



# October Hill

MAGAZINE



# October Hill

M A G A Z I N E



Volume 3, Issue 3

## Welcome to October Hill Magazine



November kicks off the start of the traditional holiday season throughout the United States and North America. Family members all over North America gather to celebrate the holidays together in a spirit of love and good cheer. But the year-end also often represents a time for reflection upon one's personal accomplishments in life, success in business, or progress on life's journey.

We at *October Hill Magazine* are looking both forward and backward. Our Autumn issue also represents a milestone for us – the completion of our third year as a literary publication. Looking back, we can measure how much progress we have made from the time our magazine was just an idealistic dream on the drawing boards. Looking forward, we can foresee continued growth in our editorial content and opportunities to diversify and develop new editorial offerings and product offshoots.

Our submissions and reader interest have grown with each issue. To us, that is a very encouraging sign. Our numbers of readers and followers have increased as well. We are most grateful to both the writers and readers who have embraced our publication and our core mission of creating an editorial platform for new writers of short stories and poetry.

At the same time, we are also extremely grateful to our family of staff editors who have continued to grow with us and to bring exciting new ideas to the table on each new issue. None of this would be possible without you.

We wish everyone Happy Holidays this Fall season. And we look forward to the promise of a new year in 2020.

**Richard Merli**     *Editorial Director*

**Samantha Morley**     *Managing Editor*

# Meet the Team

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Interested in joining our team? Send an email with your resume to [OctoberHillMag@gmail.com](mailto:OctoberHillMag@gmail.com)

**TOC image by Genevieve Felsenstein.** Genevieve is a senior Visual Arts major and Literature minor at Ramapo College of New Jersey. Her work often vacillates between humorous and macabre. I try to approach topics with the appropriate sensitivity while adding a layer of wit. Genevieve's influences include author Franz Kafka, artist Odilon Redon, and filmmaker Jan Švankmajer.

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*Page by Genevieve Felsenstein*

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## Fiction



*Childhood Bedroom by Genevieve Felsenstein*

## **Act of Kindness**

**By Kenneth Kapp**

In the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn, the intersection of Kingston and Eastern Parkway is rarely without congestion; there is always heavy traffic, with people rushing about their business, and commuters hurrying to and from the #3 subway line. This is especially true in the summer when people can linger on the street and catch up with friends and neighbors. At this point, double lanes in each direction run down the center of Eastern Parkway. There are wide pedestrian islands on both sides with benches and trees, and then single lanes for local traffic with parking at the curb. Apartment buildings and stores are stepped back from the sidewalk, many with small plots of grass. For several blocks in either direction, the Parkway separates an essentially Jewish side of mostly Lubavitch Hassidim from a mix of minorities on the other side.

One afternoon at four o'clock, an old man with a long white beard carefully crosses the local service lane to the pedestrian island. He's leaning on his cane and crumpled plastic bags are lodged under his free hand. He threads his way to the main intersection and waits for the traffic lights to change before attempting to cross the four main lanes. By the time he reaches the pedestrian strip on the other side, the light has changed again. A few cars finish turning left from Kingston, but he patiently waits for the lights to change before crossing, refraining from joining the others who pass him on either side.

Arturo drops his cigarette, grinding the butt in front of him, points at the old man, and says to Porto, "What's he doing coming over here? He should crawl back into 770 where all them Jews come out like ants. Man's going to get hurt coming on this side of the Parkway. Hey, when Hoso and Rami get here, we can take bets if a car clips him crossing back over."

Porto pats his large belly. “Sure, loser buys some donuts as soon as you figure out what we’re betting on.” He thinks for a while. “Does it count if I trip him?” Porto is high and hungry.

They both lean back against the apartment building, sticking their chins out, as if to assert that the smells inside will be from Jamaica, Puerto Rico, or Haiti, and nothing like the smells found on the Jewish side of the street.

The old man smiles as he approaches the entrance of the building, turns, and bends over to pick up two loose fliers and a sheet of newsprint. He straightens up with difficulty and leans his cane against his hip, retrieving a plastic bag from under his arm. He flaps it open and pushes the litter in.

Arturo scratches his head, opens his mouth, and then watches as the man picks up candy wrappers and a discarded can that was stuck under a fence.

Arturo looks at Porto. “You seeing this? The guy’s crazy. All bets off.”

The tail from his faded white shirt has come free along with the ritual undergarment. The fringes reach below his knees and the black stripes running from side to side look like asphalt streets bleached by the summer sun.

Hoso and Rami come around the corner. Rami, short and skinny with a faint moustache across his lip, is one step ahead. The young men go through a ritual of tapping knuckles before Rami asks, “What’s happening?” Arturo answers, “*Nada*, just this old guy picking up papers.”

Hoso takes a dirty tissue out of his pocket, blows his nose, whistles, and throws it in the direction of the old man. “Hey, man, here’s another for you.” He blushes, knowing that he’s been disrespectful. *My grandmother raised me better. Good thing I’m black and the guys can’t tell I just colored.*

The next afternoon, Rami and Porto are slouching at the corner, watching traffic and people going about their business. Rami elbows Porto. “Looks like it’s that crazy old man again. Must not be ‘nuf garbage on his side of Eastern.”

Eventually, the man makes his way across and when he starts down the street, they step in front of him. Porto says, “You back again? Maybe spying; you some kind of narc?”

Rami adds, “No garbage on your side?”

He looks up, his eyes straining through cataracts, and answers, “Yes, but this is also part of the neighborhood. It would be nice if both sides were clean.”

Rami and Porto turn and watch as he picks up the papers blown against the side of the building. They spot Arturo and Hosó further down the block. Porto takes out a candy bar from his shirt pocket and throws the wrapper in front of the Jew.

The latecomers stand at the corner of the building. Arturo nods. “The old guy got a problem.”

Porto nods and spits out a piece of the candy bar. “Less a problem now. Tossed him a warm piece already chewed in case he ain’t got teeth.” Rami scratches his chin. “Maybe it ain’t kosher. You wasted a good piece of candy, Porto.”

Hosó looks down. *My grannie didn’t raise me this way. But I ain’t got no other friends.*



A few days later, all four of them stand on the corner and watch as the old man crosses with a young boy. The boy is holding his hand, carrying the bags.

Arturo steps away from the building and asks, “Hey, ain’t the kid too young to learn your business?”

Rami steps in front of them. “Why you bring him here?”

The old man smiles. “Good question. It’s never too young to learn kindness. And kindness is everyone’s business.” Rami moves aside, and the old man and boy move on to the next building, where they begin picking up litter.



Next week, midweek, Hosos alone and approaches the old man. “Hey, kindness, ain’t that for dogs? Like they say, ‘Be kind to your pets.’ My granny’s got a cat. I got to empty the litter box twice a week.”

The old man looks up, and up again. Hosos’s 6’2” and his hair is in dreadlocks coiled tightly on top of his head. “Yes, but we also learn that the *essence* is in the doing.”

Porto comes up and butts in. “That some kind of perfume?”

“No, it’s not that kind of essence. Essence is what makes a man and is found inside. Cleaning up makes for a better place, and I hope it helps me.”

“Really?”

Rami and Arturo arrive. The other night, Arturo was at a club where a shooting occurred. He’s worried. “Hey, bet the dude’s got a piece at home, knocked off the competition, and comes to this side of Eastern to work off the bad karma.”

Porto looks at Arturo and says, “You going with that karma shit!” He turns to the old man. “Okay. What’s the going rate for stiffs – fill three bags?”

They step aside and the old man walks halfway down the street before they see him bend over, picking up litter.

They’re all waiting at the corner when the old man returns. Hosos is the first to approach and asks, “You getting paid for this, old man – by the hour or by the bag, maybe? Got enough crap on this street to make you rich, you think? That why you do it?”

“No, a better place is reward enough.”

Rami moves in front of Hosos and asks, “You’re really one crazy fucker. You learn that from a book?”

“Books and from the Rebbe, that’s how we refer to Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, of blessed memory.” Thinking of his Rebbe, the old man’s eyes close and tears appear.

The old man steps aside so as not to block the foot traffic. Arturo, still leaning against the building, observes, “That dude been dead for years – who’re you kidding? You got him on ice in that basement across the street?”

“No, he’s buried in Montefiore Cemetery in Queens. You can visit his grave if you wish to pray or ask a question.”

Rami’s incredulous. “You just hit your head or something?”

“Or you can come visit across the street, at 770. You don’t have to be Jewish. Sometimes I study there.”

The four young men look at each other. Arturo answers for them, “Nah, don’t think so.”

Porto adds, “That kindness could be contagious!” He pauses, “Hey, kindness: I kinda like that. Maybe you got a Jackson you can loan me?”

The man transfers the full bags to the hand holding the cane, laughs as he scratches his head, looks up to the sky, and says in a solemn tone, “Next time, I’ll bring more bags and you can all help gather up kindness.” Porto snarls and Rami must rein him in.

Hoso’s the first to laugh. “Man got you good.” The others join in. Arturo makes a face and smiles, then reaches out and shakes his hand. “That’s good, old man. That’s a good burn.”



The next time, the boy comes along. He’s carrying the bags except for a white one under the old man’s arm. When they’re finally across the street, the old man smiles and approaches Porto. “I want to apologize for the other day. I didn’t mean to embarrass you. I’m sorry. We learn that embarrassing someone in public is like killing him.” He gives Porto the white bag. “There’s a twenty-dollar bill inside.”

Porto takes the bag and finds the Jackson inside. Meanwhile, the boy and old man have continued down the street.

The young men wait against the building and, an hour later, they watch the man and the boy struggle against the rush-hour flow of pedestrians. Arturo steps in front of them. “Nuts – you Jews are nuts, that’s why you get your asses kicked all the time.” Then, he thinks for a moment and says, “Here, you give me them bags. I got us a dumpster behind this building. Keep our non-Jewish junk where it belongs.”



Weeks go by, sometimes the old man comes alone, sometimes with the young boy, but always with the bags.

Hoso asks, “Where you get all those bags?”

“There aren’t that many. I empty them in the dumpsters and reuse them. Some have become my good friends and have been with me for weeks.”

One time, it’s drizzling and Arturo finds the old man a block away. “It’s going to pour, old man. Why don’t you come back later?”

“There’s still a lot of litter and the bags aren’t full.”

Arturo looks around, doesn’t see any of his friends. “Why don’t you give them to me? I’ll finish; wouldn’t want you to get sick because of me. And, don’t worry, I’ll empty them and have them ready next time you cross the street. Hoso told me you reuse the bags.”

It doesn’t take long for Arturo to fill the bags. He’s emptying them in the dumpster behind the corner building and is spotted by Hoso. “Hey, Arto – you nuts? Old man put you on the payroll?”

“Nah, it’s raining and I didn’t want him to get sick. No big deal.”

The next day, they’re hanging at the corner, talking, with Hoso giving Arturo grief.

Arturo lets him run on for five minutes before holding up his hand. “Not saying nothing, but I slept solid last night. In the morning, there were strange dreams that I was back in school, learning something. I rolled over, smelled coffee, must have been my mom, but then I was back asleep.

Dreamt I came downstairs, muttering that I'm late for work, and there was Angie, my kid on her hip, handing me a cup of coffee. Then I woke up when some jerks started banging on the dumpsters."

Porto says, "Always told you they've been cutting drugs into the weed. Legalize the shit. Going to get me one of them t-shirts."



Two days later, Rami and Hosos see the old man on the far island. They push off the building, with Rami making a loud whistle. Hosos holds up his hand and they both thread their way through traffic to the island where the old man remains standing.

Rami announces, "We decided to help you on the Jew-side. Gonna see if your garbage is circumscribed." Hosos laughs. "Nah, didn't want any of the bros see us working with an old Jew."

"I understand. Don't worry. People are people and we've plenty of garbage here, both the circumcised and circumscribed kind. Thank you both for helping. And you know, it's even more important that we're all working together."

The next day, Rami and Hosos get to their corner early. "Hoz, maybe there's a kind of drug in those bags. Had crazy dreams last night like Arturo – about going to art school and making some beautiful pictures. Fuck that graffiti shit! Maybe big murals, like we saw in the library that one trip."

"Hey, you have dreams?"

Hosos backs him against the wall and grunts, "I ain't saying."



The next time the old man crosses the street, the four young men approach him and ask if they could look inside 770. Porto jokes, "Just to see there's no body, you know."

The old man looks into their eyes before answering. "Yes, to start understanding each other, there should be fewer secrets. The litter can wait."

When they cross the parkway, the young men feel as if they're floating on air. They walk down the steps and enter the basement, surprised by the chaos inside. Boys, young men, middle-aged men, old men, all grabbing prayer books from lockers or shelves and forming groups to pray. The old man points to a curtain and a chair in the corner. "That's where we keep the Torah Scrolls, and that's where Rabbi Schneerson, the Rebbe, prayed." The four men step further into the large room and look around.

Arturo leads them back to the old man and they go back outside. "It's just a big basement with a lot of benches and narrow tables. Enough noise so you can barely hear each other."

The old man smiles. "I think when they pray, they hope more that God hears them. But, you're right. There's probably too much talking. When the Rebbe was there, then it was quiet. And sometimes, on special occasions, he would talk for hours, about the kindness I was telling you about. And after, perhaps he would give little cakes to everyone, and hand them out himself. Or other times he would give a dollar bill, again to each person, one at a time, and ask people to use it for charity. The dollar, it should be multiplied."

As they cross Eastern Parkway the old man begins to sing, *Kol ha'olam kulo gesher tsar me'od – gesher tsar me'od*. The four of them stare at him, but no one else seems to notice. The old man's eyes are closed. They continue across the wide boulevard. *Veha'ikar, veha'ikar – lo lefached klal*.

When they're all standing in front of the corner building, he sings the song in English. *The whole world is like a very narrow bridge, a very narrow bridge, and the main thing, the main thing, is to never be afraid. The whole world is like a very narrow bridge, and the main thing is to never be afraid.*

He explains, “Life is difficult for everyone. There are always new challenges, like crossing Eastern Parkway – not such a narrow bridge or going into 770. We shouldn’t worry. Life is tough; it’s hard to do the right thing, to show a little kindness. We should not be afraid.”



The next time he sees them, he says, “My young grandson says you can hear the song on YouTube, whatever that is. He wrote it down.” He starts to give a slip of paper to Arturo, but a wind comes up and blows it out of his hands and down Eastern Parkway.



The last week of August and the first week of September set record temperatures in the city. The four men find cooler places to meet and don’t know if the old man is still picking up litter and filling his plastic bags.



Arturo and Rami returned to school and earned their GEDs. They’re now in apprenticeship programs. Occasionally, while walking, they bend over and pick up a piece of litter, thinking of the old man. Hosokawa moved to Chicago where he works with an uncle painting commercial buildings. Porto became more involved with drugs and is now incarcerated.

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**Ken was a professor of Mathematics and a starving artist before working for IBM. He was downsized in 2000. He now teaches yoga and writes. He lives with his wife and beagle in Shorewood, Wisconsin enjoying chamber music, home brewing, and running white-water rivers. Several short stories have been published in addition to two self-published novels: *The Slow and Painful Awakening of Herr Wilhelm Neimann* and *Lois Looking for Love*. Further information can be found on [www.kmkbooks.com](http://www.kmkbooks.com).**

# The Fruitless Pursuit of Happiness

By Joseph Cusack

I'm looking down at my own feet; I can see clouds, bouncy white clouds and a bright blue sky. A kid's picture, a perfect picture of a perfect day. Everything's ok. It's all good. I can feel my hair growing.

