October Hill

MAGAZINE

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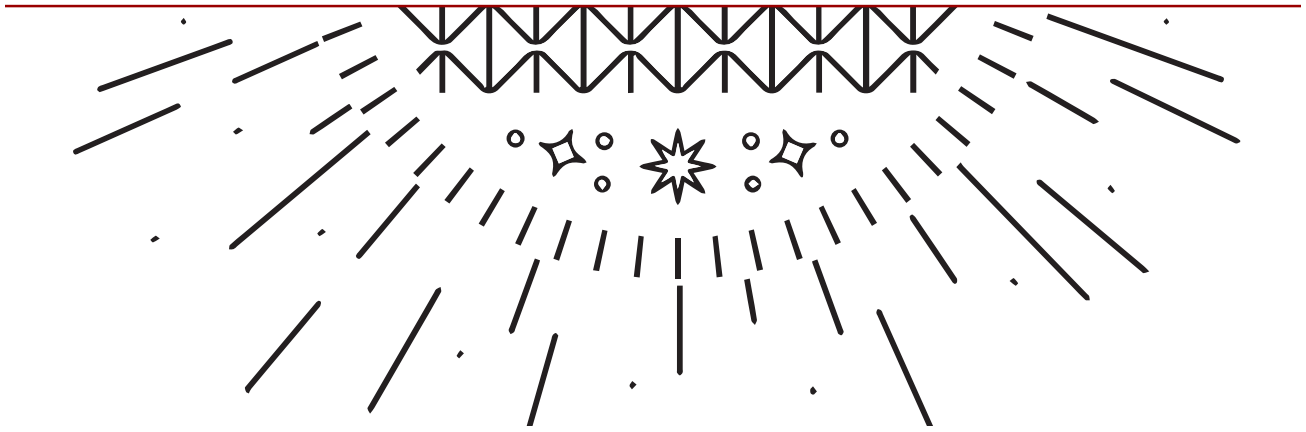


At last, it's Spring!

So many of us are probably glad to bid a fond farewell to winter, at least for this year, and eager to welcome in spring, a time of renewal and the rebirth of nature.

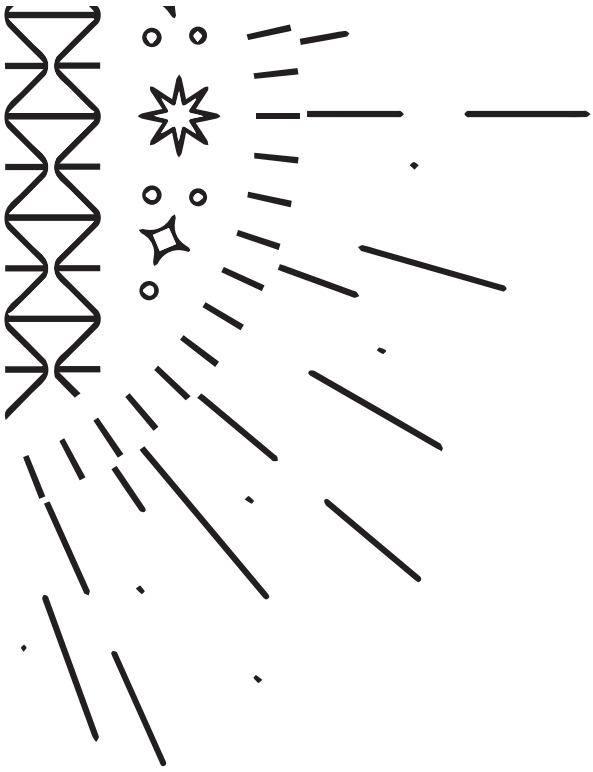
Spring has a special meaning for us at *October Hill*. This Spring marks our fifth anniversary as a literary publication. Some of us can barely believe that we have already been working at this for a full four years. But the calendar doesn't lie.

Just as spring signals a season of renewal, we're excited not only to renew our commitment to serve as a platform for new authors, but to renew – and hopefully improve upon – the quality of our publication. In this issue, we're extremely pleased to introduce a new and improved *October Hill Magazine*. Our managing editor, Samantha Morley, has spearheaded the redesign of the magazine, including a transition to a two-column format for our short stories, poetry, and book reviews. Our readers will still enjoy the same access as always to our exciting line up of new short stories, poems, and book reviews, but in a new, easy-to-read format.

Spring represents a season of change and renewal. The one thing which will not change at *October Hill* is our commitment to publishing quality work by authors new and old. And we remain as excited as ever about that. In the meantime, we hope you enjoy our new look!

Richard Merli *Editorial Director*

Samantha Morley *Managing Editor*



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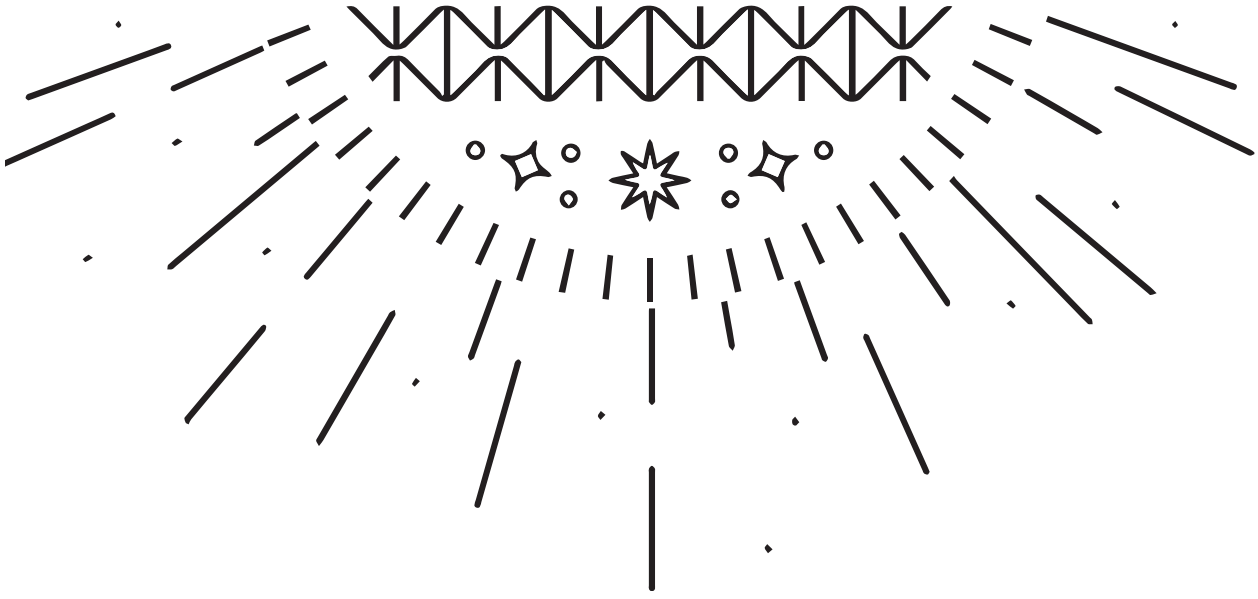

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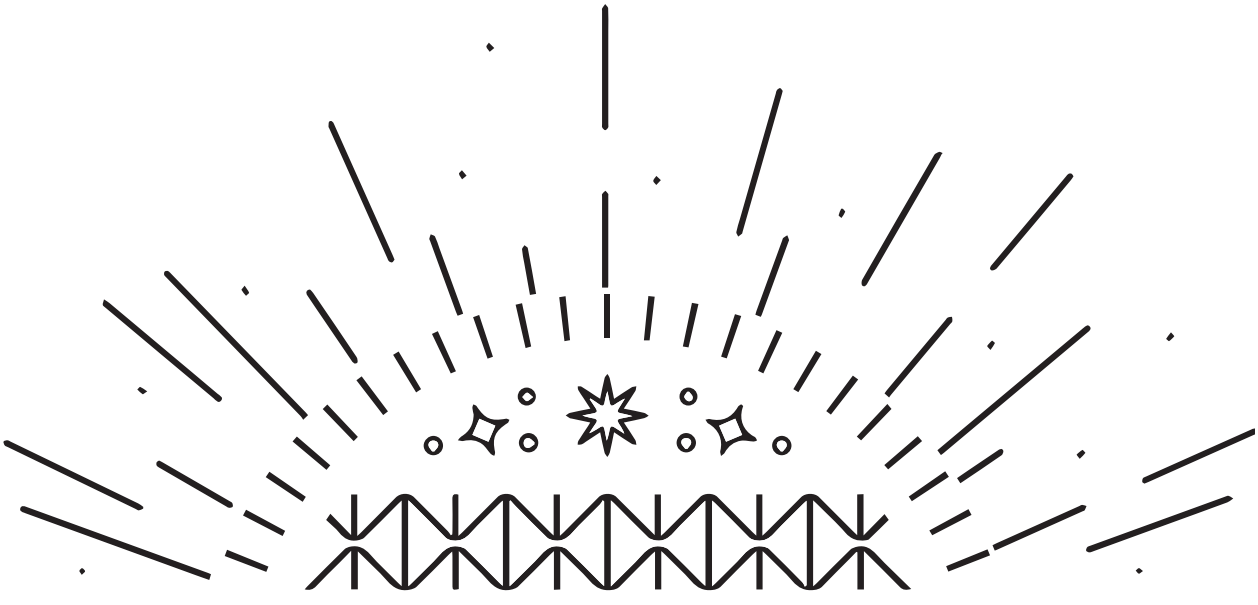

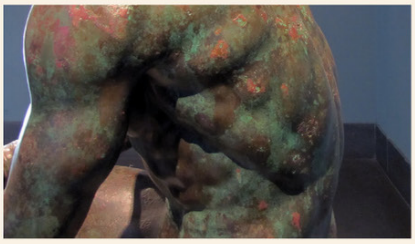

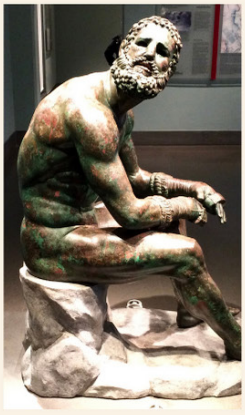

The Boxer's Gaze

Jeffrey Hantover is a New York-based writer. His novel, *The Jewel Trader of Pegu*, published by William Morrow in January 2008, was chosen as a Barnes & Noble "Discover Great New Writers" selection, Borders' "Original Voices" selection, and the Independent Book Sellers' BookSense pick.

Every Saturday, Margaret Flannery drove two hours from her home in Staten Island to the Green Haven Correctional Facility in Stormville, New York, to visit her son John Jr., who was halfway through a seven-year sentence for burglary. Every few months, her daughter Linda would drive her. But Linda was divorced with three kids, and it was hard to find friends to look after them for the whole day. Most of her friends were married and had kids of their own or worked on Saturdays. Margaret's husband, John, never visited his only son. Not even once. John Jr. went through the drug treatment program at Green Haven. He was a good boy before the opioids. Margaret was sure her son, now 27, would live a decent, honest life when he was released.

"He's turned his life around," Margaret said.

"Prove it," John said. "Then he'll be welcome back in my house."

"Our house," she corrected him.

John Flannery said nothing. He just shook his head. He had worked his butt off all his life. He didn't get his job because his uncle or his cousin pulled some strings, like the guys in the fire department or the police department; he got it on his own. No one did him any favors. His son thought the world owed him happiness on a silver platter. Maybe the kid was too good-looking for his own good. He took after John's mother. She was a beauty. What was happiness, anyway? You went to work, did your job and did it well, and came home to a warm meal, a cold beer, and a well-pitched game on television. You put in your time, took your pension, and retired.

In ten months, John Flannery would retire after 28 years at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in the Receiving and Shipping department. He lost count of the pairs of white gloves he had gone through over the years. He claimed he could walk through the museum and remember every object he packed and uncrated. When sending a piece from the collection to another museum, he took special care to make sure it was well packed and protected. When they returned, he welcomed them back like a long-lost relative. He liked looking at beautiful things, especially the ancient art of Greece, Rome, and China. With gloved hands, he touched statues, vases, goblets, and jeweled swords that emperors, kings, and men of power and fame once touched and admired, fought over, and claimed with blood. Works of art that were old when Jesus was born. Objects that survived because he took care of them and protected them.

He owned a house in Florida and wanted to move there as soon as he retired. He didn't want to spend another winter on Staten Island. Margaret wanted to wait until John Jr. was released. She could talk to him on the phone every week from Florida, her husband said, and their daughter would visit once in a while.

"The boy blamed everyone but himself," John told his wife. "Not everyone who loses his job takes drugs; not everyone on Staten Island is a junkie. Not every Flannery has been a choirboy, but not one has done time, to the shame of his mother."

"I'm not ashamed of John. He's got a good soul. You know that," Margaret said.

Too many dinners ended with her in tears. Too many nights, they sat across from each other in sullen silence. She was his wife, and they would go to Florida. No more arguments.

The department head had told John to clear his calendar for Monday and select his most experienced men. Something important—a bronze statue from Italy—had arrived. John came down to the Level B1 receiving area with his mug of coffee to find a crate the size of a small studio apartment, surrounded by what seemed like the entire staff of the Greek and Roman department: the senior curator, three assistant curators, the collection manager, the administrator, the administrative assistant, and the technician. *Why the crowd?* he wondered.

There was also a young man in a tailored suit speaking in Italian to Madeline Mancuso, the youngest curator and one of John's favorites. She grew up in Queens. Her father was a bus driver, and her mother was a pharmacist's assistant at CVS. She had a PhD from Princeton but didn't affect an English accent like some of the other Ivy League–educated curators. Like John, she was a long-suffering Mets fan whose playoff hopes were dashed well before September.

She waved John over and introduced him to the attaché for cultural affairs from the Italian consulate. She motioned toward the crate.

"He's never traveled outside the country," she said. "Mr. Romano is worried about him. I told him you and your men are the best."

Damn right, John thought. *Why is he looking over our shoulders? What does he think we are, a bunch of amateurs?*

The whir of electric drills filled the room. John's crew unscrewed the bolts that ran along the edges of the crate. They removed the top and all four sides. A large object wrapped in layers of opaque plastic and bubble wrap sat on a large palette inside a tight-fitting Styrofoam-carved shell. It was bound by packing tape and crisscrossed with wide leather straps. It reminded John of pictures of Houdini, shackled and chained. The bolts that held the ends of the straps were unscrewed. The staff and attaché moved closer. The men cut the tape with box cutters and carefully unwrapped the plastic chrysalis that enshrouded the statue. No one spoke. Then, under an invisible conductor's baton, all the staff began to clap. John and a few of his men, with their gloves still on, joined with muffled applause.

The chief curator spread out his arms. *"Benvenuto a New York, mio caro pugile."*

"Bravo," exclaimed the attaché. Overwhelmed with emotion, he went from person to person—staff and workmen—shaking their hands, beaming, and mumbling "bravo" over and over.

"That's one fucking bruiser," Jose, the youngest in the crew, said. "Right, John?"

John shook his head in silent agreement. He never saw pain like this in all his years of painted and carved crucifixions: the battered and scarred face, the broken nose, the blood-spattered arms and legs. He couldn't escape the statue's gaze. In a way he couldn't explain, the statue's pain shamed him. He took another bite of his sandwich while Jose and two other crew members who helped with the uncrating talked loudly about the statue. They all agreed the *Boxer at Rest* was the best damn thing they had ever seen.

"Just the fucking best," Jose said. "If he was the champ, I'd hate to see the guy who lost," he laughed.

Met policy didn't allow photos of work being uncrated unless the administrator took them for insurance purposes. The crew all said this was one piece of art that they would take pictures of after it was installed.

John sat mute at the dinner table and barely touched his meal that night. He told Margaret he wasn't hungry. She couldn't remember talking about John Jr. over the last few days, as that always put her husband in a dark mood. She didn't ask him about his day or tell him about hers. They sat at the table in an uncomfortable, heavy silence.

Two days later, as soon as the statue was installed, John went to see him on his morning break. The *Boxer at Rest* sat on a gray faux stone at the end of the barrel-vaulted gallery that led to the main Greek and Roman galleries. John read the text on a low stand next to the statue. It was a rare Greek bronze from the third or fourth century BC. Rodolfo Lanciani, the archaeologist who was present at its excavation in Rome in 1885, wrote that in his long career, he witnessed many discoveries, some real masterpieces, but he "never felt such an extraordinary impression as the one created by the sight of this magnificent specimen of a semi-barbaric athlete, coming slowly out of the ground, as if awakening from a long repose

after his gallant fights." The fighter looked over his shoulder at his surroundings. He seemed lost, bewildered, not sure where he was. John took several pictures of him from different angles on his iPhone, more to show Margaret than for himself. This was not art that comforted him. John wanted to tell the boxer that everything would be okay; he would look after him.

On Saturday morning, Margaret woke early for the drive to Green Haven. She made ham sandwiches and put the potato salad she prepared the night before in a large plastic container. She packed napkins, plastic forks, several bottles of Snapple iced tea, and a box with three slices of John Jr.'s favorite cheesecake from Enzo and Tino's Bake Shop on Roosevelt Avenue. She hoped the forecasted rain held off. She and her son could eat at the metal picnic tables in a fenced-in area in the prison yard. John was upstairs, probably awake, just lying in bed like he often did on the weekend before getting up to go out back to work in the garden.

John tossed and turned, pulling the blanket this way and that. Usually, he was out like a light once his head hit the pillow.

He got up to pee in the middle of the night, his dream muzzy and fading. He struggled to keep it clear. John Jr. was eight or nine. He had a gap where two of his front teeth hadn't come in yet. It was a sunny summer day with a blue sky. From their seats, four rows behind the Brooklyn Cyclone dugout, they could see the twists and dips of the Coney Island Cyclone in Luna Park. They were doing a father-son ball game right: peanuts, hot dogs, and ice cream Drumsticks. It was Class A baseball, a long way from the majors. For most players, this was the highest rung on the ladder, the end of their dreams. They missed the cutoff man, overran a pop-up, swung at pitches a foot outside the strike zone, and threw fastballs straight down the pike when they should have nibbled on the corners. But there were a few who showed promise. They stood out. You could tell that they had a future. They had a smooth grace in fielding a grounder in the hole, got a good read on a flyball, and had a wicked curveball that they weren't afraid to throw on a 2-0 count. They hustled and ran hard to first on a routine grounder to second base. They played the game the right way.

Junior brought his mitt and pounded it hard every time a Cyclone came up to bat. He wasn't the most athletic kid—not the first or even the second when his pals chose sides for a game in the park down from their house. But he could tell you the name of every Met and their E.R.A.s and batting averages. On a school night, when his son was supposed to be asleep, John heard outside his son's bedroom door the faint sound of the Met's announcers on the transistor radio Junior put next to his pillow. John didn't say anything. He was a good kid. Let him be a kid.

> "He couldn't escape the statue's gaze. In a way he couldn't explain, the statue's pain shamed him."

It was the bottom of the eighth, and the Cyclones were up three runs. If their relief pitcher didn't blow it, this would be the last chance for Junior to catch a ball hit by one of the Cyclones. Two outs, two strikes. Junior was muttering to himself, "Come on, come on."

A soft foul pop-up came their way. Junior held his arm out, his eyes closed. The ball landed in the middle of his mitt. An angel couldn't have placed it better. John wouldn't have traded his son's smile for a winning lottery ticket.

"I knew it, I knew it," Junior said.

They walked out onto the boardwalk. His son clutched the ball tight in his mitt. He reached out to hold his father's hand. *Remember this moment*, John thought. Soon, he will be too "grown-up" to hold his father's hand.

"Pop, this is the best day of my life."

John squeezed his son's hand.

John lay in bed, holding the fading memory in his mind. He would look in the basement. Maybe he could find the baseball in a box that his son left when he moved out.

Just before he fell back to sleep, for reasons he couldn't understand, John saw the *Boxer at Rest* just after they uncrated him. He seemed stunned by his new surroundings. It was his pain that first struck

John. Now, John felt something deeper, sadder. The boxer seemed to be saying that he could handle the pain—the wounds, the blood, the swollen cheeks.

"It comes with the territory, John. It's the loneliness that's hard. I'm so damn lonely."

Margaret stood at the front door, the car keys in her hand and the bag full of food at her feet.

"I'm going, John," she raised her voice toward the stairs.

Surprised, she saw John fully dressed, his shoes on, walking down the steps. He crossed the living room toward her. He took the keys from her hand.

"I'll drive," he said.

The Owl

Nashae Jones' work has appeared in *Blackberry*, *American Athenaeum*, and *Bicycle Review* magazines, among others. Her work has been nominated for several awards, including the Pushcart Prize. She currently lives in Virginia with her husband and two kids.

After Noah's engagement to his Bengali bride, Rashi, he decided, with no hesitation, to move to the southernmost part of the state, a location that was 282 miles away from his mother.

Noah's mother did not take kindly to the move, as she depended on Noah for many things: Bingo on Mondays, tree trimming and lawn care on Tuesdays, and a Saturday night book club in which Noah was the sole male member. All of these things were deemed necessities in Annie Mae Halimander's eyes. She needed a routine. In fact, she craved it. As a young woman, she'd write out her daily schedule on the smooth grip of the wall behind her bed frame, hiding it each day behind her clove-colored pillows and sheets. The need for routine hadn't escaped her as an adult. Every morning, she would wake up before her husband, slide her feet into a slack pair of memory-foam slippers that were replaced every year on her birthday, rinse her mouth out with tepid sink water, remove the curlers from her graying hair, and apply a simple coat of brown-cherry lipstick. She'd make breakfast: two eggs scrambled in bacon grease and four slices of thick, buttered toast. Her husband would receive a glass of black coffee while she sipped on a mug of creamy peppermint tea. This routine remained the same day after day in a house stunned with silence and rancor from the absence of children both cherished and abhorred.

Noah understood his mother's need for a routine. Furthermore, he understood that he was an intricate part of that. Being an only child, he was more connected to his mother in ways that were now even more significant than when he had been an infant at her breast.

Even as a child, he had felt the insurmountable burden he placed on his parents, each of them busy with careers and friends, while he—the mouth that was always open—drowned them in his wants and needs. Oftentimes, he would hold his hands to his mother's face and feel the dips and folds in her skin—wrinkles, he assumed, formed from his entrance into her life. But now, as an adult, he felt the burden shift sides. He felt his mother's suffocating need, her interloping, lukewarm love that hadn't existed when he was a boy. Sometimes, she called Noah in the middle of the night to talk about his father's breathing or how he no longer could fully climb the stairs. Noah would listen patiently, acutely aware that his mother's anxiety did not stem from worry about her husband's deteriorating condition but a clumsy, overarching concern about her own waning mortality.

When Noah finally told his mother about his new woman, it was on the eve of his engagement. Annie Mae didn't say much. She simply asked what type of name Rashi was.

"It's unique," she told him. "You know how I feel about blacks giving their children weird names. They end up standing out, like pickled sore thumbs with big red targets on their backs."

When Noah informed her that Rashi was Indian, Annie Mae made a loud sound of disgust.

"An Indian, Noah? Who told you to go and do that?"

Noah didn't respond. He often ignored his mother's comments, carrying on with the conversation as if she merely existed as a sounding board.

"She's a biomedical engineer," he quipped proudly, "who graduated second in our class in grad school. She's a really hard worker. You'll like her."

But Annie Mae couldn't imagine liking anybody less than this deceptively smart Indian girl, who was slowly growing into an ill-suited succubus, melting her son from her clenched fingers.

The wedding rehearsal took place a week after Noah's proposal. Noah explained to his mother that a quick wedding was best. They were both in their thirties and wanted to quickly start a family.

A day later, Annie Mae met Rashi. She sat across from her son's bride, close-lipped and rigid. Her spine was straighter than it had been in years.

"I didn't think you wanted kids." Annie Mae felt the words vomit out of her.

A stunned silence bit back at her. She really hadn't meant to be cruel, but it slipped out while staring at the girl's cloying, clever face, her wide-set eyes that blinked too often, and her solid mouth that seemed to melt in with the rest of her face. Rashi shook her head, her symmetrical and smartly cut bob moving with each tug of her neck.

"No, he's very much changed his mind," Rashi answered warmly, breaking the awkward silence. "He's scared, you see. He's scared of the unknown."

She paused and reassuringly placed her hand on Noah's knee. She leaned into Annie Mae and lowered her voice as if she were going to share a devastatingly crucial secret.

"He's afraid that he won't be a good father."

At that moment, Annie Mae wanted to scratch the girl, to claw her, to rip her nails against her skin, to render her paralyzed from the same hand that nurtured, bathed, and fed her husband-to-be. But Annie Mae sat silently, sipping her tea, looking at Rashi with muffled politeness. Rashi continued in a flurry of excitement.

"I told him that he will be a great dad. An absolutely wonderful one."

She bubbled over with excitement, squeezing Noah's knee. Her puffy cheeks reddened. Annie Mae thought that Rashi looked like a sea anemone, abnormally bright and wriggly, unnatural to behold outside the confines of the ocean.

"Yes, he will be a great dad," Annie Mae replied shortly. "He was raised right. He's a God-fearing Christian boy. He'll raise his kids the same."

A strange expression passed over Rashi's face. Her eyelids drooped. Her mouth became slightly off-centered. Noah, too, dropped his eyes, his hands beginning to twitch in his lap.

"What?" Annie Mae asked, her heart beginning to make a steady decline in her chest.

"Nothing," Rashi said, too bright and too artificial. She smiled like a shark, pulling her lips back over her teeth.

"What is it?" Annie Mae asked again, this time focusing on Noah's downturned eyes. She used the voice she had used on him as a child; a stern, unyielding voice that Noah could never ignore.

"We're atheists," Noah blurted, breaking the room's vibrating silence.

The word hissed and swam up the length of Annie Mae's neck, scooting up her hollowed cheeks, and settling in the base of her throat.

"The devil is a liar," she whispered, clenching the white tablecloth where she had set out a pitcher of lemonade and a tray of peanut butter brownies.

Rashi stared at her, the shark-like smile still plastered on her face. "Don't worry," she said hurriedly to Annie Mae. "We aren't devil worshippers or anything." She let out a light, tinkling laugh. "It's just that both of us grew up in such strict religious households."

Realizing what she had said, Rashi stopped. A deep pink blush creased her cheeks. "Not that I'm telling you that you were too strict in raising Noah," she said hurriedly. She looked down at the floor. "It's just..."

Noah firmly took her hand and cleared his throat, mercifully stopping her.

"It is what it is, Mom. We could explain our reasoning to you; I could give you valid explanations, filled with logic and proven facts. Hell, I could even let you read an article that Rashi wrote on the subject." His voice rose slightly, awash with a feeling of pride. "But I know you. None of that will matter to you. All I'm asking you to do is to respect our beliefs."

Noah paused, his heavy, dark shoulders heaving

with every breath. Rashi was also still, both of them seemingly suspended in time.

"I took you to church as a little boy," Annie Mae said, pleading with him. "You sat in the front pew every Sunday in a crisp, white shirt and clean, black shoes. You would sing the hymns with such conviction, always closing your eyes, raising each syllable to the Holy Spirit. You believed. I *know* you believed."

Noah was quiet for a long time, staring at the yellow wallpaper that covered the living room walls.

"I believed in a lot of things, Mama," Noah whispered. "But the real world doesn't operate like that."

The rehearsal dinner, which was thrown together quickly and quietly, was held two hours away from Annie Mae's home in a small hotel on the beach. It had been an inconvenience to drive there the night before the dinner in her husband's stuffy, debilitating car with her purse on her lap and the buzz of antiquated silence vibrating in her ears.

She'd asked Noah why he and Rashi had to have the rehearsal dinner so far away. When Noah answered that the wedding venue was near the hotel, Annie Mae had responded like a child who had been told a petulant, nonsensical thing. "But why?" she'd asked. She desperately wanted to know.

"Because," Noah hissed, "it's what we want."

Annie Mae winced at the use of "we." She considered this a small, vile lie. Noah did not like the water. As a child, she would have to coax him into the tub, sometimes promising that she, too, would sink into the warm water with him. That had been one of the highlights of her life: sinking into sweet, clear water, sharing skin-to-skin contact with her son, her creation, until they both emerged reborn. But even after these sessions, Noah would not enter the ocean, even if he was perched on Annie Mae's hip. When he was older, he told Annie Mae that he was not keen on swimming out into the unknown. He hated the uncertainty the ocean promised. So she knew that it wasn't him who had decided on a beachside wedding, but Rashi instead. She alone had persuaded her son to dive into uncertainty, something he had previously shunned.

Annie Mae and her husband arrived at the hotel and checked into their room. They settled in, her husband sitting on a broken armchair and Annie Mae sliding into the bed. Annie Mae's husband remained silent as she quietly recounted all of Rashi's faults: her outspoken cockiness, her resolute clarity, her creaking laugh, her lack of devotion, her straight, skinny nose (What if the grandchildren inherited this?), her aloof disbelief in God. Annie Mae's husband simply shook his head.

"She makes him sing," he said.

Annie Mae was about to dispute him. She was about to tell him that she'd never heard Noah sing. But then she realized what he meant and grudgingly agreed.

She slowly slipped out of her traveling clothes: a white T-shirt and a pair of stretch pants. For a moment, she imagined that her husband still yearned for her, that her blackened skin hadn't yielded and folded under the weight of all the years. But her husband did not glance her way. Instead, he unceremoniously clicked on the television, his feet still encased by his shoes. After dressing, Annie Mae stepped out onto the hotel room balcony. She knew that her husband required privacy while getting dressed. Unlike herself, solitude comforted her husband. Night after night in their small family home, he would lock himself in the downstairs bathroom or closet, shutting himself off from the varied nuances of the world. As a new bride, Annie Mae had hated it. She'd threatened estrangement and affairs; anything to secure his affection, to keep him locked in her arms, to keep him from wriggling away. But her husband was not to be kept in the throes of passion. He kept his routine despite Annie Mae's protests. When Annie Mae became a mother, she relished the time her husband spent away from her and her son. By the time Noah was older and gone, her husband's absence had become a thing of familiarity, something as routine as switching the television channel.

Annie Mae looked out past the balcony. Small, painted cottages lined the edge of the beach. The hotel seemed to be the only one around for miles. She imagined the people asleep in the cottages, lulled to bed by the sound of the waves, or rather so unaffected by the crashing water that they fell asleep oblivious to the ocean's existence. Annie Mae's husband called from inside the room.

She stepped inside. He'd washed his face, straightened his shirt, and threw on the new tie that Annie Mae had purchased for him last Christmas.

"Ready?" Annie Mae asked with an air of approval.

He seldom changed out of his worn T-shirts and jogging pants. Annie Mae found it refreshing to see him in a new light. This wasn't a romantic inclination, or even a visceral one. Annie Mae simply enjoyed looking at old things that had been made to look new again. Her husband nodded and shuffled toward the door.

> "By the time Noah was older and gone, her husband's absence had become a thing of familiarity, something as simple as switching the channel."

A downstairs conference room, which seemed like it was rarely used, had been prepped with several tables and chairs. They had brought in a small screen with pictures of Noah and Rashi skirting across.

"Mom, Dad," Rashi said, greeting them with her arms thrown wide open.

She leaned over to hug Annie Mae's husband first, her white dress constricting her movements so that she was only able to reach one hand around her future father-in-law's shoulders. Annie Mae's husband gave Rashi a brief nod.

"And Mom."

Rashi said "Mom" forcefully, silently willing Annie Mae to disagree with her.

Annie Mae folded into Rashi's bony arms, placing her face near the girl's pinned-up hair. She smelled, but not in an unpleasant way, like a musky spice reminiscent of a dish that Annie Mae had once cooked.

Noah appeared behind Rashi and nodded, first at his father and then at Annie Mae.

"You have to meet my parents," Rashi said with exuberant bubbliness.

She swept into the small crowd of people, returning seconds later with parents on each arm. Rashi's father was a good foot shorter than his daughter and wife. He stood attentively, briefly flashing Annie Mae and her husband a smile.

