonna try another church?"

"I might. Not sure yet."

"Well if ye do, p'haps me in the missus'll join ye."

"I'd sure like that. Say, d'you oughtta come over to my place sometime. Don't tell Reverend Carter, but we'll kick back a few beers together."

"Sure thing R. J. Think you can play that red guitar of yours when we do?"

"I reckon I can. I'm gonna' hafta learn some new songs though."

### *Ken Allan Dronsfield*



**Ken Allan Dronsfield** is a poet who was nominated for The Best of the Net and 2 Pushcart Awards for Poetry in 2016. His poetry has been published world-wide in various publications throughout North and South America, Europe, Asia, Australia and Africa. His work has appeared in The Burningword Journal, Belle Reve Journal, Setu Magazine, The Literary Hatchet Magazine, The Stray Branch, Now/Then Manchester Magazine, Bewildering Stories, Scarlet Leaf Review, EMBOSS Magazine and many more. Ken loves thunderstorms, walking in the woods at night, and spending time with his cat Willa. Ken's new book, "The Cellaring", a collection of haunting, paranormal, weird and wonderful poems, has been released and is available through Amazon.com. He is the co-editor of two poetry anthologies, Moonlight Dreamers of Yellow Haze and Dandelion in

a Vase of Roses available from Amazon.com.

### *Stand To Deliver*

Standing upon this high precipice  
the final judgement has now come.  
I will be known as a poetic dreamer;  
plebeian writer of visionary advertency,  
not a master of liars or mass schemers.  
egotistical, they sit perched on thrones  
absent of desire or perceptive purpose.  
Devouring those in realms of shadows  
their souls live in depths of a fiery circus.

I stand and deliver, remiss of humanity,  
finding tranquility and a wanton bliss here.  
why so many pack this clamorous abyss;  
whilst a few heighten a zealot's passion.  
I now soar in a ghostly exhilarated dive  
a one-way flight, beyond the hazy veil;  
sunset is marvelous down at the harbor  
closer to the ground the clouds I inhale.  
rising from the mist chasing the raptor.

*Au Revoir to Summer*

Last nights dishes wait in the sink  
hot water and soap to arrive soon  
cat sits nervously pondering when  
his dinner will finally fill the bowl.  
Summer's sun has left for Florida  
chain saws echo across the valley  
pumpkin looks pitiful on the porch  
wish I was more skilled at carving.  
Standing in the back yard alone  
watching the leaves gliding down  
like paper airplanes here and there  
some helicopter spin to the ground.  
A sense of sadness is now borne.  
colder days are well on the way.  
Au revoir to Summer, Bonjour Fall.  
whilst I've only written a bit all day.

*Sleep With Dead Grass*

Chill in my tired bones  
steamy breath follows  
crispy red apples drop  
oak firewood stacked,  
walk the dying fields  
sleep with dead grass.  
Colored leaves release  
spinning down to ground

full dresser and closets,  
walk the dying fields  
asleep in dead grass.  
Autumn's song plays  
a freshness of spirit  
feel a harvest solstice  
life's circle goes round,  
I walk a dying field,

unpacked winter clothes

I sleep in dead grass.



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### *A Stellar Ballet (Villanelle Rhyme Poetry Format)*

Time's not sleeping but forever creeping  
Breathe to live while the blood is steeping,  
in shadow dreams lies incessant weeping.  
Heart beats as a clock, a tick and the talk  
love burns with a flame in an all night stalk  
Time's not sleeping but forever creeping.  
a moon rising high in this fleeting twilight.  
in a teary haze, whilst affixing my sight  
in shadow dreams lies incessant weeping.  
Love kind and true, now absent and ablaze,

the full moon exhales within a lunar phase  
Time's not sleeping but forever creeping.  
unto a midnight waltz, as feelings decay  
stars twinkle and whisper in a stellar ballet  
in shadow dreams lies incessant weeping.  
How starved your wicked ego has been,  
to devour my heart with a treacherous grin.  
Time's not sleeping but forever creeping  
in shadow dreams lies incessant weeping.

### *Of the Deeper Wood*

A madness descends upon one who tends  
the clock on the wall after those who recall  
in the hiding or seeking and soft squeaking  
in a dilapidated cottage of the deeper wood.  
Harlequin colors within an irrational swirling  
find a mind spinning in the haze of red wine  
and I can't find my way through night or day  
blinded by the tock, as the tick seeks to rock.  
Standing there bare, while the cat's on the chair  
dizzy and fading while the clock sings a sonnet.  
Feeling no pain within a numbness of the brain  
salvation's a meal, confined in a maniacs creel.  
Dance by the fire, whilst absorbing warm desire  
within the fistula of life, a steamy purge of strife  
moving with a gallop through the life of a trollop  
cast spells in the dark, to a stars reddish quark.  
I am whom you think, wasting away in the stink;  
listening to "Lunatic Fringe", on tape in the parlor  
readying the knife, I'll dissect your wretched life  
within a dilapidated cottage of the deeper wood.

(Excerpt from Ken Allan Dronsfield's book, *The Cellaring*)

### *Don Beukes*

**Don Beukes** is the author of 'The Salamander Chronicles', his debut poetry collection published by Creative Talents Unleashed. Originally from Cape Town South Africa, he is a retired teacher of English and Geography and taught in both South Africa and the UK. His poetry deals with issues affecting the global village and he is passionate about speaking out against racism, homophobia, sexism and intolerance. He has collaborated with artists from South Africa, the UK and America as part of his Ekphrastic poetry collection and his poems have been anthologized in various publications. His poetry has also been translated into Afrikaans, Farsi and Albanian.

His debut collection is available here <http://www.ctupublishinggroup.com/don-beukes-.html>

*The Oracle Chronicles*

As hordes of dark forces assemble across the parched lands known as Vygieskraal, a lonely mysterious figure slips unseen through the sacred waterfall, high above the hazy ravine splitting the three kingdoms of Belhar, Kraaifontein and Grabouw.

Not even the feared gamdroelas could pick up the scent of this elusive stranger to these forlorn lands, ravished by senseless decades of sporadic wars over the most precious prize of all; the only remaining legendary source of the life-giving water flowing to all the subjects in the three Kingdoms. Whoever controls the source, controls all the citizens. However, since all the water has dried up, a darkness has descended upon all who dwell in these war-torn ancient lands.

The knowledge of the sacred path leading to the source has long been passed on from a line of oracles, born with unknown visions and wisdom; only to be revealed when called upon by a chosen maiden from one of the three kingdoms, seeking the right of passage to secure the source for her nation.



Before she bravely entered the unknown, Eniamrach hesitated for a fleeting moment, just to take in the enormity of her task. She knew that any doubt would unleash a torrent of abuse from her family, who has offered her to the king of Belhar, Sekueb Nodmai. She just could not fail, must not fail if she was to secure the source for the kingdom. All she knew from the map passed on to her by her great-grandfather, the wise oupa of her village, was that the entrance to the oracle was beyond the blue mist, through the gigantic ancient tree; hollowed out by years of conflict.

Suddenly the curtain of water cascaded right in front of her, as she bravely walked through it; her fear numbed by the fact that only she could ensure victory for her people and bestow honour on her family.

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After a tiring journey of strange sights and smells, Eniamrahc noticed the stoic silhouette gazing at her from the top of a grassy hill. "That must be the oracle", she whispered to herself, as she kept her eyes fixed on the strange attire; the protective veil, the robe covering her entire body and a stare that looked right through her; knew her.

Unexpectedly the oracle spoke directly to her!

"Before you look at me and seek what only I can see, do you have what I've asked for?" Eniamrahc had to steel herself not to steal a split second peek at the revered enigma talking to her. "Yes great oracle, I have with me root of bokmakierie, essence of waterblommetjies and residue of knoffel, as you requested."