The sound of the wind fills my ears. There's laughter below and the breeze is easy, with a seaside hum that's punctuated by squawking seagulls and gentle souls listening, their hands cupped to channel the love. I can feel myself floating down, drifting softly - it's all so effortless. Beneath my feet: shoe boxes, white boxes stacked up as far as anyone can see. Where did they all come from? Piles and piles of shoes boxes stretching to the horizon. Row after row after row in undulating hills, stretching out. Loads of them.

"Heeeennnrrryyy," a distant voice echoes from far away in the background, whispering my name. "Heeeennnrrryyy." It sounds familiar, but I can't decode who it is because it's the sound of everyone I know - have ever known - calling me with one voice.

The bad-tempered gulls scrap it out overhead, kicking and fighting. Their rowdy antics propel me right back to the day trips on the ferry; I'm a little boy again. A wave of nostalgia sends goosebumps up my sides and cold tickles down my spine like a shiver in a warm eiderdown. I feel my little body and I breathe my little breath. Safe from the world. Tucked away.

"See all those seagulls, lad," said the old man with the cap, his eyes baggy and puffed from years of hard work in cold winds.

"They're the lost souls of the dockers who worked the river. They've done so much thieving and robbing from the ships they were supposed to be unloading, that they can't get into heaven. The big fella up there won't let the swines in because they're all scallies."

A whiff of tobacco and whisky drifts out with his words. His face is kind, his back hunched. Paddy Boyes. Grandad Paddy.

“They weren't all bad lads, really, so the other fella down below can't have them, either. So, they're stuck, scratching a living to repay an impossible debt that they could never afford in the first place. Someone, somewhere, always benefits from this kind of unhappiness. They're laughing at them scallies.”

The blood vessels in his nose thread across his face like reddened tree branches. His hands are so rough and so worn from a life lived hard. He's got no time for the feckless and the lazy, but he's on my side without conditions.

The sand lies rusty on the Cast Iron Shore; he takes me by the hand and rests his other on my shoulder; his eyes are close to mine.

“It'll cost you a lot to get here,” he says softly. “But once you are, all the moments are free. Always remember this, lad: you're born alone, and you'll die alone. That's all you need to know. Everything else is a detail, nothing more than window dressing.”

I duck as a raging gull soars over my head. Stumbling on a pile of boxes, I come crashing down, ending in a gulley, banked high with box upon box upon box. White shoe boxes. Perfect and unopened. I pick up the first box I can get my hands on and open it. Inside is a pair of Adidas Beckenbauer Super footie boots. Wow! Brand newies. Perfect. I toss the box aside and quickly put the boots on. I pick up another; a Tag Heuer watch lies gleaming in the sun. In another, a bottle of Calvin Klein aftershave, and then a box full of cash. One with jewelry. Another containing keys to a Range Rover. Airline tickets to the Maldives. B&Q vouchers. A cuddly toy. A new kettle. A George Forman grill. A pair of Ray Bans. A bottle of champagne. Two Bury black puddings. A box of diamonds. A gold bullion bar. “My God,” I shout at the top of my voice. “This is like a lottery winner's Christmas!”

Climbing to the highest pile and looking out, I see box upon box touching the horizon, in all directions, and all for me, with nobody else in sight. A sense of property fills me. I've arrived.

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**Joseph Cusack is a busy working freelance journalist based in Manchester, United Kingdom. He likes to listen to and tell stories.**

# **We Don't Need to Whisper**

**By Sam Campbell**

It's been eight months since I last saw the sun. The sky is blotched from view by a thick cloud of smoke. Ashes fall from the heavens like rain, fluttering to the barren land, only to be swept back up in a heavy gust of wind. The lush terrain where we'd played as children is now black. Most of the buildings are gone, engulfed in the mighty inferno set by the soldiers when they walked into our city. The buildings that were left standing are in ruins - their roofs caving in, their floors falling out. And everywhere is the smell of death. The bodies may be gone, but the smell remains.

I take a deep breath. I don't get choked up anymore when I breathe in the fumes. It's a sad thought, but I suppose that most humans are capable of adapting to anything, no matter how horrible. I've been travelling for two days now. It is dangerous enough being out during the grey light of day, but two days straight is suicide. I duck underneath a blackened cement patio. At one point in time, wooden lattice had weaved underneath the porch, but it has burned away, making this one of my favorite hiding places.

I reach into my knapsack and pull out a photograph from before. It's the only one I could save from the fires; a photo from when we had first moved here. Our house stood behind us, new and full of hope. My sister and I stood beaming at the camera with smiles so wide that our faces disappeared. We were only kids when this picture was taken. We never suspected that our happiness was nearing its expiration date. Behind us, our parents stood. Dad's left arm was draped around mom's waist, and his right hand rested on my shoulder. I place my finger on his face, trying to feel him once more. He was lost the day our world went up in flames.



It was Halloween of my senior year, and dad was working late. My mom, who handcrafted our costumes each year, was bent at my sister's hip, tightening the fabric around Verona's waist. Mom's blonde curls bounced up and down with her every motion, with sewing pins held between her lips, as she transformed my sister into a butterfly. I thought it was childish of a fifteen-year-old to be a butterfly, but my mother made it so graceful that now I was almost jealous of her choice. Mom had already made the final adjustments for mine, so I sat as the queen of hearts staring out the window. The sun slid behind the tops of the towering oak trees that grew on the outskirts of town. They cast dark shadows across the streets, where everyone was preparing for the annual Pumpkin Parade. Across the street, Mrs. Bentley was raking up the fallen leaves that polluted her yard. I laughed as her three young boys ran like missiles into the pile, erasing Mrs. Bentley's last hour of labor in three seconds. She scolded them half-heartedly and began raking once more. The doorbell rang and my mom mumbled for me to answer it. I glanced out of the peephole and laughed as I opened the door.

"Todd!" I squealed, lunging forward and throwing my arms around his neck. I felt his body shake as he laughed and wrapped his arms around my waist. I pulled back out of the hug and Todd brushed his hand across my face, moving my lips towards his. The movement was familiar, but it still sent shivers down my spine. I smiled as the kiss ended, happy with the fact that after six months we still had the same spark between us. A slight movement behind Todd caught my eye, and I noticed a tall, lanky boy standing a few feet away, shifting his weight back and forth. He was wearing corduroy pants and an argyle sweater vest, complete with a yellow bowtie, a comb over, and large black-rimmed glasses.

"Oh, Val, this is Cooper." Todd said, remembering his companion.

I managed a smile. "Hi, I'm Valkyrie, but you can call me Val."

Cooper smiled and waved but didn't say anything. I would have let the conversation drop, but something told me that this was the date Todd had arranged for my sister, so I pressed further.

"Didn't Todd tell you we're going to a costume party?" I asked.

Cooper nodded and Todd spoke up. "Um, sweetie, he is dressed up."

"Oh, I'm so sorry! I don't recognize your costume," I said, feeling my cheeks flush. The silence dragged on.

"Well, what are you dressed up as?" I asked.

"Bill Gates," Cooper muttered, with a smirk. I smiled and nodded, unsure of what to say next. Verona came to my rescue. She glided up beside me and said, "Okay, I'm ready."

"Verona, allow me to introduce Cooper," Todd said, motioning to his friend.

The smile on Verona's face fell, but she managed to stay pleasant. "Hello, I'm Verona. It's very nice to meet you."

Cooper nodded but didn't say anything. Todd ushered us to his car with a joke about being fashionably late. We drove in silence towards the high school, where in just a few short months, Todd and I would walk across the stage and receive the tickets to our futures. The school came into view, but Todd took a sharp left turn down a dirt road that was hidden from view by brush. The tree branches slapped against the sides of the car before swinging back into place, leaving the road concealed from the view of anyone passing by. The car was immersed in darkness as the canopy of trees blocked out the remaining rays of sun. Todd switched on his headlights and drove through the forest.

"Could someone please tell me where we're going?" Verona asked from the backseat. "I thought the party was at the school."

"We're skipping the party," I said, "to prepare for the after-party."

“If this party is supposed to be in some abandoned cabin in the woods, I don’t want to go. Have you never seen a scary movie? Because this is pretty much how they all start,” Verona said. Cooper laughed for the first time, and I knew that would make Verona relax a bit.

“It’s not a cabin,” I said, “so don’t worry.” A few minutes later, we pulled up to an old, vacant hotel. Ivy and other wild vines were crawling up the sides of the building, which stood three stories high. I had found this place four years ago while hiking, and as far as I knew, Todd and I were the only people who knew about it, until now. I opened the car door and stepped outside. The others followed my lead.

“Nope, it’s not a cabin,” Verona said, climbing out of the car. “It’s worse.”

“You won’t think that when we go inside. Todd and I have cleaned up a considerable amount,” I said, walking towards the hotel. We went inside and Todd powered up the generator. I flipped a switch and a yellow light illuminated the small room. Todd went back outside to bring in the party supplies. After a few minutes of bustling around, Verona began enjoying herself. She put a CD into the old stereo that was sitting in the corner and music began pumping out of the speakers. Todd spread out the snacks on the counter, and Cooper was staring at the generator with a look of extreme concentration.

“What can I do to help?” I asked Todd.

“Well, I called in an order for pizza. It’s ready, if you want to run out and get it. Also, my brother said he’d score us some booze, so if you drop by my house, he’ll hook you up. Then, we should be good.” I agreed and then leaned across the counter to give him a kiss goodbye.

I climbed into Todd’s car and revved the engine to life, puffed up with the feeling of importance at being trusted to drive his prized possession. As I made my way back down the dirt road, I flipped on the radio and the car was filled with the monotone voice of a radio newscaster droning on and on about a war. I rolled my eyes; the news was always talking about war. I wasted

no time turning the station to a hit music channel. When I turned the car back onto the main road, I gunned the gas and sped towards town; the faster I got there, the faster I could be back at the party.

I smelled it before I saw it. The musky, heavy scent of smoke filled up the air around me. At first, I thought that the grey haze settling down around the neighborhood was just twilight tripping into dusk, but then as I drove the car up a steep incline and came to the top, where the neighborhood overlooks the city, I could see it all. I slammed on my breaks and froze in place, taking it all in. It looked as though the sun had crashed down into the city, which burned with an orange-yellow glow. It would have been beautiful were it not so terrible. As I sat there, sparks like firecrackers blasted across the side of the tallest building in the city. It shook, and then fell over on its side, crashing down on to the tops of the buildings next to it, taking them down with it. I sucked in a shallow breath of smoky air; my father worked in that building.

Above me, planes zipped by like gunshots and I ducked my head down, but they were already miles away. I gripped the steering wheel hard and released the brake; I had to get home as fast as possible. As I drove further into the neighborhood, the more horrifying my surroundings became. Houses were burning, people were running down the streets screaming and, worst of all, there were the soldiers. They were all tall, stout, and covered in metallic white armor that was polished to a shine. I could see in their armor the reflection of the embers that danced through the wind around them. They were all carrying large guns, different from any firearm I'd ever seen before. They looked like something out of a science-fiction film rather than something that I was driving by and seeing in real life. But when one of them lifted their weapon and blasted two children who were running away, I lost any fragment of denial that this wasn't real and wasn't really happening.

I sped up, my foot pressing hard against the gas pedal. I tried to block out everything that was happening around me. I flipped the radio station back to the news, but now nothing but static filled my speakers. I let out a frustrated groan, but then words and pieces of information began

filtering through the static. I made out “invasion,” “seek shelter immediately,” “destroying everything in their path,” and “not much is known about the invading army.” Then the voice cut out completely and there was nothing but static. I hit the power button and silence washed over the car so that all I could hear were the distant screams, gunfire, and explosions. I drove as fast as I could and pulled up to my house. I ran inside.

I found my mother hiding under the kitchen sink.

“Val!” She yelled, jumping out and pulling me into her arms.

“Get in the car, mom, now!” I felt like I was no longer in control of my body. I could feel myself moving, grabbing my mother and yanking her out the door, but it didn’t feel real. It was like someone else had taken over because they knew I couldn’t handle what was going on. I heard a bullet whistle past my ear. Across the street, Mrs. Bentley’s house was blazing. The heat of the fire was almost unbearable. Mom climbed into the passenger seat of Todd’s car. I stood for a brief second, my eyes scanning the flames for any sign of Mrs. Bentley or her boys.

I saw Mrs. Bentley stumble out of her front door, dust and soot clinging to her clothes and skin. I ran over to her and guided her to the car. She coughed and hacked.

“Mrs. Bentley, where are the boys?” I asked. An inconsolable wail was the only response I received.

When I pulled back out of the driveway and onto the main road, my mother let out a frightened squeal and grabbed my arm so tight that it hurt. I hit the breaks; there was a soldier standing right in front of our car. For a moment, nothing happened. No one moved, no one even blinked. There weren’t even any sounds, save for our heavy breathing. I stared at the soldier’s helmet, at the dark glass protecting his eyes, and I tried to see behind it, but I could only see the reflection of the car’s headlights. He raised his gun. I slammed on the gas and the car pounced forward, giving him only seconds to fall out of the way. I didn’t move my foot from the gas pedal. I drove so fast

that the flaming houses blurred by. I kept watching my rearview mirror for any sign that the soldiers followed. I could see none. I took the sharp left turn onto the gravel road for the second time that day. I pulled up to the hotel and ran inside. Cooper, Todd, and Verona all turned to look at me when I cut the music off.

“Everyone quiet,” I ordered as mom helped a limping Mrs. Bentley through the door. I turned off the lights and grabbed the emergency flashlight. I clicked it on and shined it at the others.

“What’s going on?” Verona asked, her voice shaking.

“We’ve been attacked.” I said, feeling the adrenaline leaving my system. “We’re the only ones left.” I watched their crestfallen and distraught faces as I told them about the flames, the bombs, what I heard on the radio, and the soldiers. When I was finished, they all stood quiet.

My mother spoke next, her voice quivering as she relayed what had happened after we left. She’d been cleaning up the scraps of fabric and thread on the floor and turned on the evening news. That’s when she first learned about the soldier’s invading. She said that no one knew where they came from, or why they were attacking us, but that we weren’t the only ones being attacked. Major cities and their surrounding suburbs all around the world were being attacked simultaneously.

“Where’s dad?” Verona asked when mom fell quiet. She whispered the question.

Mom lowered her head. “I tried to call him at work, but there was no response. I kept trying, until the phones stopped working.”

“I watched them bomb his building.” I said, not meeting anyone’s eyes.

No one said anything else. The sound of Mrs. Bentley’s quiet sobbing was the only noise we could hear, even though we all knew that somewhere outside the hotel someone was screaming, something was burning, and soldiers were marching. Verona stepped forward and wrapped her arms tight around me. I reached out and invited our mom into our embrace. In a moment, Todd was behind

me, wrapping his arms around all of us. At some point Cooper joined us as well. Mrs. Bentley didn't move from her chair where she was crying. We stood like that, hugging one another, for a long time.