"This is my father," Rashi said. "Dr. Sanjeev Kapasi."

The man held out his hand to Annie Mae's husband. "How do you do?"

His voice was deeper than expected. It reverberated against the wall, spreading out in waves of hidden melody. Annie Mae's husband nodded, shaking the man's hand.

"And my mother," Rashi said, waving her hands toward a stately woman on her left. "Sudha Kapasi."

Rashi's mother was darker than her husband, shaded almost the same midnight black as Annie Mae's skin. But Annie Mae could see in the woman's eyes and tell by the woman's posture and stance that she did not regard Annie Mae as an equal.

"Pleased to meet your acquaintance."

Unlike her husband, the woman's voice was heavily accented, a sound that was quite strange to Annie Mae's ears. The woman, clothed in a gold sari and her hair parted and struck in the center with red dye, seemed to fit in with the crowded conference room better than Annie Mae did. She seemed to belong, whereas Annie Mae was buoyed out to sea, feeling isolated from her husband, her son, and all the other faceless strangers who filled the room.

A tiny beige card marked where she and her husband were supposed to sit. Mercifully, Rashi's parents were seated on the other side of the room. Annie Mae would not have had much to say to them, and, as it was, she did not feel the urge to make polite conversation.

Annie Mae wiggled into a tiny, white chair and waited quietly as her husband squeezed into his.

"Where's the food?" Annie Mae said, looking wearily around the room.

"Don't know," her husband answered gruffly.

"Well, Jesus Christ to heaven, I'm hungry."

Her husband grunted in agreement.

"I told Noah to go with a buffet. Everyone eats what they want when they want. No having to wait for—"

Annie Mae stopped. She noticed the decorations set out in front of her on the table. The table itself was a

swirling combination of silver and black, its surface old and chipped but magnificent in the way that it held its injuries. In the center, somebody—probably Rashi—had placed a small, silver owl. It was this owl that caused Annie Mae to pause. She placed her hand over the tiny glass statue and squeezed.

Forty years ago, long before Noah and long before her husband, Annie Mae had been a student, a girlish adult, still aching from budding breasts and elongated, crooked legs. It was a different time from the era Noah grew up in—cleaner and sweeter. Annie Mae remembered walking to school, her lunch bag swinging on her elbow, her dress rolled up over her knee. The boys she knew were all the same: tall or fat or skinny or short but tanned and dark by birth and the heat of the sun. They playfully swatted at the back of her legs and whispered quickly in her ear before running away. They brought her warm colas in shapely glasses, laughing when she accepted. She'd felt best when smothered in their attention. She would sit toward the back of the room during class, feverishly fanning herself with a stray page or her hand. She'd revel in the fact that the boys' eyes would wander carelessly over her bare calf, noting the shape, appreciating the smoothness of her brown, creamy skin.

"Annie Mae," they would call out after her, and she would prop one hand up against her tightly pressed curls.

She wouldn't answer. Her mother had warned her that men enjoyed the chase, and to keep them, she had to keep them running. Besides, Annie Mae hadn't really liked any of them. It was simply exhilarating to watch them watch her. It was a complex type of voyeurism.

Annie Mae had enjoyed it until the day she learned the price of her games, the serious effects of her teasing. Most people, when faced with trauma, claim to remember the day clearly, an image as clear as glass. But Annie Mae could not, for whatever reason, remember the important details. She did not know if it had rained that day or whether the sun was out, bright and heavy on her face. She could not remember what she wore, whether it had been her patent, black church shoes or her simple white shoes that she'd nicknamed Jolly Janes. Whichever shoes they were, she had slipped them off when she tried to run. Even more puzzling, Annie Mae could not recall the faces of the four (maybe five?) boys who cornered her on her way home from school that day. She could only feel the force of their hands, first on her breast, then on her thigh, then a clambering octopi of fingers reaching for her white panties, clean and pressed from the night before.

No, their faces were not memorable. They were a blur, an amalgamation of brownish tan skin and gleaming white teeth. She did not remember these details. What she did remember was something minor, a blip in a seemingly endless moment. She remembered a building, a hardwood store that went by the name of Al's Hardwood Barn. Al, being a particularly clever man, had placed a plaque decorated with a looming gray owl above the sign containing his name. It was the owl, with its awkward beak and cartoon eyes, that Annie Mae remembered most. The remnants of that broken memory could not be overpowered by the owl with whom Annie Mae had shared an intimacy. Her parting glance to the hardware owl was one of antipathy, a look she saved from the boys as they bled into the night.

"What's wrong?" Annie Mae's husband asked.

He squeezed her hand, showing a rare act of affection toward her. Annie Mae shook her head and pressed her lips tightly together. Taking the hint, her husband left her in silence.

Annie Mae glanced at her son. He bubbled with happiness, his arm loosely placed around Rashi's waist, his mouth smiling. Rashi's parents stood beside the couple, erect and proud. Rashi and her son's friends, all young and stylish, milled around the room, flouncing this way and that. Their energy hissed and snapped, and Annie Mae felt as though she were inside of a pair of wavering jaws. She turned the silver owl over in her palm. It was weightless and timeless, a glass decoration that Annie Mae would never have been able to afford for her own wedding. She held the owl in the center of her palm, staring into its unblinking eyes.

"Annie Mae?" her husband questioned.

His shoulders rose in concern. Annie Mae ignored him. She held the owl out, teetering it in her hand. Without looking up, she dumped the glass owl onto the floor. A spectacular sound filled the air.

Annie Mae, on the eve of her son's wedding, neatly tucked in her chair and exited the room.

Insect Whisperer

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Today I spoke with an insect.

I was driving from New York City to Buffalo, an almost six-hour drive that I embraced by pressing harder on the accelerator pedal. It was awkward loving to drive à la *Easy Rider* and feeling the unrest of enduring mile after mile until my destination. How could I be so contradictory?

Music was the only thing that helped me navigate the lengthy trip, calming my anxiety down, especially when it came to other drivers. The worst would emerge when the driver in front would decide to control the speed limit of every other car behind him, purposelessly monopolizing the road for as long as possible and never moving to the right lane, stubbornly disregarding the rules of safe driving. Other kinds of drivers I couldn't deal with were those who stood side by side with a large vehicle, neither slowing down nor accelerating. It was painful trying to reason with these idiots by flashing headlights or honking at them. These only served to make them more staccato on their moronic plight.

This type of purposeless behavior completely shattered my meditative state when driving, but as soon as I passed it, life was exhilarating all over again. That was how the road allowed me to quickly redeem myself from my worst mechanic reactions. Reactivity wasn't a good thing for my mind and heart, and I knew I had to work hard to dispel it. So I kept circulating back to my harmonious autopilot, remembering that I could still return to the roadless-traveler attitude as my new mantra to safe driving. The roads were so much nicer without the drivers.

Immersed in the curves of the road, in my mind, I gestured my hips as if swinging on the loops of a lemniscate, from the side to side of each curve, almost as if I was driving a motorcycle, like a pas de deux from the eye to the yellow line, keeping the serpentine flowing while embracing the road's design. It was being aware of the Newtonian precepts of uniformity—straight lines versus bodies in motion—yin and yang in a continuous dance of balancing each other out.

I exhaled back to the universe all the small-minded enforcing protocols that came with driving, embracing with my eyes the trees around me, the mountains passing by, and letting go of the poorly maintained roads, with all the cheap asphalt pointlessly rotting year after year, and the exaggerated entourage of trucks staging their deceptive raison d'être by pretending to fix it. The barrage of highly paid inefficiency would not banish the enjoyment I felt in seeing the trucks in my rearview mirror, so I inhaled the air of freedom once more. I was now tuned back to the roadless driver in me.

I realized that driving was like sailing in the open sea, an ancient emotion I felt written in my DNA, pushing me forward and fearlessly toward the unknown. In a previous life, I was probably one of those ancient Polynesian way-finders, navigating the most serendipitous waves with a celestial compass made of shells, each shell synchronized by a specific direction from south to north, from Hema to Akau, or better yet, from east to west, Hikina to Komohana, all absolutely attuned to the stars. Like them, I trusted my instincts, deeply aware of the risks surrounding me. Of all the unpredictable situations, an animal crossing my path would be the most defeating, as I felt haunted by having no choice but to kill it. I would probably throw the headlights on it first, then honk while slowing down at once, steadily steering away toward the farthest shoulder. Of course, all of these

choices would be a gamble. My internal autopilot would have to redefine the odds so both the animal and I would be spared, like nothing happened, just a little bit of trembling from the shock, but soon forgotten, sending good thoughts to the animal on its way home and a deep thanks to the stars for my safety.

I suddenly noticed a tiny fly moving on my windshield, first moving just a bit, almost as if it woke up from its slumber. My first thought was, *Oh no! Now I have to put up with another kind of distraction.* I even thought of getting rid of the fly so it wouldn't lead me to an accident. So I waved my arm toward it, but it didn't move. Then I waited a minute, hoping it wouldn't fly in my direction. If it comes near me, I have to get rid of it, remembering when I didn't think twice to get rid of flies, even becoming skillful and showing off when no one else could catch them. I also remembered the last many years I began saving them from certain death, going out of my way to move their frail little bodies carefully to a safe place. Now in the car, I decided to just wait and see how the little bug would react. It kept leaping through short distances, sticking to the windshield since flying took too much effort. I imagined how exhausted it must have been after waking up from a heat-induced hibernation, possibly having gone through several near-death experiences locked inside the scorching car for days. Now, it was disoriented but definitely determined to survive.

Why kill it? Was it because it seemed insignificant compared to human life? Yet killing it because of its size, for no reason, would be cowardly. I felt empathy for its sense of resolve to survive despite its frailty. I knew how it felt struggling to stay alive. We humans had just been dealing with that sort of despair forever. The isolation has driven me to begin talking to insects, giving me a sense of disconnect when within proximity. I was imagining how an insect felt, when it was right there, in front of my eyes, still moving through little levitations, now closer to me than before. I decided to start talking with it.

"I know what you want," I said. "I know you need air and water and that you want freedom." I kept talking to it, becoming more and more aware of my own words, keeping short sentences with a paused and calming frequency in my voice. I decided to open just a bit of the passenger-side front window, hoping that the fly would react to it. In the meantime, I kept saying encouraging words such as, "You will be okay," and "I am sure of it!" aware that the possibility of the fly reacting to my words was zero. But it kept moving toward the right side of the windshield very timidly, leaping inch by inch. It stayed that way for at least half an hour, making small hoops around the windshield, right to left, and right again, trying to regain its own awareness. By now, I wasn't yet sure if it was following a specific pattern. It seemed disoriented, but it never went to the windshield or to the left side of the car.

As I had been paying attention to the road, when I searched for the fly again, now it had moved to the right back window. I was perplexed as it appeared intentional! The tiny insect seemed to be following some kind of logic, as it picked the windows purposefully. I began to realize that maybe, just maybe, the little creature could be responding to my intention. How was it possible that the insect was grasping my intention beyond words? Could it be that certain insects are more aware than others? Smarter than others? Would that be a kind of intelligence? I was now completely in my head. I kept talking to the insect, insisting on its next move with a few words, and was mesmerized when she—yes, I said she—made an audacious leap toward the right front window. So I used the remote window switch to shut it quickly so she wouldn't be disintegrated by the hard wind coming through. Now the situation was changing. I noticed a certain aggression in my move, a hidden despair of how fearful I was that she would die thriftly.

"Please be careful! Slow down!" I yelled. "Move slowly and don't try to fly into the wind yet." I saw myself talking to her, seriously, but was also aware that I could be nearing insanity, if seen from a Cartesian perspective. My very logical mind had flipped 180 degrees as my mental dialogue with an insect, in close proximity, led me to realize. But I couldn't stop now.

"You are strong! You will survive!" I noticed she was taking a leap of faith as she flew to the passenger-side front window. Was she trying to get out?

I tried to slow down the car to give her a chance to escape through the window, as I had opened it slightly again. I noticed that the road was filled with cars, all traveling 70 to 80 miles per hour. I closed the window, as I was afraid that she was feeling rushed to leave.

"Let's regroup!" I drove the car to the right lane, trying to slow down and give her a better chance to survive. But it wasn't any different, as even the slower cars and trucks were charging behind me.

Nothing seemed to be helping her situation. She was perceptive and flexible, I give her that, but could it be that I was mirroring my own life on her way of making decisions? I couldn't pull over even if I wanted, as the highway was busy with cars, all traveling over the speed limit. Everything seemed to be competing with the possibility of survival for this poor insect. My only choice to avoid her from being blown into pieces by the wind was to get off on one of the exits and try to return to the road later. But I was on a major highway and couldn't just pull over. Perhaps I was being maternal to a fault. My excuse was that I was late for my meeting with a broker with only an hour to visit five properties before deciding on an apartment. I didn't take the exit. How crazy our lives were, everything always needing to happen so quickly. Why? We humans lived in a state of despair. That was the objective side of me—the coward—trying to make sure things were under control. My attention was back on the road, watching for cops nearby, aware that I was inconsistent in my speeding and braking patterns.

A trip that took six hours each way was exhausting enough to make me forget about the fly but, when I looked again, she had moved closer to the edge of the window. So, I opened the window once more. How could I be so selfish, when all that the fly could think about was her own survival? I was back and forth in my thoughts of what to do next, attempting to decide between going with the flow or being rational. I could easily save her if I wanted to get off the highway. Take an exit and let it go! Still, I didn't. I hated myself for living in a contradictory mode, and everyone else around me did, too—except the fly.

With all my limitations as a human, I was proud of the fly's will to survive. It was the first time I was talking to an insect, all too new for the both of us. When I looked again, the fly had moved once more, now closer to the top of the right window, which was slightly open. She stood there for some time while I often looked at her to see if she had moved. I kept talking to her, asking for her to be cautious, telling her not to try slipping out the window in one shot. It was funny that I thought I knew the laws of physics more than the insect did. Her nature kept her attuned to each step of the way leading to her freedom. But, at that moment, I was afraid that she would evaporate by the turbulent force of the wind. I noticed that the fly stood immobile on the edge of the window for at least ten more minutes. Then I was staring at the road again. When I looked back, she had moved to the passenger's side rearview mirror and was glued to the inner edge of the black frame, dodging the wind like a warrior. How could I have missed such an incredible moment? It was like missing your child's first steps. I began to seriously realize that the fly had to be connecting with my words; she had to be aware, on a vibrational level, of us, together, concocting this elaborate plan for her escape. She was undoubtedly responding to every single direction I'd given her, showing me that she knew her own strategy even better than I, now waiting for her final leap to the unknown. How beautiful it was. When I saw she was holding on, glued to the edge of the mirror outside, I was humbled by what I was experiencing. I felt like my entire reality changed; I felt moved to tears when I realized what was happening. I was still afraid, now more than ever, since I knew she was still in peril of being dissipated to her death. Yet I had to notice how strongly she held onto the frame of the mirror, aware of what she was about to do. How remarkable that moment was for her, and even more for me. Even though I was driving and couldn't be staring at the insect on my right the whole time, I didn't want to miss her departure. I wanted her to be fine. So I looked one more time, and it was almost as if she was aware that I was witnessing her final leap. She released her fragile tiny feet and flew. She flew beautifully into the open, carried by the hard wind, somehow maintaining her sense of direction and time.

She had completely changed my perception of her ability to fly, majestically staying on her flapping wings, unstirred by the harsh wind. How could that be? She seemed to challenge the laws of physics, her tiny weight attuned to the forceful wind that took her without harm. I had just learned a new law of traction from the insect herself—for every action there is a different reaction. And this idea was altered in an exceedingly small frame when it came to the dexterity of my tiny friend. How little I knew about the insect's size and flexibility, her way of traversing aerial space, and most importantly, that she could grasp, in an infinitesimal, minute scope, our shared consciousness despite the nonsensical, semantic fragmentation of words that means nothing. Perhaps it was the fact that I was conscious of my communication with the fly that made her respond to my thoughts. Was it my own projection making her respond to me, like in hypnosis? This never happened in my communication with humans; it was always a trail of awkward despair and frustrating tears. Maybe because we humans assumed that we knew something, and once we thought we knew, we tended to make others follow it à la law and order and those kinds of things.

With the fly, there was love, an intent to help, a seductive persuasion via tempo, the warmth of the sound of my voice, and an encouraging positive frequency. All in support, never in command. Not even insects would think that command speaks louder than love. That insight made me realize I had completely changed, aware that it was not my logic or her logic, but a shared consciousness that was capable of creating a remarkable experience.

When I returned home that night, having driven six more hours, I noticed there was a different flow in the traffic. It was evening; the sun was setting, and, despite the rush hour, the cars were passing by me without so much tension. I felt that my body sat comfortably in the normally uncomfortable seat, almost as if I was relaxed on a soft and motherly couch. The other cars passing by were all staring at me, trying to keep me on their track, speeding to get back next to me, to enter my flow, almost as if my earlier experience had changed my whole vibration, making me more dipteran than human and, even through the metal of the car, allowing my metamorphosis to be sensed. It seemed that humanity was closer to me than before, and the robotized driving existence was finally erased from my sensory perception. And that whole time, I was feeling elated for saving my friend, the insect. The stars twinkled and followed me on each turn of the road.

I couldn't stop smiling. I was proud to have become an insect whisperer.

Frog Hunting

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"Do you see those ones?" The man pointed to the reeds at the edge of the swamp. Ian stepped forward, his boots squelching softly in the recently thawed mud. "Grab them firm, but don't kill them. And go quietly. You don't want to spook off the whole pond." The boy inched towards them, crouching as he approached. His tiny fingers splayed out wide at his sides in anticipation of the catch.

The two frogs squatted under the dormant cattails, one on top of the other, a thin line of eggs stretched out behind them, little gelatinous poppy seeds covered in mucus. As Ian moved to a glacial stop behind them, a silence rolled over the water. He and his Dad held their breath. The frogs did not notice the boy sneaking up behind them, not until he had his little hands firmly around both of their squirming bodies. He held the pair high above his head.

"I got them!" Ian squealed. He splashed through the pond toward his Dad, securely holding the pair of frogs. Their eyes bulged wide, legs frantically pulsing through the air as they tried to escape. A thin trail of eggs splattered on Ian's wrist.

"Good job!" His Dad beamed down at him. "Here." He reached out with a mud-splattered red bucket. "Put them in, and we'll go find some more."

Ian was five the first time his Dad took him frog hunting. They had hiked through the woods together after the last snow melted, taking the short path behind their house to the pond at the end of the street. His Dad held their new red bucket, and Ian wore his Mom's old green boots. They were three sizes too big and flopped around when he walked, even if he wore multiple socks. His Dad had told him that frog hunting was a Holden family tradition, something he did with his father when he was younger. Back then, they used to actually hunt them when they didn't have enough money to get meat from the store. His whole family would catch frogs by the dozens and fry them with a little butter. When his Dad got married and moved north with his Mom, she put an end to the practice. Frog hunting was only for fun now—well, as much fun as one could have during a cold Michigan spring, his Dad always chuckled.

The best time to go was in late March when the pond thawed out, but before anything started growing. The frogs laid their eggs during this time, and, if you were stealthy enough, you could catch them in pairs. Ian once caught four at a time, two in each hand. The trick was to pause right before you lunged for them, to let the pond get quiet for a moment and let the water smooth out in front of you. If you went too fast, you risked slipping and diving headfirst into the mud. Ian had been yelled at by his Mom more than once for coming home covered in a slimy layer of dirt, muddy water dripping from his jeans onto the clean kitchen tiles. His Dad usually just laughed and said that being messy was part of being a kid.

This was all before the accident, though, before his Dad lost his vision. Ian's Mom started crying over the phone when the doctors told her what had happened. They said he had been sawing something at the factory when he hit a rough patch and a spray of metal flew through his eyes. It left both of his corneas a bloody mess. Ian's Mom sank to the kitchen floor when she heard this, the landline cord looped through her pointer finger. Her eyes were closed. Ian thought she looked like she was going to sneeze, the way her face was frozen in a disjointed way, until the tears started to roll silently down her cheeks. He had just turned eight at the time. He didn't know how to process the fact his Dad was never going to look at him again.

Ian visited him at the hospital later that week. He and his Mom dropped by on their way home from school to check in and find out some test results. "It's going to be fine," she had said, squeezing his hand in the elevator. She smelled like hand sanitizer and coffee.

> "It was one of the last good days of the year, in late April, when the buds were starting to peek out on the willow trees. The frogs always got sneakier as the leaves came out."

Ian felt like he couldn't breathe right in the hospital air.

His Dad was propped up in bed, facing the TV. A baseball game played on the screen; the Tigers were losing. A large strip of gauze ran across both of his eyes and around the back of his head. The fluorescent lights hollowed out the deep wrinkles around his mouth, giving his skin a grayish tone. Ian's Mom knocked lightly on the door.

"Bill," she called softly. "It's me and Ian. We came to visit."

He didn't respond.

"Is your headache any better from this morning?"

He ran his thumb over the IV line coming out of his forearm and nodded. She squinted slightly and a crinkle formed between her eyebrows.

"I'm going to find your doctor," she said. "Try talking to your son, please."

Ian sat on the plastic chair beside the bed. He wished he could follow his Mom around the recovery room. He didn't want to stay in this cold room alone with his Dad. The crowd roared faintly from the screen. His Dad rubbed his forearm again.

"So, Ian," his voice was hoarse. "How was the second week of school?"

"Good." Ian stared at the linoleum floor. He couldn't look at the bandages stretched across his father's face. There was a reddish hue oozing up from beneath them, darkening the thin white fabric. His Dad coughed slightly. A silence settled over the room, sinking into the bedsheets and melting over Ian's ears. He shifted in his seat and watched a round of commercials come on.

The next inning had started by the time his Mom reappeared at the door, her arms folded across her chest. "I'm sure they already told you, but you're going to be here a little longer. No more surgeries, though, so that's good." She looked down at Ian. "Did you give him the paper yet?"

He shook his head and pointed to her purse. "You have it."

She mouthed "Ah" and handed him a piece of red construction paper, folded into quarters. Ian carefully laid it on the bedsheets.

"It's a picture I drew in art class," he said quietly. "It's about our frogs. My teacher let me use the nice paper. I was the only one out of the whole class. She said I could use it because she knew it would be good."

His Dad reached out and felt around for the paper. He didn't unfold it but held it limply in his lap. "Thank you," he said, his voice cracking. Ian stood up and grabbed his Mom's hand. He wondered if his Dad could still cry.

Ian's Dad spent most of his time inside that winter, either listening to the TV or sleeping. He stopped talking much, only occasionally asking for help changing the channel or passing the salt at dinner. His voice was always scratchy. Ian used to hide at the top of the stairs, hoping to hear him say something. He thought that maybe his Dad was like one of the toys in *Toy Story*—he only became his old self when no one else was around. But no sounds ever came from downstairs except for ESPN and his Mom banging around in the kitchen.

In late January, Ian's Dad got a pair of large black glasses to replace the cheap ones he got at the hospital. It was supposed to be a Christmas present, but his Mom had ordered it too late. She produced the gift during dinner, ceremoniously carrying the silver-blue package from the kitchen after everyone had eaten and placing it directly in his Dad's hands.

"Merry Christmas." She kissed him on the cheek. He pulled away slightly. Ian watched as he felt for the edge of the wrapping paper and ripped it back,

revealing a small box. He ran his fingers over the sides, looking for a seam.

"Oh, here, let me help," she said, plucking the box out of his hands. She neatly split open the tape and handed it back to him. The contents of the box rattled slightly in his hands; he was shaking.

"Susan." His voice was soft. "I don't always need your help."

"I wasn't going to sit here and watch you struggle. Sorry."

He violently arched his arm back and threw the box across the table, knocking over a ceramic bowl on the other end. It shattered when it hit the ground. Ian froze. His Mom looked stunned; her mouth tilted partially open.

"I don't need help walking around; I don't need help getting dressed; and I certainly don't need help opening my Christmas presents," he spat. "I'm a grown man, not a four year old. You're not my mother, you're my wife—act like it." He nearly collapsed after this speech, his palms on the table, and his chest bent halfway over his plate. She narrowed her eyes.

"Fine. You know what? If you don't need any help, you can clean this up by yourself. I'm going to bed. Come on, Ian." She stormed out of the room. Ian trailed silently behind her.

At the door to her bedroom, she turned to look down at him. His face was red and flustered. He had tomato sauce on his *Star Wars* shirt. He looked scared; he looked like his Dad. She glared at him and jabbed her finger in the direction of his bedroom. Ian turned obediently, tears welling up in his eyes. He wondered if his parents might get divorced. She slammed her door.

The light was still on when he came downstairs later, looking for a bowl of cereal. Crying had made him hungry. His Dad was on all fours in the dining room, lightly sweeping his hands across the carpet, feeling for shattered pieces of ceramic. Ian stood in the doorway. The Christmas glasses were on the floor, lying partially out of their box a few feet in front of him. He knelt slowly and picked them up.

"Dad," he said. "Here." His Dad turned to him. He had pushed his old glasses on top of his head like a pair of sunglasses, and Ian stared into the space where his eyes used to be. Thin scars ran across his brow bone and over his nose. His eye sockets were spread open, wrinkled and hollow, pink except for a shadow curled deep inside.

"Ian—where are you?" he asked, groping out into space. "Where are you?" The question was nearly a whisper. Ian stepped forward and placed the glasses in his open hands. His Dad fixed them over his ears. Ian ran upstairs before he could say anything else.

Ian had nightmares for weeks afterward. In his dreams, his Dad's eyes constantly bled from the corners like tears, little rivulets of blood streaming down his cheeks. In his dream, Ian would hide behind the maple tree in the backyard and watch his Dad stumble through the woods, trying to find the path to the pond, whispering his question over and over. Ian started to feel it in the rhythm of his chest, an elliptical where-are-you-where-are-you-where-are-you that beat within him long after waking up.

That spring, Ian didn't go frog hunting very much. His Mom sometimes went with him to the pond, but she wasn't as fun as his Dad. She didn't like seeing the frogs joined together like that, the way they would squirm around in the bucket before slowly and unceremoniously disconnecting themselves. When Ian released them all at the end, the crinkle between her eyebrows emerged as they hopped off. This would have been fine, but she had also picked up extra shifts in the ICU and wasn't around much to go with him. Ian tried going by himself a few times, but it felt wrong without his Dad there to hold the red bucket and shout directions from the shore.

This day, however, Ian was determined to go. It was one of the last good days of the year when the buds started to peek out on the willow trees in late April. The frogs always got sneakier as the leaves came out. He put on his boots and grabbed the bucket, swinging it around as he left the house. He hoped his Dad would hear him and want to come, enthusiastically saying something about the beautiful weather and grabbing his own boots. But he sat silently on the couch, the blue glow from the TV reflecting off of his glasses.

The pond was muddier than usual; it had rained the night before. Ian sat crisscross on a big rock looking for an unsuspecting frog to hop out of the reeds. He fiddled with the handle of the bucket as he waited, spinning the white plastic bit around its metal arm. During a normal year, he and his Dad would have been out here at least once a week. During a normal year, they would be driving to the final week of

hockey practices in Livonia, his Dad sitting in the stands to watch, even if they were just power skating. During a normal year, they would be putting the sleds in the attic and taking down the bikes. It was the telltale sign that warmer weather was soon to come, his Dad would say, back when he said stuff like that.

Ian scrambled off of the rock, dropping the bucket. His face scrunched up like a tinfoil ball as he started to hyperventilate, sucking in loud, panicky gasps. Tears splattered on his Lakewood Elementary sweatshirt, and snot dripped around his mouth. He took a step forward and tripped over his Mom's boots, face-planting in the mud. The cold water seeped through his jeans. He sobbed even harder now; a crazy, animalistic wail.

A loud crashing sound came from the edge of the woods. Ian looked up, still crying. His Dad was running toward him, his hands splayed out in front to feel the branches, and his head cocked at an odd angle toward the sky. He slipped a little on the muddy bank but didn't fall. Ian scrambled up and reached out for him. His Dad scooped him up high in the air, the same motion Ian used to do with pairs of frogs so long ago. He wrapped his arms around his Dad's neck, staining his T-shirt with mud.

"It's okay," his Dad whispered. "I've got you. I'm here."

Driving Home

Maren Halvorsen is a writer living in rural Washington State, on the Olympic Peninsula. Her novel *The Bailiff's Wife* was a finalist in the Pacific Northwest Writers' Association 2020 literary competition.

This is how my brother died.

We were driving home between Burns and Bend, the end of a long trip that took us up into Canada, a long time ago. This last part of the drive was always the worst, because the highway on this stretch is nearly completely straight, 130 miles of nothing but flat desert and sagebrush. Plus, we were all tired, and it was dark, and when it is dark in the desert, it is truly dark. Dad had his eyes on the road, hardly moving. All I could see was the road right in front of us and some of the sagebrush on either side, lit up by our headlights like some sort of alien lifeform. The air was heavy with the fast-food dinner we'd scarfed down in Bend, and my brother was asleep, his face flattened against the car window, his head wobbling gently with the movement of the car. Somehow, I had a superstitious feeling that I had to keep my eyes on the road, and this kept me awake as if I were helping Dad, willing him to stay focused on driving. I knew that Mom was the same way. She sat in silence, smoking a Winston, looking relaxed with her eyes half closed, but I knew that her brake-pedal foot was always ready.

I remember thinking about starting school, seeing my friends, and how sick I was of being around my brother. Pat and I were usually okay together. For a long time, we had shared a room. Underneath the indoor-outdoor carpeting, installed after an attic room was converted for my private space, you could find the drawings of monsters and circus animals that we had spent weeks composing together on the plywood floor. We created an entire road system and raced our Matchbox cars like it was the Indy 500. It was all part of a make-believe world we now knew was ridiculous, even embarrassing, but it meant a lot to the two of us back then. Now that we were living in separate rooms, we didn't spend much time together. We had what I guess are the usual squabbles that kids have, and I mostly used him as a punching bag when something was bothering me. I'm not proud of that. He was two years younger, which to me then was like ten years to me now. We went from being buddies—"the boys," as my mom always said—to opposites, and I thrived off of our differences. He went his way, and I went mine. I thought he was a baby, and sometimes he acted like it. Falling asleep like this, not caring if drool was seeping down his chin, was being a baby. The way Mom treated him, always checking on him, always taking his side, that was being a baby, too. I was sick of it. Now that we each had our own room at home, I looked forward to going inside mine and shutting the door.

The radio had carried us through Bend, but now the only station we could get was the country-western one in Burns. The hard twang of a Conway Twitty ballad was followed by corny Buck Owens, and I thought I would die, as if this music were some sort of contamination, something that would follow me around and that kids would smell on me at school next week. I had just begun to get into music and had friends who introduced me to Led Zeppelin. But it was clear that no amount of eye-rolling on my part was going to have any influence on Dad. Actually, quite the opposite. If he got any hint that I didn't like the music, he'd turn it up, just to be spiteful. He thought it was funny. So I just looked at the highway and stayed quiet. We'd picked up speed here in the straight stretch, which meant that home was closer.

Suddenly, we swerved, and Dad let out a curse as we went onto the gravelly shoulder of the highway. He slowed down and then returned to the road.

"Just a damn jackrabbit," he said, "out too late for its own good."

This woke Pat right up, "Was it okay?"

"Who cares?" Dad shrugged. "We're okay, and that's what matters. I don't give a damn about a rabbit. Deserves what it gets. Darwin." He loved using Darwin. He did this with people, too. Somebody might pull out in front of him in traffic, and he'd say, "Natural selection, buddy. Only a matter of time."

Pat looked out the back window. We were already too far away to know if the rabbit was dead in the road, but he kept staring out there as if he would learn something.

"Gonna cry about the rabbit, baby?" I whispered to him.

"Don't be stupid," he said, refusing to look at me. I figured he had tears in his eyes.

"I'm not the one who's stupid," I said, just to keep it going.

"I can hear you, boys. Now, stop it," said Mom, stubbing out her cigarette. "We're almost home."