Only then did the oracle give Eniamrahc a nod to look at her directly. Her voice sounded like a faint rumble before lightning strikes.

"You have a rare ingredient I have anxiously waited for. Only the root of bokmakierie can cause the gamdroelas to lose their vision, consequently allowing you safe passage to what you are seeking."

"Now you need to convince me why I should show you the way to the source of all life. Time is running out. Well? Don't just stand there! Do you want this or not? "

'How can you doubt me oh revered Oracle? I have risked my life to reach this sacred place. My journey here pre-ordained by my people and our wise and brave King Sekueb Nodmai, to whom I am promised to upon delivery of the knowledge of all life. My future and that of the people of Belhar, along with the other two kingdoms depend on my determination to succeed in the enormous task bestowed upon me. I am here to serve and I am prepared to die for it but not before I honour my great-grandfather, who led me here by revealing the source of all life to our king.'

If the Oracle had any doubts, she certainly did not reveal it. She was intrigued however to hear that an elder of an unknown village possessed the location of the secret liquid entrance to where she has lived all her life. This was indeed a revelation that would need her attention imminently but the task at hand surpassed any other concerns. This heroic maiden had a familiar life force radiating from her, a sure sign that what she was about to reveal was destined to be given to Eniamrahc.

'I am convinced brave maiden that your arrival here has been expected. I am yet to discover the identity of the elder who blessed you with this sacred knowledge of how to reach me but that can wait for later. I am convinced that your intentions are genuine and therefore I will ask you now to give me your hand and look beyond my eyes for what you came to seek. I must warn you though that the path to the liberation of your people will be filled with unimaginable horror and loss. Your very essence will be tested but this is what the stones have whispered. Never look back as I lead you now to where you were meant to journey to. Do not be startled by what you are about to witness. Only you will know which way to turn, which enemies to avoid and ultimately discover the very source of where we all came from. Something has gained access to the source of all knowledge but it has been blinded to prevent it from owning it. It is now up to you to confront it and destroy it. Trust me...'

As Eniamrahc touched the Oracle's hand, her very being was shaken by the visions confronting her. Not only did she have to face the gamdroelas down below on the plains of Vygieskraal but she had to rescue the cursed Bloekomboom army from the deep grotte below who would accompany her to her final destination, there to initiate a fierce battle for the ultimate knowledge, which would secure their future.

As she walked away, disappearing into the whispering woods of the Hottentotsholland mountains, all she could wonder about was why the oracle reminded her of a familiar face she once saw in her childhood dreams...

*Cassandra Francis*



**Cassandra Francis** grew up in Las Vegas, Nevada. Despite the desert heat, her creativity never faltered. She chased ideas of long-winded adventures and space battles until she found herself in Winter Park, Florida. She is currently studying creative writing at Full Sail University and has been acknowledged for her photo series inspired by Gregory Crewdson.

*Sundays Off*

"I'm not harvesting today, come back later."

Sam's shoulders slumped and her chapped lips quirked into a bemused smile. "Are you serious?"

The man shrugged and continued to rock in his wooden chair. "I don't work on Sundays."

The wooden porch creaked as Sam moved to sit in the chair next to him. "Please. I have been waiting for so long."

The man took a drag from his joint. "Everyone has to wait their turn."

"And my turn is now."

The man stopped rocking and examined Sam's expression. "You seem younger than my normal clients." He rolled his joint through his fingers rhythmically. "Why you in such a rush?"

Sam rested her head in her hands. The small wrinkles around her eyes mirrored the cracks of the wooden porch. "It's just," she took a deep breath, "it's time."

The man jutted his hand out in her direction, she flinched. "Take a drag why don't ya? You're all stressed out, and it's stressing me out."

Sam eyed the joint and worked her wedding ring around her swollen knuckle. "Fuck it, why not?"

They sat in silence as the autumn breeze rode over the country hills. Birds chirped from a tall oak tree at the end of the yard.

"Are you really not going to help me? I traveled a very long way, you know," Sam said.

The man dusted tiny pieces of lint from his button up. "Fine, I'll do it. But you have to do me a favor in return."

"Okay, yeah. I'll do anything." Sam sat at the edge of the rocking chair.

"Why are you here? Tell the truth. I can tell when you lie."

"My life was good. I made good money, got married young and had two lovely kids. But I missed something. I felt empty, I just wanted to be someone, wanted to be unique." Sam shook her head. "I got cancer a few months ago. Stage three." Her shoulders slumped, and she rocked the chair back. "I just wanted to be someone. But, it was too late."

The man nodded. "You became someone, I know it's hard to grasp but, you're original. There is no one else like you. Come inside; we'll file the paperwork." He got up and opened the dusty screen door.

Sam followed him into the house. Small figurines lined the shelves in the living room, and a big TV sat on a cluttered desk. Discarded pizza boxes littered the torn couch, and half empty Styrofoam cups sat on the floor next to the La-Z-boy.

The man cleared a spot off for her to sit. "Here, you want a pop or something?"

"No thanks."

He handed her a manila folder and a cheap pen. "I just need your sig, here, here, and here."

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Sam complied and gave the folder back to him. "I do have to admit, you aren't what I expected."  
 He raised a brow. "Oh, yeah? Did you expect me to have a scythe and a black robe?"  
 Sam smiled and looked around the room. "Yeah, something like that."  
 He clapped his hands. "Alright. Let's do it." He retrieved a small glass jar from his kitchen and popped the cap off.  
 "Come here."  
 Sam got off the sunken couch. "What do I need to do?"  
 He grabbed her hands and placed them on the jar. "When I tell you to, you're going to breathe into the jar. It's going to feel like something is being pulled out of your throat. Don't be afraid, and just keep going."  
 She held the cool glass and nodded. "Okay." She took a steady breath and looked up at him. "I'm ready."  
 He moved behind her and gently placed a hand on her head. "Go," he said.  
 She did what she was told, and the jar started to fill up with a thick red smoke. The longer she breathed, the more her consciousness sank into the vivid unknown.  
 Her body went limp, and the man caught her before removing the container from her hands. He laid her down on the yellow kitchen tile and screwed the lid back on the jar. He opened the pantry door and pulled a thin chain that dangled above his head, and a white light flickered on. He scrawled 'SAM' onto the top of the lid with a dying Sharpie and placed the jar next to the others.



*Adam Levon Brown*

**Adam Levon Brown** is a published author, poet, amateur photographer, and cat lover. He has had poetry published hundreds of times in 11 countries. He identifies as queer.

He has been published in venues such as Burningword Literary Journal, Harbinger Asylum, The Stray Branch, Poetry Pacific, and Yellow Chair Review.  
[www.AdamLevonBrown.com](http://www.AdamLevonBrown.com)

*Semblance of a Flower*

Myopic  
 conversations  
 Cornering  
 my inner hope  
  
 Tangible  
 Nihilism  
 oozing into  
 adverbial pores  
  
 Mortar shells

blasting sideways  
 off of trailing sentence  
 fragments  
  
 Decadent  
 Dahlia  
 set hyperbolically  
 in blood  
  
 Forget the periods....  
  
 Dead End-



## *Burn Out*

How many times  
must I set fire to you  
just to warm your bones  
from past loveless winters?

You act as if icicles  
are all you have known

while you spit on the flames  
of everyone around you.

What the hell is your problem?

Note to self:

Stay away from your own heart.