I tuck the photograph back into my knapsack and crawl out from under the patio. I take off at a run towards what used to be the main part of town. We ran out of medical supplies four days ago and were dangerously close to running out of food. Cooper had volunteered to go out and get them, but he never returned. Now, I scan the broken landscape for his body as I make my way through the ruins of what used to be my town, and towards the hospital, where Cooper would have headed first.

The hospital is four stories high, but I can see that most of the support in the center of the building has collapsed and the roof has caved in. The top two floors have an open view of the sky. I duck behind a large chunk of stone that has fallen from the side of the building, and peek over the top to get a good look at the entrance. Two soldiers guard the way inside. I duck back down. The last thing I need is to be spotted. My hand goes to my side, where my pistol rests. It won't offer me much protection from anything more than a rabid dog, though. Cooper was only able to rig one gun to short-circuit the soldiers' armor, and he has the weapon in his possession.

With the front entrance to the hospital occupied, I scan the area for another way in. The odds of my finding Cooper alive are low to begin with, but now that I know that guards are stationed around it - I shake my head, trying to dispel that thought. We need Cooper to be alive. He's the one who managed to set up solar panels to provide electricity to the hotel so we wouldn't be living in the dark. He's the one who thought to organize a search party and rally survivors and gather supplies. He's the one who was able to reconstruct a soldier's uniform using scrap pieces he collected in order to engineer a gun that could short-circuit their armor. The boy's a genius and, without him, all of us would be dead by now. It was reckless of him to travel so far by himself.

The hospital has about a dozen entrances but if soldiers are stationed at one then they'll be stationed at them all. Every window on the building is boarded up. My eyes study every inch of the hospital, searching for any way inside. On the left side of the building, close to where I'm hiding, is the entrance for the parking garage that connects to the hospital.

I take another quick look over the stone. The soldier isn't even looking in my direction. I take off running to the parking garage. Inside, I feel a bit more protected. There are still cars parked inside, so if the soldiers came inside, I could hide behind them. I begin walking up the gradual incline of the parking garage. The gentle increase in altitude and the curvature of the structure remind me of a flat street. It seems never-ending. I see him after I pass the tiny little red square with the number 3 painted on it.

"Oh my God! Cooper, are you okay?" I whisper, rushing forward and falling to my knees beside him.

"Does it look like I'm okay?" he says in a quiet tone that implies stupidity on my part. He is lying exposed on the cold floor of a parking garage in a puddle of his own blood. His already pale skin now has a green hue.

"What happened to you?" I brush a strand of greasy black hair off his forehead.

"What do you think? I had a bad run-in with a soldier. My leg got shot up pretty bad. He got shot up worse." He nods his head to the left and my eyes follow the direction to see the scorched body of a soldier lying in a heap.

"Okay, well, at least you're alive," I say. It's hard seeing him like this. I stand up, surveying the situation; it will be difficult to get him back to the hotel without attracting the attention of the soldiers, but I believe we can do it.

"Um, Val..."

I sweep my gaze from his leg to his eyes, and in them, I see the reflection of a towering figure standing behind me. I turn around and freeze, standing like a deer caught in the headlights, staring into a soldier's eyes. Something about them is terrifying. They stab into me like a knife, cold and sharp. They are colorless. Emotionless. Void. I was never aware that a human could be so empty and still exist. I'm unaware of what the soldier is doing; I'm too interested in his eyes to see anything else. But from behind me, I hear Cooper calling my name, and then the loud bam of the gun going off. The soldier's eyes widen, electrified, and then dull once more before he slinks to the ground. I stand there, waiting for the terror to subside.

"Valkyrie! What the hell do you think you're doing?" Cooper yells. I'm startled by the intensity in his voice. I turn to face him. He is staring up at me like I've lost my mind. I blink a few times and mutter, "Sorry."

He shakes his head, marveling at my incompetence. "Let's get back to the hotel before more of them show up. I'm running out of bullets. And patience."

I smile and put my hand underneath his arm, helping him off the ground. He leans against me for support and we work our way back towards the hotel. His left leg is in bad shape, and I feel the pain rip through his body every time it touches the ground. Todd and Verona rush forward when they see us approaching.

"Where were you two?" Todd asks, leaning forward and pecking his lips against mine. He takes my place underneath Cooper's left arm and we begin walking towards the hotel.

"It's a long story," I say, preoccupied. "How is everything here?"

"Uneventful," Verona replies as we enter the office of the hotel. She takes her hand and flips her hair behind her shoulder. She's always been prettier than me. Thin, tan, blonde, and athletic. I want to tell her, in this moment, how much I love her, how much she means to me, and how proud I am to call her my sister. Because it feels like if I don't tell her now, I'll never get the chance to. I

open my mouth to speak, but my words are drowned out by a high pitch scream coming from the top floor of the hotel. We all exchange worried glances. The rules of the hotel have been clear since that first night when it became our home: we're not supposed to make any noises above a whisper. Ever. We take off towards the source of the noise, leaving Cooper in the office alone.

“What’s going on?” I ask my mom, who is standing outside of Room 313.

“Valkyrie, thank God you’re here!” She says. I walk into the room to see what all the commotion is about.

“Please don’t do this. Think of everything we’ve been through.” Mom calls out as loud as she can while still whispering. Mrs. Bentley is perched on the windowsill, her hands clutching the sides for support.

“No! I don’t ever want to think about it again. Why do you think I’m doing this?” she yells at them, tears streaming down her face.

“I don’t understand how you could just give everything up that we’ve worked for.” Mom says.

“Of course, you wouldn’t understand!” Mrs. Bentley spits the words at my mother. “You still have your children. You can still kiss them goodnight. You can still hold them. I have lost mine. I have nothing.”

“But we survived! You can’t just throw that away!” Mom argues.

She shakes her head. “I don’t want to survive. I want to live. There’s a difference.”

The others’ voices erupt in a burble of noise and I can no longer make out individual words, but I don’t have to. The meaning is all the same: Don’t jump.

She is scared; I can see that in the way her eyes are darting around the room. I would be, too, if an entire roomful of people were shouting at me.

“Quiet,” I whisper, but no one hears me over the sea of voices. So I repeat it, louder this time. “Quiet.” But still no one hears me. I swallow, readying my voice to speak louder than a whisper for the first time in eight months.

“Quiet!” I scream, and the room falls silent. All eyes are on me now, instead of Mrs. Bentley. I meet her gaze and note the differences between the soldier I saw this morning and her. Her eyes are vivid, intense, and screaming with color. In that moment, I understand what she is doing. You can’t take someone full of life and force them to whisper.

“Everyone out,” I say. They begin to protest, but I stop them. “We cannot control the choices that other people make. We are not soldiers and we will not force anyone to do something they do not want to do. If she doesn’t want to live, then at least she’s free to make that decision for herself. Everyone out.”

No one argues with me. No one utters another sound. They all shuffle out of the room. Mrs. Bentley watches me with awe as I walk to the door, the last one out of the room. I turn to her and say, “In the end, it doesn’t matter what anyone else says or does. It all comes down to the fact that it’s your choice.” With that, I step out of the room and shut the door behind me.

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## Sands Shift

By Roderick Makim

Sands shift. There should be nothing remotely startling about this statement. You might as well say winds blow, or thunder rumbles. Shifting is a primary characteristic of sand – it gets everywhere, eventually.

A beach on the Caribbean will one day be the dirt of the Gobi Desert – or at least, the individual grains of sand that made up said beach will be. If you wait long enough, everything from rock to glass to coral will be broken down into grains of sand, to shift along with the rest.

Everything becomes sand, eventually. Even bones.



Jorge watched the sand shifting around him with something as close to envy as he could manage. He'd never quite gotten the hang of envy. It always seemed like a waste of energy to him.

He hadn't had much else to do these past few years. Being dead and buried put quite the brake on any plans of moving around at all, he found. He had always wanted to see more of the world than this sleepy little town, but now he was stuck here forever, in a little graveyard by the beach with only the iguanas and crabs for company. Oh, and the other dead people. They were better than the iguanas and the crabs, but as far as clearing a low bar goes, that was a gold medal contender.

And there was the sand, of course.

He'd never paid much attention to sand when he was alive. With nothing to do but look at it and listen to it shifting around his corpse, Jorge was entranced to find beauty in every grain as it jostled for position. Each one was different. Each had a different secret tale in the minute facets and planes of its surface.

The crabs and iguanas were another matter entirely. The crabs and iguanas could go to Hell. They burrowed down and stripped the last shreds of flesh from Jorge's bones. Jorge had been very much attached to his flesh. They had had a lot of good times together.

Now it was all gone, and he was left with just his bones. His bones and the shifting sand, whispering as it went past him.

On the whole, it wasn't much of an afterlife. As far as Jorge was concerned, the disappointment of finding out that the afterlife was staggeringly dull was offset by the discovery that there was an afterlife at all.

*'It could be worse,'* he thought to himself. *'I can still think to myself, after all. An iguana popped out my eyeballs and there's really not much to see, but I can still see. A crab took my ears off and there's really not much to hear, but I can still hear. I don't have any breath, but I can still talk. Could be worse...could be worse.'*

He wasn't the only dead person in the graveyard by the beach, but he quickly discovered they weren't among the world's great conversationalists. He also thought he might be the only one who appreciated the beauty of the sand. The others absolutely hated it.

"Buried in sand! Buried in sand! What a disgrace!" Maria lamented constantly. "What can you grow in sand? What can you build on sand? Where is the fertile black soil and strong, steadfast stone?"

Maria's people were originally from the mountains, far away, and they had been wealthy landowners – at least to hear Maria tell it. Time and circumstance had brought her low, all the way down to the shores of the Yucatan Caribbean. All the way down to sea level (or, in her present situation, just below sea level). She considered this a major demotion in life and in death. Maria had a very literal sense of the phrase 'moving down in the world.' It was a phrase she used constantly, and whenever she paid any attention to Jorge at all, she always seemed to judge him harshly for

spending his whole life as down in the world as she could imagine. Being down in the world amounted to some kind of moral failing, as far as Maria was concerned. Jorge, in her estimation, must have been as shifty and inconducive to growth as the sand to have stayed here his whole life. Not a stone-and-black-soil kind of person – not Maria’s kind of person at all and she was not shy in telling him so.

It was annoying and offensive, but Jorge had never quite gotten the hang of being annoyed and offended. It always seemed like a waste of energy to him.

Rodrigo, on the other hand, had a far more practical dislike of sand. In life, he had run the only hotel in town and keeping it clean had been a constant, losing battle against the sand. Being buried in it now was the final indignity of a long, inglorious campaign where the only victories were pyrrhic.

“Beat me at last. It beat me at last. Coarse and irritating and it gets everywhere,” he would moan, weeping pitiably in his grave. Which is almost impressive, when you consider that skeletons are not renowned weepers. The lack of tear ducts is something of an impediment to a good weeping. As indeed is the lack of eyes or nose – but Rodrigo was hardly going to let a little thing like that get in the way of an eternity of assorted blubbering, bawling, snivelling, sobbing, wailing and, of course, good old weeping.

All things considered, Jorge considered this to be a bit of a waste of an afterlife. Even one as dull as being buried in sand in a little graveyard by the beach. Still, it wasn’t really his place to judge and if Rodrigo wanted to spend his afterlife weeping then that was none of Jorge’s business.

There were others in the graveyard, of course, but they were buried too far away for Jorge to hear them. Their voices were muffled by the sand.

Eventually, Jorge grew tired of listening to the endless complaints of Maria and Rodrigo and simply listened to the sand. It sounded like a thousand whispers as the grains shifted past him...and,

after some time, he found he that was able to understand them. Each grain whispered its story as it passed him and, hearing the stories, he was able to live a thousand lifetimes every day. The afterlife was looking up. There had to be some advantage to being dead, he supposed, or else people would stop doing it.

The sand whispered its stories...places it had gone...things it had seen...things it had *been*. Everything from a little girl's castle on the beach, not far from the graveyard, to the concrete in a billionaire's palace on the other side of the world.

Time shuffled on, and eventually the stories were not enough for Jorge. It was all very well hearing about these places. Other beaches on other seas. Deserts and mountains. Green fields and vast cities of steel and stone and glass. Jorge listened with something as close to regret as he could manage. He had never quite gotten the hang of regret – it always seemed like a waste of energy to him. Still, he had always wanted to see more of the world. There seemed to be so much he had missed out on. Even Maria had her mountains.

All in all, he would much rather be a grain of sand than a corpse in this little graveyard by the beach, he declared one night, as the wind blew, and the thunder rumbled.

“Give it time,” the sand replied.



Sands shift. They shift from beach to desert. From sea floor to mountain peak. Carried by wind and tide.

Eventually, Jorge shifted along with it, with a sense of joy and wonder.

There was just so much to see.

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**Roderick Makim grew up on an Outback cattle station, went to school over the radio and then went to Hogwarts without the magic. He has done a stack of different jobs but now he freelances and does his own writing on a beach in Mexico. His first novel is a modern fantasy set in an Outback Pub while low-level mythical creatures swap stories and complain about how they never made it into any myths. All of his work is available on Amazon.**

## **Wish You Wouldn't**

**By Ann Graham**

"I'm playing poker tonight," Jerry said.

"Again?" Sheila asked.

"Damn straight," he said without raising his face from his food.

Sheila scraped her uneaten eggs and bacon into the trash, dropped the plate into the sink and flinched at the sound of cracking ceramic. Jerry didn't. She grabbed a damp cloth and ran it underneath her Elvis salt-and-pepper shakers. There were five sets on the short shelf Jerry had built for her just after they'd married. Thirteen years ago, she'd been happier than she thought possible.

"I really wish you wouldn't."

"Come again?"

"Please don't," Sheila whispered. She turned her favorite shaker around in her hand and avoided looking at him. In just the past several months, he'd begun to frighten her with his angry outbursts.

"Why the hell not?" Jerry said.

"I'll try to get home early. It's delivery day but I'll hurry. I thought we could spend the evening together, play some records," Sheila said.

"I'm playing poker. Tonight, I said."



Sheila dug around in her hair for her pencil and made a checkmark next to the entry, "pudding, instant, chocolate, 4." Because the owner and her boss, Dora, ordered small quantities of hundreds of different items, it took Sheila hours to unpack, price stamp, and shelve everything. She'd come to hate shipment days, not because Dora left her alone to finish, and not because of the

long hours, but because Jerry had begun playing poker those nights and losing money they couldn't afford to lose.

The tiny grocery and merchandise mart carried the specific products Dora knew her customers wanted, needed, or liked. When she placed orders with United Supply, Dora referred to the spiral-bound notebook in which she kept track of her customers' purchases. For the few tight-lipped ones who never shared their names, she jotted down a description. For example, "guy, fifty-ish, green pickup-truck, white side panel, Super Long Salems, Beanee Weenees, sardines in mustard, and Coors." She reminded Sheila every day that the profit margin was slim in the grocery business.

Sheila popped the lid off the last crate but decided to finish stocking the shelves in the morning, something she'd never done in the ten years she'd worked for Dora. She locked up the store and hoped that Jerry'd be home.