Pat leaned against the window and shut his eyes. I kept my eyes on the road, at least what I could see of it in the headlights. Mom lit another cigarette, and I inhaled the acrid, warm scent that would always remind me of her—intimate, close, and mingled perfectly with her Chanel Nº5. Dad had his own scent, Aqua Velva aftershave, tingly and sharp. He'd given up smoking the year before when his older brother was diagnosed with lung cancer. He just got up and threw his smokes in the garbage. Mom had tried to quit, but it didn't work like that for her.

There was a rattle and thump right behind us. Dad slowed and pulled over again. This had nothing to do with the rabbit. I had taken my eyes off the road, just for a minute, and blamed myself. Thinking about it now, it seems kind of egotistical that I believed I was the reason why things happened like they did that night. I've never been able to get out from under that, not really.

Dad looked in the rearview mirror. "Damn it!" he said. "The lid from that storage box fell off. Pat, you were supposed to tie that on tight."

Pat got defensive, as usual. "I did! Tight as I could!"

"Well, go out there and get it! Now!" Dad turned and looked hard at Pat. "You gotta learn how to tie those knots. This could have been really dangerous, like if there'd been a car right behind us. Let's get it and put it back on. Do it right this time." He gave me one of his looks too. "Micah, you help. Get it back on the roof. We all want to get home."

Mom said, "It's the highway, Scott. I don't know."

We all looked at Dad. He had that stubborn look on his face. "What don't you know, Earlene? It's his fault, for Christ's sake. He's gonna fix it."

Pat was already out of the car by this point. I got out, too, but stood by the car, letting him get the lid—not my problem. I've thought about it a lot since then, of course.

He had to walk quite a long way, along the side of the road. The lid was sitting right in the middle of the highway, on the faded yellow line. It was so dark out that it took him a moment to find it, a darker shadow among shadows. I could see it, from the safe distance of the car, better than he could.

"There it is," I called out as if I were being helpful. He almost fell over it. At that point, I should have gone out there, too, to help him; even though the lid was plastic, it was awkwardly sized. But he was my baby brother, and Dad had sent him out to do the job, so I let him do it alone. He grabbed hold of one end with both hands, intending to walk backward to the car.

"That's it," I said, encouraging him.

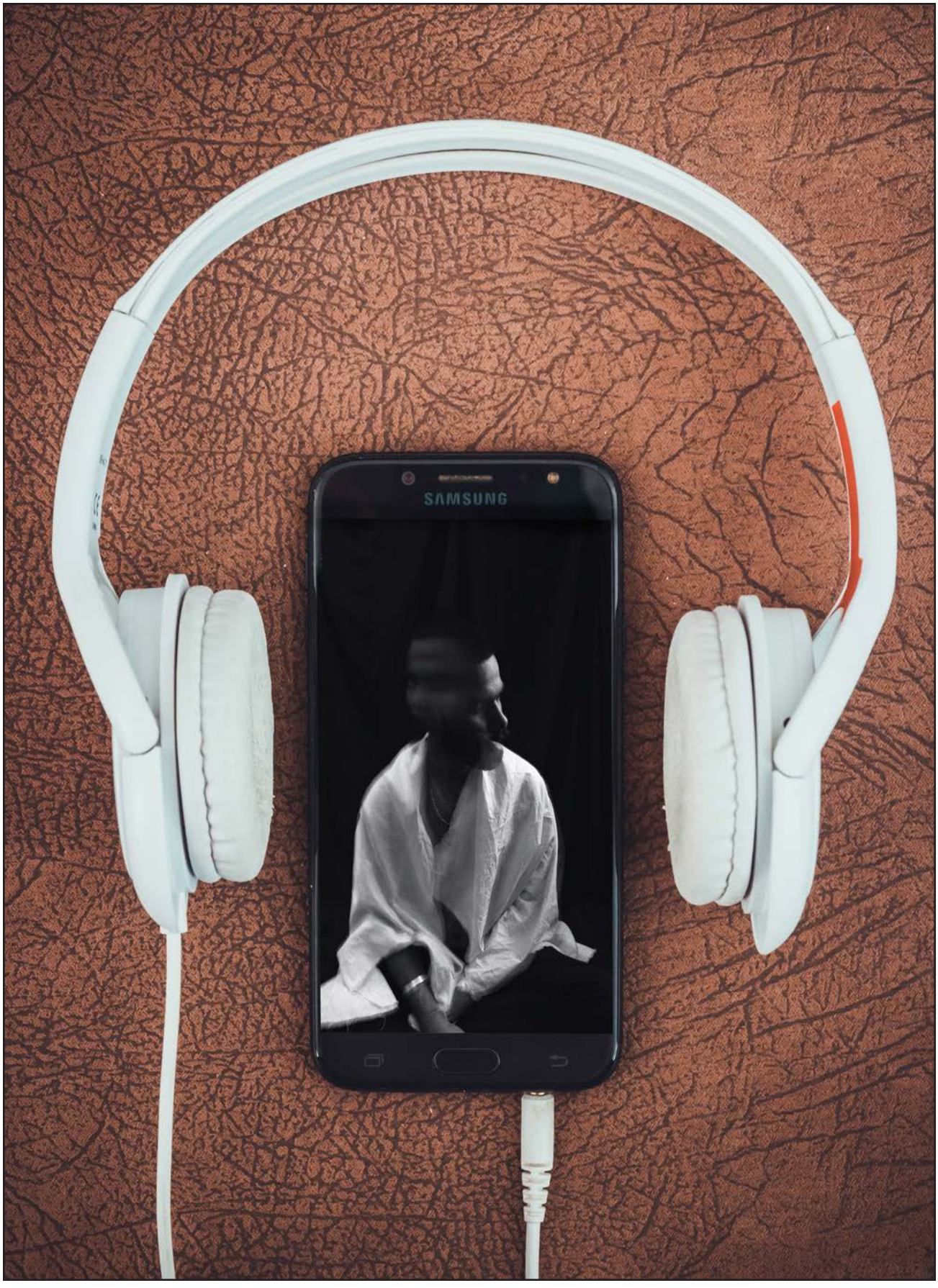
It only took a moment. Pat was standing by the lid, leaning over to drag it off the highway, and some bozo was driving way too fast on an open stretch, coming up way too fast, and only paying attention when it was too late. The funny thing is, I don't remember seeing what happened—I really don't—even though there's no way I didn't see every second of it: my brother going flying onto the windshield of the truck—*bam*—and off again. I've reconstructed it in my mind, and I dream about it, but I don't remember really seeing it.

I only remember Mom screaming.

We never speak of it. We never share memories of that night or that trip. It's as though the trip never happened—that whole week in Canada, the camping,

the swimming in the lake, the hot dogs and sleeping bags. We never talk about the driver, pacing back and forth next to Pat's body as if he could turn back time. We never talk about Dad, climbing out of the car, kneeling down next to my brother, touching his face. We never talk about how he picked Pat up and carried him to the car. We never talk about how Mom got into the backseat without a word to anybody and cradled Pat's head in her lap, blood seeping into the skirt I never saw again.

Dad told me to move into Pat's old room, and I did. I spent the whole first night ripping up the carpet, working my way from one end of the room to the other. Dad said something about carpet being expensive. But then Mom got up and left the room, and it didn't go any further than that.


SAMSUNG

The Player and the Playlist

Ken Kapp was a Professor of Mathematics, a ceramicist, a welder, and an IBMer until it downsized in 2000. He taught yoga until COVID-19 decided otherwise. He continues writing, living with his wife and beagle in Shorewood, Wisconsin. He enjoys chamber music and mysteries. Ken is a homebrewer and runs whitewater rivers.

After work on Friday, Jack Skinner went to the Devil's Lair for dinner. It was expensive, even by New York standards, and he only ate there if the week had been particularly productive. It was down a half flight of stairs. Dark woods and heavily textured black and red drapes framed private booths. Large oil paintings of curates in scenes that were definitely not in keeping with their priestly vocation lined the walls. Jack smiled as he was brought to his customary table and nodded that he would like the filet mignon, medium rare.

While eating the crab appetizer, he recalled how pleased he was with The Metropolitan Opera's production of Verdi's *Macbeth* last Saturday; it was a spectacular way to end a productive month. A new usher had shown him to his seat, and he noticed that her name was Jaclyn. She was not unattractive and had a pleasant twinkle in her eyes when she handed him the program. It was the first time in 20 years that he thought more about the usher than the opera. He looked for her when returning to his seat after intermission and presumed, when he didn't see her, that she had taken a station in the hall.

Jack put down his steak knife and sipped the French cabernet. It could have used another few years in the bottle, but since he was dining alone, he hadn't felt the need to pick over the wine list and had followed the sommelier's suggestion.

He reflected on his temporary lack of a paramour, wondering if he was getting too old for "jousting." He slowly turned the wineglass, tilting it to see if a pattern on the sides would hint at an answer. *I'm beginning to forget all my dalliances, anyhow, so what's the point? Not that I don't enjoy their company, but at that last party, when George—jealous that my date was so much younger than me—asked me the name of my "daughter," and this wasn't the first time that's happened—well, maybe I should read the handwriting on the wall.*

Jack laughed at the memory. *Sheila had turned red, told George he wasn't funny, then demanded that I get her a cab. She had a nice parting shot. "You wouldn't want your daughter to be out after curfew!"*

He put his glass down and nodded to the waiter that he was finished eating. He made an exception to his one-drink rule and asked for Irish coffee. Sipping it slowly, he recalled how when he was 50, he had celebrated his birthday with a few of his male friends. One had asked, "Jack, how have you ever managed to stay single all these years?" Perhaps it was the Irish coffee, but he remembered answering candidly, "I seem unable to commit; I guess that's one of my shortcomings."

Jack motioned for the bill and decided to walk back to his Midtown apartment. He was tired and hoped the mile walk would clear some of the gloomy cobwebs from the corners of his mind. 30 minutes later, on the elevator, he stared at his reflection in the shiny brass paneling. *I always tried to be honest and upfront, even when I was 20. Mes amoureux, I never took advantage and never engaged if we had more than one drink. I couldn't stand the thought of waking in the morning, looking at the head on the pillow next to me, and thinking, "God, was I drunk last night!"*

He got off the elevator, jangling the keys in his pocket as he walked down the carpeted hallway. Straightening his shoulders, he inserted the key. *I would whisper "amori mio" in her ear if we had dined on Italian food, and my friend would inevitably giggle. The French endearment was always safe, but I would never use the German—ich lebe dich—it sounds too much like liver sausage.* He let himself into his apartment,

thinking that perhaps he was getting old, rattling on to himself about past lovers. As for the languages, he had thanked his parents for an expensive liberal arts education.

He credited the required music survey class he had taken back in college for opening his eyes to classical music. For more than two decades, he had subscriptions to the Metropolitan Opera and the NY Philharmonic. As he grew older, attending these performances grew in importance, becoming almost as pleasurable as a congenial companion. Preparing for bed, he thought about Jaclyn and wondered if she would be amenable to joining him for a performance of Berlioz's *La Damnation de Faust* early in 2020. He would look carefully next time to see if she wore a wedding ring. He guessed he had four months to figure out the logistics. The libretto was based on Goethe's *Faust*, and he had forgotten that Faust sold his soul to the devil in order to be with Gretchen. He chuckled at the thought that even back then, old men could become obsessed with younger women. Though in the case of Faust, Gretchen couldn't have been more than 18.

Jack's initial relationships were facilitated by the drug culture of the 1960s and the sexually open attitudes of Woodstock. Most of the student body at his college were from the privileged class and considered pleasure to be part of their birthright. Some of his richer friends said that the free-love movement was similar to their parents sneaking off with another spouse after a few cocktails. "They're playing around under the cover of a marriage license. Seems like a lot of unnecessary bother to me." He thought there was some truth in this but worried that it seemed so callous, resolving to be better than this. He doubted that he would ever be part of the *Great Gatsby* crowd.

However, his maternal grandparents were old-school, having come to the United States shortly after they got married. "Jack, it's important to treat everyone with respect and to show kindness to all. Wealth is not a birthright. Each person is as worthy as the next." They shared a long list of their principles, and since they seemed the happiest of all the grown-ups he knew, he had made it his business to take their advice to heart.

When he dated, he was discreet. The Rolling Stones' "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction" was still playing at parties, and Jack would be the first to admit that it didn't apply to him. He was finding satisfaction and he thought his partners were also pleased. He was considerate and kind, often being told, when their passion cooled, "You're a great guy, Jack, but I think I need to move on. I hope we can still be friends."

Jack was sitting alone in his kitchen Sunday morning, dipping his biscotti in his coffee. He closed his eyes and thought back a couple of years to when Melinda was sitting across from him, also dipping her biscotti in a cup of espresso. *"You know, Jack, you're still a child of the 60s, free love and all of that. I think you have to think of me as a friend with benefits." They went back to bed, but when she left two hours later, she kissed him at the elevator and said, "I think we should just be friends going forward. I'm moving to Portland in a month. I'll write; maybe you'll come visit." He chuckled, put the dishes in the sink, and went to shower. She never wrote; he never went.*

By the time he was 35, Jack's name was on the company letterhead. Even though his clients were wealthy, he remained a liberal; the Reaganomics of the prior decade had made him cynical. He remembered his grandparents and worried about their friends and families who now suffered under the subsequent recession.

As he matured, his relationships lengthened. If he'd had a servant like Leporello in *Don Giovanni*, the cataloge of his conquests would require fewer entries after he turned 30, and the aria *Madamina, il catalogo è questo* would have been considerably shorter.

When he was 41, he had been in a relationship with Elvira for eight months. She had to go to Paris on business and invited him to visit. He declined, thinking that was enough to signal that their affair was over, and had started an affair with another woman. Elvira had found out and caused a scene; it was the only time any of his lovers had yelled at him. He vowed that from then on, he would avoid similar situations.

Ten years later, he decided that fewer overnights would be one way to temper his relationships and that he would try to make the companionship as much cultural as connubial. He tried to strike a reasonable balance between the two without turning himself into a "perfect" catch. He was sensitive to when a relationship appeared to be heating up and had developed several ways to throttle back without bluntly breaking it off. Basically, he would become less available using business demands—conferences,

late meetings, and out-of-town customers as ready excuses. To be safe, many times he just went to a favorite hotel or B&B upstate, taking along a couple of good books to read. Or, he would explicitly say that he had to attend a charity event with another woman, hinting by the tone of his voice that something more was involved. Seldom did he have to explicitly say, "I'm sorry. I just don't wish to take our relationship to the next level."

Jack was a regular subscriber at the Met and knew many of the ushers in the orchestra section. A brief discussion assured him that Jaclyn was unmarried. He untangled himself from his current relationship by the end of October 2019.

In November, he approached her during the first intermission, remarking on the similarity of their names. At the second intermission, a serious discussion about German versus Italian opera had barely started when the chimes were heard signaling people back to their seats. He gave her his card and said to call. "I'd like to continue our discussion over coffee."

Dipping her biscotti, Jaclyn asked him about his favorite works of music. "You could make a playlist and save them on an MP3 file. That way, you can hear them whenever you want. Life is so short; it would be a shame not to hear Zerlina's wonderful aria, *Batti, batti, o bel Masetto* from Mozart's *Don Giovanni* one more time. Or perhaps the last movement of Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*."

Jack wondered if she was hinting that she would sing *Batti, batti* to him some night. He smiled. "Yes, that would be nice, but since I'm always discovering new pieces and finding new favorites, it would be an impossible task."

He paused. "It would be like making a pact with the devil." When she smiled, he continued. "And speaking of the devil, how would you like to attend Berlioz's *La damnation de Faust* with me in January? It's a matinee, and we could go for dinner afterward."

Jaclyn answered in kind. "Well, then, we will have to make a pact. I'll agree if you will start a list of your favorite musical selections. I'll make the file and find a way for us to listen together with two headsets so you can customize the settings. We can perhaps take dessert back to your apartment after *Faust* and listen together."

Jack blushed and said he'd get on it right away. Over the next two months, they met twice for coffee and once for dinner. He decided he could wait until after they attended *Faust* to see if their relationship would be one with "benefits."

His colleagues were concerned when Jack didn't show up for work at the beginning of February. When one colleague joked, "He's afraid of the groundhog," another recalled that he had casually mentioned he was thinking of taking a couple of weeks off to escape the winter cold. Then another reported that he had. The office gossip continued. "I saw him at dinner with a young woman. I bet they slipped down to the Caribbean and he was so excited he forgot to call in." Finally, the receptionist suggested, "It's a midlife crisis."

They tried calling his cell and sending emails. Two weeks passed, and at the beginning of the third, a colleague was sent to his apartment building and talked to the manager. He was told that Jack was a private person and that he had left a note that he might be gone for two or more weeks. He had mentioned that he was going to start with a new cleaning service in February. They didn't see any cause for alarm and suggested that he probably was on a well-deserved vacation.

The following week, his company thought it best to make an official inquiry. A senior detective was called and given access to Jack's apartment. They found him in bed, a pained look on his face and a headset on his ears. Dried blood from his eyes, nose, and mouth traced channels on his face. The headphone was connected to a strange-looking device with a second port. They speculated that the faint indentation in the second pillow was from another person. One long black hair was discovered and taken in as evidence. However, when they checked the evidence bag later, there was only ash.

By that time, New York City was an epicenter for the COVID-19 virus. Hospitals and medical examiners were overwhelmed. Jack's body was bagged but was misrouted, joining those that had succumbed to the virus. The paperwork was incorrectly filed and only the name and address were left with the body bag. Eventually, his lawyer traced it and the prearranged private funeral followed.

Had an autopsy been carried out, they would have found major damage within the skull. A clever

medical examiner would have speculated that the earphones had been set to an unsafe volume. "As if someone was able to funnel the sound from rock-concert speakers, full blast, directly through those little buds in his ears, like a large magnifying glass focusing the sun's rays."

But the coronavirus and botched paperwork prevented any follow-up. Had the police questioned the door attendants and scrutinized the security tapes at his apartment building, they would have seen a companion entering the building with Jack several times early in the year. But then, there followed a few unaccountable blanks in the tapes. And had they checked for prints, only Jack's would have been found.

Jaclyn, after the rules on social isolation were relaxed, was sitting at a table in front of an espresso bar in Brooklyn's Park Slope neighborhood. She watched as a man got out of a cab and limped to her table. He was wearing a long, black trench coat, and a wide-brimmed dark hat was pulled down over his face. Only his goatee was visible when he looked down.

"May I?"

She smiled. "Beelzie, of course you may. I've taken the liberty of ordering you an Americano."

He sat down and picked up his cup. It had gotten cold but took just a moment to warm in his hands.

Jaclyn nodded. "Still doing tricks, I see."

"And you didn't do too badly yourself with the MP3 playlist."

"Yes, but it would have been nice to have gotten more play, to give the devil his due, so to speak. As it is, it got buried by the COVID-19 pandemic."

"Perhaps, but each has its place and purpose."

He put his hand over the cup, got up, and left. There was a small pile of ashes on the table; Jaclyn brushed it to the floor and left a ten-dollar bill under her cup.

A month later, a police technician found the MP3 player in a discard basket. He was able to access the playlist and found two selections. He recognized the first selection *Batti, Batti* from Mozart's opera. The second one was the Stones' "(I Can't Get No)..."

Second Honeymoon

Keith Manos is the author of 11 nonfiction books, including *Writing Smarter* (Prentice Hall, 1998), *101 Proven Ways to Motivate Athletes* (Coaches Choice, 2021), and *The Elite Wrestler* (Coaches Choice, 2020). In 2015, Black Rose Writing published his debut novel *My Last Year of Life (in School)*. His second novel *Missing* will be published by Breaking Rules Publishing in 2021. Keith's short fiction has appeared in magazines like *October Hill Magazine*, *Storgy*, *Attic Door Press*, *New Reader Magazine*, and *Literary Yard*, among others.

I love my wife. I really do. And to prove it, I'm making her the main character in this story. In fact, over the years, she's been in several of my stories whenever I need a female protagonist who is slender, sexy, and self-assured. I know that if this story gets published, she'll agree to the second honeymoon I'm planning.

In one of my previous stories, Monica wore a halter top and shorts and shopped at Walmart. I needed toothpaste, and I know Walmart has the lowest prices. The plan there, you can probably guess, was to get the reader's interest right away, and I figured any editor would recognize the obvious: almost everyone shops at Walmart...and sex sells. That story was nine pages long—a lot of work, you know—but I think Monica stopped reading after the second page because she couldn't tell me how it ended.

Our third wedding anniversary is in two weeks, and I'm giving her this story as a gift. (I want our second honeymoon to be a surprise.) When I tell her I'm writing a new story titled "Second Honeymoon," she sighs and says, "Adam, at least make me look like Jennifer Aniston this time, will you?"

She demands this while we're shopping at Walmart, each of us pushing a metal cart since we are totally out of groceries at home. The front left wheel on mine, which is filled with the heavy stuff—six two-liter bottles of Dr. Pepper and a whole watermelon—squeaks a little bit at every turn.

"I was thinking of describing you more like Dolly Parton," I say, because this new story is about a former brassiere model, and Dolly Parton, whom I've seen on television, would be perfect for the part. I'm guessing her bra size is somewhere around a double G. In my story, however, her name will be Donna Parton so that I don't get accused of defamation. The conflict is that Donna finds herself in a loveless marriage with a garage-door repairman named Marvin, the kind of guy who can't help but look left and right every time he drives in a residential neighborhood and announce, "That door would be $1,200 dollars," or "Probably $1,350," or "That's an easy $900," when he passes each house.

"I don't look like Dolly Parton. See?" My wife turns sideways, arches her back, and thrusts out her chest at me. Her eyes go wide—first at me, then at her chest, and then back at me. "Adam, you really need to grow up." I'm not adding an exclamation point here, but right after she says this, she bumps my shopping cart with her own and then passes me, like we're on a NASCAR track.

She's right, of course, at least about her and Dolly Parton. My wife actually looks more like Mia Farrow before Woody Allen dumped her for his stepdaughter. Her hair is sandy blonde and curly. When we first met, her hair was even curlier, and I remember how I used to hold it—romantic like—when we kissed, even though her hair spray made my hand sticky. My wife doesn't have any hips, and her boobs stick out like teacup saucers. Nevertheless, I've learned in my writing class to be creative, so I'm keeping Donna Parton.

Right now, we're the only ones in the canned-food aisle, and she pushes her shopping cart away from me and reaches for a can of green beans. I watch her and enjoy how she extends her slender arm, gracefully scoops the can, and places it soundlessly into the cart.

This is how my wife and I met: shopping. I was getting groceries for my dad and myself, and I

followed her with my cart for two aisles, fearful that she'd think I was stalking her. I finally got up the nerve to ask her for advice about cucumbers, and, when by coincidence we were in the checkout line together later, I asked for her phone number. When she gave it to me, I felt like I'd won a trophy.

Today, when she bends over the cart, her blouse lifts over the backside of her jeans, and I can see an inch of the pale skin of her lower back. *Do that again,* I plead silently. My eyes flick to a can of mushrooms, and I try to transmit my brain waves to her head, directing her to look again at the shelf, to reach for the can of mushrooms, to bend over her cart. I close my eyelids halfway, dip my forehead toward my wife, and repeat *mushrooms, mushrooms, mushrooms* like 30 times, but my brain waves must be weak because she doesn't reach for the can, even though I vaguely remember writing it on the shopping list.

Monica continues down the aisle, and I hunch over and lean my forearms on my cart. A pose I've seen other men do—the cool, I'm-a-veteran-shopper types—although I'm not.

"Don't be so touchy," I say. "No one will know it's you."

She gives me an angry look over her shoulder and almost hisses, "You just want to see Dolly Parton naked."

"Naked? How do you know you're going to be naked?"

"Because you like naked people. You have at least one in all your stories."

I push my cart slowly behind her and consider her analysis. I try to remember all the stories I've written, and I have to admit, my science-fiction story does have naked aliens. But that's because they're aliens, and my castaway cannibal story has naked people because they're on a tropical island, but they only get naked near the end when their clothes get tattered and the heat becomes unbearable.

I try to argue, "Okay, so what if I do? Demi Moore showed off her boobs, as did Ann Margaret. Why not Donna Parton?" To be honest, I would really like to see Dolly Parton naked, standing erect with her arms up like she was being arrested. I wonder if they would sag.

Monica rolls her eyes. "Those are actresses. Those are movies. But if you make me naked in the story, I want to look like Jennifer Aniston, or maybe a young Liz Taylor with different hair. By the way, what am I *doing* in your story?"

"You're shopping with your husband who's a garage-door repairman. His name is Marvin. But you don't really love him."

She doesn't know it, but I'm gazing at her butt, wondering how she would react if I gently bumped it with my shopping cart. I'm guessing that would bother her, but maybe—just maybe—she would turn, swipe her hand over her butt in a playful way, and smile mischievously at me. She smiled like that before we got married, especially when I let her read the poems I wrote about her.

She flips her hair off her forehead and rolls her eyes again. "Oh, brother. That's really going to sell." She turns her cart at the end of the aisle, and her butt disappears around the corner.

My cart squeaks when I turn to follow her, and I notice she's almost halfway down the next aisle already. I almost have to raise my voice, "You never know. It could get published."

She stops, angles her head so that I can only see her profile as she looks at something on the shelf, and says, "Don't count on it, Adam. Why don't you write another story about an alien abduction?" She's pushing the cart, so her back is to me again, and I can't tell if she's teasing me. She's probably remembering the story I wrote about aliens who abduct humans, perform experiments on them, erase their memories, and take them back to the exact moment of the abduction. The humans, however, only realize they've been abducted when they experience diarrhea, a consequence of the aliens experimenting on their colon. So now, whenever I feel a bad bowel movement coming on, to be funny, I tell Monica that aliens abducted me.

I take her seriously and lean my forearms on the shopping cart. "My writing teacher says we should only write about what we know best."

"Then you should write about pornography." She grabs a box of spaghetti, drops it with a thud into the basket, and pushes her cart down the aisle.

Like I said, I love my wife. And she loves me. I was certain of that on our third date. After taking her to a fancy Italian restaurant, we spent the rest of

the evening watching an Elvis Presley movie on television—the one where he's in Hawaii—and although my dad interrupted us in his T-shirt and boxers on his way to the kitchen, Monica still agreed to go out with me again. The next day I was so grateful that I bought her a ukulele—resembling the one Elvis played in the movie—at a pawn shop. I figured that whenever she saw it in her bedroom or even played it, she would never forget that night with me and feel sentimental.

Those were the fun days: going out to dinner, watching movies, and staying up late. The days when my wife was both a woman and a girl. I know we're still in love, but, in truth, I don't write poems for her anymore, and she always goes to bed before me.

When we get home from Walmart, I offer to help put the groceries away, but she tells me to get out of the kitchen and that I'll only be in the way. So I go into the family room, sit on the couch, and listen to her stack cans in the pantry and open and close the refrigerator door. I know what she's thinking: My story—this story with Donna and Marvin—will never get published. I'll send it out and the editor will reject it, just like all the others. I sit on the couch, tilt my chin up, and call out to her, "You know, a lot of stories are better if at least one character is naked or has a gun."

"Name one."

"That girl Rose in *Titanic*. She posed naked for Leonardo DiCaprio."

She groans. "That's another movie, Adam."

I wish just once that she would see things my way. She got to choose the dinner for our wedding reception; she selected our house; and she decided we should lease a car rather than purchase one. No one ever told me before I got married that there was so much politics in a marriage after the honeymoon. I lived with my dad after graduating from high school, and not once did he ever tell me what to expect.

Monica doesn't realize the effort I put in for her. She doesn't understand what my days are like while she's working as an assistant manager at that bank in the plaza. Like how I give myself over to my writing, sometimes working three or four hours straight, crafting all kinds of stories while I spend the rest of the time watching movies just to get ideas. However, I won't gloat and say "I told you so" when I finally get something published. There are a lot of great writers who never got published, like my friend Jeremy and my writing teacher Alex. In fact, Jeremy told me that all best-selling authors—Tom Clancy and Danielle Steele, for instance—have at least one naked woman or guns in their books. I figure that my odds of getting published will improve if I have both.

I called out again, "But I bet *Titanic* was a story first."

"Whatever," she mumbles with more sarcasm than indifference. I can't see her, but I've become an expert at her voice.

I'm hoping that we're going to have pity sex when we go to bed that night, but we don't. She wants to read. I like to read, too, but not now, and especially not a book as thick as hers. I mean, really, who reads *Madame Bovary*? You should see this book. It has to be nearly 400 pages. I can't believe it keeps her interest because it has nothing to do with recipes, lingerie, or the Federal Reserve.

Later, when she's sleeping, I imagine she's dreaming—happily, I hope—about the time in our second year of marriage when we vacationed in Hempstead County, Arkansas and saw the world's biggest watermelon. I also remember the nights when we played foot tag under the covers. (I always let her have the last tag.)

I watch her sleep and listen to her breathe and snore, sometimes even timing them, before I slide out of bed, go downstairs, and open up my laptop to the website I've visited before.

After I finish, I calm myself down and think about that Arkansas vacation, reaffirming my belief that Monica and I should go on a second honeymoon—someplace exotic like Albuquerque or a foreign country like Nova Scotia. I suggest that to her when we sit down for breakfast the next morning.

She sips her coffee and peers at me over the cup. "You're kidding, right? Nova Scotia?" She's dressed for work in her pin-stripe skirt suit, but I can't take my eyes off her pink lipstick.

"No, I'm not."

She takes her cup to the sink, rinses it, and says, "That sounds expensive. Let's think about it and talk tonight or tomorrow."

"I love you," I say to her back as she moves to the door. The sunlight coming through the window must make her hair warm to touch, even if she still

uses a lot of hair spray.

She turns and gives me a question-mark smile. "Are you all right?"

"I am, and I think a second honeymoon would be a fun vacation for us. We should start planning it."

"Let's talk later," she repeats and grabs her purse from the counter. Seconds later, she is out the door. I wait an hour and thirty minutes before grabbing my lunch bag and driving to the plaza where her bank is—something I've been doing since last Friday. There, I sit in my old Datsun, look at the opaque windows, and think about her inside in her business outfit and high heels, crossing and uncrossing her legs on her cushioned chair and helping people with their mortgages or accounts. I also watch the bank entrance and the people going in and out.

For each person, I make up a story: that balding guy is a retired cop who once shot a man in the stomach; that gray-haired woman is going in to get a gold necklace from her safe-deposit box that she'll pawn to pay for dance lessons and a hot tub; and that middle-aged guy wearing a service-station uniform is depositing this week's receipts from his gas station, and he's bummed because business has been bad. He might lose his house because of it.

Around one o'clock , my wife exits with a tall guy in a dark suit. He must be a co-worker because I never saw him enter the bank. He's laughing at something she said. She's laughing, too—so hard, in fact, that she puts her hand on the sleeve of his suit coat as if to balance herself. Her hair falls over her eyes when she dips her head, but I suspect her eyes are glistening because of the joke.

They stroll to his car, a maroon Lexus, and he opens the passenger door for her. She gets in, tucking her skirt under her, and smiles up at him as he politely closes the door. I turn the Datsun ignition and watch them pull out of the parking lot.

On the four-lane road, I follow them south until he pulls into a Holiday Inn. I'm impressed. One lunch there has to cost at least $12 to $15—and I secretly hope that my wife isn't treating him. He should treat, shouldn't he? We need to start saving for our second honeymoon.

I park two rows away and watch as they walk side by side to the entrance. When they reach the glass doors, my wife leans her forehead onto Mr. Suit's shoulder as if she is losing her balance, and he gently rubs the middle of her back as they go inside.

I wait, eating a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and drinking a Dr. Pepper. Then I wait some more. A one-hour lunch turns into a 90-minute lunch, and I'm worried now that she is truly spending too much. I'm serious about my second honeymoon plan. If he's paying for her meal, that's no problem, but if she splurged on this lunch and later wants to tell me we can't afford a second honeymoon, I want the evidence to contradict her. I leave my car. When I go inside, the bubbly clerk behind the polished counter asks me if I'm checking in.