## *9 PM*

Woke up  
around 9 pm

The coffee  
was still warm,  
signs of a struggle

I took a hard look  
at my carpal tunnel

to keep writing

I flipped through  
Youtube past  
the political nonsense

Now I'm settled down  
listening to Tom Waits

telling me to hold on

syndrome and decided

## *Clemencio Montecillo Bascar*



Clemencio Montecillo Bascar was a former Professor and Vice President for Corporate Affairs of the Western Mindanao State University. He is a recipient of various local, regional, and national awards in songwriting, playwriting, poetry, and public service. Several of his poems had been published in international literary magazines and journals such as, *Foliage Oak*, *BRICKrhetoric*, *About Place*, *Torrid Literature*, *Mused-theBellaOnline Literary Review*, and *The Voices Project*. He had written and published by the Western Mindanao State University two books of poetry, namely; "Fragments of the Eucharist" and "Riots of Convictions." In the Philippines, some of his poems appeared in the such magazines as

*Women's*, *MOD*, and *Chick*.

At present, he writes a column in the *Zamboanga Today* daily newspaper and resides at 659 Gemini Street, Tumaga, Zamboanga City, Philippines. He is married to the former Miss Melinda Climaco dela Cruz and blest with three children, Jane, Lynnette, and Timothy James.

*Ph Creating Another Monster?*

Haven't Philippine Congress collegially realized that for almost half a century now, it has been enacting Organic Acts for the establishment of inapplicable, unsuitable, irrelevant, dysfunctional, and gargantuanly wasteful sub-political entities for the people of Mindanao and Sulu without anchoring them on valid historical, cultural, anthropological, political, and diplomatic premises and justifications?

Hasn't it crossed the collective mind of Philippine Congress that no genuine, durable, comprehensive, and sustainable peace in Mindanao and Sulu will ever be attained unless the primary historical cause of the armed struggle for self-determination in these two ancient unconquered Sultanates will be completely uprooted and done away with, determined through descriptive, historical, and scientific research methodologies?

I have expressed this personal conviction time and time again to the point of being branded as boringly repetitive and absurdly redundant. For almost half a century now, said Congress has not yet commissioned a reputable and independent research agency to conduct in aid of legislation, a comprehensive and in-depth study about the historical, cultural, military, diplomatic, and colonial variables which gave rise to the armed struggle for self-determination, secession, or independence by various revolutionary organizations in Mindanao and Sulu. Yet, billions and billions of hard-earned taxpayers' monies are incrementally being allocated for consultancy services and research activities of national legislators every year.

To this day, not a single national legislator in the Philippines has formally taken the initiative of even just consulting the experts in the anthropological, cultural, political, and colonial history of these two ancient states to determine exactly the triggering and compelling circumstances and causative factors for the birth and escalation of the liberalist armed struggle in Mindanao and Sulu. Said Congress must fully know and completely comprehend beyond any iota of doubt the primary root-cause of these seemingly perpetual sanguinary confrontations between the various rebels groups and the Armed Forces of the Philippines before they can intelligently, judiciously, suitably, and relevantly craft a law to address it effectively.

Frustratingly and ironically, what such Congress has been reactionally and palliatively doing, is enacting laws that partially and minimally allocate portions of territory and granting parcels of political power to belligerent groups under certain diplomatically negotiated and agreed terms and conditions without exerting any serious effort to determine or verify whether these territories from the standpoint of ancient political history, really legally belong to the Republic of the Philippines. Completely relying on their collective legislative competence, rhetorical adeptness, and plenary power, they come up with organic acts creating political entities that are not firmly anchored on valid and reliable historical, cultural and territorial justifications and foundations causing more divisions, sentiment of being left out, and even disharmony among the different indigenous peoples and revolutionary fronts.

Concrete legislative proofs are the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) and those previously created by Congress which have been declared dysfunctional, ineffective, unacceptable, and failed experiments and therefore, must be abolished and replaced by another entity under identical legal parameters, territorial configurations and power sharing arrangements without the benefit of conducting first a thorough evaluation to objectively and justly determine whether or not the existing autonomous region in Mindanao is really a "failed experiment." Is there no one in Philippine Congress who believes in the employment of research and scientific method of solving a problem, making decisions, and enactment of laws?

The only easily perceptible differences among the congressionally created political entities from one another, are mostly in terms of nomenclatures and sets of power holders. Nothing in the proposed and previous Organic Acts passed by Congress pin-pointedly addresses comprehensively the root-cause of the almost half a century old Mindanao Crisis. What a waste of taxpayers' fiscal resources which could easily run into the billions if an honest-to-goodness auditing and accounting are conducted from the inception of the Peace Process to the present.

Because of the repeated failure of Congress to address effectively and totally the historical root-cause of the Mindanao Crisis and its glaring habitual incapacity to enact a suitable, applicable, and functional organic act for its resolution, the peace and order situation in these two ancient monarchies, has only gone from bad to worse notwithstanding the vigorous meddling, intervention, and facilitation of foreign countries in the peace process which to this day have not been proven to be of any useful diplomatic value. On the contrary, many objective and impartial observers commonly perceive these foreign interventions and meddlings in the domestic affairs of the Philippines as a major contributory factor to the escalation and worsening of rebellion in Mindanao and Sulu for they influence the outcome of whatever peace negotiation is undertaken by government and the various revolutionary fronts.

Today, Congress is again on the verge of changing our form of government from Presidentialism to Federalism without the benefit of a nation-wide survey to comprehensively, objectively, and scientifically determine the acceptability and suitability of this kind of political system in our multi-cultural society. I am sure this is just another titanic and outrageously expensive trial-and-error political experiment to be funded by the taxpayers.

*Bipolar Mirage*

you told me that this is the way to ETERNITY; how come there's nothing beyond this point ANYmore? that old man at the crossroad must have TRicked us to choose this Path for the QUID PRO QUO he demanded from us.

hey, don't look at ME as if you're blaming me for the Choice we Made; it was you who took the first step toward this direction; you even forced me To follow your footsteps to be sure that I won't take a FALSE turn; by the way, who told you that we havE reached a dead enD ?; look again, my friend, we have just barely started our journey; i suspect the same old man must have told you the fairytale that ETERNITY is such a long, long way? on the CONTRARY it's just a blink AWAY; but buddy, it isn't fair for you to cross the BAR ahead of me.

but it's not eternity that worries me; it's the now and the things that don't fit with what we think reality should be; look at those worms that ought not to be at this very early part of the day; they should have not lined up their bodies so enticingly for the red ants to feast on when their breeding season is yet too far away. but things just don't happen without any reason they say; it goes, too, to the things that remain in our wildest fantasies.

it's just a simple case of being in the wrong place, wrong situation, wrong company, wrong time and for the wrong reason; there's really no such thing as eternity; dante designed it at the height of his bipolarity.

*Bogus War of August 13, 1898*

What is so detestable and shockingly outrageous about this Spanish-American Mock War of August 13, 1898 is the irrefutable fact that this bogus military encounter triggered the series of events leading to the deceptive inclusion of Mindanao and Sulu which were not colonial possessions of Spain by conquest in the sale and cession of the Philippine Islands to the United States in Article III of the December 10, 1898 Treaty of Paris which seems to have always been impregnably hidden and tightly-guarded military anomaly.

Briefly, here is the theatrical script of the Mock War:

"As carefully crafted with the help of the Belgium consul Edouard Andre, in its final draft, the choreographed sequence of events called for the initial shelling of the fort of Malate, which would promptly be abandoned by its defenders. As the Americans then began their ground advance, Admiral Dewey would bring his ships before the city and hoist the signal flags demanding surrender. Upon seeing these, General Jaudenes would order the white flag raised, and the Americans would enter. As has been the case in Cuba, the word 'surrender' was avoided to be replaced by the term 'capitulation.'" Source: The Mock War of Manila, August 13, 1898 by C. Douglas Sterner, Copyright 1999-2002 posted on-line by HomeHeroes.com.Inc.