The next morning, August sixteenth, in the middle of Oklahoma, the wind blew as hot and dry as the day before. Sheila hoisted herself onto the stool behind the cash register. She fanned herself. She'd rushed to finish stocking the shelves so Dora wouldn't ask her why she hadn't finished the day before. Dora plopped an armload of paperwork onto the counter and sat beside Sheila.

A young woman entered and headed straight to the magazines. She rifled through the rack with purpose.

Dora said, after a glance over, "The new *Cosmo* isn't out yet, Stacey. Try next Tuesday."

"I'm a week early? Well, darn," Stacey replied. She took a chocolate doughnut out of the pastry case and held it in her mouth as she dug the exact change out of her pocket and dropped several coins into Sheila's open palm.

“Take care of yourself, Stacey,” Sheila said as she rang up the purchase and dropped the coins into the cash drawer.

Stacey nodded at each woman, the doughnut still in her mouth, and left.

After the glass door bounced closed, Sheila said, “Her mother isn’t doing too well.”

“That’s too bad,” Dora said and looked down at her paperwork.

“I tell ya, life’s not too easy these days.”



During the summer of ‘64, a couple of months after high school graduation, Sheila and Jerry had stood before the Justice of the Peace. After a couple of pregnancy scares, Sheila had insisted they get married. They repeated their vows in front of two strangers who acted as witnesses. Then they went to Sirloin Stockade and fed each other chicken-fried steak, made many promises, and toasted with red table wine slipped to them by the restaurant manager. Appealing to Sheila’s obsession with Elvis Presley, Jerry vowed that they’d include the King in all their anniversaries to come. After dinner, they went to see *Viva, Las Vegas* again and made out in the last row.

Jerry had kept his promise, and in some way, large or small, centered each anniversary on Elvis. To surprise Sheila for their fifth, he’d taken her to a live concert in Las Vegas at the International Hotel. On another, Jerry surprised her with the black velvet portrait he’d bought on the corner of MacArthur and Harrison from a man in a van. They hung it next to Elvis’s grade school library card that Jerry’d purchased from an advertisement in a movie fan magazine.



A pale-yellow Cadillac pulled up to the door and an elderly woman with a lopsided hairdo swept into the store, her long strides giving her balance and aplomb. She did not acknowledge Sheila or Dora as she veered toward the cooler or when she walked out the door with two six-packs

of Coors without a word or payment. Both women watched from their perches but did nothing.

“Looks like Mrs. Gooden got herself some beer,” Sheila said.

“I thought James took away her car keys. I’m going to have to talk with her husband again,” Dora said and scratched her brow.

After the twins, Frank and Sam, paid Sheila for their Skoal tobacco, Dora asked, “Have you and Jerry decided how you’re going to celebrate this year?”

“I’m not sure,” Sheila said without looking at Dora. “Elvis is on tour but not close enough for us to drive, so I think we’ll wait until he’s on TV.”

After a few seconds of silence, Sheila said, “The concert’s supposed to be on TV.”

“Be sure to let me know if you’re going to be gone,” Dora said. She made some marks on her paperwork, and then continued. “Will you see how many packages of Oreo cookies we have?”

“Sure.” Sheila slid off the stool and went to aisle four.

“Oh, and while you’re looking, diapers, are there any?”

“No diapers. Might want to get some newborn Pampers. Linda’s popped. She’s been coming in again. There are four Oreos, and it looks like someone helped himself to some cookies.” Sheila gingerly lifted the package to keep the crumbs from scattering.

For a moment, she stopped and recalled that morning when she’d dusted her Elvis salt-and-pepper shakers. She shook off her sense of impending doom and returned to the front of the store with the package. She showed it to Dora. Several cookies were missing.

“Damn, I know who did that. I knew I should’ve gone back there when that Clark kid was in here. I wondered what he was doing. He didn’t even buy anything,” Dora said.

“He hides behind that long hair.”

“He always stinks. That’s why I didn’t go back there.” Dora tapped her pen on her chin.

“You know his dad got laid off after he hurt his leg out there at the pump plant. I heard

their water and electricity keeps getting shut off,” Sheila said.

“Whenever you decide, let me know the dates if you’re going to be gone,” Dora said again. She leaned her elbows on her stack of papers.

“I think Jerry’s going to surprise me with a cassette player for my car,” Sheila said. She nodded to keep herself from crying.

“Your Gremlin doesn’t have a radio?”

“Just AM. He’s been looking at cassette players. I’m guessing that’s my anniversary present this year.”

“Did you stock the beer that was delivered this morning?”

“Yes, but Walter only left about half of what he usually leaves.”

Dora thumbed through several sheets of paper and ran her pen down the quantity column. “So he did. Did he say why?”

“No, all he said was ‘looks like this’ll hold you.’ I didn’t ask. Just counted and signed. I could listen to Elvis every time I drive. That’d be wonderful.”

“He’s a sweetie, you got there,” Dora said.

“I’m kind of worried. Well, not really worried, but kind of. He’s so absentminded lately. He’s started cursing at me, which is one thing, but his playing poker has me worried.”

“Poker, for money? Oh, that’s not good. I don’t care how you cut it.” Dora shook her head. She turned and looked straight at Sheila for a good long while.

“I know. He says it’s not a big deal,” Sheila finally said and shrugged.

“Is he losing?”

“He doesn’t say and I’m afraid to ask.”

“Keep an eye on him. I don’t like the sound of it,” Dora warned.

“What shall I do with this ruined package?”

“Take it home, if you want,” Dora said.

Sheila put the Oreos under the counter with her purse and repositioned herself on the stool behind the register.

“Jerry’s a good guy. No question. But no good can come from gambling,” Dora said.

“I’m not crazy about it. What can I do?”

A woman with her hair in pink sponge rollers and a young girl with disheveled braids entered the store.

“Hi there, Glenda,” Sheila said and walked out from behind the counter to give her a hug and patted her daughter on the top of her head. “Sally, you’re getting so big.” Sheila felt a pang of longing for a child who was never going to be. Ironically, she and Jerry had gotten married because she was afraid that she was pregnant, only to find out years later that her uterus couldn’t even carry a pregnancy to term. She’d been unable to share with Dora or anyone else that Jerry’s only response after her second miscarriage had been, ‘Oh, well, you’re not the only woman who can’t have a kid.’

“I’m five,” Sally said and followed her mother to the dairy case.

Dora called out, “Glenda, Randall says tree roots are growing into your pipes.”

“Oh, yeah, but it looks like he took care of it. It’s not a problem today, even with all my kids flushing the toilet over and over.” Glenda laughed.

She paid for a gallon of milk, Cheerios, Wonder Bread, and eggs. Sheila held the door open for them, and Dora made her notes.

Then, she said, “I’m going back to the cooler.” Dora put on the sweater she kept draped over her chair.

After a couple of minutes, Sheila watched Randall pull into the parking lot. Dora’s husband, a plumber, with two of his own trucks, worked long hours, had one partner, and regularly

stopped in at the store.

“Hi there, good looking. Is my wife in there?” He pointed at the walk-in cooler.

“Yes, she’s checking temps,” Sheila said.

Randall’s big boots made stomping and sliding sounds. Sheila watched the long laces swing out to the sides as he headed to the cooler. She made change for a customer’s Velveeta and Underwood Deviled Ham and looked up to see Jerry holding the door open for the customer. It was clear that he wanted her to hurry.

“Well, hi, honey. What are you doing here?” Sheila was surprised. Jerry rarely came to the store because the garage where he worked as the main brake man was twenty miles away.

“Hey, is it just you here? Right now?”

“What?”

“Where’s Dora? Is she here? Is that Randall’s truck out there?”

“What’s going on, Jerry?”

“Sheila, look, I need a hundred.”

“What?”

“Now, quick, a hundred.”

Jerry shoved Sheila to the cash register. “Open it,” he said.

She did.

He grabbed the short stack of twenties and stuffed them into his pocket.

Sheila backed up and sat on her stool.

Dora and Randall came out of the cooler.

“Hey there, Jerry. Haven’t seen you in a blue moon. Coming up here to check on your wife?” Randall slapped Jerry on the arm.

“Wait a minute, buddy, I’m just kidding with you. That’s all,” Randall said.

“Not so funny there,” Jerry said. He nodded at Dora, and then continued. “I stopped in for a hello. Any harm in that?”

Sheila gurgled. Dumbfounded, she couldn’t speak.

“Yeah, well, see you later, honey,” Jerry said and nearly knocked over a customer in his attempt to leave.

Randall kissed Dora on the cheek, gave a wave to Sheila, and left as well.

Dora turned towards Sheila and said, “Haven’t seen Jerry in a while. Is his hair longer? Has he lost weight? I hardly recognized him.” Her eyes stayed on Sheila.

“He sure surprised me. I wasn’t expecting him to drop by.” Sheila turned her head.

“I need to call the beer distributor. Hand me the Rolodex. I don’t understand why—I know it’s not the weekend yet—the delivery guy, you said it was Walter, only left half as many six-packs as he usually does.”

As Dora untangled the long cord and pulled the telephone from underneath the counter. Walter, their regular beer delivery guy, shoved open the door and entered, pulling a dolly laden with cases of beer.

“Hey there, Walter. I was about to call you. What’s up?” Dora said.

“I’m sorry, Dora. I should’ve told Sheila that I’d be back before the end of the day. I didn’t have enough on my truck to leave the usual amount. I left what I could to make sure you didn’t run out before I got back.”

“I was wondering how I’d make it through the weekend.”

“You know I wouldn’t let you down. You know that, Dora,” Walter said and winked. Then he continued, “Did you ladies hear the news?”

“What news?” Sheila stood up.

“Elvis died,” Walter said and continued on his way to the cooler.

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**Originally from Kansas, Ann Graham has lived in Texas for nearly forty years. She attended the Squaw Valley Community of Writers workshop and has been published by *Grey Sparrow Journal*, *Digging Through the Fat*, *The Oddville Press*, and *Panther City Review*.**

# The Perfect Saturday

By Brittany Green

My ears are ringing, and I can't quite remember how long I've been sitting here on this terribly uncomfortable sofa. Who buys a sofa like this, I wonder, as I run my hand over the empty seat next to me. My ears are still ringing. It's a dull sort of ring, a droning, buzzing sound that's actually really annoying but it's all I can hear. Why are my ears ringing, I wonder, racking my brain for context.

"Harper," he calls my name loudly, halting the ringing, and grabbing my attention as he continues to pace the room.

He's talking about something important. I can tell - his hands are too animated as he waves them around, undoubtedly making a point that I can't hear because my ears have begun to ring again. He stops pacing. His hands are calm as he crosses the room, bending down in front of me. His eyes are too intense, too serious. This isn't like him, I think to myself, as I stare into his dark eyes, rimmed with dark circles. Is he not sleeping, I wonder, adding it to my growing list of curiosities. I wish I knew what time it was, why my ears are ringing, and why this sofa is so uncomfortable. My thoughts ramble on.

"I'm so sorry," he calls again, close enough that I can smell the mint on his breath.

My mind begins to rewind, replaying the scene that started all of this, returning to the words that sent me stumbling backward onto this horribly uncomfortable sofa. The words that propelled me into this state of shock and confusion.



I knock, waiting at the door for what feels like forever. I've been looking forward to this moment all week. I knock again and check my watch, 9:30 on the dot. I smile at the thought of the day ahead. A day I've spent two weeks planning. The perfect Saturday. My heart begins to race when I hear footsteps approaching the door, I hear the click of the deadbolt unlocking before the door swings open. My heart sinks slightly as I take in the sight of my boyfriend, disheveled and half-asleep, standing in the doorway. He looks at me with wide eyes. His brow is creased with confusion.

"It's Saturday," I say cheerfully, shrugging my shoulders and tilting my head to the side in the same way I always do when confronted with a question I'm not exactly sure how to answer.

"Saturday," he repeats, running his hand through his hair as recollection flashes in his eyes. "I'm sorry. It was a late night. It just slipped my mind," he says, stepping inside and inviting me in.

"I couldn't get ahold of you last night to confirm, but we had plans, so I came," I explain, suddenly feeling awkward as I glance around his small, sparsely furnished apartment.

"No, no, I'm glad you're here," he says, wrapping his arms around me tightly and kissing my head.

He smells of beer and cigarettes, I think to myself, realizing how much has changed since Adam and I met, one year ago today at Westchester Community College, a fact I feel sure Adam has forgotten. My mind recalls the memory of a type-A guy nervously asking to share my table in the library.

I had looked around the nearly empty room, and then back to him.

"There are like six completely empty tables," I said before looking back down at my laptop.

"But, you're not at any of those tables," he said as he pulled out the chair beside mine, sitting sideways to face me. His nerves were seemingly forgotten. I had snorted, covering my mouth with the back of my hand, unable to contain the laugh I knew I shouldn't let out at the boy's expense.

"I'm sorry, but that's a terrible line," I said, turning up the corner of my mouth.

“It’s not a line,” he said as he shook his head, revealing a perfectly mischievous smile.

You can never identify a pivotal moment when it's happening, but looking back, the moment he flashed me that smile, I knew I would give him my heart, and so much more. All he had to do was ask. When I look back at that moment, I can see my whole world pivot.

“I’m going to shower, and then we can go get breakfast,” he suggests. His voice pulls me back to the here and now before he heads down the hallway towards the bathroom. “Make yourself comfortable,” he calls before closing the door.

It had been a month since Adam had moved into the city but only a week had passed since my last visit. The place hadn’t changed at all. In fact, it hadn’t changed since the day he moved in. I look around the sparsely decorated living room, thinking of all the things I’ll change when his place becomes ours. This is my last semester at WCC, and Adam has asked me to join him in the city after I graduate. I’ve never lived anywhere other than Westchester, but I love Adam, so if Adam loves the city, I can love the city, too.

I hear the shower turn off and, a few minutes later, Adam walks down the hallway with a towel around his waist. He heads into the bedroom and emerges fully dressed. The night before washed down the drain along with the soap and water, now replaced by his cologne, a familiar scent I love. He wraps his arms around me, kissing me on the lips for the first time since last Saturday.

“I love you,” I whisper into his mouth as I close my eyes, sinking into the perfection of his kiss before he pulls away, biting his lower lip.

“Can we talk for a sec?” he asks, taking a deep breath and moving towards the sofa.

“Sure, but I’ll just stand. I hate your sofa, remember?” I ask rhetorically, giggling at the joke we’ve shared since he picked out the dark brown leather loveseat from Ikea. Bachelor furniture I had called it, scrunching up my nose at the thought of him living that lifestyle in the apartment we would soon share.

He forces a smile, clearly not seeing the humor in it today as he hooks both hands over his shoulders and takes a deep breath.

“Is everything okay?” I ask, after an uncomfortable minute of silence.

He looks down at the ground and my eyes automatically follow. I see his bare feet standing on the Berber carpet, but I draw a blank as to what is going on and return my glance to his face.

“Adam?” I ask, my heartbeat quickening at the growing tension.

“I cheated on you,” he whispers, finally looking up from the floor. His terrified eyes stare into my own as he waits for my response, a reaction of some kind.

I feel the breath catch in my lungs as I stumble backward, reaching for the sofa I hate, hoping it will offer me some stability in spite of our differences.

“Harper? Are you okay? Just let me explain,” he says frantically, walking toward me.