"No," I say. "I just want to go into the restaurant."

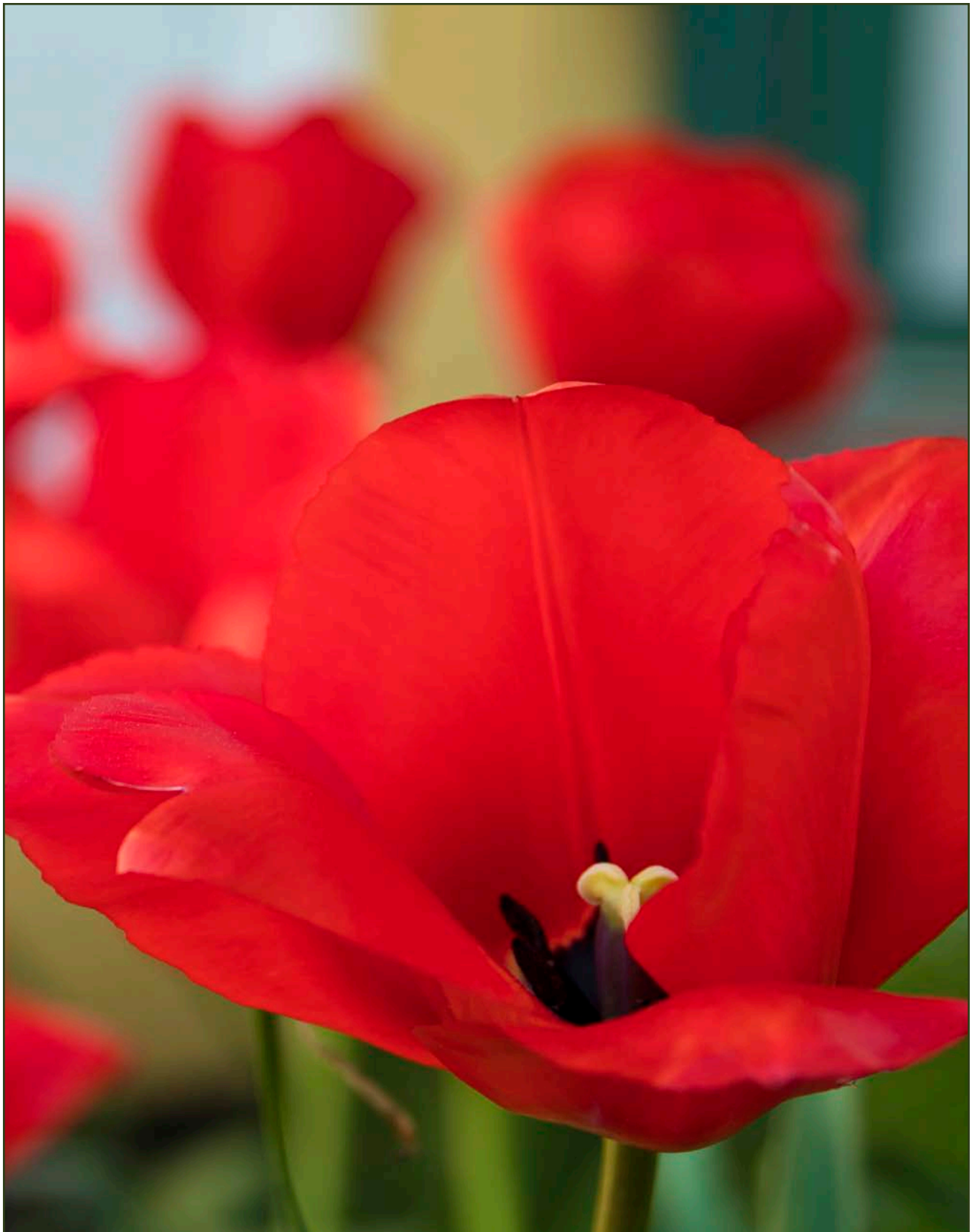
Her eyes narrow but she says politely, "We don't have a restaurant here, sir, but there are some nice places nearby."

I look around the empty lobby area, at the silent elevators, and again at the smiling clerk. "Thank you," I say. "Thanks," I repeat because I'm having trouble swallowing.

I return to my Datsun and head home, keeping the car parallel to the yellow lines like I'm driving on a map. My mind wanders and suddenly I'm thinking of Marvin and Donna. Of course Marvin would drive a Datsun, a car that is so nondescript that it's almost invisible. He stays in the right lane and leaves the radio off so he can listen to the wind skim over the hood of the car and rush through the open crack of the windows, making that jet engine sound that drowns out my thoughts. I like driving this way; it's relaxing. I don't want to use the stifling air-conditioning. I drive around for a while and let other cars slide by me until I find myself on the street where Marvin would live. I slow down to examine the garage doors for more material for my story.

By the time I'm home, I'm full of ideas about Donna and Marvin: how they met, fell in love, and honeymooned in Nova Scotia. Then, once I'm inside our house, I get the revolver we own out of the shoebox in our closet. I undress completely and sit on the living room couch, which is the first piece of furniture that Marvin and Donna bought together that now smells like dust and stale air. Through the front window, I can just make out a naked, blue sky, which, as the afternoon drifts by, fades into an orange-purple dusk. I feel myself breathe and stare at the sky.

I smile, knowing that the sky will always be there no matter what my characters do, especially Marvin, the garage-door repairman. While I wait, I practice aiming the revolver—at the door, at different spots on my forehead, where I feel the tip of the metal barrel soft against my skin, and then at the door again—and hope that Donna comes home on time, so I can finish writing this story.



Kristen Zarra is a photographer based out of South Jersey and Philadelphia, PA. After exploring the editorial and music side of photography, she fell in love with the way she could create and capture the emotions of the moments. Kristen is currently a freelance photographer and has had her work published in Veracious and Recap Magazine.

The Brothers' Wife

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

Jim sat at the table in his brother Tom's kitchen, flipping through the pages of the *FarmTek* catalog. Tom's barn had burned down in February, and Jim had come to help him put up a new one.

It was his wife Connie's idea. The brothers didn't see each other often enough, she said. True enough, Jim had his life in Kansas City with Connie, and Tom was a hundred miles away on the farm. Then, too, there was that undercurrent of tension between them. Naturally enough, Connie married Tom first, then, years after the divorce, his younger brother.

"Is this it?" Jim said, nodding contemptuously at the photo of a structure—plastic, Plexiglas, something like that—in the catalog. "When Connie and I were in the Pennsylvania Dutch country last summer, we saw barns there made of stone, a century or two old. They'll probably still be there a century from now, too. And you want to put up one of these things?"

Tom stared off into the distance.

"Pennsylvania," he said. "I'll bet Connie liked that. I should have taken her places. She got bored out here on the farm."

Tom and Connie had been high school sweethearts. They got married right after graduating, and Tom took her to live out on the family farm. It had been the boys' grandparents' place, and then their father's. But they'd never lived there because when he got married, their dad moved into town and delivered mail, driving out to work the farm in his spare time. He kept threatening to move back to the farm after the boys' mother died but never did. Now he lived in a cabin on the Lake of the Ozarks, too stove-up from arthritis to do anything more than fish.

Jim had grown up working weekends and summers on the farm but never enjoyed it as Tom had. As soon as he finished high school, he was off to college to get an I.T. degree and then a job in Kansas City, where, three years after the divorce, he ran into Connie in a sports bar, and they began to date. Tom tried to claim that Jim finally got what he wanted, that he'd loved Connie all along, but that was silly. Jim was barely 13 when Tom and Connie got married, after all. Right about then, if he remembered correctly, was when he had that crush on Roberta Sparks with the freckles, braces, and the first set of real tits in their grade. Connie he barely knew, and when he ran into her in Kansas City, it was like meeting a stranger. She was the same age as Tom but, vivacious and gregarious, seemed even younger than Jim. He'd had little experience with women, hadn't been shy exactly, but passive, too easily content. She'd taken him out of himself, taught him to *live*.

That was 11 years ago. By now, their life had settled into a pleasant routine. It probably helped that they didn't see Tom often. He'd never expressed anger, or even surprise, that his brother had taken up with his ex. But there were bound to be undercurrents. Earlier that day, in fact, not long after Jim arrived at the farm, he overheard Tom saying to someone on the phone, laughing, "Oh, yeah, I've been where he has. I know what that's like." And Jim, thinking he was talking about being with Connie—sex and all that—had felt like strangling him. But it turned out that Tom was only talking about some other farmer having a hernia, for which Tom had undergone surgery before Christmas. In fact, that was Connie's rationale for urging Jim to come down and help out with the barn.

Tom reached across the table and tapped Jim on the hand to get his attention. He closed one eye, like a

wise old owl, pointed a thick, callused finger at Jim, and said, "There's a thing you should know."

"Oh?" Jim said, drawing back.

"Yes. Those Pennsylvania Dutch—they're not Dutch at all. They're *German*."

"Well, let's go out and take a look at her while there's still light out," Tom said.

It took Jim a moment to realize he was talking about the barn.

Tom put on his denim jacket with holes at both elbows, and Jim put on his fleece. As soon as they stepped outside, Jim put his collar up. It was one of those deceptive March days typical of western Missouri, bright and pretty, but the wind coming across the prairie out of Kansas cut to the bone. Jim wished he'd had enough sense to put his gloves on.

Where the barn had stood there was now only a large concrete rectangle, which once must have been the floor. Jim swore that the floor had been dirt.

"I can't remember exactly what it looked like," Jim said.

"You didn't spend any more time out here than you had to, as I recall," Tom said.

"You recall correctly. What happened to it, anyway?"

Tom shrugged, "It caught fire. February 14th—Valentine's Day."

Jim wanted to make a joke out of Valentine's Day but couldn't quite figure out how to do it.

They stared down at the concrete.

"So, you're going to put up one of these plastic bubble things," Jim said, pulling out the *FarmTek* catalog he'd stuffed in his back pocket.

Tom looked at him, smiling. "You're sentimental, aren't you? Want me to stick with the old wooden barn?"

"Sentiment doesn't have anything to do with it. It's just that this thing"— he slapped the catalog—"might work for a hay barn, but with stalls for cattle?"

Jim looked around. Now that he thought of it, where were the cattle? Maybe they burned up with the barn. But more likely, they were at a neighbor's. Farm neighbors still helped each other out, he supposed. It was something they had to do to survive.

"Let me see that," Tom said, taking the catalog from his brother. "No, you're looking at the wrong thing. This is it, here. It's Clearspan, all right, but with a pony wall. I'll have to hire somebody to install the Clearspan, but the pony wall, that's what you and I are going to do."

Jim looked at the photo of a shiny half-cylinder Clearspan structure atop four-foot concrete walls. Yes, he supposed you could put stalls in there.

"So you and I are going to...?" He looked around and noticed the flatbed stacked high with concrete blocks parked next to the tractor shed.

"Yep. I'd probably be smart to hire somebody to do that for me, too, but whoever said I was smart? We've got the concrete slab, though. That's the foundation right there. Surely, you and I can stack blocks and slap a little mortar on them."

Tom walked over and climbed up on the flatbed.

"We might as well off-load a few right now. Work up an appetite for supper. We'll start in for real tomorrow."

"Sure you should be lifting those things?" Jim asked.

"Aw, I'm pretty much healed. The last couple of weeks, I've been able to take a leak without somebody holding my pecker for me, so I ought to be able to handle a few concrete blocks."

Jim rolled his eyes. "Old joke," he said.

"Who's joking?"

Tom hefted a concrete block and handed it down to Jim.

"Holy crap! I'd forgotten how heavy these suckers are," Jim said. "What do you want me to do with it?"

"Well, not stand there and hold it. Set it down, fool. All we're doing for now is taking them off the truck. We can use a dolly to bring them over to the slab later."

"You should have parked the flatbed closer in the first place."

"It's only 20 feet, for God's sake. Sitting in front of a computer all day has turned you into a first-class pussy."

"I don't sit all day. Every couple of hours, I'll stand up and walk around my desk for a little variety."

Jim hadn't stacked a dozen blocks on the ground before he stopped and pressed his hands into the small of his back.

"Remind me tomorrow morning to take some Tylenol prophylactically."

"That shows how we're different. You use prophylactics for stacking concrete blocks, and I use them for screwing."

"Funny guy."

They started back to work. After a few more minutes, Jim stopped again and looked at his hands.

"I for damn sure should have worn work gloves," he said, holding his palms up. They were scraped raw.

"Okay, I get the idea," Tom said, climbing down from the flatbed. "We'll try this again tomorrow."

Jim turned back for the house, but Tom turned the other way, and Jim followed him across the farm lot, past the outbuildings to the pasture.

"Don't worry, the power's off," Tom said, nodding at the electrified wire atop the fence. He stooped and went through a gap in the barbed wire, then held up a strand for Jim to crawl through.

"Couldn't we have just walked down to the gate?" Jim said, grunting as he bent over.

"Pussy."

They walked across the pasture, Jim on the lookout for "landmines," which was what they called cow patties. The pasture sloped down to the creek. The sun was setting, and the pasture stubble gilded in the slanting light.

"It is pretty," Jim admitted.

"I never should have brought her out here," Tom said. Jim almost said, "Brought who?" but they both knew.

"She got bored. She bores easily. She needs a change now and then. Maybe, if we'd lived in town, like Dad and Mom, and I just drove out to the farm, maybe then..."

Jim tried to think of what to say, but Tom didn't give him time.

"Naw, naw, who am I kidding? It wasn't the farm. It was me she got bored with. It takes living with a person a while to find out what that person is really like. Well, it took her seven years, but I guess she finally figured it out."

"Is that why you brought me out here? To warn me that I'm living on borrowed time?" Jim said, trying to make it sound like a joke.

"Just don't be an asshole. That'd be a good start. Just because you're my little brother doesn't mean you have to be an asshole like me."

"Connie never said you were an asshole," Jim told him.

Tom cocked his head and said, "So you two talk about me?"

"No. Almost never."

Tom seemed disappointed. He looked at the ground. Then he said, "Come on. Let's go eat some supper."

They walked back across the pasture, this time crossing out by the gate. When they got back to the farm lot, Tom suddenly stopped.

"We've got company," he said, nodding toward a white SUV parked behind Jim's car in the driveway.

"It's Connie," Jim said.

Connie was standing at the stove in the kitchen. She looked over her shoulder when Jim and Tom came in and laughed like she'd pulled a good joke on them.

"Didn't expect this, did you?" she said. Whether to him or Tom, Jim wasn't sure.

"It's a nice surprise," Tom said. He went over to the stove, and Connie turned and gave him a big hug

while holding a spatula.

"Why'd you come?" Jim asked, but realized that that sounded confrontational and added, "You never said anything about coming." That didn't sound right, either.

"I hadn't planned on it, but then I thought, 'those two jerks won't get any calories that don't come out of a beer can if I don't go down there and cook for them.' So here I am."

"I'm glad," Jim said, trying to make it sound like he meant it.

"Come on, little brother, we better go wash up," Tom said, and then to Connie, "We've been slinging concrete blocks. You should see the kid here. He took to it like a duck to water."

"Pull the other one," Connie said.

"I'd like to," said Tom, winking at Jim.

There was only one bathroom in the house. Tom and Jim stood side by side, washing their hands in the sink.

When they got back to the kitchen, Connie was at the stove frying hamburgers in a big cast-iron skillet. Grease was sizzling and popping. She stood back as far as she could from the skillet and reached the burgers with the spatula. Every time she turned a burger, grease erupting, she'd grimace and turn her head away.

Tom handed Jim a beer and asked Connie if she wanted one. She said no, but he could open a bottle of iced tea for her. He said he didn't have any iced tea, and she said she knew that, which was the reason she'd brought her own. They both laughed as if it was a private joke between them.

Jim and Tom sat sipping their beers. Connie brought over the burgers, plus a skillet of fried potatoes, which Jim hadn't realized she was cooking. Tom didn't have any buns in the house, so they ate the burgers on white bread. They weren't bad, everyone agreed.

No one mentioned the fried potatoes until Jim said, "I think they could use a little salt."

"They are a little dry," Connie admitted.

Tom laid his fork down, put his head in his hands, and laughed. "Lord, you never could cook, Connie," he said.

Connie smiled as if the accusation pleased her.

"Jim does most of the cooking," she said.

"Yeah, I'm not bad. I can cook a little," Jim said.

"I always knew you'd make somebody a good wife," Tom said.

Jim felt himself blushing. Why couldn't he laugh along with them? Why did he have to act like the little brother with his feelings hurt? *Stop being a jerk*, he said to himself. But he didn't know how.

After supper, they went outside to show Connie the remains of the barn. It was almost dark, but the concrete slab seemed to glow like a field of snow. Tom began to explain the pony-wall barn Jim was going to help him put up.

Connie shook her head. "I don't know. I always kind of liked that old red barn."

"I didn't think you liked anything on this farm," Tom said.

"Oh, I have some fond memories of that barn," said Connie.

It was hard to tell in the failing light, but Jim thought he detected a smile of complicity passing between them. What had happened in the barn? Jim could guess.

They went back to the house and drank beer as they tried to talk with enthusiasm about the old times. But it was tough going. Before long, Tom put on the television. There was a detective show on, half finished, which they watched anyway, and then Tom put on an episode of "House Hunters."

"I like the 'House Hunters International' best," he said. "I like seeing all those places I'll never get to."

"You talk like you're 80. You haven't even turned 40 yet," Connie said. "There's no reason you couldn't go anywhere you wanted to."

"You're right," Tom said, nodding like he was trying

hard to believe it.

"We're thinking about going to Italy next summer," Jim said.

Connie looked at him with surprise. "Since when?"

"You told me you always wanted to see Italy. You told me that once."

"Did I?"

The bedrooms were upstairs, Tom's the smaller of the two. It was the one that their dad had slept in when he was a little boy. Jim and Connie were in Grandma and Grandpa Copas's bedroom. He tried to conjure up a specific image of the old couple but couldn't.

Everything in the bedroom was neat and clean. Tom must have given it a going-over before Jim got there. He smiled, thinking of his big brother doing housework, wearing an apron, and carrying a feather duster. It occurred to him that Connie had worn an apron earlier in the evening when she was cooking supper. He couldn't remember ever seeing her in an apron before. Of course, it was rare to see her at the stove at all, except to make herself a cup of tea.

Jim sat in the straight-backed wooden chair in the corner of the room with the *Kansas City Star* in his hands while Connie changed into her nightgown.

"The bathroom downstairs is the only one in the house," he told her. "If you have to get up in the night to go, be careful on the stairs. They're kind of steep."

She looked at him like he had two heads.

"*You're* telling *me*? I lived in this house for seven years, remember?"

"Oh, yeah, right," he said, nonplussed. Yes, this had been his grandparents' bedroom, but then it was Tom and Connie's, right? He couldn't remember ever going upstairs after the two got married. But then, what reason would he have had to?

Connie pulled the bedspread back, the smell of musk reaching him from across the room.

Jim went downstairs to the bathroom to brush his teeth and change into his pajamas. When he got back to the bedroom, Connie was lying in bed with her back to him. *She's pretending to sleep*, he thought. But, no, she really was sleeping.

He sat back down in the chair in the corner and watched her sleep, snoring like a cat purring, her lips parted slightly, the pillowcase damp at the corner of her mouth. She was still an attractive woman. But, without her makeup and with streaks of gray in her hair, she looked in her forties.

When they first got married, they talked about having kids but decided to wait. There were too many things that they wanted to do and they didn't want to be tied down. Then, only a couple of years ago, Connie told him she was starting to think of having a child. Her biological clock was running down, she said. Jim said, "Well, it's something to think about, I guess. Before we commit ourselves to anything, let's sleep on it for a bit, consider all the angles." Connie never brought up the subject again.

Jim thought he might have made a mistake.

He went over to the bed and carefully eased himself under the covers. Connie seemed to stir for a moment but then began her soft snoring again. So that was all right. He hadn't disturbed her.

Jim woke in the middle of the night and realized that Connie wasn't in bed beside him. He waited a few minutes to see if she'd gone downstairs to use the bathroom. But when she didn't return, he got up and went downstairs. She and Tom were sitting at the kitchen table, Tom drinking coffee.

Before he could say anything, Connie volunteered. "I couldn't sleep."

"Me neither," said Tom.

"That coffee won't help," Jim said.

"You don't believe that communist propaganda about caffeine, do you?" said Tom.

Jim looked at Connie. "How long have you been down here?"

"I don't know. What time is it?"

Jim hadn't put his watch on. Wasn't there once a clock on the kitchen wall?

"I don't know," he said.

She stretched, arching her back and throwing her arms out wide.

"Think I'll head back to bed. You coming?" she said.

Jim didn't reply. Connie got up and walked around him and out of the kitchen. He heard her climbing the stairs.

He looked at Tom.

"You want her back," he said.

He expected Tom to say something along the lines of, "You're crazy," but instead Tom said, "Why *shouldn't* I want her back? I never wanted to lose her in the first place. Splitting up wasn't my idea."

"So you're going to make a play for her?" Even as Jim said it, the phrase sounded silly to him, like something out of a Western.

"What would be the point?" Tom said. "She'd never come back to me."

"I didn't ask you if she'd come back to you; I asked you if you were going to try to get her back."

Tom rolled his eyes and sighed. "You need to worry less about what *I'm* going to do and more about what *you're* going to do. I'll tell you one thing free of charge. If you don't get your act together, she'll leave you."

Jim tried to keep his voice steady. "What are you talking about, 'get my act together?' What did Connie say to you?"

"Nothing. She didn't have to, but I can see the signs. I've been there, little bro, remember?"

"You're just trying to worm your way in. You're—" Jim couldn't finish the sentence. He felt tears stinging his eyes, like when they were boys fighting over something, and he couldn't do anything because Tom was too big and too strong. He turned his face away.

Tom stood up and, at the same time, motioned for Jim to sit at the table.

"Sit. Let me get you a cup of coffee."

"I gave up that stuff years ago."

"Right," Tom said as if he weren't surprised. He sat back down.

When he awoke the next morning, Jim found himself alone in the bedroom once more. He put on his robe and slippers to go downstairs. As he passed the bedroom window, he glanced out and saw Tom walking across the farm lot. It must have been cold out because Tom was wearing a heavy canvas jacket, leather work gloves, and a hat with flaps pulled down over his ears like the ones they wore when they were little boys.

Tom stopped by the stack of concrete blocks he and Jim had off-loaded yesterday afternoon. He hefted one and set it back up on the flatbed. Then another. And another.

Jim watched a moment longer and then went downstairs. Connie was sitting at the kitchen table, slowly stirring a cup of coffee.

"Well," he said, hands on his hips, "that son of a bitch is going to build you a wooden barn."

She continued dreamily stirring that coffee as if she hadn't heard him. Or maybe it was only exactly what she expected, and there was nothing to be said about it.

Jim watched her a moment and then turned and walked out of the kitchen. He'd no sooner gotten out of the door when he whirled, charged back in, and said, "I'll burn it down."

She smiled and took a sip of coffee.

Break

Brent Holmes' work has appeared in *Continue the Voice* and *LKN Connect* and has been accepted to *Night Picnic Press* and *Fumble*. Along with writing fiction, Brent has written papers in research mathematics. Brent plays guitar and works as a data scientist in North Carolina.

I opened my eyes, and light stung my pupils. I flew to my feet, knocking Sheila to the ground, and grabbed my phone. 9:47 a.m.! "No!" I shouted. Sheila meowed moodily, her eyes half open as she laid on the ground, tangled in a blanket.

I brushed my hair with my left hand while hopping into socks with the aid of my right. "Why didn't I set an alarm?" I asked Sheila. I threw a dress over my head, but I hadn't unzipped the back. I pulled, failing to fit through the dress. I attempted to slip into my shoes without looking and crashed to the ground.

I paused amidst the chaos and sat up. I took the dress off and walked back to my bedside table. Underneath "9:50 a.m." read: "Saturday." I pressed my fingers to the insides of my eyes and expelled the chaos from my lungs.

I unraveled the heap of cat and blanket at the base of my bed. Sheila purred, hopped on the bed, and settled back to sleep. I sat with her, stroking her fur. I pushed my hair off my forehead. "What am I going to do with myself, Sheila?" Sheila opened a single eye, but it flashed shut again.

"At least I was able to get some sleep for once," I mumbled. My phone rang. "I hate people who call me. There's no reason not to text." Robocalls constantly slammed my phone. I stopped bothering to answer years ago. I sent the caller to voice mail.

I entered my bathroom and shut the door. As I turned on the shower, Sheila began to cry and claw at the door. I opened the door, and she sauntered in. "You were perfectly fine ignoring me earlier." I shut the door behind her. "You'll have to be happy inside because I'm not letting the warm air out."

I got in the shower and took my time. I washed my hair twice and combed the conditioner through each strand. I exited the shower, blow-dried my hair, brushed my teeth, put on deodorant, and flossed. Being able to take care of myself was nice. I put on a blouse, jeans, and sneakers. I reached for a hairband but eschewed it. I fluffed my hair and walked to my kitchen.

I smiled as I looked at the processed food bars by the door. I opened the fridge and extracted the eggs and a package of turkey bacon. I played music on my phone to keep me occupied as I cooked. Sheila rubbed herself along my legs. "You want some turkey bacon?" I asked her, offering a raw bit. She narrowed her eyes, sniffed it, and eventually ate it. "I guess my friends aren't the only ones who look at turkey bacon funny," I snickered. Sheila reared up on her hind legs and sunk her claws into my jeans. "Ouch," I cried. "Well, I guess you like it." I tossed her a little more. "But that's it. The vet said you're supposed to eat cat food."

I took my plate of food and reclined on my couch. I turned on Netflix and ate my breakfast. I checked my phone: 10:50 a.m. Why did I always have to check my phone, even on Saturday?

I finished the cartoon and put my plate in the sink. Sheila longingly looked up at the sink before realizing I was walking to the cat food. She sprinted between my legs. That maneuver had made me trip many times before, but we had grown used to each other's movements. She jumped on top of her food box, and I picked her up and set her down beside me. She expectantly stuck her head in the bowl. I took the scoop and ladled the bowl full, pouring it around her head and into her dish. Some cats are picky about their food. Sheila wasn't one of those cats.

I stretched my arms a bit and decided to run. I hadn't run in weeks. I hadn't weighed myself in weeks, either. I felt sick at the thought. Eating a reasonable breakfast twice a week was only going to do so much. I retreated to my bedroom and changed into running clothes. I had more running clothes than I could ever use. Somehow, I had thought that the act of buying the clothes would spur me to use them. I jogged to my front door and opened it to a beautiful fall day.

I breathed in the cool air, letting it flow all the way to the tips of my fingers and toes. I locked my door and checked with a push and a pull. The door had aged poorly from all my worrying. I slid the keys into my pockets, which I was grateful to have—so much of women's clothing came without pockets.

> "I needed the time. I needed a break, an escape, and I had found it, straight out of thin air."

It took me a few minutes to realize that I was jogging too fast. Had I lost my stamina, or had I forgotten how to pace myself? I slowed to what I hoped was a sustainable speed. My legs burned, and I tried to distract myself by looking at the trees. The leaves were turning orange and red as if a comfortable fire had enveloped the trees. Autumn was a beautiful season, especially on the weekends. The air was crisp, the leaves were falling, and it rarely rained around here. But during the workdays, autumn was difficult. The sun sank earlier and earlier, until one day it never rose at all. At least, it didn't rise for the denizens of my windowless office building.

My lungs burned, and my legs ached. How had I let myself get so out of shape? I went back to searching for distractions. I thought of my art. I had a painting project I was working on—well, had been working on. I'm sure a fine layer of dust had covered my art supplies. I was a meticulous painter and, back in college, that wasn't a bad thing. But now my slow approach impeded my ability to finish anything.

My heart pounded harder. There are so many things I wished I could finish. I used to write songs and poems and I used to paint, but that has all fallen to the wayside now. And then there was my health and Wednesday's presentation to worry about! And this was all before kids. They say it gets so much worse after kids. I stopped. I gasped for breath. My chest ached, and tears welled in my eyes.

My phone buzzed. "Shut up," I grunted. I sent the caller to voice mail. I walked the rest of my route. I should really make more time to date or else I'll never have kids. I wiped the sweat from my face and gasped in another breath. Or maybe I shouldn't have kids. Life is such a wreck right now.

I opened the door to my apartment, and Sheila greeted me with a chorus of meows and leg rubs. I checked my phone. I had missed a lot of calls for a Saturday. Twelve noon. I showered again. Sheila didn't bother the door this time. I washed faster, remembering the litany of things I had decided to do on my run.

My most recent painting endeavor waited on my desk. My cat meowed at me. "If that's a compliment about how I look, thank you! If you're asking for more food, the answer's no."

I checked my phone—another missed call. I rolled my eyes. 12:30 p.m. I breathed a few hard breaths. Time went by so fast. I couldn't keep doing this. I turned my phone off and tossed it onto the couch. I took in a few deep breaths and smiled at my painting. A woman in a bright, yellow dress and a big gaudy hat stared at a distant boat across a gray ocean with dark, ominous clouds. The boat was the color of her dress and wasn't coming back. I wasn't sure if the viewer would know that it wasn't coming back, but I would do my best.

I took my tiny brush with a single bristle and began to paint. I despised my slow method, but to change mid-painting would be worse than leaving it incomplete. I got lost in the painting, recalling the joy it had always brought me. My stomach growled, reminding me I had skipped lunch. I looked at my painting and, though the changes were small, and the final result lay many free days away—free days I could not promise—I felt pride in the updates.

I reached for my phone, but it was on the couch. Who needs it? I grabbed my keys and decided to go out. Nearby, there was one of those trendy new health-conscious restaurants that didn't deep-fry everything. I had been meaning to try it for a while, but I almost never ate out, as I had no one to go with. Today, though, that wasn't going to bother me.

I drove into a near-empty parking lot. I reached for my cell phone to check the time. My pocket was empty. Instinctively, I looked at my car clock, but it had been broken for years. I wondered what time on a Saturday this strip mall would be so empty.

Regardless, the emptiness signified that I had plenty of the day left.

I requested a booth for one. The server seemed unfazed. I ordered, and my food arrived quickly. My waiter was almost too attentive. The poor man was relying on me for nearly all of his wage this hour. "Tell me," I said to him. "How often do people eat in a restaurant alone?"

He shuffled his feet. "It's not the most common thing, I'll admit, but it's far from rare."

"I thought it'd be more awkward than it is."

"We try to help all of our customers have a wonderful time."

"It might be worse with more people around…" I mumbled.

"Only if you make it that way."

I nodded. I got a to-go box and paid my check. I tipped well.

When I got home, I grabbed my guitar from the closet and played the songs I wrote about boys in high school. Somewhere along the way, I had felt too mature to write poppy love songs, but I never figured out how to write any other kind of song, so I just stopped writing. I looked through my notes—so many lazy attempts. I laughed. I never finished anything. I decided not to stress about writing new songs. This would never be a career, and I don't think I'd ever tire of my old songs.

After a few hours, my fingers were sore and red. My once-proud calluses were gone. It must have been a while since I last played. Sheila, sensing a break in the action, hopped onto my lap, settled, and emitted loud purrs. "Weekends are amazing," I said, petting Sheila's upturned belly. "Well, weekends where I don't have to work or follow through on plans or do anything. Weekends that are just a break. I just wish they weren't so far apart. It's like my life gets put on hold." I put my feet up and turned on Netflix. Part of me wanted to do more painting or write poetry, but another part of me was exhausted. I smiled. I could paint and write tomorrow. Did I have plans tomorrow?

I noticed a bulge in the couch cushion. I fished into the couch and pulled out my cell phone. I turned it back on. It had been a nice relaxing day, but it was time to be an adult and see if any of those messages were actually important. I hoped they weren't. I knew they were most likely robocalls, but I'd feel better when I was sure.