To assert that the present generation of Mindanaoans, Suluans, and Filipinos, generally do not have any idea as to why the contending land forces of American General Wesley Merrit and Spanish Governor-General Fermin Jaudenes conspired to hold a "mock war" instead of a real war for the capitulation of the City of Manila on August 13, 1898, is a certainty on account of the great length of time that has elapsed since then.

According to same article posted by HomeOFHeroes.com. Inc. authored by C. Douglas Sterner, Copyright 1999-2002, two major reasons were given: (1) to save Spanish honor and (2) to deny victory to Aguinaldo and his guerrillas. These were also the conditions demanded by General Jaudenes to be considered before he agreed to engage the American forces in a mock war instead of just outrightly and voluntarily surrendering Manila more than two months after the US Oceanic Squadron destroyed the Spanish Pacific fleet in the first Spanish-American naval battle at Manila Bay on May 1, 1898 which virtually catapulted the status of the United States to a world power overnight.

In the cited article above, the author stated that General Jaudenes personally believed that it would be disgraceful act for the Spanish commander to give up the city without a fight. Moreover, as narrated by the same source, General Jaudenes feared that such act would be received with derision and probably court martial upon his return to his homeland. He also was quite fearful of the consequences if the city fell to Aguinaldo and his band of Filipino insurgents.

I shall no longer take the burden of explaining whether the Mock War between the armies of Spain and the United States on August 13, 1898 for the capitulation of the City of Manila was in conformity or adherence to the Ethics and Law of War or the Leiber's Code of 1898 for I don't have the legal competence to do that being a non-lawyer. Whether it was

immoral, unethical, or unlawful from the military standpoint, the determination of such judgment rightfully belongs to the legal experts of such subject matter.

What I would like to underscore about this Mock War is the fact that this was the last and only land battle that took place between the Spaniards and Americans in the Philippine Islands during the war of 1898 and only for the capitulation of the City of Manila. And this Mock War was held on August 13, 1898 a day after Spain and the United States signed the Peace Protocol ending all hostilities between these two warring countries on August 12. The Mock War was conclusively without the knowledge and approval of the higher authorities in Madrid and Washington D.C. making it purely a decision made by the top military officers of the two contending armies in Manila. In fact, as documented, it was Admiral Dewey who intentionally cut the only cable that linked Manila to the outside world which was the reason why the news about the Peace Protocol was received only on August 16, 1898. Here's a portion of the written account of C. Douglas Sterner confirming that the Spanish-American military encounter for the capitulation of Manila was a genuine Mock War and not a Real War:

"There were no Medals of Honor awarded for heroism in the last of the Spanish-American war...the battle had been a staged event, a sham to save face for the Spanish and deny victory to Aguinaldo and his guerillas. The day-long drama cost 6 American soldiers their lives, and resulted in 92 wounded. The Spanish suffered 49 killed in action and 100 wounded." ... and they called it " a splendid little war". Was it? Tell it to the marines.

### *Bryanna George*

A creative visionary whose passion spans between writing for books, television, and film. Bryanna George has known from the early age of eight that she wanted to tell attention grabbing original stories. She lives in the endless daylight of Florida, the sunshine state. But ever enamored by the darkness of speculative multi-layered worlds that live inside her mind, she plans to write many more horrific, fantastical, and dark sci-fi tales.

### *Stolen Things*

Amber couldn't stop as she reached her greedy fingers into friends' and family's pocketbooks. Nothing was forbidden as Amber built her collection of stolen goods. For years she'd perfected her craft to such a degree that she no longer got caught by angry victims. It was a horrible thing to do but her addiction and curiosity always won in the end.

Ring! Amber looked up from the cash she'd borrowed from her mother's purse as her doorbell rang. She wasn't expecting packages today, knowing how she lived in an apartment complex, the deliveryman always mixed and messed everyone's parcels. Good news for me, she thought.

Amber slid the door open and gasped. Bestowed on her doorstep was a box, gleaming and golden, intricate and ornate, flowers were carved at the chest's every angle.

It's gorgeous! She admired the box as her tongue dried with anticipation. And now it's mine!

She lunged forward, capturing the golden container. She claimed this box as she would a man, and disappeared back inside her apartment. She barely heard the door shutting behind her, refusing to tear her gaze away from the box. She ran fingers over the carvings, trembling as she touched the smooth perfect lines that decorated her newfound treasure.

Suddenly she felt something loosely attached to the bottom of the chest. She tugged with small force and beheld a small note.

To my most beautiful friend, Ayana,

I miss your magical laughter and witty charm every day. Cherish this gift for your collection that I hope to see one day. But I know we will meet again, and we'll find each other like we have in our birthplace of Africa. I wish you a happy birthday and many more to come.

Love always your dearest friend, Keyon.

Amber blushed at the content, it wasn't explicit but she had never read a note so intimate before. The writer claimed the two were friends but he sounded like a not--so-secretive admirer.

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Ayana lived down the hallway, alone but happy. She wore colorful dresses. Her long natural raven curls fell down against her honey brown skin. Always the eccentric beauty greeted Amber with a smile as the women crossed paths, leaving Amber envious.

She felt plain in comparison with her unremarkable flat blonde hair and sallow skin that aged her five years from her twenty-eight. Still, she thought Ayana was a sweet woman who she respected. Amber knew she should go to Ayana's apartment and rightfully hand her the gift her gentlemen friend sent.

But Amber couldn't be denied, she wanted the chest as her own.

Amber carried the golden box into her bedroom, where the walls surrounding her bed were bolted shelves of stolen trophies. The prize would not join the others, it would be given its own shelf; her greatest reward, she placed the beauty on display.

She wondered about peering inside her masterpiece. Swallowing, she opened the top lid of the chest, expecting to find more golden beauty.

Instead she was faced with an ocean of darkness. She sputtered, confused. A black pool rippled and gurgled loudly within the swarm living inside the box.

"What the hell?" she shrieked as the dark lunged from the box, cutting off her scream, wrapping her face in an unbreakable hold. Her screams muffled under the mass as she tried clawing the thing off her face. She achieved nothing as the black goo streamed down her arms, over her hips, and wiggled between her toes. Covered head to foot, Amber fell on the ground squirming, crying to God as the horror dragged her toward the chest.

God never answered.

She and the black mass were snatched out of sight and into the golden box.

"Ms. Amber? I believe you have my delivery. Ms. Amber?" Ayana opened the unlocked door with surprise. Sounds of footfalls reached a bedroom, a stunned gasp is cued, a phone was dialed and the caller on the other end responded.

"My lovely, Ayana, did you find your gift?"

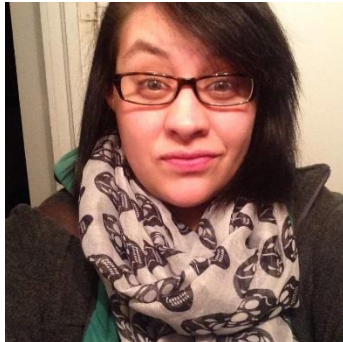
"Yes, Keyon. I found it but I can see it's been used by an unwelcome guest."

Laughter echoed on both end.

Keyon purred, "Ayana, you know how I feel about thieves, I placed a special root on this gift. You know what they say about opening Pandora's Box."

"Yes, I see." Ayana said gently, opening the lid of the chest, revealing glowing jewels, pearls, and African beads that were meant for her eyes only. "I guess curiosity really did kill the cat."

### *Kensley Lewis*



**Kensley Lewis** is a 23-year-old student at Full Sail University and studies Creative Writing for Entertainment. She resides in North Alabama and spends her free time with her husband and their 3-year-old son, reading, and binge-watching television shows.