I put up my hand to stop him, and he takes a step back. His lips are moving quickly, but my ears have begun to ring, and my mind is reeling. I can't hear what he's saying, but hasn't he already said enough? I ask myself. The shock of Adam's confession is overwhelming, and flashes of our past fill my mind. Our first date, our first kiss, the first time we slept together, and that very first moment in the library. Every perfect moment feels tainted by those four words, “I cheated on you.” The words play in my mind over and over until I can't even think properly. My head is spinning, and my ears are ringing, and I've lost track of time. I can't quite remember how long I've been sitting here, on this terribly uncomfortable sofa.

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**Brittany Green is a fiction writer from New Jersey. She enjoys writing stories for all ages. This is her first submission to a literary magazine.**

## **The Denial**

**By Nana Tokatil**

It was not the pain that brought on thoughts of death, because the pain was frequently subdued for extended periods, but it was the absolute weakness that made him lose all contact or feeling with his body. The cloudiness in his mind, even when it lifted, caused his thoughts to wander unrestrained. He could see figures dressed in white – Anna, too - coming and bending over him, agony in their eyes, but he couldn't make out who was more familiar. He felt as though he was slowly exiting from this scene.

There was no heart beating of agony. His heart was regulated by medicine and monitoring. Still, this heart seemed finally to be in a better condition than the kidneys and other organs of his body, for it was this heart that improved and awoke his will to fight. Little by little, wires and tubes were removed. Anna's gaze, although tired, showed relief. She brought their three children to see him, even from a distance, before his departure to the Recuperation Center, which was quite far from their town. It was recommended to him to stay there for at least a month.

Springtime was coming, but it was still quite cold. By daybreak Anna was on her feet. She went down to the kitchen to warm the milk and make porridge for her mother-in-law, who in the morning needed help getting up and getting dressed. She called the children by their names; it was time to wake up. The eldest was a girl of six, who could dress herself. The younger ones, a boy of four and a girl of two, couldn't manage without her. She climbed the stairs to wash their faces, dress them and take them down for their breakfast. She spread butter and jam on their bread and poured milk into their cups. She had a bite standing up and went to get herself dressed. It was Sunday and they were going to see Daddy, who had been away for so long. Holding one in her arms, she took the children out.

She recalled a few weeks ago how slippery the sidewalk had been in the freezing wind. She was taking her elder daughter to the nearby school, the boy to the kindergarten and the little one to daycare, then hurrying to work, and then back to pick them up, all the while seeing to it that they ate well at home. Then they were rushing to see Eric at the hospital, then on the way back to do some shopping, cooking, washing and ironing until late. Her mother-in-law was of little help. Eric was her only child. Since the beginning of WWII, she had been a widow. Knowing that her health was deteriorating, she moved to be with Anna, her only refuge. They got along very well. They were fond of each other. But agony was the word to describe Anna's day. She tried to be on time and faithful to her obligations, but her heart ached for Eric, her darling Eric. Throughout these years she kept being deeply in love with him.

Eric and Anna had met ten years after the war. He had been an engineer in a factory in the industrial zone and she had been working there, too, as a secretary. Both were tall, good-looking, and with a common trauma, for their fathers had been killed during the war. It seemed that mutual attraction and love would be inevitable. Eric had mentioned that while still in his late teens, he had had to serve under poor conditions in a submarine of a defeated navy, which had damaged his health. It was nothing serious and life with their three children had been full of love and joy.

Relieved, and with smiling faces, Eric and Anna left the hospital to travel to the Recuperation Center. Eric felt weak, but Anna was there beside him, optimistic about the future. Her heart and mind were finally at peace. It was springtime. The trees were slowly regaining their green foliage. The sun was shining and soon he would be back to his family and work. The trip was tiresome, but Eric believed that his stay in this place would change everything for the better.

The gardens, the flowerbeds, the ponds and the awakening of Nature gave Eric the strength to try harder at all sorts of therapies that he was undergoing in order to rebuild his muscular system after a prolonged stay in bed. His kidneys functioned well. The staff were excellent especially Kate,

a physiotherapist, a brunette and a beauty, whose touch warmed his soul and soon enough his whole body. Relationships with patients were out of the question. For Eric, Kate was life after death, springtime and love. Neither could Kate resist the attraction of this handsome man, whose body she watched getting stronger and more desirable day by day.

Anna visited him on Sundays, but the trip was tiring. When she was informed that Eric needed to stay one more month, she decided to visit him every other Sunday. Eric was glad to see Anna, listen to the news about their children and his mother, but he was happier to see her leave. The improvement in his health gave him the license to leave the Center once a week for a visit to the nearby town. Kate's place became their love nest.

After the end of the second month, when Eric asked to continue his stay as an outpatient, a veil was suddenly lifted from Anna's eyes. She could see what she had avoided seeing for two months: the change in Eric's behavior, the feeling of distance, the lack of warmth in his touch, his indifferent glance. A thunderbolt had struck her.

Her thoughts kept returning in circles to how unfair this was! So many months of agony, weariness, effort and love! Hadn't she looked after his mother, his children and him? How could he? Anger burst out. All these questions poured out and there was a scene. Eric admitted his feelings for Kate. Anna, wrecked with pain, left for home. Neither the presence of her children nor his mother could console her. She felt everything had collapsed around her.

Eric asked for time to think over the situation. He was strong and ready to go back to work. He was in love with Kate, but he missed what he had accomplished in his life: having a loving family and a beautiful wife, Anna, who was there at his side during the hard times and whom he had hurt so badly. Not long after, he called to say, "I am breaking up with Kate and returning home."

He asked for pardon and forgiveness for the pain that he had caused. He asked her to realize that he had been coming back from death to life. Kate had been a challenge and he had given in, but

Anna was in his soul and heart. He repeatedly asked for forgiveness. Anna was frigid from pain and could not forgive him. Months passed and years followed without any change in her feelings. Eric, on the other hand, did not cease making an effort. He tried in many ways offering presents and trips, but the best he succeeded in doing was gaining a truce. Soon, however, her hostile feelings would rise up again remembering the wrong she had suffered. In the end, Eric gave up. For the sake of peace, he adopted a “Yes, ma'am” approach.

Time didn't soothe Anna's feelings. She remained adamantly frigid towards him, not taking into consideration that the children were growing in this hostile, though subdued, home atmosphere. Nevertheless, they tried to be polite to each other and were caring parents. The elder daughter loved her father but, growing up, she adopted her mother's attitude and ideas, becoming rigid, opinionated and uncompromising. She was torn between affection for her father and loyalty towards her mother. The two younger ones kept themselves at a distance from both parents and, as soon as they were out of school, they left to pursue university studies in towns quite far away. They started their lives and families there, visiting their parents only occasionally. Although the elder daughter also moved to another town, she visited them regularly out of love and care for their health, checking that there was peace at home. In the end, she simply suffered from these visits.

As soon as her mother-in-law died and since the children were no longer around, Anna decided that it was time to ask for a divorce. Eric, throughout all these years, had no objection. Their only asset was their small two-story house, and this had to be divided up. The agreed arrangement was for Eric to live upstairs and Anna on the ground floor; the kitchen would be used in common. A strange set up was created - an awkward situation.

Anna admitted quite lightheartedly that she could not forgive him. Not so light or easy was it for her elder daughter, who had to live in this divided house upon her visits, always torn between

the two of them. A severe critic of others, with unrealistic ideas, she could not remain in a job, or worse in a relationship, although she had grown up to be a beautiful woman.

When Eric turned sixty, still attractive, he was lucky enough to meet a lovely lady. It was time for a change in his miserable life. Not long after, they got married and he moved to her house in the picturesque outskirts of an old town. Everyone was relieved; finally things had cleared up.

Anna lived with her rheumatic pains and a few lady friends. Their children, who lived far away and had families of their own, paid visits to Anna and to Eric so their parents could see their grandchildren. Eric lived happily for six more years; he threw a big party in a castle to celebrate his sixty-fifth birthday and died the year after. A year later Anna died too.

The elder daughter couldn't cope with the double loss. In the beginning, she was in shock, but the behavior of her mother's lady friends caused her another shock; during her absence they pounced and took away her possessions, even pieces of furniture from her mother's house. She was deeply disturbed and felt desolate. She tried to find a job, some work, but she could not concentrate, there was no recovery. She was diagnosed and declared by the State Health Institution as unfit for work and received a small pension. For her, a difficult and lonesome life lay ahead.

She was the victim of a forgiveness that was sternly denied.

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**Nana Tokatli was born and lives in Athens, Greece. She was an exchange student to the USA. She is a graduate in painting and stage setting of the Fine Arts School of Athens and has exhibited her works in 18 solo shows. Since 2000, she writes poetry and short stories both in English and in Greek. A collection of poems in English and a collection of short stories in Greek have been published. Also, her poems have been selected for *The Poetic Bond IV, V and VI*.**

## **A Hospital Visit**

**By Ewa Mazierska**

I promised my sister to bring our eighty-seven-year old aunt from the hospital in Brzeziny to her apartment in Koluszki. The hospital was some twenty kilometers from Lodz, where I was staying with my sister for several days. Having no car, I took a bus and arrived early so that my aunt wouldn't get worried that nobody was coming.

I couldn't find my aunt's room in the maze of the hospital, so I asked a nurse to direct me. She took me to her ward, commenting that my aunt was very lucky to have so many people visiting: her neighbors, my sister, my daughter, and now myself. She also listed the extras that my aunt had received in the last couple of days, such as an extra portion of chicken soup, an extra shower, and a gift of a comb because she had misplaced the comb that she brought with her as soon as she was able to leave her bed. I was not sure if this information was merely factual or whether it included a hint that I should repay it somehow. Whatever it was, I took a box of chocolates from my bag with an envelope including two hundred zloties, which I prepared before my trip as a token of our gratitude to the nurses. I respect nurses more than any other professional, so I'm happy to give them gifts. Besides, nurses in Poland, as elsewhere, are underpaid, and I dread that I will spend the last years of my life in a world without nurses.

The room was for three patients, but it was occupied only by my aunt, who was perched on the edge of her bed. She said that, in this way, she prepared herself for the journey that was to last another twenty kilometers. She wanted to go home straight away, but I said that we couldn't go without the discharge documents, for which we had to wait an hour and a half. She replied that her neighbors could bring them, and we could just go after her bag was packed and she was ready. But I disagreed as I preferred to follow the right procedures. My aunt didn't argue, realizing that there

was no point; it was better to save her energy for more important battles. She was thinner than usual; her arms were covered with bruises from drips, and her legs with scars from numerous accidents, but she was not skeletal and gave the impression of being well-looked after. This applied especially to her hair, which was completely white, but looked thick, shiny, and combed. In anticipation of using her image in my future literary pursuits, I tried to think about an object to which I could compare it, but my aunt's body refused my attempts at metaphorization; she was stubbornly herself. Was it a defense against the decomposing work of death and the subsequent rituals of commemoration? I had no chance to ponder on this thought. I only tried to keep it at the back of my mind, to bring it forward when its time comes.

My aunt's eyes signaled that she was at her most alert, which reassured me that she wouldn't die during my visit, but also worried me, as they suggested that she planned to be in charge of our conversation, ignoring everything that didn't suit her under the pretext that she did not hear me. That would then force me to answer the questions that I preferred not to be asked. I tried to prevent it.

"You have a nice room here, all for yourself. And the hospital seems clean and does not smell the way hospitals usually do. Must be better now in Poland than in England where patients stay in wheelchairs in corridors, waiting for days for free beds," I said. My aunt didn't reply so I carried on, "Somebody brought you flowers?" I inquired, surprised, as our family is rather immune to such gestures.

"No. The nurses bring them to every hospital room. Apparently, they are unsold flowers from the local flower shops," she replied with a whiff of scorn.

"That's nice. Some British florists do this, too," I said. "Did they feed you well, auntie?" I asked.

"Well, they didn't allow any food for the first three days, just a drip. But after the operation, they gave me broth and I must say it was very good. It was fresh and aromatic, maybe because they

used plenty of celeriac leaves. The next day for breakfast, I had rice flakes with milk, and for lunch there was chicken soup with potatoes. Again, it was very good. I squashed the potatoes with a fork, so it felt more substantial. For supper, it was chicken soup again, but without potatoes. It was a pity, as it felt watery, even though they added something to make it thicker. Still, you couldn't satisfy one's hunger properly with such a soup. Yesterday, it was some cereal with milk for breakfast, not very good. It tasted like the artificial stuff from packets. For lunch, there was vegetable soup with potatoes, and chicken soup with noodles for supper. For breakfast today, I had rice flakes again with milk. Maybe they will give me soup before we leave."

"If not, I will cook some soup for you when we get home. I will make sure it has celeriac leaves. I like them, too. Unfortunately, in England, they remove the leaves before selling celery, which makes it taste different. Was it painful, the operation?"

"It was. They couldn't put me to sleep because I was too old and weak, and they starved me before and after. And then they put a tube into my ass."

"I guess this is a rule that applies to most operations, and especially to those that are on one's guts. They don't do it out of cruelty."

My aunt's eyes were blank, showing that she hadn't heard me, or rather, that she didn't like to be patronized. After a short silence, she said, "Ania was here every day. She is a good child, this daughter of yours. Is she still visiting her father? Is she giving him money?"

"I don't know," I said, feeling angry that I let her hijack our conversation after all and that I was powerless to stop her.

"How it can be?" my aunt continued. "He didn't pay child support when she was small. He turned his ass on her when his sons were born, and now he wants her to help him because he is penniless and useless? Do you know what I would do, if he asked me for money? I would kick his

ass so hard that he would fly into the air and tell him that this is what a father deserves for neglecting his child.”

“You are right,” I said. “But she doesn’t want him to starve. He is still a father to her.”

“If I were you, I wouldn’t let her visit him or spend a penny on him.”

“She is an adult. I cannot control her like that.”

“She is an adult, but still takes money from you. She told me so herself,” said my aunt. “She needs to stand on her own two feet.”

“She tries, but it’s not easy. Wait here and I will check if these discharge documents are ready and if they give you soup before we go.”

I went to the nurses’ room where someone said, “The documents are ready, but the doctor hasn’t signed them yet. As for the soup, it would be better if your aunt didn’t eat it, to avoid getting sick in the taxi.”

As soon as I returned and conveyed this to my aunt, she continued, “And how is he?”

“Who?” I asked.

“You know who, the other motherfucker, Justyna’s ex?”

“I don’t know. I don’t ask her about him. It’s not polite to enquire about one’s old partners, even if this person is a sister,” I said, knowing that my aunt would ignore the hint. She did and carried on, “He is a bastard. And your mother told me that as soon as he split with Justyna, he got himself a new woman, big and fat.”

“Justyna and Roman got divorced. They both can do what they want to do with their lives.”

“But it’s not right. Justyna and you work hard to help your children, while these bastards walk free.”

“This is all in the past,” I said. “Was anybody visiting you except the family and the K’s?” I asked, my last attempt to change the subject.