The phone started up, and 27 missed phone calls greeted me, most of them with messages left to my voice mail. "Whoa," I whispered. What could have happened? I started with a text from my work friend, Sarah. Shoot, had I made plans with her? I hate when I make plans. I love my friends, but I just…I just have so much to do and so little time to do it.

I read, "Hayley, where are you? Are you okay? I'm worried." I scrolled up to another missed message. "Hayley, were you in a wreck? What happened? Mr. Gunther's furious, but he's also worried about you." Another: "Hayley, your presentation starts soon. Where are you!?!?" There were more.

I felt the blood drain from my face. I checked the clock on my phone. 7:43 p.m. Wednesday.

No.

It couldn't be. I had seen that it was—I had been sure that it was—I had…really needed a day. I cried. I needed the time. I needed a break, an escape, and I had found it, straight out of thin air.

All 27 missed calls were important—not just important, but catastrophic, and I had sent some of them straight to voice mail! "What have I done?" Sheila looked up at me with empty eyes. She lay her head down on my arm and started to purr.


Arcade

Arnold and the Coin Pusher

Jordan Dilley is a writer living in the Pacific Northwest who holds an MA in literature. Her fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Woven Tale*, *The Bookends Review*, *Blue Lake Review*, and *45th Parallel*, as well as other publications.

At the arcade, there's a hierarchy. At the top, you have Skee-Ball, Whack-A-Mole, and basketball shooters: games that involve real skill. Then you have the video games, nostalgic Pac-Man and Space Invaders, and the newer dance arcade imports. They aren't big-ticket earners, unless your name is at the top of the board, but they're fun. At the bottom of the totem pole are the coin pushers, boasting no skill, no fun, and an internal structure that defies the laws of physics. It should come as no surprise, then, that this is Arnold's favorite game.

On Saturday afternoons, after a week of collecting soda cans, mayonnaise jars, beer bottle caps, and anything else the recycling plant will trade for scratched quarters and dimes, Arnold and I hightail it out of the two-bedroom clapboard for Sherman's Arcade. It's a grimy establishment stuck between a fetid *carniceria* and a salon offering full sets and bleached extensions. Arnold and I agree that despite the stained brown carpet and the few games that eat our quarters without coming to life, an afternoon spent there is better than an afternoon spent waiting for Dad to get out of bed to grab another beer or watching Mom watch sitcom reruns, dabbing at her eyes as the characters lead more fulfilling lives than the one she does.

We keep our stash of quarters and dimes in a battered shoebox, buried underneath a pile of old coats and eyeless stuffed animals in my closet. Dad isn't a mean person, but he doesn't respect personal property as much as he should. Arnold checks the box from time to time, usually before Dad gets home from his job at the fertilizer plant, his suspicious pudgy hands running over the dull coins. If one coin is missing, he has me drop everything and count.

I helped Arnold into his coat one Saturday morning in November, the change jingling in his pocket. He insists on carrying our weeks' worth of scrounging himself, and I don't fight him on it. Dad saunters out of the darkened bedroom, the TV flashing between commercials, to grab another beer. He's wearing the same shirt he came home in last night, and there's a yellow stain down the front. "Be back before dark," he tells us before heading back down the hallway, his sole attempt at parenting finished for the day. The truth is he's usually passed out by dinner and stands an equal chance of hearing a tornado whip past the house as he does hearing Arnold and me coming home late.

I get Arnold situated in my bicycle's sidecar before pedaling away from our house and block, whose street sign has been on the verge of disintegration for years. It's not that Arnold can't ride a bicycle; he just gets distracted. A puppy skipping down the sidewalk, or an abandoned corn-popper toy, is enough to send him careening into traffic, mindless of all danger. Bobby Thompson, a smart-alecky kid with an underbite, used to tease us about the sidecar until we dumped a grocery sack full of our dog's crap (a month's worth, saved up) on his lawn, wedged his yearbook picture in the top, and lit the whole mess on fire. So far, we're the only ones I know who've burned a dog-crap effigy.

When we get to the arcade, we split the money evenly down the middle. Most people probably assume I'm the one who finds the most smashed Pepsi cans, dirt-encrusted bottle caps, and discarded pickle jars on account of Arnold's learning disability. But that kid is a magpie, stuffing bits of metal into an old cartoon backpack where his homework should be.

We push through the turnstile, throwing our full weight against the rusty hinges until we pop out the other side with a reluctant *thump*. Arnold takes off

before I can remind him to check in with me every half hour, a strategy I worked out after he wandered into the *carniceria* one day, and I almost had a heart attack. I looked for him up and down the arcade's rows of flashing neon and in the bathrooms where the lights flicker and rolls of toilet paper line the toilet tanks' lids because the dispensers are broken. Now, he's ensconced in the yellow glow of his favorite coin pusher, Jungle Jive, a vaguely racist holdout from the '80s that Arnold claims has the highest payout.

I head to a dingy corner of the arcade to the dusty Mortal Kombat cabinet. I always start with the old favorites—Mario, Space Invaders, and Gauntlet—before moving onto the newer games whose controls are covered in a thinner layer of adolescent sweat. I work in a few rounds of Skee-Ball to get my blood pumping. My friends at school claim I'm anal-retentive, a phrase I had to look up the first time I heard it, but they're wrong. It's not that I have to approach these games chronologically; it's because I like to. I like seeing the progression of the pixelated displays with laughably small CPUs and analog circuitry to the sophisticated ultra-rendered 3D displays with graphics cards I'd give my right thumb to cannibalize. That's what I want to do when I grow up: develop video games. I don't even care what kind—PC, Internet RPGs, console—as long as I'm in the game, pun intended.

Not that I'm stupid enough to admit it. No, when grown-ups ask what I want to be when I grow up, or when our teacher asks us to research occupations and give a report in front of the class, I never say video game developer. Plumber, garbage man, or minister: these are acceptable answers, based on my background and my parents' low income. Video game developers have to go to college, and college is expensive. The best I can hope for is the odd night class here and there, maybe a hardship scholarship if one of my parents dies before I turn 18. And despite our Dad's steady beer habit, the chances of him killing his liver in the next five years seem low. Dreams like that are for other people.

Back in the game, my character is kicked in the stomach, his health bar dwindling, when Randy and Andrew, a couple of kids from school, spot me. They squint at my screen, pretending they can't make out the pixelated characters. They ask me where Arnold is, and I point in the direction of the coin pushers. They smirk but don't say anything; they learned a long time ago not to make fun of how Arnold has a hard time with simple math and how he has to wear Velcro sneakers because he can't tie his shoes.

"So," Randy says, leaning against the cabinet, as if casualness can make up for that Krakatoa of a face, "enter the science fair yet?"

I haven't, even though my project is done. For the last year, I've been learning JavaScript out of library books and online tutorials. For the science fair, I made a video game. It's essentially Bejeweled, albeit primitive. The winner gets a $500 savings bond for college.

I shrug. "Not yet."

Randy puffs out his chest. "Just submitted mine."

"Yeah, he got a bunch of plants and grew them under different lights. The ones he put outside grew the best. Plants need sunlight. Who knew?" Andrew rolls his eyes and punches Randy in the arm. Randy *thuds* against the cabinet, jostling the joystick that's still clutched in my hand.

My character dies, and I collect the three red tickets hanging out of the slot. Randy and Andrew wander off toward the snack counter. Arnold is in the same spot, staring at the coin pusher and its steady back-and-forth sweeping, a stray coin falling into the slanted mouth at the bottom. He is so focused, oblivious to the flashing lights and inane arcade music around him. I envy him. He'll probably never drive a car or hold down a real job, but he knows what he wants and never lets anything get in the way of it.

As soon as I finish shooting a bunch of aliens and soothing my losses with a mediocre game of Skee-Ball (the balls are so dented after years of wear and tear that getting one to roll straight would be a miracle), I rouse Arnold. We collect his tickets and cross the street to the burger stand to order small beef patties with cheese, probably Velveeta, that are cheap and decent. I buy Arnold two cheeseburgers. When he asks for a third, I stick a diet coke in his hands instead. He's getting a little pudgy. The nurse at school said something about growth-hormone problems and then mentioned Arnold's chromosomes. Arnold frowns at the diet coke but drains it nonetheless.

I look across the street, past the desiccated wood tables we sit at. The arcade is the only real pop of color on this gray November day, the only contradiction in the mundane landscape. Even the *carniceria* has faded, its signs advertising chicken breast at fair prices desaturated from years of rain and splattered deicer. The people who move in and out of the shops are gray blobs of winter coats with their hoods pulled up, hurrying from their cars to the stores and back. I

wonder how it all looks to Arnold, if he sees the gray landscape and instinctively feels its lack of possibility.

"I haven't entered the science fair yet," I tell him. I know he doesn't always follow, but talking to Arnold is therapeutic, and he always at least pretends that he's listening.

Arnold bites the straw of his coke but inclines his head toward me.

"What if, after all that work, they don't pick mine? What if they pick something stupid, like Randy's? Something that's been done a hundred thousand times? I'd be setting myself up."

Arnold shrugs over his now-empty cup and moves the straw from side to side with his tongue. He wipes a string of drool that has been creeping down his face since he finished his last cheeseburger. He jingles the remaining change in his pocket, letting me know that lunchtime is over; it's time to get back to the arcade. There are still a few hours of daylight left, and he wants to spend it in the yellow glow of the racist coin pusher.

After Arnold gets settled in front of Jungle Jive, his nose smudging the cloudy Plexiglas, I wander the rows, hands in my pockets, sweating all over my meager collection of red tickets. Neon cyans, oranges, and magentas blur past. Lightning bolts, monsters with huge jaws, even a demented-looking Pegasus, its eyes bulging as it flies upward, can't lift me from the funk that I've been in since Randy and Andrew brought up the science fair.

Even if I did win, what's $500 against the thousands it would cost to go to school? If I find a job next year when I start high school and I work full-time every summer, it still wouldn't be enough, not even close. And if we worry about Dad stealing our arcade money, I can only imagine what he might do if he knew I had $500 stashed away.

I pass the prize counter, the Chinese finger traps and stuffed dogs seemingly mocking my hopeless situation, when a commotion erupts from the bank of coin pushers. I rush toward them, convinced that Arnold has done something, made some innocent blunder that disrupted the arcade's status quo. Once, at one of our cousins' wedding, he told a bridesmaid her dress was too small for her. To be fair, her arms were bulging out of the sleeves, the shoulder seams growing weaker as the day wore on, but it knocked us off the family-function guest list for a while.

I approach the coin pushers and shoulder my way past the crowd that has gathered around Arnold. "I've never seen anything like it," a few people are saying. When Arnold catches sight of me, he pulls me toward the machine and the veritable mountain of red tickets. And the machine is still spitting them out, an unbroken coil snaking its way around his Velcro sneakers. He describes how he'd been building up the pile of coins, feeding them into the machine at just the right time so they stacked on top of each other, until they couldn't hold any longer and avalanched down the front in one glorious succession of *tink...tinktink...tinktinktink*.

"You've been working on this machine for how long?"

Arnold scrunches his face. "My birthday?"

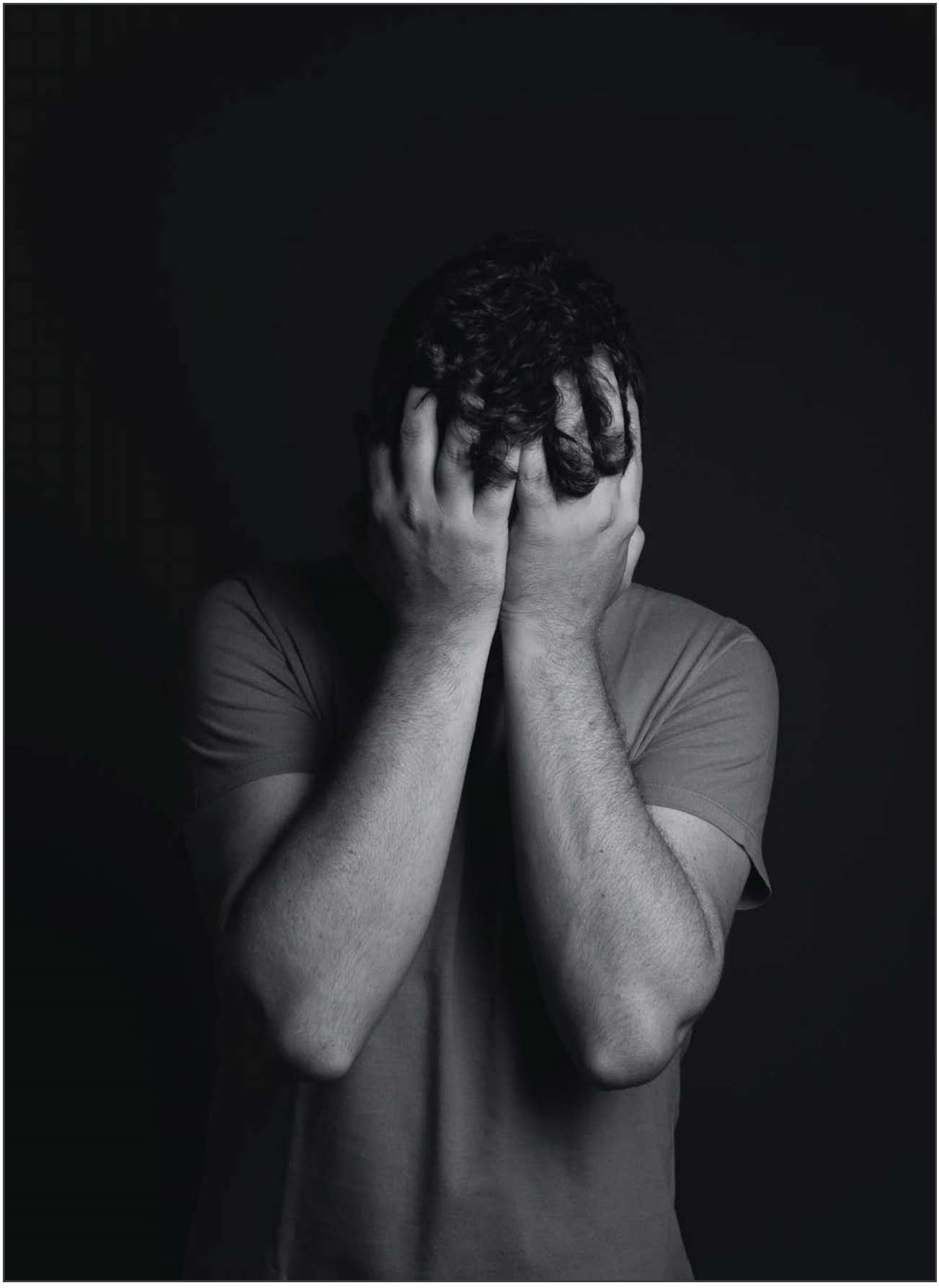
I remember. It was the first time we came to this arcade—the one closer to our house closed down and was turned into a furniture rental place. Arnold's birthday is February 12. He's been working on this machine almost as long as I've been learning how to code.

When the crowd dissipates, we gather the tumbleweed coils of tickets and throw them down on the prize counter. I take the sweaty wad of tickets out of my pocket and place them on top. Arnold picks the jumbo gummy bear, a couple of pistol-style squirt guns, and an assortment of finger traps, Slinkys, and fruit-flavored nougats.

We make it home just before the streetlights flicker on. Mom is gone, and Dad is asleep on the sofa, a game show playing on the TV with the sound turned off. A group of tin soldiers mingles where his fingers hover, inches from the carpet. He isn't snoring, which means he stopped at a six-pack. Even though it's almost dark and the wind is whistling through the cracks in the fence, we fill the water pistol at the kitchen sink and take potshots at each other in the backyard until Mom gets home and yells for us to come inside. We smile at each other over a plate of lukewarm chicken nuggets. Arnold tips a Slinky off the table and it somersaults toward the refrigerator.

"I think I will enter the science fair," I tell him after dinner as he breaks open the plastic packaging of the giant gummy bear.

Arnold nods and hands me an ear. "Can't wait for next Saturday."



Straightening Out

Michael Tilley's work has appeared in *Rosebud Magazine*, *The Chaffin Journal*, *Offcourse*, *Speech Bubble Magazine*, and others. He lives with his wife and two children in Brooklyn, New York.

Down on his knees, drawing a bead of baseboard caulk, Seth heard a strange sound overhead. He finished the line, stilled, and listened.

There it was again: an extended creaking at shifting pitches. Not the intermittent sigh of an old farmhouse in the wind, he thought.

He set aside his caulk gun, pulled off his shoe covers, rose to his feet, and wiped his hands on a rag. A stray speck of compound on a switch plate caught his eye; he chipped it gone with his thumbnail. Beyond the laundry room's frost-edged window, a rabbit in the dew-wet grass scooted out of sight behind a garden bed.

Seth walked along the hall to the bottom of the staircase. Slipping his hands into the back pockets of his jeans, he dropped his chin on his chest and listened again.

Maybe he heard something; maybe he didn't. He couldn't tell for sure. But a few beats later, it was clear as a bell: another creak just like the one before.

"Hello?"

The creaking stopped. Then, there was silence.

"Hello?"

Nothing.

The only sounds in the house were of a ticking radiator and a distant leaf blower. At the top of the stairs, dust motes drifted in a beam of sunlight that slanted inside from an unseen window. Seth watched and waited, massaging his toothache with his tongue.

Finally, he muttered, "Whatever," and went back to work. He wasn't about to be caught snooping where he had no reason to be. Not a chance. Fuck up this job and Kim would have his ass.

As it turned out, Seth didn't hear a peep from above the entire rest of the day, which made him wonder if it was all in his head.

On the other hand, a few hours after calling upstairs, this happened: while he ate his lunch on the back stoop, looking at the fall foliage and the university atop the hill, a door slammed somewhere in the house. Going inside, he found the place empty. Opening the front door, he saw only a woman on the street pushing a stroller. He turned, re-scanned the house, and then swung back to the street and shot another look around. Nope, no sign of anything.

He *knew* he hadn't imagined that slam, though.

It was almost five o' clock when Seth finished up. As tree-branch shadows played on the laundry room walls, he swept the new tiles, stacked the supplies he was leaving, and removed his shoe covers for good. He stood a moment, surveying his work. *Pretty decent*, he thought.

As he contemplated whether whatever they were eating for dinner would work for his bad tooth, he went out the back door to drop a big bag of trash in the garbage can in the driveway. The air smelled of fireplaces, and it was turning dark fast. The sky had gone all inky blue, save for a pale pink thread skimming the horizon. High in the distance shined the lights of the university; on the porch next door glowed a three-eyed jack-o'-lantern. Seth heard someone raking leaves and the faint strains of a violin. Across the street, a lamp switched on. Then, a soft jingling sounded through the hush, and a second later, a large woolly dog trotted by on the sidewalk, followed several paces behind by a slightly bent man in

a flat cap and barn jacket.

"Good evening," the old man said to Seth, touching the brim of his hat.

Seth liked being in town—the feel of the world here, the change from normal. He always had, ever since he was little.

He turned and headed back toward the door. On the third stride, a weird twinge in his knee struck him (probably from all the squatting and kneeling…unless it was that tumble while horsing around with Dustin), but the pain vanished as suddenly as it'd cropped up. His stomach rumbled. Leaves crunched underfoot. Ruing not being able to have a drink tonight, he started climbing the steps.

"Hey, there!"

Seth glanced up. It was the owner of the house, angling off the sidewalk with a satchel slung over her shoulder. He moved down the steps and waited for her.

"Good day?" she asked.

"Yep, comin' along. We're just about there."

"Wonderful!"

They went inside to check the laundry room.

She taught at the university, either English or philosophy—he couldn't remember—and looked the part: long gray-white hair worn loosely, chunky black-framed eyeglasses, and dark clothes. Her personality, though, surprised Seth. She was bubbly, even sort of goofy, he'd say. It wasn't at all what he expected from a professor, especially one her age. Eleanor was her name. Nice lady. He'd gotten hooked up with her through Kim, who'd met her while serving food at a campus function. When it somehow came up that the professor's house needed a little work, Kim said that her husband could probably help. Of course, six months ago, there wouldn't have been a chance in hell of her offering.

Ten minutes later, they were standing in the driveway. Seth was set to go with his tool case in hand, and the professor was pinning her knee-length open sweater closed with folded arms. Their breath showed as they spoke.

"Can I give you something now?" she asked. "Or would you rather be paid all at once?"

Seth seesawed his head as if deliberating. He definitely could use a few dollars, but he didn't want to seem desperate.

"Whatever you prefer is perfectly fine with me," she said.

"Well…I guess…maybe…" Trailing off, he added a few ruminative tongue clucks.

The professor regarded him with a patient smile. Suddenly, she clapped her hands together.

"I'm going to give you something," she said decisively, reaching into one of the big hip pockets on her sweater. Then she froze. "Unless, of course, you don't want me to."

"Nope, that'll be fine. Thank you."

She pulled a slim leather wallet from her pocket and unzipped it. Averting his eyes, Seth looked past her, out across the broad open space behind the house. Right away, he spotted some movement in the trees at the far end of the grass. A deer, he assumed.

Then he realized it was a person.

As the professor riffled through bills, counting under her breath, Seth saw the figure—clearly a man—emerge from the wood. Tallish and hunched over, he hurried over the ground with his hands in his pockets and head covered by a hood. He was walking straight toward them.

The professor looked up and, noting Seth's gaze, followed it.

Her expression changed just a shade, a bit of its cheeriness draining away.

"That's my son," she said.

They watched him draw closer. He flicked his foot at something in his path, stumbled a little while hitting a dip, hawked, and spat loud enough for them to hear. At about 20 yards off, he swerved left, stealing through the shadows of the adjacent property until passing out of sight behind a garage.

His mother saw him off with a dismissive wave of the hand.

When she turned to Seth again, she was back to looking like before.

"How's this?" said the professor, chipper-voiced, extending a small stack of folded bills.

They talked the job over a couple of minutes longer and, before parting ways, agreed on Seth returning the day after next, when the washer and dryer were scheduled to be delivered. He'd install the appliances, tie up any loose ends, and that'd be that.

"Tooth any better?"

Leaning back against the kitchen sink and holding a coffee mug, Seth shrugged. "Maybe some." He felt around his cheek. He shrugged again. "A little, I guess."

Kim plunked her mug on the table and got bug-eyed. "Will you please go to the dentist?"

"If it's not better soon, I'll go."

"Yeah, and—oh, never mind!"

Shaking her head, Seth's wife lifted her mug and took a sip.

Seth's phone beeped in the next room. He thought it could be Nate, who'd said he might need a hand today with a painting job. He hadn't heard from him since the weekend.

It was a message from the gas company about the balance on the account.

Seth put the phone in his sweatshirt pocket and went back into the kitchen. Kim was rinsing her mug, framed by the red and yellow hillside in the little window above the sink. He walked up next to her and set his mug in the basin. Before he turned away, she laid her hand on his forearm.

"Don't forget, you need to pick them up later." She looked him straight in the eye—not threateningly, but as if taking a precaution—like she was going to burn the obligation into his head, just to be safe.

"Yep, got it," Seth said. He'd already remembered. He'd remembered for a while now, but that probably wouldn't matter, especially when the kids were involved.

The trash smelled, Seth suddenly noticed, so he tied up the bag and hauled it out the front door. Crossing the cold, damp ground with his bare feet, he jogged to the garbage can and back. He paused on the bottom step to wipe bits of dirt and gravel from his soles, then continued up, tugging open the storm door.

Not far off, a rifle shot exploded.

Seth let the door go and turned around. The report ricocheted from ridge to ridge and echoed across the valley. But everything he saw before him—the long grassy slope and the two-lane road below it, the cut cornfield past the road and the vivid hills in the distance—was still bathed in morning light. He coughed into his fist and went inside.

"It's getting late," Kim said when he walked back into the kitchen. "We should get them moving."

Seth threw open the door to the kids' bedroom and barked into the gloom that it was time to wake up. Then Kim and Seth started raising a racket. Kim rummaged in the fridge for lunch makings like a bear, while Seth clanged silverware from the dish rack into a drawer.

From the kid's room came a *thunk*, followed by a groan.

"So, what're you up to today?" Kim asked. She was standing to his left, chopping celery stalks into chunks. "You're not back at the professor's place till tomorrow, right?"

"Mm-hmm."

She popped a piece of celery into her mouth—he could hear her crunch and chew—then she began hacking a fresh stalk. Seth pushed the drawer shut, looked out the window, and scratched some dry splatter off the glass. Outside the trailer house up the hill, a tarp covering stacked firewood flapped in the wind.

He glanced at her. He understood what the set of her face meant.

"Nate may want me for something today," Seth said. "I'm not sure. It's possible."

Kim nodded slowly, her eyes focused on the cutting board.

Dustin shuffled out of the bedroom, wordlessly hugged each of them, and shuffled on to the TV room, where he collapsed on the sofa and put a pillow over his head.

"Otherwise," Seth continued, "might not have anything." His wife, who'd started slathering peanut butter onto white bread, didn't react. "That's okay, though. It'll let

me look at the shed. That roof has gotta be fixed before winter."

Kim turned to him. "Just don't…just make sure you pick them up."

"Jesus Christ! Yeah, I'm on it. I already told you I am."

She smirked, started to say something, but stopped when Jessie emerged from the bedroom, scowling and slump-shouldered, and mutely went to join her brother.

Kim waited until the girl was out of the kitchen, and then, without looking at Seth, said flatly, "I need to get ready." She set the knife on the countertop and stalked into the bathroom, closing the door behind her.

"Word got around. Seth was a scammer, a scumbag, a sorry excuse for a husband and father."

Seth called out to the kids, asking what they wanted for breakfast. They didn't answer. He let them doze a couple of minutes more, busying himself with finishing the lunches as the shower ran, and then asked again. When they still didn't respond, he put two bowls of Cheerios on the table and went to get them, first carrying in Dustin and then retrieving Jessie, who was now too old for that and could only be ushered by the arm.

Through the bathroom door came the sound of the shower shutting off, the curtain sliding back, and the sink faucet switching on. A minute later, Kim walked out in a towel and went directly to their bedroom. Seth was urging the kids to take their last bites and get dressed fast—the bus would be there soon—when she reappeared in the uniform she wore for work at the university dining hall.

"Go, you two," she said. "Listen to Dad."

Dustin and Jessie trudged off, grumbling, and Kim brought their bowls to the sink.

"Are you having more coffee?" Seth asked after a few seconds, just to say something.

"I'll get some at work," she said, drying her hands and walking past him into the kids' room.

He heard her tell them that she was leaving, that she loved them, and that they should have a good day. Then her voice dropped into an indistinct whisper.

"Got it," Jessie said once the whispering stopped, in the strenuously sober tone she adopted whenever, as the older child, she was given some responsibility. Kim repeated that she loved them, told them to hurry, and came back into the kitchen.

Furrow-browed and smelling like shampoo, Kim righted the salt shaker, shoved a chair under the table, and grabbed her phone. Then she looked at him, her eyes extra blue in the pale light falling across her face.

"See you later."

"All right," said Seth. "Later."

She turned and walked out.

It wasn't long before the school bus showed up, roaring over the hill along the rutted lane that ran through the trees to the main road. Hearing it, Seth handed Dustin's toothbrush to Jessie. "Will you finish this?" he said.

By the time he opened the door, the bus was idling at the foot of the slope. Other kids were climbing on. Straddling the threshold, he yelled into the house for Dustin and Jessie to put on their shoes and jackets, and to hustle up. On a patch of gravel beside the bus, a group of parents were gesturing and laughing loud enough for him to hear. Seth knew them all, had been to their places, partied with them. But he never went down to the bus stop anymore.

The kids came tearing out of the house, pecking Seth's waist (Dustin) and chest (Jessie) as they flew by.

"Hey!" Seth called after them. "I'm picking you two up later."

"Okay!" Dustin yelled without slowing and immediately shouted to a friend.

Jessie, though, stopped in her tracks and turned. She didn't say anything, just gazed up from the grass, her thumbs hooked in her backpack straps as the wind disturbed her ponytail. The look she was giving him wasn't the look of a child.

"Yes, I know," she said after a moment. "Mom told me. Bye, Dad." She swung back around and jogged away.

Once the bus had gone, Seth returned to the kitchen.

He emptied the sink strainer, set a new sponge out, and collected some crumbs. He used the bathroom. He poured more coffee. He fixed the running toilet, drifted into his bedroom, and finally ended up in the TV room, where he sat down to finish his mug. He was in that same spot, fiddling with his achy tooth, his coffee done ten minutes ago, when his phone rang.

"Yeah, I can be there quickly," he said. "Not a problem at all."

He was worried that Kim might leave him. She'd thought about it, he was sure. Seth wouldn't have blamed her if she'd decided to. What he'd done to her was low-down and dishonorable. He had humiliated her.

His game was a swindle. He went from house to house, prepared with lies devised to elicit pity—short on rent, car not running, kid in need of an operation—and turned them into handouts, which he used to fuel a bender. Bankrolled, he'd disappear for a day or two, ignoring his phone. When he finally came home, still drunk or stoned, Kim would interrogate him, push him to rack his hazy brain for the name of every neighbor he'd hit up. And then she'd walk out to the car and make the rounds, showing up on doorsteps shame-faced and apologetic, paying off his debts with money they couldn't spare.

Word got around: Seth was a scammer, a scum bag, a sorry excuse for a husband and father. When the kids began getting ragged on at school, they talked about moving. But where could they go, and what would they do once they got there? They didn't have any answers. They were stuck, and they both knew it. Kim cried.

Seth wished he hadn't acted edgy with her that morning.

He had no illusions that people would forget, that he'd ever not be under suspicion. But it'd made a difference, cleaning up these last months. Things with Kim were better, likewise with the kids. And occasionally, if somebody were desperate enough, he'd receive a call like the one before about the emergency to which he now was headed. It was a start, at least.

He rattled along beneath falling leaves, enjoying the scent of the overnight rain and wet earth in the crisp air. A sheep pasture flashed by, a doe freshly split open. A banner advertising VFW Spaghetti Night stood beside a picked-over pumpkin patch. Somebody with their face on a makeshift sign wanted to sell an old riding mower.

"Shit," Seth said suddenly.

He remembered that a tool he needed was at the professor's house.

Seth swung into the driveway and put the car into park. He walked around back, knocked, waited a few seconds, and then shook his tangled keys. With the one the professor had given him for the job, he unlocked the door.

The house was cold and dark, save for some dull sun filtering through a window at the end of the hall, and it smelled of yesterday's paint. Right there on the left was the laundry room. Seth went in to get his tool.

"Hey!" yelled someone in the house.

Seth stepped into the hall.

A man in a ski cap was coming forward through the murk. He had something in his hand.

"Stay away from my mother!"

The man was almost on him. He saw his twisted, wild face.

Seth's first punch smashed his temple while his next cracked his jaw. Then he banged two hard shots into his gut.

The professor's son lay wheezing on his side with his knees drawn up, grimacing and grabbing his stomach, his eyes hammered shut while his lips moved a little. On the floor next to him was a thick tree branch. Seth recognized him. He hung around the bars, always alone and angry looking, never talking unless to make trouble—a real dark type.

Seth sank into a squat, leaned against the wall, and stared at nothing.

When his head cleared, what was left in it was his promise to pick up the kids.

"No more surprises," Kim had told him the day he moved back in.

90%

Paul C. Rosenblatt has been writing for literary magazines for three years. He has published creative nonfiction in *Streetlight Magazine* and short stories in *Avatar Review*, *Writing Disorder*, and *Shark Reef*.

Their dating profiles matched well: They were both in their early thirties, divorced with no children; they both liked listening to jazz and reading mystery novels; and they were both looking for a long-term relationship. In the first moments of their first masked face-to-face meeting at an outdoor coffee shop, he noticed that she had striking brown eyes and was quite tense. She noticed that he was a bit overweight and had intelligent, caring blue eyes and dark-brown curly hair. As the meetup at the coffee shop progressed, he didn't like that she remained tense, but he appreciated that she was a good conversationalist, an attentive listener, and was totally honest about herself. Although she didn't particularly like his laugh, she liked that he was curious about her, but not inappropriately so for a first meeting. He seemed to enjoy and value what she had to say, and he had interesting things to say.