*inside Job*

Pauline sits across from Johnny, glass in one hand, a cigarette in the other. There is a silence in their conversation, so she takes in the sunshine on the patio at their weekly rendezvous.

"What do you think?" he asks.

"Think about what?"

"Do you think he knows? Lou? Do you think he knows about me? About the jobs? Because, I swear Paulie, I have a lot riding on this, and last night on my way out there, a black van made every turn I did for ten miles."

"Relax, dear. I told you this work ain't for the faint of heart when you signed up a few months ago. Don't tell me you're getting all paranoid on me?" she gives him a devilish grin, taking a long drag from the Pall Mall.

"I don't think so, but when you've got a dead man in your trunk and you're on your way to the desert in the middle of the night, and someone's taking the route you are, you start to worry."

"Would a raise help?" she takes a sip from the glass, raising her blond eyebrows.

"How much?"

"Two grand sound fair?"

Johnny makes a scoffing noise. "A year? Are you out of your mind? That's pennies compared to what the others make."

"You misunderstand me," she says, and laughs. "Two grand a week."

Johnny's eyes almost fell out of his head. An extra hundred grand a year would rid him of the Vegas desert, and run away with Pauline once and for all. "I could just kiss you."

"What's stopping you?" she grins, bringing the cigarette up to her mouth, taking one last drag, and putting it out in the ashtray by her feet.

Johnny stands, stretching his arm toward her. She takes the offer and stands with him, his arms enclosing her in a rough embrace, enveloping her torso.

"What are you waiting for?"

He picks her up and wraps her legs around his waist and brings her to the nearest bed of the two in the room. He throws her down on the striped comforter, undoing the motel maid's hard work. She throws her head back and laughs, his warm breath and tongue tickling her ear.

A loud banging knock on the door startles them and Johnny jolts up from his position on top of Pauline. She doesn't move from the bed, but Johnny makes his way to the door.

They knock again, three times, all louder than the one before. "Vegas PD, open up!" one man yells, knocking three more times.

Johnny reaches for his gun that is tucked in the back of his pants waist and inches closer until he reaches the peep hole in the door. He peers into the small glass hole and is met with three men dressed in uniform, "VPD" etched on the front of the shirt's fabric.

Hand still on the gun behind his back, Johnny opens the door, but the three men rush in with force unpredicted. They tackle Johnny to the ground, but Pauline stands tall between the two hotel beds, pistols in both hands. There is three of them and only one of her, but the distraction she was creating made it easy for Johnny to get up and point his gun at the man holding him and push the other against the wall, crushing his neck with his forearm.

The man closest to Pauline stumbles over the low-sitting chair and falls to his knees beside Pauline. "Please, we were sent here, I got two girls and a wife," the man says, hands in the air in surrender.

"I hate beggars," Pauline says, pulling the trigger. The man falls forward. "Well, what's it this time?"

"Lou knows," the second man says, "and he's bringing in the big boys."

"Oh really?" she says, "guess I was wrong. Maybe he did sharpen up over the last decade. Well, biggest mistake you've ever made in your life was trusting that fool. All of you." Pauline pulled the trigger, firing off shots from both pistols, blood splattering across the beds and white lamps above them.

"Come on, we gotta move 'em. I'll call the cleanup crew." She sets the guns down and picks up the telephone from the nightstand. "Yeah, Jameson? Hey, it's Paulie. We're at the Motel 13 off the highway. Know the place? Good. Yeah, see ya." She hangs up the phone and looks at Johnny. "Well, we better make it an extra six grand this week."

"Lou?" he asked, confused.

"Alright, time for a little explaining. Lou is an old friend of mine, grew up together, all that stuff. Well, he used to be in the mob, got on the mob boss', Gordie's, good side, settled all his debts. So, Gordie had an idea. There were a few problems with snitches. Men tattling to the police and men thinking they'd get extra protection from being on the force. So Gordie had Lou enlist in the force, work his way up to chief. So, anytime someone new came to the police snitching and brown-nosing the cops to be safer, he'd load 'em up, send 'em our way, and that's that. We'd bury 'em in the desert, no

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families to question disappearances since they'd needed help from the mob to begin with. So, we take care of 'em, get paid a lump sum from Gordie, police stay off our back, life goes on, wealthy, and with no worries. For all of us."

"Well, why didn't you say this sooner?"

"We had to make sure you weren't a snitch," she smiles.

He hoists up two bodies over his shoulders and walks to the empty parking lot and throws the men in his trunk. He comes back in. "Let's get a move on," he says, slapping her ass.

"God, I love you," she says as he takes the last man to the car, shutting the door behind her.

*Thom Young*



**Thom Young** is a writer from Texas. His last poetry collection *A Little Black Dress Called Madness* hit #1 Poetry in Germany. He is a 2017 Pushcart Prize nominee and his work appears in over a hundred literary journals including *International Journal of Poetry*, *Poetry Quarterly*, *3am* magazine, *Word Riot*, *Thirty West*, and many more.

*Love Again*

it's love  
the dogs are loose  
there's a pain  
in  
my gut  
it says don't do  
it again  
the knives

will get you  
in the back  
again  
but  
I move forward  
it's worth  
it.

*Death Comes*

death never worries  
about time  
she hangs around  
until it's time  
and some are easier  
to kill  
for they died  
long ago  
but still breathing  
still jumping off cliffs

still sorting through  
red dyed hamburger meat  
at three in the morning  
making popcorn  
for nobody  
life has been their chainsaw  
and  
pain seems natural  
because  
it is.

*Friends*

he walked into the school  
told the teachers and the boys  
to get out.  
then he shot the girls  
one by one in the back of the head  
then put the cold steel in his own mouth  
the next day  
they all forgave him  
and when his widow needed help

they took up a collection  
and they didn't boast  
or tell anyone about it  
they say  
the killer used to drive  
a milk truck  
and did a good job  
of keeping  
everything cold.

*Scott Dutton*



**Scott Dutton** is a student at Full Sail University majoring in the Creative Writing for Entertainment. He expects to earn his BFA degree in 2019. He has an Associates of Arts degree from Grays Harbor Community College and an Associate degree in Information Technology from the Community College of the Air Force. Scott is a member of the Air National Guard and an Eagle Scout. He has an avid interest in game design and animation and has been writing fiction informally for several years. Scott can be reached at [scottdutton@centurytel.net](mailto:scottdutton@centurytel.net).

*For Love of Rembrandt*

Rick Abbeth sat at his post in the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. He stared at the security monitor for a moment. Two policemen waited outside in the dark for him to respond. Rick leaned into the microphone. "May I help you?"  
"Boston Police. We're responding to a disturbance."  
Rick buzzed them in and the two men entered. The taller of the two sauntered toward him.  
"Are you the only one here?"  
"Yes." Rick's eyes grew wide.  
The men drew their pistols. "Sir... this is a robbery." The taller man aimed his gun and motioned for him to step away from the desk.  
"I-I don't want any trouble!" Rick stepped out, his arms and legs shaking. "I'm only a musician."  
"No funny business. Drop your weapon. Turn around and place your hands on your head." The man's partner pulled out a roll of duct tape and approached Rick. They wrapped him up and locked him in the nearby basement.  
"How much time you think we got, Jim?" The taller man's partner followed closely as they entered the hallway.  
"A musician..." Jim shook his head. "We needn't worry, Fred. If he were competent, he'd have called the cops to check if we were real."  
Fred tapped Jim's shoulder repeatedly. "J-Jim, remember that art history class we took in high school?"  
"Yeah?"  
"What was that one artist? You know, the one that starts with R?"  
"Rambert? Ramone? No..." Jim shook his head.  
Fred read a sign next to one of the rooms. "Rembrandt!" He stopped and covered his mouth. The sound of his voice echoed throughout the museum.  
Jim raised an eyebrow and turned to his partner. "Let's turn it down a notch, yeah?"  
Fred nodded.  
"So, you like Rembrandt's works?"  
"I like the boat on the ocean."  
"The stormy one, right?" The corners of Jim's mouth rose.