“Grazyna came twice because she has a cleaning job in Brzeziny. The poor woman always works like a donkey and for what? The money was first squandered by her crippled husband, and now by Karolina. She is twenty-eight and has never worked a day in her life. Instead, she is drinking every day with her husband and they have this boy who is two years old now. Grazyna says that if not for her, he would starve to death, as often they don’t have enough money to buy bread. Still, they find it to buy vodka. When I first saw Karolina, with her eyes squinted and froth coming out of her mouth, I told Grazyna ‘Don’t take her. She is defected. There will be nothing good of her.’ But she said it was too late and she was the only child they offered her in the orphanage. If she wanted to adopt a better child, she had to pay a private adoption agency and she had no money for that. Of course, I was right since Karolina has epilepsy and she has to wear glasses so strong that she doesn’t look like a human being, but an insect.”

“Are you comfortable sitting like that, auntie?” I asked.

“Yes, I’m fine. I’ve had enough of lying flat like a log for five days.”

“So, you won’t mind if I lie down?” I asked.

“Go ahead. You must be tired with all these errands in Warsaw and Lodz.”

I lie down and my aunt continues, “If Karolina is so useless, why have a child on top of that? You should have kids only if you have the means to support them because there are enough old and sick people to look after. Now, Grazyna says there will be a trial in court. I don’t know what this trial will be about, but I suppose it will be about the kid. I guess they will try to give him up for adoption. But they should examine him, as judging by his parents, I’m sure he has defects and the people who adopt him should know about it.”

“Everybody has defects,” I said. “Either you are born with defects or life cripples you.”

“I don’t like when you talk like that. You and Justyna had no defects. You were like pure gold. When I saw you for the first time, I told your mother ‘she will be our treasure.’”

Although the door and the window in the room were open, it was very hot, and I was falling asleep, half-hearing my aunt saying, “Grazyna says Karolina’s husband is forty-four and has four children of his own. I don’t even know if they were married. I guess not – he used her as a whore, except that he didn’t have to pay her, as she was too dim to refuse him or ask to be compensated. But he should have had mercy on her and used contraceptives.”

I was awoken by a nurse who brought the discharge documents. She was a plump and jolly woman with a loud voice, similar to the type of the protagonist in Coetzee’s “Slow Man” who was rejected on the grounds of her patronizing manners and vulgarity. But she was the right type for such people as my aunt, as they need to be shouted at so they cannot pretend not to hear. The nurse was ultimately good-natured and aware of the absurdity of the situation with me lying on the bed as if I was a patient. What was even more absurd was some of the advice offered to my aunt, given her advanced age and her general state: avoiding cigarettes and alcohol, refraining from sex for up to four weeks, and undertaking additional tests every one to five years. She was even giggling when the nurse mentioned sex and looked at me, perhaps assessing whether I was also in a category of those for whom warnings about sex is a pure formality. I gathered that the verdict was inconclusive.

It was time to leave. As I was putting my aunt’s remaining belongings into her bag, her neighbors, Mr. and Mrs. K, arrived, announcing that they would take us home; no need to waste money on a taxi. Somehow, I thought that it would be better if there were fewer of us for the journey, but it would be impolite to say, so Mrs. K and I walked my aunt slowly down the stairs while Mr. K ran in front of us to fetch his car. It was a scorching day and I started to have bad premonitions. After five minutes had passed, the car still hadn’t arrived.

“Where is the car?” I asked eventually.

“I don’t know. There were no free spaces at the hospital car park, so Tadeusz had to park it on a neighboring street. He will be here any minute now,” she said.

“Wouldn’t it be better if he brought the car first and then we walked auntie down?” I asked, feeling stupid that I hadn’t thought of this before.

“Perhaps, but it’s too late now,” said Mrs. K.

It was indeed too late, as it became impossible to keep my aunt in a vertical position.

“Can you help us?” I asked a large man, smoking nearby.

“I cannot. I have a sore back. Find a wheelchair,” he said

The car arrived as my aunt lost consciousness and looked like the victim of the tie man from Hitchcock’s “Frenzy” with her tongue sticking out sideways and her eyes looking ahead without seeing.

Mr. K found a wheelchair and we transported my aunt to the ward where she had been previously. There, I was told by a nurse whom I hadn’t seen before that her case was closed and I had to take her to admissions, where she would be treated as a new patient.

“What if she dies when I’m waiting?” I asked.

“Maybe she won’t,” she said. “I will go with you to say it’s urgent.”

In the meantime, the Ks left. Mr. K. had to go to work, so I was again alone with my aunt, who recovered, asking me what had happened. When I explained that she had fainted, she said, “This was because of hunger. If they gave me this chicken soup for lunch, I would have been fine.”

After dealing with the formalities, I was taken to an office, where a doctor was eating hard-boiled eggs with tomatoes and onion when I arrived. Although he was still rather young, he gave the impression of being tired and disillusioned, and sighed at the sight of my aunt.

‘Oh boy! I understand you,’ I was thinking. ‘It must feel like seeing a student who, after being given an exhaustive explanation of a lecture during a tutorial, tells you that he didn’t understand anything, and you have to repeat everything and cannot even say ‘Fuck off!’’

“Please wait at the corridor,” he said. “We will have to run some tests on the patient. It will take a while.”

I took a seat in the corridor, in front of a door with the sign *Don't knock. Don't enter. Wait for a call.* behind which – I guessed – my aunt was being examined. It was one in a row of identical doors with identical signs, in front of which sat patients and their relatives. The younger ones played with their mobile phones, and the older ones amused themselves the old way – by talking. I joined the latter, both on the grounds of my age and inclination. We started with exchanging illnesses and hospital experiences. There was more than a whiff of competition between us, with the grand prix going to the most ill patient. I won on my aunt's behalf, telling my interlocutors about her multiple sclerosis, which was detected when she was nineteen; her two heart attacks; pacemakers; arthritis; and a plethora of minor operations. They nodded their heads in respect, even the runner up, a guy in his late sixties, who had bowel cancer and only a twenty percent chance of survival, and was expected to be diagnosed with another cancer, this time of his spine, as his general practitioner had warned him. We also compared our experiences with different healthcare systems: Polish, British, and German. The bowel cancer man used to work in Germany. Moreover, apart from me, who spent half of her life in England, there was an older woman who was in a hospital in Leeds. Poland won, as we were all fierce patriots and we didn't want to jinx the chances of our relatives or ourselves to leave the hospital in better health. Germany came last, being a country which for centuries exploited Poles and, when they stopped being useful, killed them. Britain came in the middle, as a paragon of neutrality, a country where one would not be mistreated, but wouldn't receive anything extra, unlike in Poland whose social care is made of extras.

After three and a half hours, all the people who began their waiting with me were seen to and I got tired of telling the stories of my aunt's illnesses. After a short consultation with fellow relatives, I knocked on the door with the sign *Don't knock.* It was opened by the same doctor who ate the hard-

boiled eggs before. He didn't turn me away but apologized for the delay. He said that my aunt had fainted because she lacked potassium in her blood. She got it via a drip and was basically fine, but needed to stay overnight, just in case. The next morning, she would be taken to her home by an ambulance.

I spent a bit more time with my aunt, to whom I repeated what the doctor had said. She accepted it with humility and said, "Go home, love, as you must be starving."

"You must be starving, too," I replied, "but probably they won't let you eat anything till tomorrow morning."

"I will be fine," she said.

As I was leaving, my aunt started to cry, with her lips tightened, which added to the impression of suffering, while looking me straight in the eyes, so I couldn't hide from her pain. I knew that her tears were reserved for me, as they contained the reproach that I dared to leave her and move abroad, risking that I miss her death.

"When will you come again?" she asked.

"I don't know yet precisely. Next time I am in Poland."

Although it was 5 pm, it was still scorching outside – that day, the temperature in Lodz was meant to reach 34°C. I went to the bus station, which was next to the hospital, and discovered that the bus that was to take me to Lodz had just left and I had to wait fifty- seven minutes for the next one.

I was tired and hungry, but there was a bonus to my suffering. My head cleared and it occurred to me that I had discovered the secret of my aunt's endurance and the point of her seemingly pointless existence. She carried on to become a total social Darwinist, measuring every human act by its value in advancing the interests of its performer and being able to detect behind the deeds that do not conform to this model either hypocrisy, cold calculation, or plain stupidity. But, obviously,

my aunt had still some distance to go. There were some remnants of altruistic love in her, most likely for Justyna and, on occasions, she was unable to peel off the veneer of fake altruism from the acts of some people, like the Ks. Perhaps, when she frees herself of them, she will die. It was strange to think that she nurtured such a mindset under the Polish version of communism, but maybe this system made us particularly mercenary and insincere. Or maybe it just shows that the ways of God are unknown, as they say. I started to think what plans God or his atheist substitute held for me. Will I go the same path as my aunt?

“Hello?” somebody’s voice woke me from my thoughts. I looked in its direction and noticed the bowel-cancer man approaching.

“How are you?” I asked.

“Great. It turned out that I had only an ulcer on my spine. They removed it, just like that,” he said and clicked his fingers, to show how easy it was. “With a laser, I think. It’s amazing; I’ve never been so happy in my life as today. What about your aunt?”

“She is fine. Just needed more potassium. She should be back home tomorrow morning.”

“I’m really pleased to hear that. Please wish her all the best and a hundred years.”

“Thanks, but she might wish to live longer.”

The bus arrived five minutes later, and in slightly more than an hour, I was in my sister’s apartment. Justyna had just returned from work and I told her about my day. She sighed and went to the kitchen to prepare supper, while I lay down on the sofa to rest.

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**Ewa Mazierska is a historian of film and popular music. She published over thirty short stories in *The Longshot Island*, *Literally Stories*, *Mystery Tribune*, and others. In 2019, she published her first collection, *Neighbours and Tourists*. Ewa is a Pushcart nominee. She was born in Poland, but lives in Lancashire, UK.**

## **A Piece of History**

**By Sarah Prindle**

*Nepal, A.D. 1199*

Three months after the fire, Bhanu still couldn't sleep soundly through the night. Many times, he awoke, his heart pounding and his ears perked. He was listening for the sounds of hooves, the screams of the raiders, or the alarmed cries of the monks at the Odantapura Monastery.

The sounds of death.

This was one of those nights. Bhanu jerked awake, gasping, his eyes struggling to make out the shapes around him. For a moment he didn't know where he was. Then he saw the sleeping monks lying on the ground, surrounding a campfire that had burned out long ago.

Bhanu counted the monks. One. Two. Three. Good, they were all there. Bhanu rose tiredly from his makeshift sleeping place and, glancing around to be sure no one else was nearby, went to relight the fire.

They were in Nepal now, having escaped from their native India several days ago. They were on their way to a safer monastery in the Nepalese mountains.

Satisfied that they were alone, Bhanu used the flint to strike up the flames. He blew on the fire, spreading it across the twigs. He reached into the pile of kindling that they had collected the day before and fed the sticks one after another into the campfire. The entire time, Bhanu tried to forget the sight of flames devouring the monastery that he'd lived in his whole life.

"Couldn't sleep either?"

Bhanu jumped and spun his head around so fast that a muscle cricked. It was only Brother Mahatma, the head scribe. Usually he was joking around and smiling, spreading joy even as he

completed mundane tasks such as transcribing religious texts, but the events of late had turned him into someone more serious. Now he looked at Bhanu with sad eyes.

Bhanu blushed. At eighteen, he was the youngest monk (well, monk-in-training) and felt like a child beside the others. Mahatma probably thought he was a little boy who was scared of the dark.

“No, not very well.” Bhanu answered.

Mahatma sat down beside him, somehow managing to look graceful. “I grieve for our friends at Odantapura. But I draw comfort in the knowledge that they followed Buddha’s teachings faithfully. Perhaps even now, they are being reborn, ready to begin life anew.”

“Or perhaps they reached Nirvana,” Bhanu suggested. “And they won’t have to cope with earthly struggles any longer.” Bhanu had grown up in the monastery, learning about Buddhist teachings since he was knee-high. One of their major beliefs was that when someone died, they could be reincarnated and have another life. This cycle of life, death, and rebirth could continue for generations. But if someone lived a virtuous life - a life of compassion and nonviolence and meditation - they could exit the cycle and reach a state of pure peace, or Nirvana. The monks Bhanu had known had been good people. Surely, they were enlightened enough to reach Nirvana.

Mahatma gave a sad smile. “We can hope.”

“I still can’t believe what happened,” Bhanu admitted quietly. “Everything was peaceful that day. I was studying with you in the library, remember? The sun was shining. And then...it all changed.” Bhanu’s voice darkened as he thought of the attack, a horde of shouting men on horseback, carrying torches and weapons, fanatics who were determined to stamp out Buddhism.

For years, the monks had heard stories about Bakhtiyar Khalji, an Islamic military general who had carried out raids into northern India, burning monasteries and murdering anyone unlucky enough to be present at the time. He had no respect for the Buddhists or their beliefs and regarded them as infidels. But Bhanu had never expected General Khalji to attack Odantapura. He’d never

truly believed that they were in danger. Not until the horsemen came charging up to the monastery, leaped down from their saddles, and started slashing the monks who'd gathered near the front entrance. The attackers poured inside and raced through the building, swords raised, seeking more victims. "If you had not grabbed me and pulled me out the back exit, I would have been among the dead," Bhanu added.

Mahatma was silent, no doubt remembering the close call, the smoke from the torches, the faces of the raiders - manic with hate and lit with the sickening pleasure of bringing destruction. They remembered the terror of hiding in the trees while the monastery was looted and burned.

Bhanu had thought that he and Mahatma were the only survivors, so it was a relief to run into two more as they fled to Nepal. He hoped that there were other survivors out there, maybe headed to Tibet or fleeing to outlying areas. But he doubted it.

"There are many people in the world who hate anyone not like them," Mahatma's voice ached with pain. "Those raiders are a perfect example of that. If only people would let each other be."

"I know."

"That monastery was my home for thirty years," Mahatma went on nostalgically. "I joined when I was only a few years older than you. I can still remember the day I first arrived, what a sunny, warm day it was. It's hard to believe it's all gone now." He didn't mention the monks who died, but Bhanu knew that he was thinking of them, too. The dead were never far from their thoughts. To keep from getting too emotional, Mahatma shifted the topic of conversation. "You were brave during the attack, Bhanu." Mahatma nodded his head towards a satchel tucked between the sleeping monks. "Did you not save one of our scrolls from the fire?"

Bhanu remembered. As Mahatma had yanked him towards the back doorway, he had realized that the monks, and their writings and artwork, were about to be annihilated by the raiders. He had

reached out and snatched a scroll from a nearby table before following Mahatma the rest of the way out.

Mahatma had shouted at Bhanu later for risking his life by “dawdling,” so it was strange to hear him praise his actions now. But of course, at the time, Mahatma had been more concerned about saving Bhanu’s life. Mahatma’s anger had reminded Bhanu of the time he’d nearly picked up a poisonous snake as a child. Mahatma had roughly grabbed him and yanked him back, shouting at Bhanu that he needed to be more careful. It was such a rare thing for Mahatma to shout; it was so out of character. It had frightened Bhanu. At the time, he hadn’t understood that Mahatma’s anger had come from a fear of losing him. But after the raid on the monastery, he’d finally come to that realization.

“You picked a good scroll to save,” Mahatma said now. “The words of the Buddha and the list of his most important teachings will be of great help to us when we start over in Nepal.”