Their first date went so well compared to the first meetings they had had with others while searching for a relationship, that they met a second time and then a third—outdoors, masked, and socially distanced. Then, after a long phone conversation about COVID-19 risks and any possible exposure points for the both of them in the past two weeks, they agreed to meet indoors, without masks, in her one-room efficiency apartment.

They had just finished eating the spaghetti dinner she prepared. After shared dishwashing and drying, they sat down on the only substantial piece of furniture in her little apartment: a small sofa bed, currently in its sofa form.

She turned to look at him and said, "Something is bothering me about a woman I shared an office with five days a week until we started working from home. People think that Sandra is a good person, but she often lies to her husband. She pretends she's keeping to their budget, but she secretly buys herself clothes that are way over their budget. She pretends she's a health nut, but after he's asleep, she sneaks into the kitchen and fills up on chocolate chip cookies. And now, the biggest lie of all: She wants a baby, and he doesn't, so she's pretending to be on the pill. But she stopped taking it two months ago. If she gets pregnant, she will tell him that sometimes the pill doesn't work. I wouldn't lie to my partner. Would you?"

His body tensed and his heart started pounding so hard that he thought she might be able to hear it. He had been feeling that a life with her could be very nice. But her question alarmed him. He wanted to give an honest answer, but he was afraid that his honest answer might lead her to dump him. He could say that people shouldn't lie to their partners and that he would never lie to her, but that would be a lie in itself because he believed that lies weren't always bad in a relationship. He didn't want to deceive her, but he also didn't want to tell her the truth. Seconds ticked by. He had to say something. He couldn't continue to think in circles. He started talking, not sure what he was going to say.

"I'm not going to defend Sandra. But I think that partners don't have to know everything about each other, if that's even possible. Maybe it's best that they don't know everything." He stopped, anxious about what her reaction would be.

Her face turned red. She crossed her arms and said in a tight, irritated voice, "I understand what you're saying. But I want complete honesty about everything. For me, it's wrong to lie and spend money way over budget, binge eat, and lie so that you and your partner will have a baby when your partner

doesn't want one. I wouldn't do anything like that to a partner. Would you?"

He smiled a wry and uncomfortable smile and cleared his throat. "I'm not saying I've lied to you, or ever would. But I'm not interested in being open about everything. I don't know if people can be. I don't know if it's even healthy to try."

Her face was still red. She frowned and said in a husky, tense voice, "I don't think that people can have a caring, loving life together if they aren't open about everything. My marriage fell apart because my husband lied and lied. I still feel burned about that. I want openness. I need it."

He nodded. "I understand. Openness is good, and being closed about something big definitely can make trouble." He paused, sighed, and then added, "But is it good to be totally open? For starters, I don't think I can be open with myself about everything, let alone be open to someone who I want to be close to."

"What do you mean? What are you keeping from me or keeping me from?"

Now *his* face turned red. He sighed and cleared his throat. "This is going to be hard for me to admit. It's stuff I've never told anyone." He sighed and then sighed again. "Okay. Well, four years ago, I lost a really good job. I told everyone that I quit because the job was dangerous. But the truth is that I was fired, and I still have no idea why. And that hurts. So there's that. And then...I don't really want to tell you this. But, well, I shouldn't hide it from you if you want to know the things I haven't been telling you that make me look bad. And if we keep going together, I'm sure you'd find out about this, and I don't want you to feel betrayed that I've kept it from you. Okay, so, here it is: I have dyslexia. I'm terrible at reading and spelling."

There was a long pause, and then she said, with a tension in her voice that made it clear that it was for her to speak hard for her to say what she was saying, "Thank you for sharing that with me. Thank you for trusting me. Your sharing those two things with me moves us closer to the openness I want. And to be open with you, I should share my reactions. But I don't really have reactions yet. I'll keep on reflecting on what you just shared. And I'll try to be as open with you as you have been with me."

He shook his head and said, "You don't have to be. I'm not asking for that."

She paused for what seemed like a long time and then said, "Look, I feel vulnerable after years of a crazy marriage. I think you and I are hopeful that this relationship will grow to become secure, safe, caring, and long-term. A lot of my pain from the past is entangled in secrets, so I've been thinking that I need you to be really, really open. But now you've got me wondering whether asking for total openness could create its own injuries…in you and maybe in me."

His body was still tense. He smiled wryly and said, "It's okay with me if you don't tell me everything. This is hard for both of us, being in the same boat together with both of us steering and being steered. Neither of us has full control, so we have to be willing to go along with each other's steering. I'm willing to go along with yours, even though it feels risky. I hope you feel okay about going along with mine."

She took a deep breath and let it out audibly. "So far, I've liked the boat ride with you."

"Thanks. I want to be known by you in the ways *I* want to be known. I want you to know the me that I hope I can be with you. But if you're like me, you have things in your past and inside yourself that are too uncomfortable to think about, let alone tell someone else about. Plus, there are probably things in your past that I wouldn't be comfortable knowing about and things in my past that you wouldn't be comfortable knowing about."

"That makes sense to me. But I don't know."

"Look, maybe we should try a compromise. Let's aim for 90% knowing. This would mean that only a small portion of the past or what we're currently thinking or doing would be hidden, so there wouldn't be many secrets or nondisclosures. And hopefully, the 10% we don't know about won't be anything toxic or deal breaking. Does that make sense?"

Her face and neck were now scarlet, and a vein in her forehead was visibly throbbing. She said, with her voice shaking, "I don't really understand what I'd be agreeing to if I said yes, and I don't want to turn you away by saying no. But maybe the key isn't the difference between 90% and 100%. Maybe it's the difference between not trusting and trusting. Can I trust you? Can you trust me? What a gamble to bet my life, if we stay together, that you'll always be a safe place for me. And what a gamble you would have to take to bet your life that I will always be a safe place for you. Damn. This is scary."

He nodded. “Definitely scary. But I like you a lot and like where things have been going with you. So, are we okay, at least for now, even with both of us feeling our way forward about this stuff?”

She hesitated for a moment and then reached for his hand, pulled it toward her lips, and kissed his palm, saying in almost a whisper, “Thanks. I’m not sure where this boat is going, and I’m definitely not doing all the steering. But I’m not planning to get off the boat anytime soon.”

Wordlessly, they stood up and opened the sofa bed. Each smiled shyly. Soon, they were making love—tenderly, hopefully, but also anxiously. Both were anxious about whether they really understood each other, where things were going, how safe they were from emotional wounds, and whether they had actually resolved the issues of openness. She was anxious about whether he somehow was deceiving her, though at the moment, she was mostly thinking about the pleasure, excitement, and touching. He was anxious about whether she would ever trust him and whether he could be with her and not feel her always wanting him to reveal more than he wanted to, or possibly could, though at the moment, he was also mostly thinking about the pleasure, excitement, and touching.

Grace and Change

Sam Paget is a short story writer from Birmingham, England. He writes contemporary, slice-of-life style fiction, set in his home city and focused on working-class characters.

Anne's was a decent café. It had a hygiene rating of four. The single missing star came down to faulty record-keeping and paperwork. This was common for small independent places in the city. Record-keeping and paperwork weren't Anne's area of expertise. She struggled with things like spreadsheets and tax forms. Anne had inherited the diner from her mother, Lily. As a young girl, Anne had worked at what was then called "Lily's" after school and on the weekends. As a young woman, she had worked there full-time. As a middle-aged woman, she had taken over when her mother was diagnosed with Alzheimer's and changed the name to "Anne's." She always had at least two youngsters working for her at once. She liked having youngsters work for her, because the right ones would always be eager to please. The right youngsters would be grateful for a small slice of money and a little free food if they cooked it themselves.

Oil spurted up and stung Grace's arms. She tipped the bacon and eggs out of the pan and onto a plate. Her forearms were singed. She pushed the plate down the line so that Yolanda could put some beans and toast with the bacon and eggs onto it.

"I'm still burning myself," said Grace. "You told me I'd learn not to, back when I started."

"I manage not to," said Yolanda. She put the plate on a counter where Anne could pick it up and take it to a table. They were busy because a few of the estate's empty units had been bought up by a logistics company. A lot of forklift drivers wanted a fried breakfast on their lunch break. "Do you do it when you're using a frying pan at home?"

"I don't eat bacon at home anymore. I can't stand the smell of frying oil, not with anything. Not even mushrooms or tomatoes."

"Maybe you'll start to like it again. You used to love eggs and bacon."

Anne picked up the plate they'd just filled. She was breathing heavily and sweating. She stuck a slip of paper with another order written on it above the counter.

"Black pudding, bacon, eggs, beans, tomatoes, toast," read Yolanda.

Grace got started on the frying.

The cafe quieted down at about four o'clock. The welders and machinists from the steel place opposite the cafe had gone home, and the electronics place next door was always a ghost town until about five o'clock on most days. The council workers from the recycling yard at the other end of the estate were long gone. Grace and Yolanda went out back through the fire escape to get some fresh air.

"Not a bad last day, is it?" said Yolanda.

"No, suppose not," said Grace.

"It's the end of an era, you know. I'm gonna miss you."

"Thanks. We can meet up for a drink sometime, maybe. Heck, we can even go for a drink today after we knock off. You up to anything?"

"No, nothing. I was just gonna go home. You really want to go for a drink?"

"Can do. Might as well. To commemorate my last day, you know."

"Where can we go?"

"No idea. Where's the closest place that's decent?"

"The Dog and Jackal is just down that way, a ten-minute walk." Yolanda pointed down the road, past the big gray industrial units. "Are you gonna miss this place?"

"I won't miss the place, but I'll miss having a job, I think."

The rest of their shift went the way it normally did. They fried food. Anne took orders, made tea and coffee, and took the food to the customers. Closing time rolled around, and the two girls helped Anne close up. Once they'd finished, they stood outside, all of them with their coats and handbags. Anne hugged Grace and kissed her on the cheek. Anne's body was thick and warm, like a blanket that had been hung on a radiator.

"I'll miss you," said Anne. "Make sure you come around when you get the chance. Let me know how things go with the new job."

"I will."

"Are you going to come for a drink with us?" asked Yolanda.

"I can't, sorry," said Anne. "I have to go help my mother do her housework. See you tomorrow, Yol. Best of luck at your new job, Grace."

Grace and Yolanda said goodbye and then set off down the road toward the Dog and Jackal.

"Anne seemed to think you were changing jobs," said Yolanda. "I thought you were going back to school. How come Anne thought you were changing jobs?"

"I'm not doing either," said Grace. "I can't work at all anymore, or study. I can't do anything."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm going to need to look after my Dad from now on. I won't be able to work or study, or anything."

"Oh. I'm sorry about that."

They got to the pub and ordered a Purple Rain and a Mojito. They swapped glasses, both of them tasting each of the drinks. They sat near a window, looking out over the smoking area. The rubbish bins had been emptied and scattered, probably by foxes. There were a lot of foxes around and about the industrial estate, living amongst the pallets and stillages that were left outside.

"If you don't mind me asking," said Yolanda, "what is it that's the matter with your Dad?"

"He was in an accident," said Grace. "He crashed his motorbike. Someone pulled out on him on a roundabout in Stourbridge. This was back in March. He was in a coma for two weeks, and then he woke up."

"Is he okay?"

"He can't move much anymore. He can respond to certain things but only with noises and stuff. The doctor asked if he wanted them to continue treating him, and he responded with something like a 'yes.' He can blink to answer simple questions, so that's what we've been using for a while, though he's working on oral speech a bit now. His brain was partially damaged, but I've had a kind of conversation with him. He can sort of say 'yes' and 'no.' He's all gone below the neck. He's going to come home in a week or so, and then I'll be caring for him full-time. I'll need to sleep in the same room because he has seizures every couple of hours, and someone needs to be around to see how long they last. If it's more than five minutes, then I'll have to phone an ambulance. I've been reorganizing the house, moving things around, so that we can share a room to sleep in and stuff."

They finished their drinks and went to have Rum and Cokes. Yolanda bought a packet of pork scratchings. Grace wasn't hungry.

"Surely you'll be getting some help," said Yolanda. "Are nurses or carers gonna come 'round? Or maybe a residential place would be right for him."

"I'm waiting to hear back from the council. I've rung them a bunch of times. They said they would send a social worker or a therapist of some sort, and have everything so, and decide how to help. They said they would assess his needs and the house before he comes home, but I haven't heard anything concrete yet."

"They're slow, aren't they? If he's supposed to be coming home in a week…"

"I'm going to call again tomorrow. I don't know what else I can do. I'm waiting to hear about money as well, from the benefits folks."

"You'll be entitled to something, I would think."

"Something, yeah. I don't know how much. I don't know if it'll be enough. I won't know until my Dad comes home. Then, I'll have to figure out how it's all going to work. If I'm going to ask for assistance, I'll need to know what needs to be done to the house.

"Some of them won't help. Some of them would, but I wouldn't trust them to do anything right. No point asking if they're as useful as a chocolate teacup."

We might need to install a stair lift, for instance, or it might be all right having him downstairs. I'll try it, anyway."

Yolanda shook her head in dismay. She put her hand on Grace's shoulder.

"You'll have to take some time to adjust. It ain't easy. You know what? I'll never ride on a motorbike," she said.

"He should have known better," said Grace. "Granddad smashed his leg up on a motorbike, crashed it in the rain, and walked with a limp ever since. He told my Dad not to ride on two wheels—three minimum, like a trike. The stupid thing is, he even has a car. It's only a crappy old Fiesta, and the bike was a Yamaha, which cost a lot. He used to say that he enjoyed riding on two wheels more. He only used the car to take me to school and gymnastics classes and stuff."

"Is there any other family member who can help?"

"I don't know. I haven't asked. Some of them won't help. Some of them would, but I wouldn't trust them to do anything right. No point in asking if they're as useful as a chocolate teacup."

"Anne and I didn't have any idea about any of this. You were exactly the same as normal. You should try to become an actress."

"I told Anne I was going to become a full-time carer. She probably thought I meant as a job, like a support worker."

"See if you can place him in a residential place. That's the thing to do. That's what I would do. Easier for you and better for him. I mean, I'm sure you'll do a perfect job looking after him, but you need to sleep sometime, don't you? He might be able to receive 24-hour care, you know. It ain't fair for you to be on the ball 24/7!"

"I worry that he'd not be happy there or that someone wouldn't treat him right. You hear stories about places like old folks' homes. I owe it to him to look after him myself. I mean, he changed my nappies, fed me, and taught me to ride a push-bike. He's my Dad."

"Just have a think, at least. If it starts to become too much, then it shouldn't all be on your back. My auntie works in a residential home. If he goes to her place, she'll take good care of him. She does her best. It's worth looking into."

They finished the Rum and Cokes and got pints next. Grace had never had a stout, but Yolanda got them each a pint.

"It's like a watery meal," said Grace. "Do you even drink it or chew it?"

"Do you like it?"

"Not really. I think it might be an acquired taste."

"It is. I drink bottles of stouts and ales at home. Cans are no good. I gotta have it from a glass or poured out of a bottle."

A large group of men came into the pub. It was someone's birthday. They were mostly old school friends who still kept in touch and went drinking on birthdays. Some of them started talking to Grace and Yolanda. They started buying them drinks. Grace drank a pint of cider and Blackcurrant, which one of them bought her. She'd never had that before, either, but she liked it. She got talking to a man who worked as a piano tutor. He wasn't drinking because he had to drive later on that night to pick up his son from karate class.

"I go around to different schools and teach the kids," he said.

"I used to play the keyboard," said Grace. "I think I have one at home, up in the attic. I wasn't very good."

"I'm sure you were. Anyone can become good with practice."

"I always wanted to learn how to play the saxophone."

"My sister plays sax. It's a brilliant instrument. You like *The Simpsons*?"

"Never watched a single episode."

"Wow. I grew up on it. The character Lisa plays the saxophone. That's what gave my sister the idea to start playing it. It sounds great. The only trouble is, you can't really play it quietly."

"My neighbors can enjoy hearing me learn," Grace laughed. "I need to do something fun once in a while."

They left the Dog and Jackal near ten o'clock. Yolanda and Grace both smoked cigarettes, even though neither of them smoked regularly. Yolanda insisted on walking Grace all the way home. After a few minutes, they made it to Grace's front door.

"Stay in touch," said Yolanda. "Tonight was fun, I thought. We can do it again sometime."

"Yeah, sure. I'll see how things go when my Dad comes home, what kind of help I can get and how busy I'll be."

"Make sure to chase up the council. Actually, let me know if you need any help as well. I can come around and help with the housework. That kind of thing."

Grace smiled, and her lips shook. Yolanda hugged her and kissed her cheek. Grace sobbed.

"It was so horrible when he was in the coma. And when I go to see him, it's not him anymore. He can't laugh, or talk, or do anything."

"I know. I know. Call me if you need help with anything."

"I'm so angry with him. Why did he have to fuck everything up?"

Yolanda finished up at the diner. She had been working with a new girl who was a year or two younger but was fairly quick on the uptake. She walked to High Street, going past the Dog and Jackal, which reminded her that she'd meant to call Grace and see how she was doing. Her Dad must have been home by then unless the council had organized for him to go straight to a residential place. Maybe they had. Things worked out differently for different people. She remembered the time when her grandma had developed dementia. She had been diagnosed in the hospital when she'd been in for a damaged knee. She never went home. Instead, she'd gone straight to a residential place for dementia patients. It had been simpler that way. There was less messing around.

It was October, and Yolanda had set out to start on her Christmas shopping. She wanted to get it out of the way. She had a holiday to Torquay planned in November and a lot of visits with family over December, so it was better to get it over and done with. She went into a bookshop and picked up a set of sci-fi novels for her brother, then went to an off-license to buy whiskey bottles for her uncle and father. She got boxes of chocolates for her mother and sister.

When she came out of the last shop, she saw Grace on the other side of the street, pushing a man in a wheelchair. He had a plastic-looking tube sticking out of the bottom of his throat. Yolanda ran over to Grace, smiling and waving her hands, although they were full of bags.

"Hey, how are you?" she asked.

"Can't complain," said Grace. "This is my Dad."

"Hey there. How are things with you?"

"Fine. Not too bad. Just going out and about for a walk. We needed some fresh air."

Grace gestured toward her Dad. Her face told a story. It was a story about how she had wanted to do a lot of things, or, at least try to do a lot of things, but hadn't done much of anything that she'd wanted. She had

worked with Yolanda for a year, or close enough. She had talked about learning to play instruments: the saxophone, the guitar, relearning the piano. She had talked about going to Europe, America, Australia. She had talked about going hiking in the Peak District, the Lake District, and the Cairngorms. None of that was part of the story on her face now. Yolanda read the story. When she revisited the story a few hours later, Yolanda realized how happy she was not to have anyone to look after—happy that her Dad was still well, working, and looking after her. She felt guilty for feeling happy, but she would rather feel guilty than swap places with Grace.

"I need to stay up most of the night because of his seizures," said Grace. "But it's okay. We still have the house. We fell behind on our rent and utilities, but now we've got benefits coming in. We're in debt, but we'll be out of it soon."

Grace's Dad started to twitch and moan.

"A fit," said Grace. He went quiet again but looked more tired than before. "I should take him home. He has more fits when he's tired."

Resurrected

Sarah Fairbanks is a bookkeeper by day and a writer by night. She has explored Spain, parts of South America, and Serbia. Sarah now lives in Western Massachusetts where she enjoys hiking and boating. She also continues another lifelong passion and creative outlet—dance. Sarah has been published in *Ink & Sword*, *Halcyon Days,* and *Thieving Magpie.*

Bleary-eyed, I stepped onto the Emerald Isle on wobbly legs, the first few placements of my feet tentative, for I had never ventured outside the walls of the United States. A few feet later, my long legs began to sing, happy to be unrestrained, though my nerves remained on high alert. Although the airport signage included English, it was first penned in Gaelic, which did nothing to assuage my discomfort.

Sweat pooled at my hairline as I arrived at customs. I clutched my passport in my hand. It left a mark on my palm.

The overnight flight took its toll, and my vision blurred...

I turned the corner. I glanced to my side and over my shoulder. The mantra that nighttime in a city was never safe for a woman was ingrained in me. Finding no one in sight, I faced forward and continued walking while tapping my fingers against the hardness of my cell phone that was tucked in my coat pocket. As my mind began to roam, a man suddenly materialized on the sidewalk, only 20 feet away, having stepped out from one of the many doors lining the street. I slowed.

He appeared scrawny, although his oversized hoodie tried to deter this by attempting to manipulate his truthful shape. He held a bulky object wrapped in a sheet or perhaps a small towel. He turned to me. Scratch marks crossed from one eye to his chin. He quickly smushed the item into his pocket. His hand was shaking. I came to a standstill. A chill ran through the air as we locked eyes. The world around us disappeared.

"Next," a lilting voice rang out. "Step forward," the customs officer commanded.

"Business or pleasure?" he asked. "How long are you here for? Where are you staying?"

Easy enough questions. I answered, "Business, one week, O'Neill's B&B in Sligo," as my heart rate returned to normal.

Boom. His stamp hit my passport.

I jumped. My tears gathered steam. My heart pounded. I immediately shoved my anxiety aside and smiled. I took my passport back and headed to baggage claim.

I arrived and found people gathered, but the conveyor belt remained silent and frozen. As I waited, I wished that my colleague Collette was by my side. But she had arrived in Ireland a few days earlier. We were both professors of Anthropology, here to obtain fieldwork through a department-sponsored trip offered each semester for two staff members. I was a cultural anthropologist with a concentration in the areas of magic, ancient religions, and goddesses. In Ireland, I could actually visit pagan worship sites and burial grounds. Therefore, I had known immediately that this was an opportunity I did not want to miss.

My gaze wandered to the window. I expected to see vivid green hills and rainbows, and the taste of Lucky Charms cereal pervading my mind. Alas, it was similar to any airport, practical and pragmatic, with no trees in sight.

"First time to Dublin?" a male voice to my right asked softly.

"It is," I began, turning toward the voice.

Subconsciously, I raised my hand to smooth my long blonde hair.

"You have to see St. Patrick's Cathedral," he began. His friendliness swirled around me, warming me as the conversation expanded and the belt churned to life. Although a tiny voice inside of me said, *Of course he mentioned a church,* I had no one to blame for it but myself. It was no secret that Ireland was uber-Catholic, but the last thing I needed was God thrown in my face. I had leaped at this work excursion to escape from my mother, whose sole solution to overcoming my trauma was the Christian church. Although my parents were far from Bible thumpers, mandatory Sunday attendance was in their child-rearing repertoire, and the church was always my mother's go-to in times of need.

Days later, having zipped from Ireland's eastern shore to the farthest point west, Collette and I took off for the Bricklieve Mountains in County Sligo. Towns were left in our dust, and houses became sparse and then non-existent. We reached the end of the road and sprang from the car, immediately taking to the trail. We were driven by the excitement of reaching the pagan burial site, built in 4000-2000 BC, which sat at the end of this climb.

We moved quietly, passing only tufts of vegetation and a few trees with crooked, gnarled branches. The moss-covered earth beneath my feet was soft and welcoming.

Stopping, Collette said, "We are the only souls in sight."

"Well, other than all these sheep," she added, pointing at the multitude that lounged in various spots upon the hill.

My eyes scanned in a circle, and I nodded in agreement. The view was devoid of villages or cityscapes. Not a car or train could be seen or heard. The only sound was the wind, which softly whooshed around me, dragging the odor of damp wool with it. The isolation comforted me, for I believed there was less possibility for violence in this deserted spot.

"Ready?" Collette asked as she raked a hand through her short cropped auburn hair.

I nodded again and took the lead. Soon, I was picking up speed. The climb was only minimally challenging since the elevation gain was steady but not steep.

Minutes later, we arrived at the top to find large piles of rocks built into pyramid-shaped structures. The one closest to us appeared to be at least 65 feet in diameter, and, at its highest point, it stood taller than the top of our heads. I stood staring, my mouth agape, as 11 more graves stretched further into the distance. There was absolutely no substitute for fieldwork.

"Welcome to Carrowkeel: tombs from the Neolithic time," I said in my best monotone.

"After you," Collette said, pointing at the closest tomb. A twinkle lit her green eyes.

I bent down, expecting the smell of death to fly from the entrance. Hesitant, I shined my light through the three-foot-tall entrance. When nothing leaped at me, I began crawling, entering a tomb built 5,000 years ago! As I placed my hand on the dirt floor, my cells connected to the land and the energy imprints of all who had come before. I moved out of the entry and into the center of the tomb. The light was weaker, but the structure was taller. I stood up as the taste of adventure ignited, trickling through my veins.

Eventually, I dragged myself from the inside of the tomb. Time passed happily as Collette and I explored other tombs, recorded data, and took pictures. I was far too busy for thoughts of home to take root, far too happy for my fear to swoop in.

In what felt like a blink of an eye, time was up, and, needing to stick to our agenda, we gathered our things and returned to the car. Landscapes heavily laden with natural beauty flashed by. From one window, mountains shot skyward; through the other, water spread outward from the shore.

We arrived at the base of our next mount and piled out of the car. Locating the trailhead, we wiggled our way through fields. Farmers tinkered in the background. Passing fellow hikers, we uttered quick hellos as the trail began to climb Knocknarea.

"Collette, we have a visitor," I said, indicating the cow who had stuck its head over the fence. "Hop up next to him," I added, snapping a photo as she arrived by its side.

Laughing, I tucked my camera away, and we began moving again.

"What a beautiful country," I said. "And no rain, like everyone predicted."

"It is, and we are lucky. Last time I was here, it rained

almost the entire time," Collette replied. "One good thing that came from the English cutting down all the trees—unobscured views."

As we continued, the incline increased. It was much steeper here than the Bricklieve Mountains, which left little space in our lungs for chitchat. Inching our way toward the clouds, the air changed, with the footing becoming more strenuous as the top loomed. Gone were the other hikers, as though they had been snatched by aliens; the farmers left long ago at the foot of the hill. In direct contrast to Carrowkeel, the sudden isolation settled uncomfortably upon my shoulders.

Ignoring the eerie feeling, I carried on. Toppling the final push, I stood before a cairn three stories high and 180 feet in diameter—the tomb of the ancient fairy queen. Queen Maeve's burial space, so large that it blocked the sun and captivated me with its grandeur. Moments passed as I stared at it with profound reverence, fighting a desire to curtsy.

"I'm gonna capture it from all sides," Collette said, breaking my trance.

"Good idea," I replied, pulling my shoulders back sharply. Had I actually bowed? "I'll head this way. Meet you back here?" I pointed to my left.

"Sounds good," she answered as she turned to her right.

Waiting a moment for my heart rate to slow, I stared at the burial site of Queen Maeve was trying to weigh in on the age-old argument: Was she only a human queen or was she in fact an ancient goddess? I wanted her to be an all-powerful goddess because my Protestant upbringing had left me wanting. When I had reached my teenage years, I rebelled against the church, officially discarding it due to its lack of feminine representation.

Knowing I would come to no conclusion in such a short time, I snapped some photos and began circling the tomb. Again, I was reminded of why I came on this trip—to gather firsthand information on ancient religions. These pictures and my emotional reaction would both be amazing additions to my classroom lectures.

A quarter of the way around, I decided to follow one of the paths that shot away from it, positioned like a hand on a clock. The flat-topped mountain Benbuhlen filled my view. It shot boldly into the heavens. To my left, the ocean spread out before me, which continued until it reached the shores of North America.

Reaching the edge, I backtracked, choosing another offshoot. I continued taking pictures rapidly, like the paparazzi. I passed not a single living soul as I traversed the barren mountain top. There were no trees to protect me; thus, the wind whipped at me with no mercy. My eyes teared up from the cold as the taste of dread filled my mouth, and a memory descended.

As we stood there, frozen in gridlock, I reached for my phone in my pocket. Suddenly, he turned from me. He lifted the hood on his sweatshirt, tucked his head down inside, and began walking. I, too, began to move. Perhaps the scratch was from his cat and my imagination had simply gone wild? Perhaps I had invented the shaking of his hands? With each step, I convinced myself to stay out of it. I didn't even glance at the door he had come out of as I passed it. I just kept moving down the street. By then, he was at least 40 feet in front of me. Arriving at the next block, he took a left. A sigh of relief escaped me.

My phone buzzed. Reaching for it, I looked down at it as I arrived at the corner.

"Hey, bitch."

The words dripped down the back of my neck. I stood frozen, clutching my phone, when my survival instincts shot into gear, enabling me to take a step forward. But the man in the hoodie moved faster, arriving in front of me and blocking my escape. I could feel his breath on my face, hot and distasteful. His stench of dried sweat enveloped me.

My heart pounded as I questioned his intentions: What did he want? Will he attack me here on the open street?

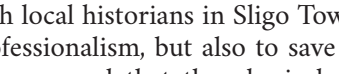
"Give me your wallet."

Air escaped my lips, for it was possible that he had no plans to assault me; it was possible he had not seen me following him. I reached for my wallet, eager to be rid of him, at the same moment that he lunged at me, shattering the momentary reprieve from my fear.

Then, his hand swung up from his side toward me.

A blast of cold air slammed into me, forcing my mind to slip back into my body, which stood thousands of miles from that street-side assault. Turning towards the tomb, I took a step. The wind thrust against me. Too stripped of energy, I could only manage to stay

upright. But as the wind, along with my memories, whisked itself into a frenzy, my willpower faltered. In my desperation, I called out to the God of my childhood. Only the sound of the roaring wind answered.



I did, of course, make my way off the mountain, but I was changed. Rather than agreeing to Collette's suggestion of rewarding ourselves with an evening at a local pub, I remained shaken from my moment atop Knocknarea, unable to act normal. Instead, I latched onto the excuse of needing a hot bath. Though, once we reached the B&B and I dragged myself to my room, I fell onto the bed. I lay there, hoping for sleep, the bath forgotten, when my memories flew at me once again.

It was dusk, and I stood on campus. Heading home, a slight tremor shot up my leg as I passed parts of the campus that lay in shadows. Forging ahead, I reached the main thoroughfare. People scurried home from work and storefronts cast light upon the sidewalks, while restaurants wafted poignant flavors onto the street. I relaxed and headed south toward my apartment.

15 minutes later, I approached my street and slowed. Reluctantly, I turned onto the side street. With each step, the street became darker as the lights from the larger road dimmed and then disappeared. Alone on the city street, the air devoid of chatter and honking horns, the only sound was the pounding of my heart. My temperature rose, and my palms became clammy. All of the air was sucked out of my lungs. I stood, frozen.

A shadow fell before me. His hand, clenched in a fist, slammed into my face, knocking me off of my feet. I fell backward, landing on the sidewalk, my head crashing against the concrete, and a pain more acute and intense than I had ever felt before shot to every corner of my being. Desperation pinned me to the ground. Unable to sit or get up, I laid there, completely at his mercy.

Everything got quieter, and my eyelids drooped. I tasted the iron flavor of blood in my mouth. My body and mind were shutting down in order to protect me from whatever he chose to do next. From a distance, I heard voices and caught a few words.

"Okay?"

"Hey..."

"Leave her alone!"

The next day, sunlight pushed around the edges of my curtains, rousing me from sleep. Determined to take control of the day, I had managed not only to meet with local historians in Sligo Town, maintaining my professionalism, but also to save face with Collette. She assumed that the physical exercise on top of jet lag was what had done me in. I grasped at this explanation, grateful that our last day together passed without my memories bombarding me.

The next morning, I awakened and headed to breakfast alone. Collette had already departed for the airport, catching an early flight home. My anxiety kept me company throughout the simple meal of a fried egg and toast. My impending departure from Ireland later today loomed, and I was not ready to face all that awaited me at home.