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"Which ones are we taking, Jim? Do they have it here?"

"Sure, if they have it. We take the ones that look expensive."

"Did you case the place out like I asked. On TV, the thieves always case the place out."

"No. I didn't want to risk getting seen by the cameras."

"Then how do we know what to grab?"

"It doesn't matter what. They're all expensive. Just... look around, will ya? Pick your favorites."

Jim pushed Fred into a room and moved on. He explored and eventually found a self-portrait of Rembrandt.

"This is Rembrandt? What a boring-looking man. Who'd want this? It's nothing but brown."

Scuffling footsteps echoed through the hallway as Fred scrambled to find him.

"Jim. Jim, I found it. It's called The Storm on the Sea of Galilee."

"Keep your voice down, you twit." Jim slapped Fred on the head. "Do you need the knife?"

"Do we really have to cut it out? It's really pretty. I don't want to damage it."

"If you want it, cut it."

Fred's mouth quivered. Jim remained unmoved and set the knife aside. He grabbed Fred and spun him around and sat him before another painting.

"Don't get emotional. While you think about it, contemplate... Vermeer's The Concert."

Fred clasped his hands together and looked up to the painting before him. It was smaller than the others.

In 'The Concert', a young woman played the harpsichord, another sang, and a man between them played a lute. The harpsichord's lid was decorated with an Arcadian landscape. Fred drew closer to examine the piece. The women were beautiful.

Jim tapped him on the shoulder. "It's time to go."

"But you said—"

"It's been nearly eighty minutes. We've been here too long. I've got a couple piles going. This is the last one." Jim motioned for Fred to move and began cutting out the painting.

As they began to leave with their haul, Fred passed by the Blue Room and glanced in. His eyes focused on The Storm on the Sea of Galilee one last time.

Jim paused beside him. "Fred? We really must leave."

But Fred was already in the room, setting down his haul. He pulled out a box cutter and jammed it into the canvas.

### *Joshua Evans*



**Joshua Evans** is an aspiring writer who is currently attending Full Sail University to hone his creative writing skills. Evans loves science fiction and horror but is striving to write outside of his comfort zone. When not teaching his children the ways of the Force, Evans spends most of his time working as a service advisor at a motorcycle shop with the hopes of finding a job in his field after he graduates college.

*Room Seven*

James stood at the door, staring at the number seven. His shirt was always unusually tidy with not a wrinkle in sight but this time it was discolored from the generous amount of sweat. He raised his arm up and with the last bit of courage he gave three subtle taps. He clenched his jaw as tight as he could, "Come on," he said. The door swung open to reveal Meredith, dressed in her Sunday best.

"Come in," she said. She backed away from the door and strolled back to the patio not even giving James a glance. She sat in the stiff chair and crossed her legs.

"This is a nice hotel room. It even has AC. Now I know where the money has been going," James said.

"Do you always have to be such a dick?" she asked.

"I'm not trying to be! I just think this is a little bit ridiculous," he said. He walked in to the room, the plush carpet felt like cushions of air under his black dress shoes scuffed with the marks of 12 hour shifts. "I just want to sit down and get this over with," he said. He made his way to the patio where Meredith was waiting. Every detail of the room stole what little happiness he had left. The beige walls, the matching carpet, the elaborate wood trim surrounding the art deco lamps over the beds, all of it made his face cringe. As he sat down across from Meredith he placed his moist head in his hands. "Why do we have to do it like this? Why can't things be the way they were?" he asked.

"I don't love you anymore. We have been through this a hundred times," she said.

"I know... I just don't know what to do anymore. I want Christy back. She needs her father," he said.

"I'm not trying to keep her from you, but calling in the middle of the night, drunk, isn't helping. I need you to be stable. We've been separated for a year and Frank isn't happy with your actions of late."

"It's hard. We were together for 15 years! 15 years of my life I gave to you!" He lifted his head up and slammed his fist down on the table, the thud echoed against the wood fence that surrounded them.

Meredith's face never winced once, her green eyes fixed on his. "Look, I drove four hours here to figure this out because I want to help you. I still care about you or I wouldn't have lied to Frank, my fiancée, and told him I was going to visit my mother. If I didn't care and didn't want you to be in your daughter's life but I need you to be rational."

"I'm... I'm sorry. When can I see her?"

"When can you stop getting drunk every night?"

"I'll stop now. I won't touch another drop if you let me see her."

"Prove to me that, for one week, you can keep your shit together and I'll agree to joint custody. That means no late-night calls, and no threats."

The anger had left James' face as the corners of his mouth lifted and a smile appeared on his face. He stood up out of the hard chair stopping half way up to grab his back. "I'm killing myself to help provide for her. I've been working two jobs to pay for the child support. I want to thank you for not dragging this through court and giving me the chance to talk this out with you."

Meredith nodded, sat up and walked to the door. As she opened the door she returned James' smile with her own.

"Remember, one week," she said.

"One week," He replied.

James stood on the concrete outside of room seven, visions of his daughter's round face with glowing blonde hair, and blue eyes staring at him flooded his mind. Something had come back to him that had been missing for over a year. His happiness had returned.



*Leanne Neil*

**Leanne Neill** is a company director, domestic goddess, mother of three, and a self-confessed composer of words. She has twenty-three years of experience in public libraries and local government. In May 2016, she started her poetry inspired Facebook page: LUST for WORDS. She lives in Melbourne, Australia

*SACRED*

Solemnly sacred...  
Our touch reserved to worship  
each other's body,  
our words prescribed to sanctify  
each other's soul.  
Vows taken secretly,

honourably testified;  
others, dishonourably broken.  
Consecrated by wrathless Gods,  
consummated in holy desire.  
Crucifixion inevitable...

*IT ONLY POURS*

I await the change of seasons,  
trepidation never lost.  
I should be acclimatized by now  
to fluctuations;  
scathing heat, bitter cold, lukewarm.

In between...

My heart still aches in tune  
with your barometric emulations;  
pressure palpable.  
I'm afraid;

the forecast is never conclusive.



*Kaeli LeDoux*

Kaeli LeDoux is a twenty-five year old college student in the Creative Writing program at Full Sail University. She has always had a love of reading and the outdoors. For her writing is a way to deal with all the things around her and express herself.

*The Dream Box*

Claire woke with a start at the sound of her doorbell. The red LED screen of her alarm clock read 3:00 am. "Who the hell would be stupid enough to come over this early!" she said angrily as the bell rang again. The doorbell sounded five more times before she made it down the hall. She yanked the front door open and was shocked to find nobody on the porch. The brunette pulled her purple robe tight over her matching shorts and tank top and stepped through the door. No sooner had she taken her second step when her foot hit something hard. "Ow, what the..." She looked down to see an unmarked package wrapped in plain brown paper. She carried the box into the living room and set it on the coffee table. She unwrapped the package to find a metal box with a large lock clasped at its front. On top of the box was an envelope and a key. when she opened the envelope, she found a card and read it. A world of dreams within your grasp, once you leave there's no turning back. The things you fear will find you first. To reach the best you must face the worst. She stared at the card for several minutes trying to figure out what it meant. When she could think of no other reason for something like this to show up on her doorstep, she assumed it must be part of the game Valerie had told her about. Claire ran to her room, picked up her cell phone, and dialed her friends number.

"Hello," Valerie said groggily on the second ring.

"Don't pretend you're asleep," Claire said. "I know it was you."