“I just grabbed the scroll closest to us,” Bhanu admitted, uncomfortable with the praise. He cleared his throat. “How much longer until we reach the new monastery?”

“We should make it there by tomorrow afternoon,” Mahatma assured him. He smiled kindly. “I don’t know about you, but I will be grateful to leave this impromptu camping expedition behind us.”

Bhanu laughed. It was his first real laugh since they’d fled India.

They were silent awhile. Bhanu gazed up at the stars. The way they flickered in the sky reminded him of nights at the monastery when they would burn candles to provide light and hope to passing travelers.

Bhanu had been one of them; his parents had been traveling with him when he was two, though he didn’t recall where they were from or where they planned to go. His mother and father took ill. The monks had taken them in and done their best to heal them, but they were beyond help.

Bhanu didn't remember his parents, or how he had cried with fear that the monks would make him leave and fend for himself. Instead, the monks adopted him. He had been lovingly raised by them. They had given Bhanu a room of his own, sturdy clothes, and the education needed to train as a monk. Mahatma had an especially soft spot for Bhanu, taking extra time to explain Buddhist teachings to him and tolerating Bhanu's many questions. It was Mahatma who had taught Bhanu to read and write, and they'd spent many happy hours in the monastery library, discussing different forms of meditation and how to achieve enlightenment. Bhanu had always been grateful to the monks for taking him in and guiding him throughout his life with patient and caring hands.

Bhanu wondered if the monks who'd died had been reborn as stars. Perhaps they were up there now, twinkling on purpose to remind him of happier times, still offering their guidance.

"Bhanu?" Mahatma's soft voice interrupted his thoughts. "Do you know what I think? Since you saved the scroll, you should write something on it."

Bhanu's eyes widened. Had he heard right? Did Mahatma want him to write on a holy scroll? *He*, a novice? What could he possibly say?

Mahatma chuckled. "Don't look so surprised. I think it's only fitting, considering you saved it from the fire."

"What would I write?" Bhanu asked, dazed.

"That's up to you. Whatever you think should be remembered. Whatever you want to share with future generations." He paused. "The scroll only has a small area that has not been filled in, so make sure to be precise...something we monks are not known for." He yawned and stood up. "I'll try to get to sleep now. See you in the morning."

"Sleep well." Bhanu murmured.

When Mahatma had laid back down, Bhanu reached over to the satchel and gingerly unfolded the scroll.

The words were written with a careful, neat script upon aged paper. Men of wisdom had copied down the Buddha's own words, the most important lessons to live by. How could *he* write on one of those scrolls? What did he have to say that could be as important? Scribes long before his time had written about the struggle of all humans to erase negative states of mind such as hatred, greed, and rage from their lives. Monks had long taught that all of humanity's problems came from such negativity, and that the world needed to embrace positive states of mind such as compassion and nonviolence. Generations had debated and discussed ending the cycle of rebirth and becoming enlightened enough to achieve peace and freedom from life's suffering—what more could Bhanu possibly contribute?

Bhanu's eyes scanned the scroll's messages. He read aloud softly, "No one can save us but ourselves...thousands of candles can be lit from a single candle, and the life of the candle will not be shortened; happiness never decreases by being shared....do not injure any being, either strong or weak in the world."

Bhanu felt that if more people believed such things, the monastery attack wouldn't have happened. If General Khalji and his men had believed in kindness, Odantapura would still be standing and Bhanu would be living there right now. For the first time, he realized how easily one man's negative spirit could lead to suffering for other people. No wonder Mahatma always stressed how important it was for Buddhists to teach their beliefs to others "through our example of peace and serenity, not through violence." Why had General Khalji hated the practitioners of such a loving, gentle religion? Bhanu could only conclude that the military general had lacked the tolerance and wisdom of the monks.

At the very bottom of the scroll, near a small blank area, Bhanu saw one of his favorite Buddhist teachings: *Better than a thousand hollow words is one word that brings peace.*

What could he write that could compare to that?

But as Bhanu stared at the scroll, he realized that if he hadn't grabbed it, the scroll would be a pile of ashes by now, its peaceful words unable to be read again.

The raiders would have destroyed a piece of history. The loss of this scroll would have been another victory for the raiders—the cowards who could not respect another culture's beliefs; the cowards who took pleasure in murdering unarmed men and destroying their place of worship.

Bhanu may not have been an experienced monk. He may not have known where his parents came from or where they had been going. He may have only been a young man. But he had witnessed the deaths of the monks. He had saved a scroll from the flames. He had kept going day after day, even when faced with hate and hopelessness.

Bhanu realized that he was a stronger person than the men who had massacred the monks. He was stronger because he did not need to be cruel to find a purpose for his own life. Bhanu wanted peace, to save lives, to bring comfort to the world...not create more pain and pillaging. And perhaps the scroll that he'd saved contained the "one word" that would one day bring peace. Wouldn't that be something!

Suddenly, Bhanu knew what he wanted to write. Using the spare quill pen and ink that Mahatma had kept in his satchel, Bhanu etched the symbols onto the scroll.

*This scroll survived the attack on the Odantapura Monastery. I saved it from the fires and the killers in hopes that its words will bring peace to future generations.*

Bhanu blew on the ink to dry it, laid the scroll across his lap, and gazed up at the stars. The stars, which had hovered over Earth since time began, had been witnesses to the deaths of the monks and the ruination of a beautiful monastery.

Bhanu hoped that, one day, the stars would be witnesses to the birth of peace.

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**Sarah M. Prindle received an Associate Degree in English from Northampton Community College. She loves reading everything from historical fiction and memoirs, to poetry and mysteries. She hopes to someday publish her own novels and poetry collections on these different topics.**

# Poetry



*Hors d'oeuvre by Genevieve Felsenstein*

## Fall Poetry Collection

By Toni Orrill

### *1. The Fragrance of Fall*

I sit upon the wooden step  
The straw glides off the stalk;  
A red vine strikes a playful chord  
Along the cobblestone, I walk.

Jumping to be first and seen  
Why ever couldn't it just turn green?  
Shouting before its rightful turn,  
Turning before the patient fern.

How many shades of ochre, I cry  
Can nature blossom for me to spy?  
Waiting for the autumn:  
Dormant barely coming.

The nose rings its sensuous call  
The fresh notes of nature's stall;  
Dabbing the neck, brushing my ears  
With the first fragrance of fall.

## 2. *Ode to The Stag*

He appeared from the frosty forest,  
Pointed hooves, echoing on pine;  
His eyes captured my disbelief,  
For night's darkness was sacrilege.

Under those gleaming stars, we met—  
An encounter with fate or dream?  
I watched again  
And there he was  
Passing through the glistening stream.

His invitation to roam shone patient  
before my frozen stand;  
Heart fearless of my human stone  
Honor preserving the buried land.

To the hollow, woman—

Beast  
made our way as laurels bowed with sound;  
And there amid the rows of woods  
The stag and I tread common ground.

### *3. Town and Country*

Stripes of maize count farm days,  
All plowed on the buttery crest,  
Bark of the wolf, dance of the fox  
Where can man find the blest?

O board the goslings wings, I cry  
Or any fowl or scowling thing!  
For the sight of your great bounty  
Makes every town and country sing!

The flannel of pastures and haystacks  
All patched into copper land at rest,  
Sheep shorn, limbs blown to thorn  
I know where to find the blest!

The strings of river roads  
All twist to the ever-coasting tide,  
Plains untamed, mountains reigned  
Over every bend and hillside.

The whistles of walnuts and acorns  
All dropped into autumn's gracious nest  
Tail and feather, wind and weather  
With ease, I hear the blest.

The howls of fanged and fierce  
All answered along the humble ground,  
Hole of the hare, port of the mole  
All of God's creations abound!

Sky atop roof,  
Dust under hoof,  
I know where to find the blest!

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**Toni Orrill is a poet, writer and novelist from New Orleans, with published works including two books and online content. She has blogged for nola.com, New Orleans' premier news site. A graduate of Tulane University, her papers are housed at her alma mater. She's having a great time with the change of seasons at her home north of the city.**

## Makers

By Lucy Newlyn

*for Meg Harrington*

It is Spring, moonless night in the small town,  
starless and bible-black, the cobble streets silent...  
No tricks on the dark stage, but a single pool of light,  
in which a Welsh voice sounded.  
It was magic; it was hypnotism; it was alchemy.

Oh, I was flotsam on the lilting waves  
of consonants that chirred and chuckled;  
I was a shell caressed by sibilants and wooed  
by choirs of liquid vowels. There was no end  
to the tug and toss of the word-hoard's ocean.

Did I follow the human drama? I had no need.  
The people were bodiless voices picked out  
briefly by lights, then receding into darkness.  
When the play ended, when the clapping stopped,  
something had gone from me. But I was a votary.

All the way home, in the car's quiet, I brooded on memory.  
Words turned and churned in my mind,  
but only as phantom traces, their thin sounds  
tuneless, papery. I knew then I would never  
experience the like of it again. I was bereaved.

It was years before I saw the film. Until that time,  
all I allowed myself was the poet's words  
on the page, seen by my own eyes reading silently.  
I tried once listening to the man himself, reciting -  
but was angered by his posh elocution, a travesty.

Before the film, how pure was my fealty  
to that first performance. In comparison, all else  
seemed irrevocable loss - until one voice,  
the medium for something rich and strange,  
brought my touchstone back to me.

Richard Burton, you died too young, of drink.  
You lie buried in Geneva - in a red suit  
to honor your Welsh ancestry. A copy  
of the poet's work is entombed beside you,  
making you one with the life that you portrayed.

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**Lucy Newlyn is a retired academic, who has published two collections of poetry: *Ginnel* (Carcanet, 2005) and *Earth's Almanac* (Enitharmon, 2015). She has two collections forthcoming: *Vital Stream* to be published by Carcanet in November 2019, and *The Craft of Poetry: A Primer in Verse*, to be published by Yale University Press in Autumn 2020. She lives and writes in Cornwall.**

## Autumnal Remembrance

By Dominic Windram

Time's rusted leaves  
Gather in the garden  
of my autumnal dreams.  
These scattered remnants:  
Burnt browns, reds and golds  
Are like Death approaching;  
Yet clad in a tarnished beauty.  
Deep within their vibrant colours,  
I glimpse the vague traces  
Of loved ones long gone.

The scent of bonfires  
Lingers like an old friend  
In the crisp evening air.  
The blood of October  
Is like a vintage wine:  
So rich: both sweet and dry.

Autumn is all light and shade;  
offering more dimensions  
To the heart of our grief.  
This is a time to reflect,  
Before the bitter coming,  
Of the certain frost and snow.

---

**Dominic Windram is a poet and personal tutor from Hartlepool, in the northeast of England, who has had a number of poems published in *New Poetry 2018* and recently in *The Pangolin Review*, as well as *October Hill Magazine*. He is a resident poet on PNN (Progressive News Network).**

## Amaryllis

By Robert Cole

Neglected, affection:  
remembering Amaryllis,  
wavering outlines of the fields

She grieves in the owl-light as  
a tragedian  
lamenting a demon lover, as

Away into the night fairies  
charm a lifetime,  
a ghost ago, she slid on ice,

Reminding her again & again: a  
dead young lady,  
unwilling to leave the

Neglected, affection:  
remembering Amaryllis,  
wavering outlines of the fields

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**Robert Cole was born in London in 1951 and has since lived in India and Mexico. He now lives between Paris and Brittany. His poetry is published in literary magazines and journals in the UK and USA, including *Ambit*, *Gargoyle*, *'he Bastille*, and *New Statesmen*. He's read at the Poetry Society (Covent Garden) and recently again at Shakespeare & Company. He edited the avant-garde magazine *Chimera* for ten years.**

## Alone in a Silent Grove

By Allison Palmer

Breath

of the muted voice, becoming quiet along the way,  
one soft stream of air made softer still, by the occasion,  
and then another,  
such divisions are a journey shared, an abbreviation  
of lifetimes,  
as one becomes the other,  
two companions choosing from those famous paths that jolt  
and separate.

In the grove,

one way blends into an opposite momentum,  
in time, becoming every bit the stranger out of step with all companions,  
wandering in the nearness of solitude and silence, as patient  
as the years and hours of ordinary life,  
but less familiar.

Disjoin path from path,

amid the afternoon lines of brightness and interrupted shadows,  
and stands of a silent grove become apparent, a few trees  
suspended in light and the stillness  
of breathing,  
a few uncommon expressions of time.

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**Allison Palmer is a municipal park ranger and writer living in California. Her work has appeared in *Dream Noir*, *Adelaide Literary Magazine*, *Belle Ombre*, and the *Bangalore Review*.**

## Ruminations

By James Goss

We have this conversation:

Is it time to leave?

Yet, we stay,

weakly insisting

we are right.

How can that be?

When it is, often

(not always)

better to just go?

We have that sense.

That we could always throw

our belongings

into our car

and hit the road.

But we find reasons

to stay, always

stuck inside

the faded shell

of our dreams.

Also, we tell ourselves:

we have our friends.

But they too

are mostly stuck

in place,

like dead butterflies  
pinned to pieces  
of thin cork  
under glass,  
surrounded  
by a thick wooden frame.

Our fantasy  
is to escape  
and go back  
to the garden:  
grow some of our own food,  
be more self-sufficient.

Anyway, we like to  
think about this  
and imagine  
that we still  
have some dreams left,  
even though  
there is evidence  
to the contrary.

In our minds,  
we cannot fathom  
the extent to which  
the world has changed.

In a very real way,  
it seems,  
it no longer exists.

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**James Goss is a writer, actor and musician, author of *Pop Culture Florida* and the *Vinyl Lives* series about record stores and collectors. He lives in South Florida with his family.**

## Dad

By Diane Kendig

Mid-August the kids are returning to school,  
because we no longer wait for Labor Day  
we barely celebrate while rushing to Halloween  
candy corn and tsking snow is due soon.  
I myself ask what I've done with the hours  
I used to spend with you, weekly doctor visits  
before stopping for sweets, the real event,  
Sundays with bowls of pasta, watching Cleveland  
teams, your lost causes after your church was lost.

It seems you are gone eons, but it was only March  
when we went for your ninety-fourth birthday,  
and you plowed through plates full as autumn fields  
to the point of no return, which is to say,  
you turned down free dessert. Never mind,  
we had pie which all the cousins baked for your funeral.  
You would have loved so many, mostly fruit;  
and this month, fruits come in bushels. Just this week,  
I tried a new blueberry recipe, cobbled up peaches.

Our tomatoes just begin to flood the counter, late  
because, like you, I wait till after Memorial Day  
to plant. "Take it easy, breezy, it's a long long  
slide," you'd say to Mom and me, the two worriers.  
"My blood and sweat, your tears," you laughed about  
this family division of labor. "I'm so sorry," people say  
to me, and I don't know what to say. I pick up the slack,

the tomatoes, zuke, and basil, check carrots, glide  
through the rows, easy, easy, slide slowly into home.