Walking aimlessly from breakfast back to my room, pamphlets laid out by the innkeeper caught my eye. Picking one up, I read, "Tobernault Well: the ancient pagan well, maintained by the parishioners of St. John's."

My gut punched me. Although I had avoided all Catholic churches thus far on my trip, I suddenly knew that I needed to see Tobernault, even if it was cared for by the church. I had just enough time to squeeze a visit in before heading to the airport.

I entered the woods. Tall trees enclosed me, shutting out the rest of the world. A well-worn path lay before me, and a tiny brook babbled to my left. Following it, I heard only my footfalls as they crunched upon the earth and the occasional twitter of a bird spouting its morning song.

Several steps later, the brook ended, having led me to the ancient well. An altar, composed of large stone boulders embedded into its surroundings with moss sprinkled like tinsel, stood before me. Jesus hovered, lifelike, above the altar on my left, and Mary to the right, with leaves and branches weaving between and around them, connecting this intimate space.

I placed my hand on the well next to the imprint of St. Patrick's hand: it was solid, cool, and uneven. Imaginations of women clad in white wispy robes danced around me, reminding me that they had claimed this space for worship long before St. Patrick had touched Irish soil in the fifth century. Although

the well was now a sanctuary of reflection used mostly by Catholics, the cultural anthropologist in me was grateful that this holy pagan site remained.

"A calm surrounded me, dispelling any lingering anxiety. A comfort filled me, erasing any whispers of loneliness. They weaved together, and a new strength formed."

As an earthy rawness filled my nostrils and ancient chants echoed in my ear, it struck me that Mary, who some considered a goddess, had been placed equally next to Jesus. Perhaps it was unintentional, but there was no denying that she sat at the exact same height as he did. The feminist in me recognized how powerful this visual display was. The Protestant child in me felt as though she had stumbled upon the missing puzzle piece she so desperately craved.

I stood transfixed. Tobernalt's magic sparked my spirituality back to life, flowing through me like the water beside me. Jesus and Mary's grace spewed forth from their high perches, meeting both the earth's age-old power and the power that burst from the stone well. A calm surrounded me, dispelling any lingering anxiety. A comfort filled me, erasing any whispers of loneliness. They weaved together, and a new strength formed.

A few hours later, my trip came full circle. I sat once again in the sterile airport, no longer surrounded by natural beauty and trees, but rather, people chirping at one another and kids running about.

"Now boarding rows 26 and higher."

The black plastic seat stuck to my legs as I stood. I joined the end of the line, which slowly progressed forward. Entering the plane, I hurried to my seat, swallowing half of a sedative. As the plane reached 12,000 feet and the flight crew began moving about, I closed my eyes in quiet contemplation.

With the sedative now swimming rampantly through my bloodstream, sleep came quickly.

His hand sprang before my eyes. His fist slammed into my face, knocking my head to the side. Pain exploded as my cheekbone seemed to shatter under the impact. He shoved me with the power and full backing of evil, and I hit the ground hard, brutally.

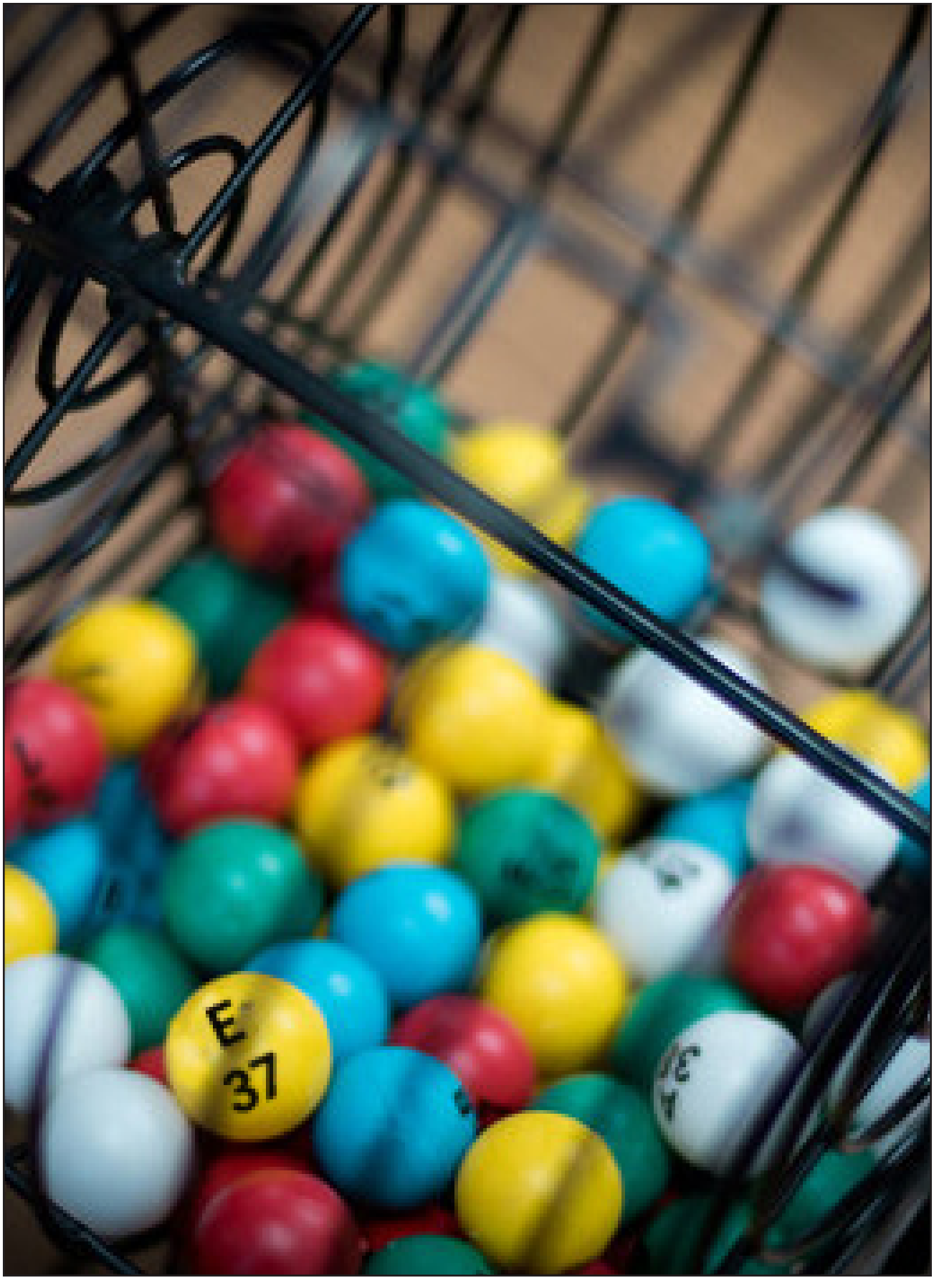
The plane hiccupped. My eyes sprang open. I gasped for breath, and my face sparked red.

I threw my head between my knees and reached for the well. I clawed my way toward Jesus and Mary.

"Hey, bitch."

I shoved his voice out of my head and imagined that I was plunging my hand into the ancient well, reaching the water. The smell of the earth surrounded me as the spirits and sprites of Ireland grabbed hold of me, anchoring me.

Eventually, I raised my head. As the tin bird chugged toward the New World, my memories of Ireland flew with me, keeping my attacker at bay. With each passing minute, the gap between myself and my fear decreased. The confrontation neared. I clutched my newfound strength, depending on it to take back my life and the streets of my city.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Wasted Cereal

Wendy Peterson has a BA in Literary Studies from Delaware Valley University. She currently lives on Long Island. Published stories include "Tuesday" at *Maudlin House* and "Only the Devil can Eat the Devil Out" at the *Thieving Magpie*.

I sat on the curb and watched as the garbage truck took the corner. Its great weight shifted around the turn—the bulk of the truck leaning clumsily toward the road—and a slosh of liquid trash trickled out behind the vehicle, leaving a wet trail on the pavement. The stench enclosed me like an overwhelming humidity. I felt swallowed by the aroma of rot and week-old garbage being cleared from the streets and crushed together formlessly in the back of the truck.

I watched the spinning of the tires as cars drove past, and I lost myself gazing into the polished hubcaps unspinning themselves into stiff mandalas as the cars halted at a nearby stop sign.

I had gone for a walk and stopped to reorder the wayward strands of loose shoelace that threatened my every step, and I hadn't found the energy to rise back to my feet, so I just sat and watched the world convulse around me. As if that's all I could do. Crouch down on the curbside of my own life and watch everything move *but* me. Me: sitting in the same way, in the same place. Gargoyling on the edge of someone else's busy street, waiting for something to happen.

Sorrel, my suitemate in college, sent me an email the other day with pictures from her most recent trip, this time from the Caribbean. Blue waters, sagging palms. In the past, it was Ireland or Zimbabwe, or pictures of Alaskan wildlife. She was slowly exploring every place she had cataloged on her adventure bucket list. She used to keep the list tacked above her desk, adding locations by taping more paper at the bottom when she ran out of space on the first page. I remember laughing at it, knowing it was only wishful thinking. Yet here she was, successfully crossing names off her list. And blogging about it. She hadn't lost her smile in any of the photographs.

And where was I? Why didn't I ever make a to-do list for my life? I thought to-do meant go to school, save your money, and start a serious-looking career before life caught up to you. Disappointed you. Play it safe. Invest in success.

But now each detail seemed like a routine and I wanted to exist outside of it (there was never anything new), or beyond it (there was no excitement), or right in the middle of it stuck—like a twig that dams the guttering of rainwater down a drain. To disrupt the repetitive tumble of duties, duties, duties—slogging from work to home to work. I felt like I couldn't climb out of it. Or at least, I couldn't sit up long enough to catch my breath, in a fish-like gasp, out of the gutter water before I collapsed back into its gargle—to work to home to work to home. At least I could say I had a home. I built up all of this security, and for what? I could be certain of my job position at the firm, and I could be certain that I had a door to lock me in at night. But where was everyone else? Sorrel was living—*living*—her life. Besides, my parents had loved their lives: nine-to-five business jobs, careful finances, a nice-looking home. I thought that was the secret to the smiles on their faces, but I guess I was wrong.

I couldn't crack the secret to the placid façade of this suburban hell, with its houses all face-lifted to have the same cheerless smiles and filled with all the typical families with their typical happiness and their typical lawns and their typical jobs and their typical lives. And me sitting, typically by, scowling at it all. And Sorrel, off seeing the world: never stuck, never certain. And I needed to be certain that I would be happy. But around here, in the sameness of living, I

couldn't make the calculation. I couldn't figure out why everyone else's version of "happy" made me so goddamn miserable when I had been so certain that it would make me permanently happy precisely because of this lifestyle's mock permanence.

Placing my hands on the curb, I pushed myself onto my feet, listening to my body groan into stance. Even these evening walks felt like an admission of defeat—one more detail, one more routine to repeat. Meanwhile, Sorrel is walking around with her toes in the sand, shoes in hand.

Dusting the ground from my jeans, I stood at the side of the road, wondering how it all ended up this way: with me wanting to throw myself under the next truck that passed. Sorrel asked if I wanted to go with her. And I had laughed it off, saying I had more important things to do, as if sameness were important.

Behind me, a bicycle bell rang, and I turned to watch as a man in a full-body, mustard-yellow suit and a faded top hat rode by. He was perched on top of a bike that was fashioned to look like an old penny-farthing, except for the back wheel, which was replaced with a reinforced tumble cage filled with ping-pong balls that popped against each other as it turned. I quadrupled my blink in case the garbage-truck stench had weakened my eyes or soured my brain or caused me to hallucinate. But, then, I mean, really what was out of the usual? It was a man modeling clothes from a second-hand shop and the raffle cage…

A raffle cage: I had seen something like it once at an adult function that my mother dragged me to when I was too young to understand why it was more important than trying to climb to the top of the tree in our backyard or more important than looking under bushes for butterfly chrysalis or hiding the grass stains on the knees of my jeans. It was an age where I was just tall enough to converse on an equal footing with most people's knees and had no ear for grown-up discussion. The lottery drum was on a table opposite the punch, and when it was spun, every adult in the room stopped and watched the metallic hypnosis of its rotation until all of the tickets dropped from orbit, like insects shocked from flight by a fluorescent zap, and the woman behind the table reached into the cage and read out a number, to which there were audible groans of passing disappointment and one loud whoop of surprise.

> Me: sitting in the same way, in the same place. Gargoyling on the edge of someone else's busy street, waiting for something to happen.

The man on the penny-farthing lottery machine waved one gloved hand as he passed, and I watched the odd contraption wobble down the road and out of sight as it turned the corner, following the trail of liquid trash.

That night, I stretched out in bed and confronted the blank ceiling above me with unanswerable questions. Who knew that "What do I want?" would be the one question to stump me for a lifetime. Didn't I want all of this— typical job, typical lawn, typical smile, typical life? Someone preplanned happiness and left the manual, and you were supposed to shut up, read it, and be delighted to play along and believe in it. Unless you were Sorrel, who took one look at those adult knees in their grass-stainless business slacks and said "Nope!" as she ran in the opposite direction. You were supposed to believe in preplanned happiness—forget the people who weren't even invited in on it—you can have it all! Step by step maintaining your place in each proceeding sidewalk square—education, job, home, family, cash—throw a rock and hopscotch through! It's fun! Who knew that the answer to "What do I want?" wasn't in a manual? Sorrel knew.

Just as I was about to shift onto my side to ask the wall the same questions as the ceiling, a glint of passing headlights sparked across the room and then collapsed in on itself. The glint conjured up the unusual image of the man in his mustard-yellow suit perched on his impractical bike. He knew it?

"Now *that* is a man who must know what he wants." I interrogated the ceiling with a long stare. "After all, no one wakes up one day and just decides to go parading around on a contraption like that, yellow pants, noisemaker, and all, am I right?"

The room could have sighed at me for all it cared.

"Oh, god. Where did I go wrong?"

The ceiling yawned, uninterested conversationalist that it was, and rolled over, turning its back on me.

I closed my eyes and dreamed of a clown on a unicycle juggling fruit. After one wild jeer from the audience, a single ping-pong ball was tossed from the circus bleachers and nailed the fool right in the forehead. The man was knocked from his unicycle and splayed out on the ground in surreal distortion, surrounded by fruits, with a rainbow pouring out of the split in his chuckling side. The ground dissolved into sand and everything sunk out of sight.

I woke with a casual headache and the sun in my eyes.

Mid-breakfast, the office called.

"Clara, can you come in an hour early? The project is backed up, and we need to send it out by the end of the workday."

Drudgery.

"Yes," slid out involuntarily. My thumb pounded the end-call button on my screen. "Shit."

The kitchen towel slumped on the rack, and a steady drip of water from the sink hit the drain in an energy-less tap.

I fed myself a spoon of cereal from the bowl I had set out in front of me on the countertop. It was a mouthful of frothing cardboard. I leaned over, close to the bowl, and opened my mouth, letting the food slide back into the bowl in a wave of milk spit up. Losing my appetite, I dumped the rest of the tasteless cereal down the sink. The milk sludged down the drain, and the soggy cereal bits got hung up in disintegrating blots in the strainer.

Grabbing my coat from the back of my chair, I headed toward the door. My bag was there from the night before. I picked it up from where it shrugged against the wall, and then I clambered out the door.

I turned the key in the lock and pushed my key ring back inside my bag. As I was zipping the pocket shut, a bell rang behind me.

The man waved as he rode past—the penny farthing wobbling, the ping-pong balls popping, the eyesore of his jacket on full display. Distracted, I dropped my bag and bolted after him.

"Hey! Hey! Wait!"

I watched the caged back tire spin a strained distance in front of me.

"Wait! Stop!"

And just as I gave up running after him, my legs stiffening in their place, I watched the bike stop half a block away. The man, still in his seat, turned and looked over his shoulder at me.

The world narrowed a moment. A bird pecked at the grass between a sidewalk crack. A sprinkler lisped into frustrated life somewhere off to the left. And I had the odd notion that my shoe was untied without even turning my head down to notice. I stood dumbly in the moment, surprised he stopped. Then, in an odd sort of trance, I found myself walking up to him.

He dismounted the bike and waited for my approach.

Sure, there were a number of things anyone could've said, but my tongue weighed in my mouth, and my mind wouldn't move. By the time I stood next to him, looking him in the face, I had forgotten any question that would've made sense to ask him. I just wanted to see for myself what fulfillment looked like, and all I got was a mannequin's carved smile on a stranger's face.

The man's eyebrows shot up after a minute of silence, and, startled, my eyes quickly dropped to the bike beside him.

"What in hell are you riding?"

"Do you believe in fate?"

My eyes panicked back to the smile on his face. "Pardon?"

"Well, you've come to the right place! Dorville Finkle's the name. I am peddling second chances. I am peddling self-redemption. I am peddling the opportunity to change your future. As. You. Know. It!" He punctuated each of the last words of his sales pitch with the wet slap of his faux-leather gloves together.

"I'm sorry. What—?"

"Just inside this cage—yes, just inside. This. Very. Cage! A few dozen ping-pong balls await patiently for one number—yes, just one number—to be plucked from its Elysian state to foretell the fate of the lucky plucker and change their life for what only can be the better. Step this way! Step this way—just around here."

He placed his hand on my back and moved me toward the lottery-cage wheel, half filled with ping-pong balls—like eyeballs that seemed to have plopped from their skulls and settled, en masse, in a group stare through the mesh bars of their cylindrical cage. I shuffled into place and shook my head.

"But, I—"

"Each number correlates with its twin numeral here in this book." Out of his breast pocket, he pulled a small journal, which he flourished in his hand like it was a child's clacker. "All you need to do is reach in and pluck out your number at random, and the lucky number, recorded in this here book, will be retrieved quicker than a Finkle wink, and your fate will be read aloud by yours truly. A glimpse into the future! You choose, and the world responds. How do you like that?"

"But it's all just chance."

"Chance? Chance? Ha! Was it by chance that you flagged me down? No! I'd argue," he flourished his hand and dipped into a bow, bending at the waist. His eyes shot up to me in a grin, "it's fate."

"But what could it possibly know that I don't already? What will it change?"

The man straightened. "Why, everything! Everything, of course!"

Dorville Finkle snuck past me and, bending over, unclasped and unwired the trap, swinging the latch open on the cage, and with a wide gesture of his hand, he presented me with a ping-pong ball.

"Reach in and pull the future out. Today's your day."

Bending over, my hand stretched toward all those blank-looking eyes, and my fingers pushed through a layer and, smoothing around one, plucked a ping-pong ball out of the mass. I stood back up and turned my hand over. The ping-pong ball sat in my palm.

"It's 37."

"Aha!" The man flipped open his journal and started to scroll with one finger along the margin, muttering a sequence of numbers to himself.

And I had the odd sensation that there in my hand was an answer to something. A real answer. A real, certain, understandable something of an answer. The answer to a question my whole body leaned in to ask. The ping-pong ball felt like a lump in the throat of my shaking hand.

Another flip of the page, and a low, short hum escaped the man's throat. "Yes. Yes—I see. Here it is. Are you ready?" He looked at me.

"I mean, when else am I supposed to be ready? Next June? Yes, go. Read it." The ping-pong ball sat uncomfortably in my fist.

The man's eyes fell to the page, and he raised one finger in the air as if to signify profundity. "When it all comes down to it, the action you take on your singular query will be the deciding stroke you need to achieve exactly what you want. When the time comes to act, choose wisely."

I gawked at him. "What action?"

He snapped his book shut. "*The* action, obviously. It's something you will only know when the right time comes. The action that leads you to what you want."

"But what do I want?"

"You know: what you want!"

"That makes no sense."

He shrugged. "I don't write 'em." He slipped the journal into his breast pocket and, after closing the latch securely on the lottery cage, remounted his bike.

"But wait! What action?"

The man politely tipped his hat as he shoved off. "Cheerio!"

I stood paralyzed as I watched him pedal off. *What action?*

I shouted after him, "That's too vague!"

Without turning around, he lifted one gloved hand

into the air and waved like he was the bloody queen. I scoffed as he turned left at the next street and disappeared behind a row of trees.

At work, the conference table seemed to stretch and distort under infinitely bored faces. I was zoning out, fingering the ping-pong ball in my pocket, when our manager's words clipped my ear.

"37 new clientele…"

37. What a stupid number.

The meeting wrapped up and a colleague pulled me to the side.

"Clara, I left that woman's phone number on your desk: the one who called yesterday for a consultation. Could you call her back and fill her in on the information she needs to get started? I need to step out today. I won't be back till tomorrow."

"Sure thing."

Walking through the cubicles, sameness after square sameness, I reached my desk. Pulling out my seat, I settled into the paperwork waiting for me—drudgery.

I placed my hand on the mouse and shook it so that the monitor would come back on. The computer screen lit up and I logged on. There was a new notification in my inbox. It was from Sorrel: a new blog post. Pictures of dolphins, sunsets—god! At the bottom of the email, she had typed, *Next time, you have to come!* I exited the mail tab and stared at the blue of the monitor before shaking my head and returning to the files. There was the sticky note that my colleague had left for me.

Picking up the sticky note with Mrs. Campbell's number on it, I began punching the number into my desk phone when I stopped. *Three-seven-three-seven. Thirty-seven, thirty-seven.* The last four digits were 3737. I crumpled up the sticky note and exiled it to the far edge of my desk.

37 cents was the change owed with my $2 coffee. 37 was the first two numbers on the building I sat in front of to drink that coffee. 37 was a segment of the full bus number back to the office. 37 cracks in the sidewalk. 37 glugs of water from the water cooler. 37 footsteps to the bathroom. 37 taps of a pen against a neighboring desk. 37 hairs ripped from my scalp. Relax. Relax. If it was going to happen, it was going to be big. Noticeable. I wouldn't miss it. Relax.

The ping-pong ball, like a coagulated thought stopping up *all* of my thoughts, was tucked away in my coat pocket. The world revolved around it.

I waited a week. I waited two. The man on his clumsy bicycle didn't come back, didn't exist. Must've changed his route.

I fidgeted to the window every time I heard a bike bell, but it was only children balancing on training wheels, gripping handles that had trails of pink streamers shooting out on each side. It was only a neighbor's wind chime, was only the timer I set for the oven, was only my heart beating—metallic—against my chest.

Every action seemed of dire consequence. I couldn't go grocery shopping without counting the tiles on the floor or overstocking on cans of soup. 37 seemed significant enough that I lived by it. Every hour of the day, I waited for the number to burst onto the digital clock on my computer screen or my phone: 1:37, 2:37, 3:37, 4:37. It was obsessive. It was paranoid. It was of the utmost importance. I was going to miss it. I was going to miss my chance. And the man of the fate-contraption, Dorville Finkle, was nowhere to interrogate, wasn't even in the phone book. I looped my evening walks—once, twice, three times—just to be sure, to be absolutely sure, he wouldn't squeak by right as I was about to retreat inside.

Nothing I did seemed right.

Where was it? When was it going to happen?

I wanted to be certain. Happiness was certain. Wasn't it?

I was late to work. My projects were incomplete. I bought the same coffee for three weeks. 37 had me on a fishhook by the crook of my mouth, and my lip jutted out in whatever direction the bait took me. I couldn't sleep. I couldn't recall what Dorville Finkle's book had said. The vague words shirked my memory. All I could remember was the number—concrete, certainty, like it was the only salvation of meaning in my dull existence. I just wanted out of

the routine. A moment to sit up and breathe. And nothing. Nothing happened.

"Clara, can you come in early? We need to talk about your job performance."

Shit.

I dumped the whole of my cereal into the trash, the milk seeping through the bag and dripping into the basin of the bin, where it would sour and turn the breathable air all to rot.

I grabbed the coat with my lucky ping-pong ball in it, picked up my bag, stepped outside, and clapped the door shut behind me.

I turned to lock the door and dropped my bag at the familiar *brr-ring, brr-ring*. I swiveled on my feet.

And there the dandy bastard was, whistling along as he pedaled on his penny-farthing bike.

"Hey!" I bounded down the steps and ran. "Hey! Stop! Stop!"

The man turned his head and waved his hand as he passed, easing to a stop a few yards away. Before he dismounted, I caught up to him and grabbed the handlebars, putting myself in his way so that there was no driving off and no escape.

The man smiled, genially, as if nothing in the world were wrong. When the whole world was wrong. And he smiled. His top hat was on his head. His bike was on the road. Nothing at all wrong.

"Back for another dip into fate, eh?"

I pulled out the ping-pong ball and shoved it in his face.

"My *fate*. I need you to read it again. What does it say? What does it actually say?"

The man leaned back from the thrust of my hand and arranged his collar, dusting the front of his coat with his gloved hands.

"And do you remember the number?" He extracted his journal from his breast pocket, replacing the book with one of his gloves that he slid off, finger by finger, stuffing it into the journal's original place.

He cracked the journal open, beginning to scroll.

Just as he licked his finger to disturb the journal's page, I lunged for the book and snatched it out of his hand, causing him to sway and tumble to the pavement, entangled with his bike.

With the ping-pong ball in one fist and the book of fate in the other, I sprinted back to my doorstep.

Throwing open the door and slipping into the house, I stood on the threshold, breathless, as I leaned against the door that I had shut behind me.

I flipped through the pages, scanning each entry—each prophecy—as if it held a nugget of truth that would save me from the mania of my dissatisfaction with life and help me escape, but by the time I reached the tenth page, a slow horror crept over me as I realized...

"They're all…They're all…"

There was a knock on the door, and I turned sharply and flung it open, the handle punching the wall as I stepped out of its way. The disgruntled man, "Dorville Finkle," held his hat in his hand and quivered in a silent, fuming sort of rage.

I glared at him. "They're all the same." I held the pages open and thrust the book in his face. "They say the *same* thing. They're no different. They're *all* the same."

He sneered, "You chose it."

Pulling the book back toward me and flipping backward through the pages. I shook my head.

"Why would you write out the same thing?"

"To stay sane."

"Who are you, anyway?" I reached the cover page and found his signature. "Dorville Finkle. You're kidding? That's your real name, huh? That's a tragedy. And you're not going to lie about that, too?"

The man snatched the book from my hand and scoffed back, "It's not possible to lie to yourself about everything. Otherwise, the world catches up to you, taps you on the shoulder, and knocks you down a peg. Nothing more terrifying than seeing the world from the level of your feet, flat on your back in the street. Try to make something from nothing.

Try to be happy when you literally have nothing. But what would you know about that? You have all the comfort you need packed into your rich little life. Life is baloney. And the only thing I have left to do is entertain myself until it's over. Munch on that for a while, sourpuss. I hope you're just as miserable now as you were when you took that ping-pong ball. Happiness is what you do, not what you wait for to come along and save you. The next time you look up, you'll know you were knocked on your ass by the lie you kept telling yourself. And you're not going to feel better until you do something about it. So there. Entertain yourself with that." He stomped his foot and turned away.

As I watched him retreat down my walkway back toward the street, I felt a fury thrash in my knuckles, like a gunshot, and I threw the ping-pong ball at his back. It grazed off of his shoulder and, in ricochet, bounced off and rolled into the street, where it sat like a sun shimmer on a dun-colored lake. Dumb optimism.

I thought fate was a man riding a bike with the back wheel a tumble cage filled with numbered ping-pong balls.

"Fraud!" I screamed at his back.

He lifted his hand without turning around and waved, calling back, "Desperate!"

The man straddled his bike, returned his top hat to his head, and, tapping it into place, cried, "Keep dreaming," as he took off.

I slumped down on the front step and stared into space.

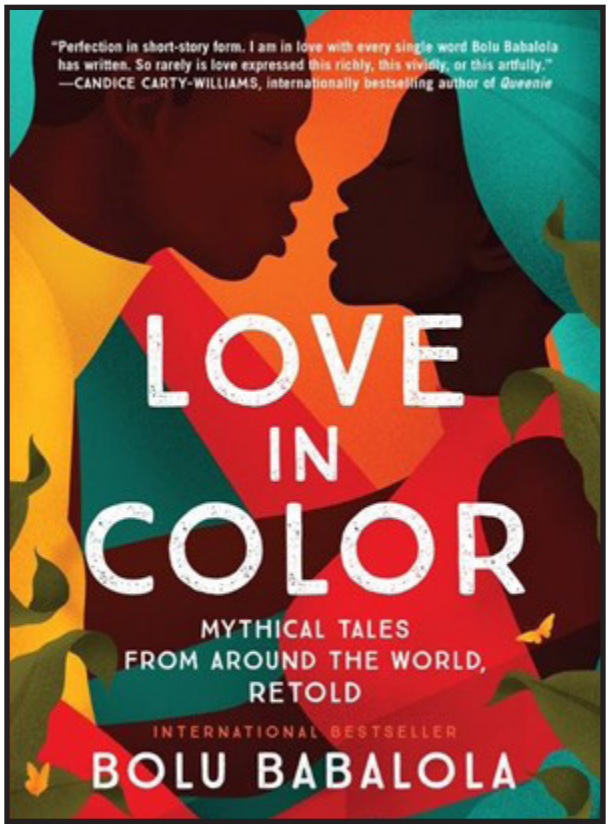
A garbage truck pulled around the corner, and, in a moment, the ping-pong ball flattened under its tire.

Short Story Book Reviews

Babalola's Debut Collection Celebrates Black-Girl Love

Title: *Love in Color*
Author: Bolu Babalola
Print Length: 304 pages
Publisher: William Morrow

Pub Date: April 13, 2021
Rating: 4/5 stars
Review by:
Julia Romero



A testament to the power of love, *Love in Color* by Bolu Babalola reimagines ten mythical tales from around the world. The book focuses on West African legends as well as stories from China, Greece, and Ancient Mesopotamia plus three original tales to finish off the collection. While some tales were recognizable—*1,001 Nights* and the legend of Eros (a.k.a., Cupid) and Psyche's great romance—others were unfamiliar, such as the folktale "Ituen and the King's Wife" from Nigeria or "How Khosi Chose a Wife" from China. While the original tales' silhouettes remain, Babalola made each story entirely her own by setting many of her stories in the present day and inverting the tales to focus on themes such as reclamation, resistance, and feminine power instead of domination and coercion. The result is a rich historical and cultural catalog that is enthralling, effortless, and a joy to read.

Originally published in 2020 as *Love in Colour* by UK-based Headline Publishing, Babalola's collection will make its US debut as *Love in Color* in April 2021 with William Morrow, an imprint of HarperCollins. In November 2020, *Love in Colour* was featured as the book of the week on BBC2's book club program "Between The Covers," hosted by Sara Cox.

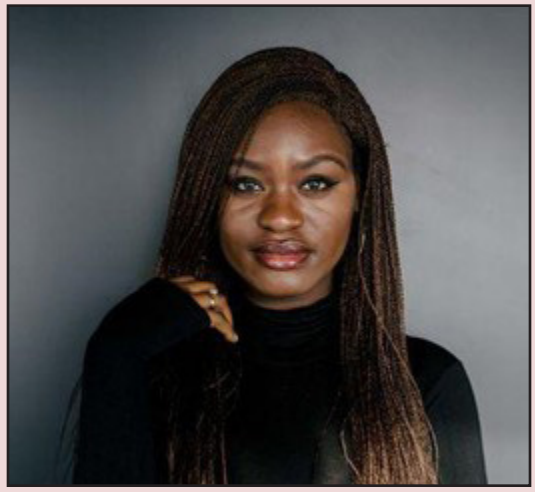
> This "is a collection written by and for Black women who want to see themselves represented as the giver and receiver of consensual and uplifting love."

Labeling herself as a "romcomoisseur," Babalola has never been shy to express her love for love. From star-crossed lovers to enemies-to-lovers to soul mates, Babalola has managed to include all the classic romance tropes without veering into the realm of cliché. Her book is a testament to her dedication to strong Black female characters, visceral expositions, and African-inspired imagery. However, Babalola's complex world-building and grand themes often pushed against the short story format's limitations, leaving some of the stories feeling rushed and fragmented. Many of these stories would have worked better as full-length novels.