"What was me?"

"I know you're really excited about this game but did you have to wake me up so early?"

"You just woke me up."

"Because you rang my doorbell fifteen times and left this box on my porch."

"What are you talking about? I didn't leave anything on your porch, I've been asleep since 11:30."

"My doorbell rang at three o'clock this morning and there was a package on the porch."

"I don't know who left it, but it wasn't me." Valerie said, yawning. "I'll come over later and we will see what is inside."

Claire hung up the phone not knowing what to think. If Valerie hadn't left the box, who had, and what was inside? Her blue eyes scanned the card for any indication of who may have sent it. All she saw was a white floral patterned card with the message written in block letters. She was too curious to wait for her friend, she turned the key in the lock and lifted the lid. As the hinges squeaked she felt as if she were being pulled, and everything went dark.

When Claire opened her eyes, she was surrounded by trees and other plants, most of which she couldn't name. "How did I get here?" she asked looking around in panic. She started walking looking for anything familiar, her eyes and ears alert for any sign of people or danger. As she walked past a tree a frog jumped onto her shoulder. Claire screamed brushing the amphibian off and backed away. She had been afraid of frogs her entire life, so much so, that she had convinced herself tree frogs could suck out a human brain with their suction cupped feet. As more frogs appeared, clinging to the trees, red eyes trained on the frightened girl she began to panic and fled. She ran through the forest until her lungs burned from the effort. Claire sat on a fallen log panting. She looked around, trying to calm her breathing, only to panic again when she saw she was surrounded by the small amphibians of her nightmares. Their red eyes following her every move. They began dropping from the trees, into her hair and on her back. As they descended their suction cupped feet began attaching to her skin. Claire's skin began to flatten against her bones. The frogs really were sucking the life from her body.

### *Pawel Markiewicz*



Paweł Markiewicz was born in Siemiatycze 1983. He studied both law and German studies.

He was twice the scholarship holder of "Forum Alpbach" - the village of thinkers in Austria.

He is poet and writer who likes the most beautiful poems and fairy tales His three volumes of poetry were printed in Poland, and one in Germany. His more than 30 poems were published in Germany as well as in Austria. He writes in German, Polish and recently in English.

### *Winter-haikus*

1  
winter queen fairy  
is dreaming about the ice  
delighting the depths  
2.  
kindness of fairy  
snow queen is making snowforms  
its old prophecy  
3.  
icicle in the warmth  
is beeing found by angels  
fulfilment of time  
4.

upright nobel bear  
he is hunting for the dreams  
about winter queen

5.  
melancholic lake  
kind fairy is freezing time  
the depths of kindness

6.  
the rime and icicle  
I am philosophising  
about your frostbite

7.  
whiteness of the world  
I am waiting for the thaw

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crushed ice in pond  
8.  
snowform over me  
I am finding fairys sleight  
and footprint of wolf  
9.  
the bed of wild wolf  
I am dreaming about lake  
frozen - never melt  
10.  
melt water of pond  
I am finding beds of bear  
In winter distance  
11.  
Zeus and the frostbite  
I am charmin a icicle  
Fulfilment in truth  
12.  
Lake pond and the depths  
I am wading throught water  
I am delighting  
13.  
the lake is melting  
nobility and kindness  
the bear will awoke  
14.  
noble cold bear-bed  
In the distance i see you  
you are good fairy  
15.  
the molten rivers  
snow queen ist falling asleep  
I am charming truth  
16.  
the melancholy  
a magic rime and frostbite  
fairys propecy  
17.

1.  
leaf is greening now  
butterflies are dyeing earth  
the old luxuriance  
2.  
the storks and sparrows  
are sencing the silence now  
early morning dreams  
3.  
kind good springfragnance  
an ant is magnificent  
beauty of nature  
4.  
flowers and blossoms

sleight are beautiful  
i am experiencing bears  
gnome whitewashes world  
18.  
spell-bound lakes ans ponds  
I am delighting in wind  
kindness of footprints  
19.  
philosophising  
i am relishing the thaw  
I am tracking wolves  
20.  
Frostbond ponds and lakes  
Magical sleight are upright  
my ice-cold-river  
21.  
rime ice and snowforms  
frozen stars about the lake  
sun and sky are cold  
22.  
broken heart of ice  
I am discovering ghosts  
cold sky without stars  
23.  
Kindness of fairy  
thousands stars are singing now  
about winter dreams  
24.  
The spell-bound ice castle  
where dwarfs gnomes are living now  
dreaming about sky  
25.  
a gigantic castle  
honourable queen in the snow  
thousand winter birds

I am feeling green and smell  
beauty of the thuth  
5.  
my bees and springs smell  
springtide in tempting blossoms  
dreams are coloured as you  
6.  
hatching brood of storks  
the luxuriance and the truth  
ants in the green time  
7.  
a forget-me-not  
Is beeing pollinated  
by colored bees

*Springtide-haikus*

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8.  
pleasure of brightness  
fresh cawslips are feeling cranes  
which are coming now  
9.  
noble butterflies  
are nostalgia for delights  
beautiful spring leaf  
10.  
freshness of morning  
wing of crane is morning good  
of time-nostalgia  
11.  
I like well springtide  
I love theild geese at night  
red sunset in me  
12.  
starks will follow bees  
In a distance I see ants  
beauty of kind spring  
13.  
crane will sing paint here  
I will see luxuriant wings  
spring shall be fragrant  
14.  
my forget-me-not  
I like love all butterflies  
strong of waking up  
15.  
insect is buzzing  
the ants are tempting today  
I am dreaming here  
16.  
greenery blossom  
brightness and freshness of spring  
butterfly-angels

17.  
v-formation geese  
birds are singing whimpering  
they are coming now  
18.  
my mash marigold  
I have the fragrance in heart  
a bee is humming  
19.  
town speeds in valley  
homes of Zeus and Hekules  
springtide is marvelous  
20.  
your stream is burbling  
I can conjure up a green  
bee is infesting  
21.  
spring nest of bears  
wolves are following ghosts  
of beautiful spring  
22.  
storks are whimpering  
you are pointing spring picture  
my nature spirit  
23.  
blossom green and smell  
the flowery springtide-time  
noble greenery  
24.  
greenery I soul  
my best dreams about the smell  
my forget-me-not  
25.  
greenery in heart  
cowslips wild geese in nature  
beauty of springtide

*Sommer-haikus*

1.  
Adonis roses  
lightning and rain are pretty  
its dawning with dreams  
2.  
rainbow after rain  
I like red sunset with wolf  
I am admiring  
3.  
lynx in the full moon  
dreams and feelings awoken  
magic world in us  
4.  
Adonis roses  
are drinking water of stream  
the dreams-fulfilment  
5.  
red sunset above

I am idolising rain  
lovely summer  
6.  
hedgerow is mine  
I am adoring roses  
garden of fairy  
7.  
lynx and herd of wolves  
are following the eclipse  
bewitched summer  
8.  
july forest dwarfs  
I am following the moon  
watching the new moon

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9.  
new moon is above  
I am philosophising  
about the stars dust  
10.  
grapes picking and sun  
both are magic fairytale  
the dreamy summer  
11.  
I am soaking  
I am marveling at lake  
water is preaty  
12.  
lovely summer  
feeling lightning rains and storm  
magnificent dreams

*Fall (autumn)\_haikus*

1.  
chestnuts in the parks  
rumination about chill  
you are fallen leaf  
2.  
the birds migration  
cogitation about wind (AM)  
a yellowed leaf  
3.  
volcanos legends  
all is noticable cold  
I sleep throught the fall  
4.  
watching of the birds  
the most of them are flying  
I will fall asleep  
5.  
our meteorite  
10.  
old cementary  
the noticable legend  
I am missing moss

13.  
magic grape picking  
I am idolising sun  
its dawning with moon  
14.  
stream under rainbow  
there red sun in the morning  
visible picking  
15.  
dreamer loves and lives  
dreamy morning grape picking  
he is admiring

pretty flowers are wilted  
ancient parks in fall  
6.  
the herd ghost-gnomes  
a fogdy morning in us  
fulfilment of fall  
7.  
cold wind is blowindg  
I am dressing as Zeus-son  
forgotten forest  
8.  
chestnut in the rain  
a legendary walking  
into world of thuth  
9.  
cold rose and poem  
Im creating the haiku  
about Adonis  
cranes of Ibikus

*L. Y. Moe*

**L.Y. Moe** wanted to be a dentist, but it didn't work out. She tried graphic design, but that didn't feel right, either. Lost and unsure, it was writing that found her and lifted her from the depths, casting a light on the path she should take.