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**Diane Kendig's five poetry collections include the most recent, *Prison Terms*, and she also co-edited the anthology, *In the Company of Russell Atkins*. Her poetry and prose have appeared in journals such as *J Journal*, *Under the Sun*, and *Blueline*. She started the creative writing program at The University of Findlay, including a prison-writing workshop that ran for 18 years. Currently, she runs writing workshops in prisons and curates, "Read + Write: 30 Days of Poetry," now in its sixth year with over 2200 subscribers. Find her on the web at [dianekendig.com](http://dianekendig.com)**

## The Flood

By Holly Day

The coffins float to the surface,  
like rebellious architecture, buoyed by the floodwaters  
that have shaken everything loose.  
We pass sandbags hand over hand to build a wall between us and the river,  
shouting panicked instructions to the trucks to bring more.

The water pouring in from the river is frigid and cold,  
numbing ankles and hands, but the water  
running off of the bloated cemetery is warm, as though the water  
is carrying the last breath and embrace of the dead  
across the grounds to keep us from freezing.

---

**Holly Day's poetry has recently appeared in *Plainsongs*, *The Long Islander*, and *The Nashwaak Review*. Her newest poetry collections are *In This Place, She Is Her Own* (Vegetarian Alcoholic Press), *A Wall to Protect Your Eyes* (Pski's Porch Publishing), *Folios of Dried Flowers and Pressed Birds* (Cyberwit.net), *Where We Went Wrong* (Clare Songbirds Publishing), *Into the Cracks* (Golden Antelope Press), and *Cross Referencing a Book of Summer* (Silver Bow Publishing).**

## Battle of Leaves

By Mark Weinrich

After 100 days of torturous heat,  
our desert autumn lingers long  
and leisurely, like a bird that  
cannot decide if it's time to  
stay or go. And without a chilling  
frost, trees have no direction,  
no reason to color flash and fall.  
Some leaves with no self-esteem  
drop like unripe fruit with just  
a fringe of tattered brown. They  
chatter down the sidewalks, hoping  
to tempt others in their migration.  
Most are wind-harvested week by  
week. They bury my yard and drift  
against the sliding glass door. I am  
continually blowing and vacuuming  
tree debris. And whenever I look up,  
there are still clouds of cottonwood  
and willow leaves hanging in defiance.  
I am convinced that desert trees have  
a guppy gene: When one leaf falls,  
ten others multiply to take its place.

---

**Mark Weinrich is a cancer survivor, a retired pastor, gardener, hiker, and musician. He has had over 395 poems, articles, and short stories published in numerous publications. He has sold eight children's books and currently has two fantasy novels on Kindle. He also volunteers at a wildlife rescue center.**

## **Starry Night**

**By Ivanka Fear**

Upon looking out my front door one summer evening,  
I said aloud, "I wonder if the stars are still there."  
The lost stars of my childhood, of summers long ago,  
The stars of country drives, of warm nights sitting outside.  
Star light, star bright, I wish...you hadn't forsaken me.  
"I haven't seen them for a while. Do you think they're gone?"  
On a quest to find them, we set off walking in town.  
Gazing up at the sky, searching all around, I said,  
"I don't see any. Maybe it's the light pollution."  
He replied, "Maybe it's not dark enough yet. Just wait."  
Making our way through darkened streets and under grey skies,  
Craning our heads, seeking celestial enlightenment,  
We pass neighbouring homes with a warm glow in windows,  
The light emanating, a confirmation of life.  
Past the church we trod, steeple pointing up to the sky,  
And I strain to see what it is that I've been missing,  
If behind the darkness in our world, the light still burns.  
Disappointed, I say, "Nothing. Let's just forget it."  
Heading home, I spot the large maple tree in our yard,  
Dark and menacing, it looms...sharp contrast to daytime.  
Tipping my head way up, past its enormous presence,  
I see it, then another, and more, surrounding me.  
"You just need to be patient. It wasn't dark enough,"  
He reminds me as I whirl in appreciation.  
What a night of unexpected illumination!  
Now I know...it was forgotten, doesn't mean it's gone,  
Sometimes you have to look a bit harder for the light.  
Past the darkness in our souls, past the doubts that plague us.  
Starry night, a twinkle, a glimpse of what awaits us.

Starry night, heavens exposed for us to envision.

Starry night, but you already knew, didn't you, Vincent?

Starry, starry night, sometimes you just have to wait -

The light comes after the darkness.

---

**Ivanka Fear is a retired teacher and a writer from Ontario, Canada. She holds a B.A. and B.Ed., majoring in English and French literature, from Western University. Her poems and short stories appear in or are forthcoming in *Spadina Literary Review*, *Montreal Writes*, *Spillwords*, *Commuterlit*, *Canadian Stories*, *Adelaide Literary*, *October Hill Magazine*, *Scarlet Leaf Review*, *Polar Borealis*, and several others. She has recently completed her first first novel.**

## All That Remains

By Ernest Clemons

there's an old shed  
beside a rusting silo  
splintered boards  
rusted nails  
all that remains

beside a rusting silo  
tall and proud  
throughout the years  
rusting tin  
kissed by rain

tall and proud  
holding promise  
to stave off  
hungry wolves  
lurking in darkness

holding promise  
in lean and plenty  
time scratches  
boards splinter  
nails rust  
in lean and plenty  
old hands remain  
in sun and downpour  
heat and freezing  
as shadows grow long

weathered hands remain -  
spirit of a shed  
with splintered boards  
rusted nails  
beside a rusting silo...

---

**Ernest Clemons has been writing poetry full-time for the past ten years. His material encompasses the darker aspects of humanity using roughly hewn language that speaks with a credulity that marks the age.**

## Death is Not an Illusion (After Tu Fu)

By George Freek

A dismal line of people crawls  
along the dark street,  
like a snake shedding its skin.  
Stars throb like guitars,  
playing funeral tunes.  
Dimly shining in a black sky,  
is a weary moon.  
I have grown old too soon.  
I draw my shades,  
and turn off my lights.  
The darkness is unnerving.  
There's no reason to procrastinate.  
There's nothing left to write.  
I stay in my room.  
I pull my shade and wait.  
For what I can't say,  
but it's getting very late.

---

**George Freek is a poet/playwright living in Belvidere, IL. His poetry has recently appeared in *Off Course*, *Torrid Literature*, *The Chiron Review*, and *The Adelaide Magazine*. His plays are published by Playscripts, Inc., Lazy Bee Scripts, and Off The Wall Plays.**

## Euphemus

By Jack Harvey

*(Pindar's fourth Pythian)*

Triton, snowy-haired,  
in splendid seeming  
graces Euphemus  
with a hunk of earth.

At sea  
carelessly lost,  
a glebe  
brought up on the  
shores of Thera;  
sacred wet black meat,  
like a toy limousine,  
rolls up  
at the crossroads,  
confounding Hermes'  
stylish stone  
to its mossy base.

Material stuff, divine power  
ripe for the plucking;  
the leavings of a continent  
content an island;  
its petty king  
legend enough  
to rule the hours.

The fields full of corn;  
herm with a phallus  
a stone  
surrounded by  
crows eating,  
eating the dead black meat;  
their resounding beaks clatter  
on more than hard seeds.  
Harvest after harvest  
the passing seasons  
bury a clod, light as Lazarus,  
awaiting intervention.

In the harsh sky  
wheeling wings  
blacken the day;  
Euphemus arriving  
in some small state,  
in slow display  
proceeds up-river;  
on stony bank  
hesitates in dismay,  
unused to destiny  
footloose and  
knocking at the gate;  
taken to task  
by the powers that be,  
asked over and over  
by the prophets of old  
the same old questions,  
like a splendid top,

Euphemus  
spinning and rolling,  
dumb as an ox,  
has no answers.

Dismissed out of hand,  
Euphemus departed,  
Libya's hope and bane.

Come, come, unruly  
citizens, haphazard  
peasantry gathered  
for no good reason,  
dead men, untrue  
to the proverb,  
tell all tales,  
speak beyond oratory;  
like the mask of Agamemnon  
here is one who,  
true to form,  
sounds beyond  
prognosticating Sibyls,  
fretting the bars  
of sense; here is one  
with a clinging, ringing  
hope that belies  
the silence of death,  
that sends us on  
with a kind of music;  
his cadaver leans out  
from the kingdom without people,  
his words, his hands

unwrap the cerement;  
yonder the grave,  
the beehive tomb,  
the cold stream of Lethe,  
but not for him;  
his strong medicine  
goes by another name,  
heating the wandering crowds  
like the thin flame  
under hot air balloons.

Seed after seed,  
lifeless lump after lump,  
his kindling clod  
makes all things wake;  
not too late  
came love and holy power;  
like brazen ploughs  
from the island earth  
plowed up,  
raised up,  
dragon's teeth.

---

**Jack Harvey's poetry has appeared in *Scrivener*, *The Comstock Review*, *Bay Area Poets' Coalition*, *The Antioch Review*, *The Piedmont Poetry Journal* and a number of other online and print poetry magazines.**

## Conflicted

By John Grey

Yes, I've met women in bars,  
back when I was part of the Providence singles scene.  
And once or twice, I splashed around in sex until morning.  
But I've never had a rifle in my hands.  
Never had an enemy I needed to eliminate.  
A pen is another story. Or another poem more like it.  
One about sex and guns if I had to.  
I've always had this crush on my imagination.  
And I've often thought about people  
I haven't thought of in a long time.  
That saved me the trouble of ever having to think of them again.  
But I've never been in a foxhole.  
(unless some of my apartments qualify)  
I just can't imagine being in a war and toting up indifferent kills.  
Or being killed myself.  
So if there's another war, I'd prefer not to be in it.  
But none of the women I met in bars ever stuck.  
(if that's the right word)  
And the singles scene tossed me to the sidewalk.  
(still single)  
And one-night stands left me with this kind of  
conflicted attitude towards women.

But I never once grabbed any kind of weapon

from my arsenal

(especially not poetry)

with a view to eliminating all of them.

You're thinking of war.

---

**John Grey is an Australian poet and U.S. resident. Recently published in the *Homestead Review*, *Harpur Palate* and *Columbia Review* with work upcoming in *The Roanoke Review*, *The Hawaii Review* and *North Dakota Quarterly*.**

## Lines Composed Upon the Brooklyn Bridge After an All-Nighter

By Richard Bentley

Wind peels waves off the river  
and heaps them against the pilings.  
Gulls cry and dip low,  
then shoot straight up again.  
We wonder, why don't doormen  
ever go to sea? Why don't nuns  
pray before the great stone Buddha  
up in the Bronx?

"Deliver us from the heavenly  
beauty of the sunrise over Queens."

Our hearts are armored  
with booze and grass,  
and we ask the prayerful nuns  
to intercede,  
"Spare them the knowledge  
of where they are going  
when the bridge they cross  
disappears in a thick rain."

---

**Dick Bentley's books, *Post-Freudian Dreaming*, *A General Theory of Desire*, and *All Rise* are available on Amazon. He won the Paris Writers/Paris Review's International Fiction Award and has published over 280 works of fiction, poetry, and memoir in the U.S., the U.K., France, Canada, and Brazil. He has served on the Board of the Modern Poetry Association and has taught at the University of Massachusetts. His website is [www.dickbentley.com](http://www.dickbentley.com).**

# Clapping

By Stephen Mead

*For Jose*

Hands: the prayer rhythm,  
space between each breath  
of palms coming together  
as fingers remain linked  
even when palms pull away...

Prayer: the percussion of this,  
be it the dance beats you loved  
or some other choir, astral,  
as those visions in your hair,  
starting to thin or in your sight,  
dimming...

Here, through my own hands  
I blow kisses of planets  
in synch with the rhythm of your fading.  
Also, I light candles, your spirit, a torch,  
keeping us rocking in the roll of life  
after the song is finished,  
the hands re-find laps & refrains,

Narcissus,  
echo, echo,  
you're dear fire flower.

---

**Stephen Mead is an Outsider multi-media artist and writer. Since the 1990s, he's been grateful to many editors for publishing his work in print zines and eventually online. He is also grateful to have managed to keep various day jobs for health insurance.**

# **My Blanket of Posterity**

**By Milton Ehrlich**

No matter how long I last,  
church bells will not ring  
as I cross the last barricade.

Moments of happiness  
will fade from memory,  
destined to leave my footsteps  
in the dust of yellow pollen.

My fabric of memory  
is torn beyond repair.

A clapper-less bell rings  
with resonant vibrations  
that only I can hear.

Future descendants  
will keep me warm  
for a very long time.

---

**Milton P. Ehrlich, Ph.D. is a 87 year old psychologist and Korean War veteran who has published many of his poems in periodicals such as the *Toronto Quarterly*, *Wisconsin Review*, *Mobius*, *The Chiron Review*, *Descant*, *Arc Poetry Magazine*, *London Grip*, *Taj Mahal Review*, *Poetica Magazine*, *Christian Science Monitor* and the *New York Times*.**

## A Sci-Fi Valentine...

By Erren Kelly

If I could travel across the  
Ages, like I could teleport  
Through bodies  
I would defy time and  
Space to give you  
Rainbows  
Like dreams, you appear  
To me like a film.  
Like love, I rewind memories  
Of us, over and over  
Until memories become  
Our reality

Like robots, we never age,  
But unlike robots  
Love and pain, are why we  
Live...  
No matter what age,  
We are young and eternal.  
Like the planets, we are  
Weightless and eager  
With a kiss, we are  
Childlike, like stars  
Finding bliss, even in  
Flames...

---

**Erren Kelly is a two-time Pushcart-nominated poet from Boston, who has published over 300 works in print and online in such publications as *Hiram Poetry Review*, *Mudfish*, *Poetry Magazine* (online), *Cactus Heart*, and *Black Heart Literary Journal*. Kelly has also been published in anthologies such as *Fertile Ground* and *Beyond the Frontier*.**

## Censorship

By Sahar Ajdamsani

This woman wants her right

She has silenced her shout

But not one can silence those eyes

The depth of what she sees

She screams her pain in musical notes

Standing powerful

Strong and true

Do not censor her

Her dreams, her thoughts, her voice

Her mighty wings, her heart, her choice

In dreams she flies

High over all

All that drags her down

Landing now atop the mountain

The peak of all she is

Do not ignore

Woman, her right, her goals

---

**Sahar Ajdamsani was born in 1996 and started writing poetry at age eight. She is a poet, lyricist, singer, photographer, author and activist and has published two poetry books *5th Season of the Earth* and *I Flew to the Moon*. Her English song book will be published soon with a publisher in the US.**

## Instinct

By Lowell Jaeger

Mounds of black scat litter the trail.  
Rotted hemlock clawed and scattered.  
A branch snaps - forest silence shattered  
by rocks knocked loose cliff-side, hail

of scree. Even birds and blackflies freeze  
for what's to come. I clap my trembling hands,  
step forward fearfully. Scan side to side  
for movement, shadows, brush enough to hide  
a great brown hump of griz. He sees  
with his nose, and god forbid his gaze lands

on me. Hairs on the back of my neck rise  
by instinct I can't name. I watch for bear;  
I watch my back. Whistle to avoid surprise.  
Swallow hard. My heartbeat knows he's there.

---

**Lowell Jaeger (Montana Poet Laureate 2017-2019) is the author of eight collections of poems, most recently *Earth-blood & Star-shine* (Shabda Press in 2016). He is the recipient of fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Montana Arts Council and winner of the Grolier Poetry Peace Prize. Most recently Jaeger was awarded the Montana Governor's Humanities Award for his work in promoting thoughtful civic discourse.**