L.Y. Moe is currently studying Creative Writing for Entertainment at Full Sail University. She lives in Kansas City, Missouri with her family.

*The Package*

I'm minding my own business, eating Frosted Flakes, when some lunatic rings the doorbell and tries to Hulk smash my front door. Ma is blow drying her hair upstairs, so I get up to answer it.

I open the door with sarcasm. "Next time, knock har-" but no one is there. "-der."

I step out and look around, but the only person is Mr. Buford at the end of the street, grabbing his morning paper.

"Ha ha, very funny!" I shout sarcastically so the Hulk can hear me. "You got me, you lil' ding dong ditching dork!"

That's when I notice a box on the doormat. It's no bigger than a shoe box, covered in brown wrapping paper and tied up with twine. Pinterest, hipster-looking crap. I stoop down to inspect it: no postage, no name, no nothing.

Hmm, take this mysterious box of who-knows-what from who-knows-who inside my house... or leave it? I decide to leave it. Better yet, if that lil' twerp is watching, I want them to know exactly what I think of their little prank. I pick up the box--which is super light--and march straight to the trash bin. I smile when I remember that today is trash day.

Perfect.

I wheel the bin to the curb and make a big scene of opening the lid, slamming the package inside and smashing it down several times for good measure.

I walk back inside to finish my soggy cereal. I'm washing my dishes when I hear Ma hurrying down the steps. She grabs a granola bar and throws on her cardigan in one motion. If there's one thing she hates, it's being late for work.

"Who was that at the door?"

"Nobody," I reply. "Just some kid being a jerk."

"Johnny," she says to me suddenly, freezing in place. "Did you remember to set the trash out?"

"Yes, Ma."

She relaxes and pats my head as I grab my bag and follow her out the door. She's locking up the house now. "Did you remember to put your art field trip permission slip in your bag?"

I sigh, "Yes, Ma."

The trash truck is on our street now, a few houses away.

"And what about your science project, Johnny?" She's yelling over the noise of the trash truck's air brakes as we load the car.

"What about it, Ma?" I close the door and buckle in as the trash truck is dumping our bin. She stares at me, expectantly. I already know what she's thinking, so I unbuckle with a grunt and get out to move the bin back to the side of the house. I hurry, knowing how much flack I'll get if she's even a couple of minutes late.

I re-enter the car and she's got the hand sanitizer ready. "Do you need anything else for your group science project? I'm running to the store today."

"No, Ma." I say as I rub the sanitizer in.

I turn on the radio as she reverses out and drives forward. I watch in the side mirror as the trash truck gets smaller behind us. We turn the corner and drive in silence for a few minutes.

"I forgot to tell you," Mom starts. "I'm expecting a package today." I'm texting my friend and don't register what she's saying. "Johnny, did you hear me?"

"Yes," I lie. "You've got something coming in the mail."

"It's not mail," she corrects me. "It's a package."

"What kind of package?" I put the phone down.



She's smiling now, "I had a neighbor hold something for me. They were supposed to keep it until next week, but had to leave town for a family emergency. I'm not sure when they'll drop it off, but they said they would leave it on the doorstep."

My gut is clenching now and we are almost to my high school. I go back and forth trying to decide whether or not I should tell her. She stops to let me out and I hesitate opening the door.

"What's in the package, Ma?"

She's beaming now, both hands in the air. "Your birthday present! I couldn't keep it in the house with all your snooping!"

The black, very expensive, Ultra-Light Air Jordans I've been asking for flash in my mind and I suddenly feel sick.

She's sitting beside me but her voice sounds far away, "Johnny, are you okay?"

"Ma," I stammer. "I've got something to tell you. And it's going to make you late for work."

### *Caleb Payne*



**Caleb Payne** is a college student from Full Sail University who has lived in Maryville, Tennessee, since the day he was born and aspires to write for a living. While caring for his sick mother Caleb works part time as a receptionist with H&R Block and attends Full Sail University online for his undergraduate Bachelor's degree in Creative Writing for Entertainment. Caleb has received an award for excellence in English and was accepted into the Pre-college Upward Bound program, only offered to a handful of individuals in Tennessee.

### *Love*

"Coming!" I shouted as I raced down the stairs, my feet thumping loudly as I hurried to answer the door. "Who could possibly be here at eleven o'clock?" I said to myself out loud as I turned the door knob and peeked my head out the door. To my surprise, there was no one on the porch. "Hello?" I said out into the dark night, the only reply I received was a chilly wind that brought the beginnings of winter on its breeze. I stepped out onto my porch when suddenly I felt something rub against my foot and jumped back in fright. I looked down at what my foot had brushed against my foot and saw a brightly colored box. "What's this?" I said bending down and grabbing the small square box. I walked back inside and set the box on my coffee table in the living room. I looked closely at the design of the box to see if any identifiable marks were distinguishable anywhere on its surface, to my curiosity there were none only a small blue button that shined dimly from the light provided by the light in the corner of the room. "I wonder what's inside?" I said picking up the box, shaking it to figure out if it contained anything inside of it. I shook the box back and forth in my hands but no noise came forth, I set the box back down and wondered what to do next. "Should I open it?" I said to myself, "What if it's just a prank and there's dog poop inside, but wait poop would have made a noise if it smacked against the walls of the box." I said thinking carefully. Deciding to satisfy my curiosity I decided to press the blue button on the box and see what the box was hiding. Slowly, I reached my finger towards the button, a growing sense of nostalgia began to overwhelm me for some reason. "Why do I suddenly feel... so happy yet sad all at once?" I said stopping my hand midway towards the button. I shrugged off the feeling and continued to reach my hand out and suddenly memories of my childhood flash before my eyes. I could see yourself playing in the grass in front of a small house and a woman calling to me, telling me that dinner was ready. "Why am I thinking of her all of a sudden, I haven't thought of her since I left home," I said, an extreme bout of sadness now replacing any happiness that was felt before. I continued to reach for the button until my finger was finally resting on the now brightly glowing button of the box. I could feel a strong feeling of loss growing within me. "I feel like I'm going cry," I said weakly barely holding back the tears forming on my eyes. I pushed the button in and heard a soft click and suddenly the light of the button faded. The top of the box popped open and I peered inside to see what was inside the box. "I thought... I lost this when I moved out." I said reaching into the box and pulling up a single photograph. "I'm sorry I lost you Mom." I said as the

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tears in my eyes poured out of me. I clutched the picture close to my chest and cried softly as I remembered the pain of her death all at once. I remembered how much she loved me until the day her illness took her life and how much she wanted to let me know every day no matter how much pain she was in. "I love you Mom," I said as I held the photograph close to me and closed my eyes, thinking of the days we had spent together. "I won't lose you again I promise," I said as sleep suddenly overcame me and I fell on the couch behind me falling into a peaceful slumber.



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