The last story in the collection is among the strongest as it blends Babalola's history with the whimsicality and beauty of folktales. Titled "Alagomeji," the tale begins as a mythical love story between a prince and a princess. As the narrative progresses, we learn that

Babalola is telling us how her parents met and fell in love. It's a sweet tale that contextualizes Babalola's dedication to love and its power to transform and empower.

Love in Color is a collection written by and for Black women who want to see themselves represented as the giver and receiver of consensual and uplifting love.



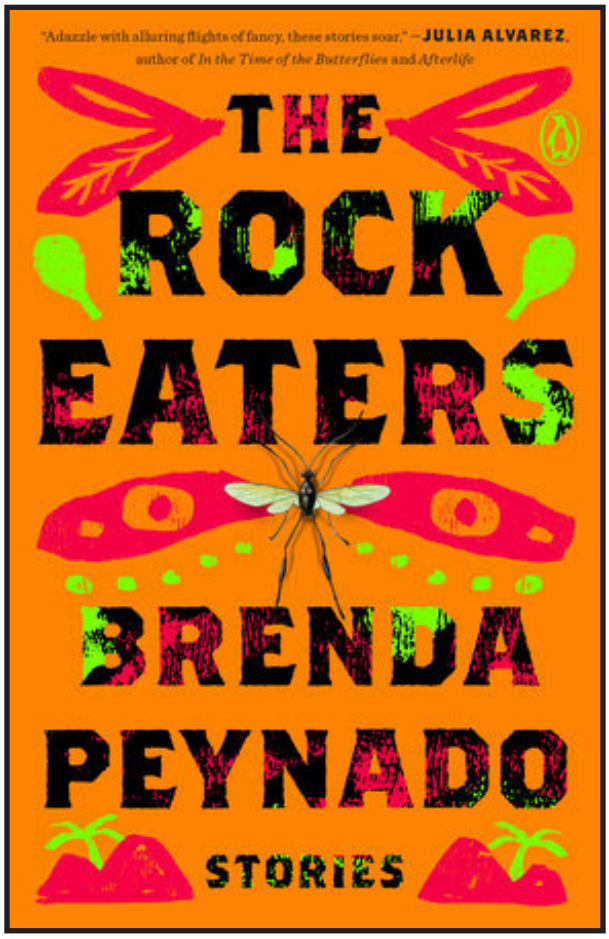
Bolu Babalola is a British-Nigerian woman with a misleading bachelor's degree in law and a master's degree in American Politics & History from UCL. She feels it is important to state that her thesis was on Beyoncé's "Lemonade" and she was awarded a distinction for it. Babalola writes stories about dynamic women with distinct voices who love and are loved audaciously. She is a big believer in women being both "beauty and the beast."

Julia Romero is a senior at New York University studying English and communications. She has a keen interest in speculative fiction that tests the limits of reality and offers new insights. She is a prose editor for *West 10th*, the NYU creative writing program's undergraduate literary journal. She's written about art, theatre, and music in Encore Magazine, and she recommends and reviews her favorite books on her instagram @_booklopedia.

Peynado Uses Fabulism and Metaphor to Tell Stories That Feel Strikingly Authentic

Title: *The Rock Eaters*
Author: Brenda Peynado
Print Length: 288 pages
Publisher: Penguin Books

Pub Date: May 11, 2021
Rating: 5/5 stars
Review by:
Julia Romero



Brenda Peynado has brought together 16 brilliantly strange works of fiction, set across time and its infinite dimensions, to create a finished product that is distinctly original and inventive. Peynado rejects rudimentary narrative structure and instead chooses to analyze humanity through elaborate and all-encompassing metaphors. This method of storytelling makes for a collection that defies the boundaries of genre and tackles issues ranging from classism to immigration to generational trauma to what it means to act like a hero.

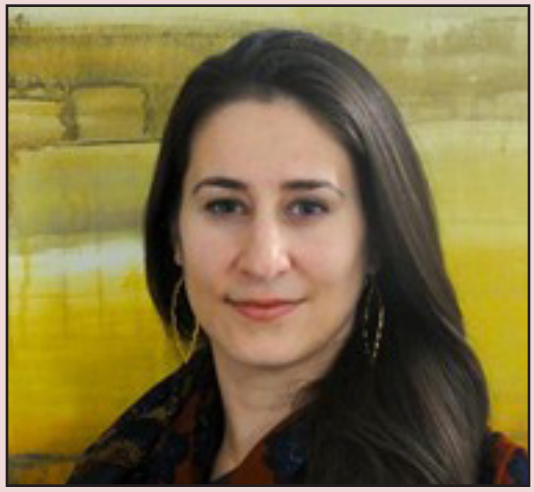
> "Above all, Peynado writes for a collective, and she shows this by adopting the use of the plural pronoun "we" in many of her stories, forgoing the generic "I," "you," or "they"—in a way combining all three."

While these issues are present in *The Rock Eaters*, Peynado never tackles them head-on. Instead, she presents a world to the reader—a world not unlike our own, yet rich with exaggeration, fabulism, and strong-willed characters—and tells their stories; a world where aliens and humans live segregated, influenced by the history of violence that began when the aliens first landed on American soil. Or a world in which a select few have developed the ability to fly away from their home village when they hit puberty, only to return with their children—on the brink of puberty themselves—and discover they're eating rocks to keep from flying away. Or a world in which sorrows develop into debilitating stone-like tumors that can only be washed away in a mystical lake that ties the residents to the suburban neighborhood they grew up in.

Brenda Peynado is a Dominican-American writer of fiction, nonfiction, and screenplays. Her work has appeared in Tor.com, *The Georgia Review*, *The Sun*, *Threepenny Review*, and elsewhere. Her stories have won a Nelson Algren Award from *The Chicago Tribune*, an O. Henry Prize, a Pushcart Prize, inclusion in *The Best American Science Fiction and Fantasy*, *Best Small Fiction*, and *Best Microfiction* anthologies, and

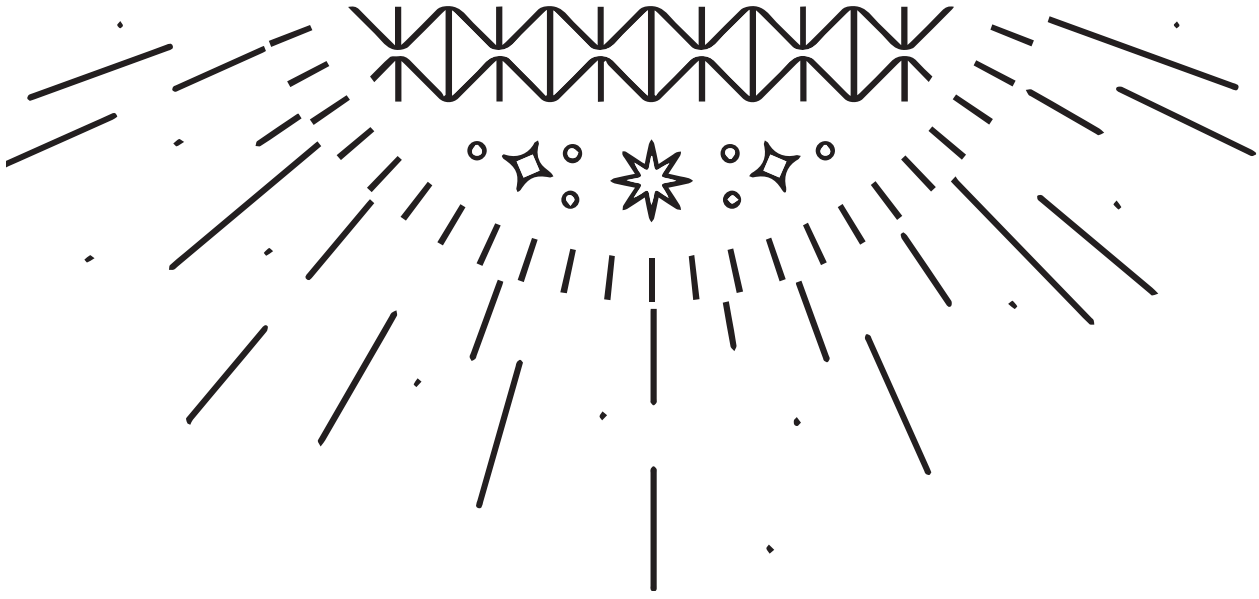
other awards. *The Rock Eaters* is her first short story collection.

With 16 stories to choose from, it's hard to pick a favorite. Each story's original concept and heartbreaking quality make it hard to stop reading. Above all, Peynado writes for a collective, and she shows this by adopting the use of the plural pronoun "we" in many of her stories, forgoing the generic "I," "you," or "they"—in a way combining all three. Peynado understands that her stories do not show the experiences of a single person but many, and that these issues can not be pushed aside in favor of blissful ignorance. *The Rock Eaters* is an unapologetic and powerful representation of the pain and hurt marginalized people experience in America and beyond. It's truly a difficult read, but it does not hide behind pleasantries and is therefore worthy of our acknowledgement and respect.

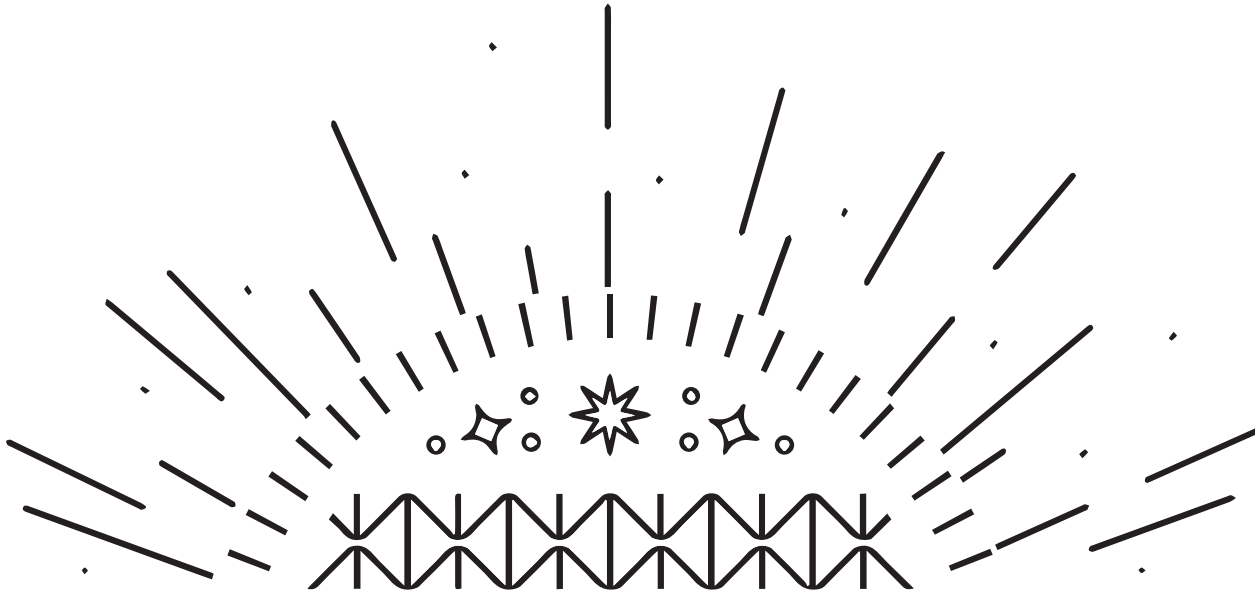


After a BA in Computer Science from Wellesley College, Brenda Peynado worked as an IT auditor for IBM. She graduated with her MFA in fiction from Florida State University, where she held a Kingsbury Fellowship and was Fiction Editor of *The Southeast Review*. In 2014, she received a Fulbright Fellowship to the Dominican Republic to write a novel about the 1965 Guerra de Abril. She received her PhD in fiction from the University of Cincinnati, where she taught screenwriting, fiction, and science fiction & fantasy writing.

Julia Romero is a senior at New York University studying English and communications. She has a keen interest in speculative fiction that tests the limits of reality and offers new insights. She is a prose editor for *West 10th*, the NYU creative writing program's undergraduate literary journal. She's written about art, theatre, and music in Encore Magazine, and she recommends and reviews her favorite books on her instagram @_booklopedia.



Poetry Book Reviews



Documentary Poetics of Belonging in Victor's Latest Collection

Title: *Curb*
Author: Divya Victor
Print Length: 176 pages
Publisher: Nighthouse Books

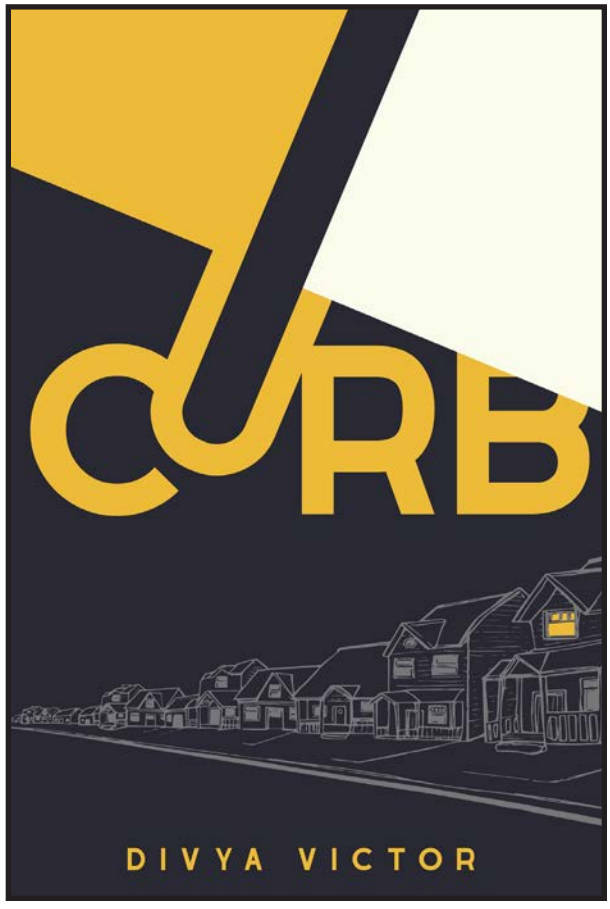
Pub Date: April 27, 2021
Rating: 5/5 stars
Review by:
Julianna Drew Björkstén

Divya Victor's latest collection, *Curb*, documents the day-to-day trauma—the consequence of colonialism, systemic racism, and hate crimes—experienced by South Asian immigrants and Americans with crackling, poetic precision. In its transcription of both commonplace microaggressions and domestic joys, Victor's collection illuminates the lived realities of belonging and unbelonging as an immigrant in America. *Curb* bears witness to the unacknowledged, invisible, and ever-present racism in urban and suburban America and commemorates South Asians killed by white supremacist violence, often, as the title suggests, on their own doorsteps.

A celebrated and masterful poet, Victor flexes her aesthetic range throughout the collection. Made up of 14 sections (including the "Notes & Objects Cited" at the back), each section boasts its own unique logic; voice, form, and tone cannot be pinned down. *Curb* exhibits a kind of intertextual documentary poetics, quoting court testimonies, referencing historical documents, and providing blocky journalistic descriptions of hate crimes. Some poems, particularly in the "More Curbs" section, seem to stutter on the page; the repetition of their broken, isolated words constitute disjointed flashes of violence—decipherable only due to the explanatory paragraphs that follow.

Many of the poems, particularly the ones told in first person, detail the linguistic lineage of displacement and the omnipresent lexicon of prejudice in the lives of South Asian migrants. This language appears in the collection through the distant, numb jargon of government forms—visas, FAFSAs, petitions, passport photos, birth/death certificates—which are always in the margins of immigrant life. Victor interweaves this harsh, impersonal jargon with the intimate, evocative language of the family and the domestic, thereby demonstrating the gross disconnect between lived diasporic experience and

> "In her poems, Victor counters the patronizing voice of empire and institution ... with the devoted language of family and belonging..."



the way South Asian bodies are handled by imperialist institutions. In her poems, Victor counters the patronizing voice of empire and institution ("ma'am can you name two national holidays?") with the devoted language of family and belonging (*"...ma* was a bowl made for two, brimming / beyond any border").

The voice of racism, pinned down by Victor's critique, haunts the collection not only in snippets of bureaucratic language, but also in the everyday, anti-immigrant dialogue which permeates spaces like the neighborhood barbecue, with its "Bills," "Susans," and "Marys": "Do you have stones, someone is asking me. Where you are from, do you have stones, like these?... *sorry to butcher your name."*

While these quotidian aggressions fill the book's periphery, *Curb* is ultimately centered around scenes of infamous anti-South Asian hate crimes. Victor reimagines these scenes in abstract, lyrical language, punctuated by the voice of the white supremacist ("<<HEY BUDDY / <<WHERE DO YOU LIVE?...<<YOU UNDERSTAND ENGLISH?"). In abstracting these anti-immigrant hate crimes and placing them within the context of place ("Residential Neighborhood / Madison, Alabama"), institution ("at the museum—a silk square with Krishna flanked / by gopis holding lilies blood-tipped / bone-white & buttered, its edges worn"), history ("A yard is a measure, a curb its end / this \ is how a landscape renders a portrait / as long & as wide as hemmed in history of linen / — was it white?"), and memory ("like the ones my father threw in the wash, soggy"), the poems in *Curb* break down isolated incidents of violence into rich, palimpsestic explorations of belonging. They remain, reverberating, in the reader's mind.

Divya Victor is the author of *Curb* (Nightboat Books, 2021), *Kith, Natural Subjects* (Winner of the Bob Kaufman Award), *Unsub*, and *Things To Do With Your Mouth*. Her work has been collected in numerous venues, including, more recently, *BOMB*, the New Museum's *The Animated Reader*, *Crux: Journal of Conceptual Writing*, *The Best American Experimental Writing*, *POETRY*, and *boundary2*. Her work has been translated into French, German, Spanish, and Czech. She teaches at Michigan State University.

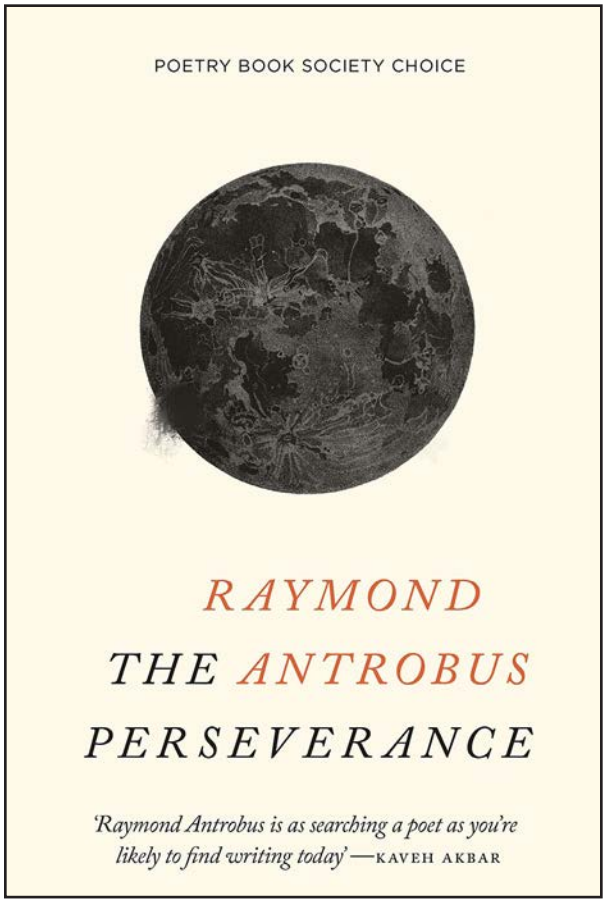
Julianna Drew Björkstén is a writer and editor based in New York. She has written about art, theater, and culture for publications like *Washington Square News* and *Whitewall*.

Sound and Silence in Antrobus' Award-Winning Poetry Collection

Title: *The Perseverance*
Author: Raymond Antrobus
Print Length: 96 pages
Publisher: Tin House Press

Pub Date: March 30, 2021
Rating: 4/5 stars
Review by:
Julianna Drew Björkstén

The Perseverance, the award-winning collection by Raymond Antrobus, was released in the US for the first time this March. In 2018, Antrobus' collection was published in the UK to much acclaim: It was awarded the 2018 Ted Hughes award, the 2019 Sunday Times/University of Warwick Young Writer of the Year Award, the 2019 Rathbones Folio Prize, and one poem from the collection, "Sound Machine," won the 2017 Geoffrey Dearmer Prize, judged by renowned poet Ocean Vuong. *The Perseverance* is Antrobus' debut (his second book, *All the Names Given*, is set to be released this year by Tin House and Picador), and it is an affecting, accessible, and astonishingly raw collection of poems.



> "In grappling with his loss, grief, and forgiveness for his father, Antrobus revisits memories from his childhood..."

Much has been written about this brief but potent work since its original, much-anticipated release. Born deaf to an English mother and Jamaican father, Antrobus' autobiographical poems explore his intersecting identities and his relationship with his family, in particular his late father, with whom he had a complicated relationship. They also deal with his dualistic identity, heritage, and cultural inheritance as a biracial British-Jamaican man. At the heart of the collection, though, lie the unshakable notions of sound and silence. *The Perseverance* begins with depictions of Antrobus' early experiences of deafness: In the opening poem, "ECHO," he muddles over what it means to be deaf in a hearing world, wondering if he instead belongs to "the universe underwater."

On the whole, *The Perseverance* hinges on the linguistic and historical collision between the deaf and hearing worlds. From the beginning, Antrobus lays the groundwork to explore questions of language and miscommunication ("What language would we speak without ears?"). He opens with a misheard epithet from Robin Coste Lewis: "There is no telling what language is inside the body." This exploration of language (spoken and signed—in the body, ears, and mouth) is reified, in Antrobus' poems, through mishearings, translations, and pointed criticism of

the ways deafness has been persecuted both in the present and the past ("Before, all official languages / were oral. The Deaf were a colony / the hearing world ignored.").

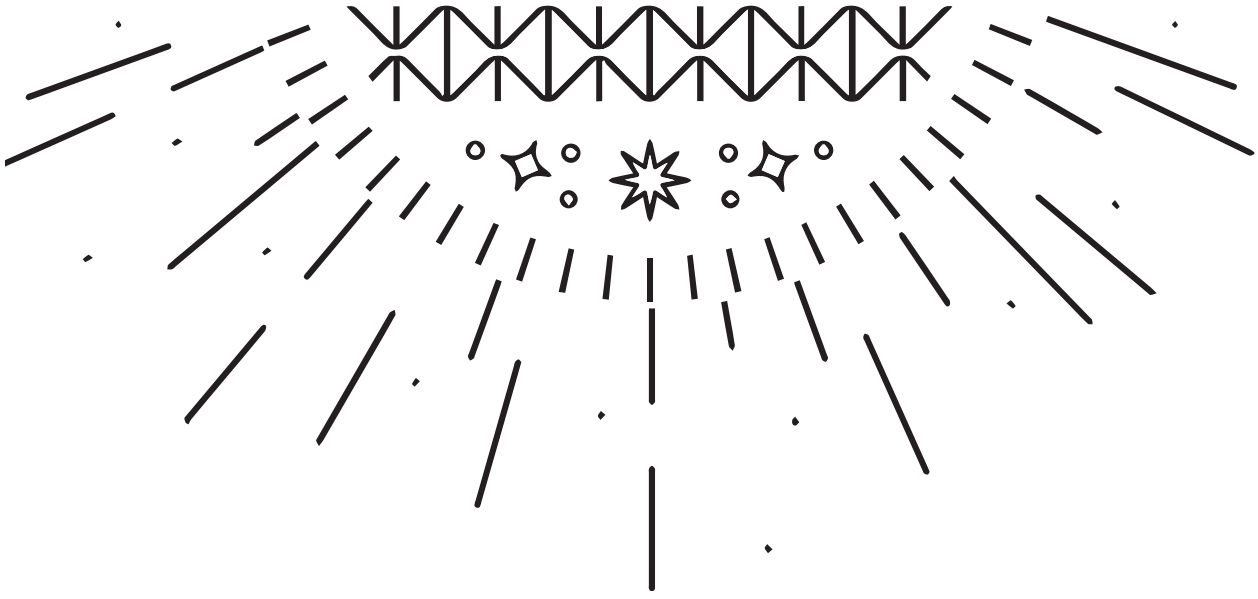
In critiquing the ways deaf people have been discriminated against in history, education, literature, and institutions, Antrobus references historical figures such as Charles Dickens, Helen Keller, and Alexander Graham Bell. Most of the poems, however, are grounded in modern-day deafness through Antrobus' experiences, the testimony of a deaf woman he interviews, and aching tributes to deaf people who have been murdered in recent years. One such poem is "Two Guns in the Sky for Daniel Harris," in which a deaf man is killed by police as he moves his hands to sign: "index fingers pointing up like two guns in the sky."

Amidst ruminations on deafness, family, and identity, a multitude of voices ring out: aunts, mothers, friends, cousins, teachers, preachers, airport employees, and Antrobus' own father. Someone's voice can be heard in nearly every poem. In a collection about deafness, silence, and sound, conversation features prominently. This chorus is populated considerably by the speech of Antrobus' family members, but his late alcoholic father leaves the strongest impression ("I keep my father's words, violence / is always a failure"). In grappling with his loss, grief, and forgiveness for his father, Antrobus revisits memories from his childhood in which he waits outside the bar his father frequented (named The Perseverance): "I'm outside counting minutes / waiting for the man, my father / to finish his shot and take me home." The collection ends on a lighter, tender note, with the sound of father and son reading bedtime stories together.

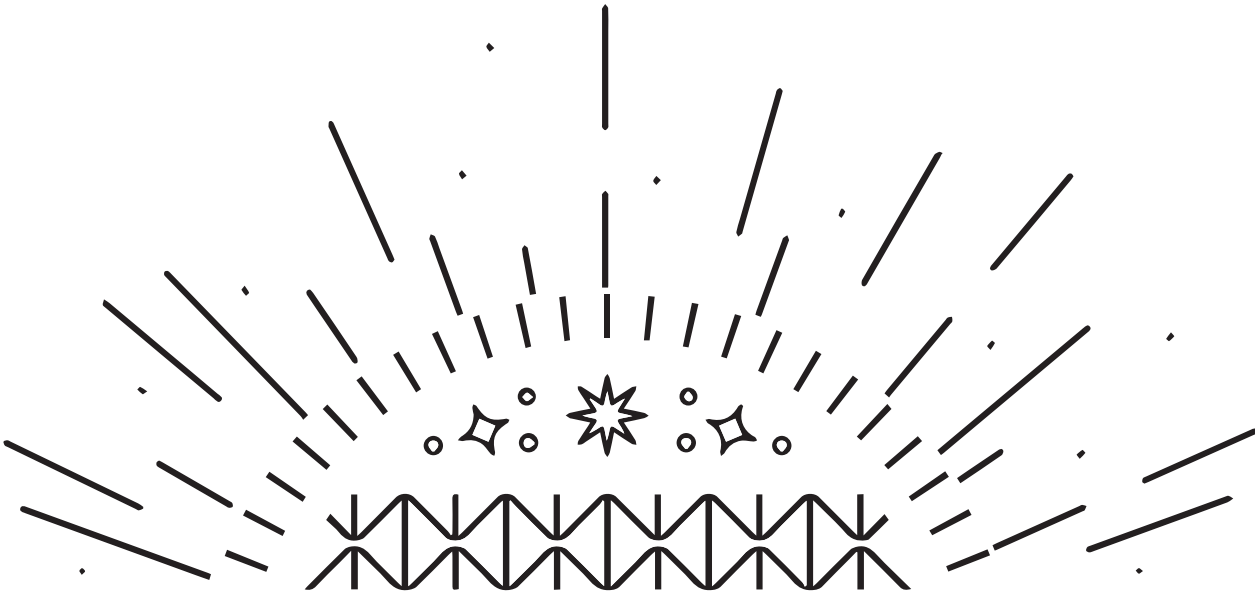
In the interview with Antrobus included at the end of the book, he admits that he's been "accused by some readers of 'over-explaining' [his] poems," but, to me, his poems lay themselves bare on their own. They are consistently simple, honest, and bright—never hiding behind opaque or florid language. The tone is conversational, the images sensorial, and the subject intimate. In the wake of their exposed transparency, I did find myself, from time to time, left wanting. Occasionally, Antrobus' poems feel too aired-out, too digestible. To this reader, a little obscure, bewildering language makes room for multiplicity of meaning. Still, there is an abundance of dense poetry these days; Americans will likely hear *The Perseverance*'s clean, colloquial voice as a singular, fresh note.

Raymond Antrobus was born in London to an English mother and Jamaican father. He was awarded the 2017 Geoffrey Dearmer Prize, judged by Ocean Vuong, as well as the 2019 Sunday Times/University of Warwick Young Writer of the Year Award. His second full-length collection of poems, *All The Names Given*, is forthcoming from Tin House and Picador in 2021. Raymond is currently based between London and Oklahoma City.

Julianna Drew Björkstén is a writer and editor based in New York. She has written about art, theater, and culture for publications like *Washington Square News* and *Whitewall*.



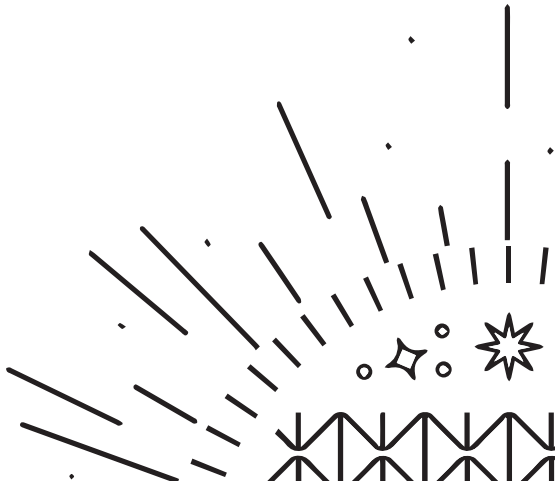
Poetry



The Colors of Spring

Dominic Windram is a poet and personal tutor from Hartlepool in the Northeast of England. Currently, he is collaborating with a German musical composer who is adapting several of his lyrical poems into song form. He is now a resident poet on P.N.N. (Progressive News Network), hosted by Rick Spisak.

When winter holds us in its icy grip,
Spring's warm melodies seem so far away.
And then one day we spot a keen snow drop;
Softly peeping through the cold, hardened ground.
And suddenly new life begins to burst forth
In violets, yellows, blues, pinks, greens, and whites.
Even in old bones, the primal pith is stirred,
And a deeper purpose is rekindled.
Spring's rich colors inspire many a poet.
Nature paints with a sumptuous palette.



Cygnus

Matthew Hunt has been writing for more than 20 years. His poetry has been published in *Brief Wilderness*, *Deep Overstock*, *The Grey Sparrow*, *Life and Legends*, *Global Poemic*, and other poetry journals. He is an inveterate traveler, mountaineer, and musician.

Oh not so much anymore
But often before
We marked the planet's turning
Upon the spit that God left burning
And to their whirled destinies flung,
Assigned them numbers, nine and one
So with them now the seasons last
With Castor's rise and Regnes' pass
In revolutions yearly brought
The flower and the ice are wrought
Yet in the dizzy spin of time
There is a thin unyielding line
That streams despite the ebb and sway
The distant, still, and Milky Way
When honest days have chilled and dried
And loss bemoaned and loss decried
Where stands these hollow dreams of night
Where beats the swan to flop and flight?
With bitter effort rise to sight
I see the streaming wings alight
All with a loud and whooping dash
The lake returns a wave and splash.

Then can we thus
With so much fuss
A darkened wingbeat overhead
A starless sky so come to dread?
Not goat, nor fish, nor bull, nor twin
Can right the planets' wobbling spin
But in the great and feathered stretch
I feel imagination catch.

Ah, and then, and then…

Into the void he firmly streams
And slow his flight, and sure his means
To southerly horizons bend
Until the autumn makes its end.

Estate Sale

Barbara Harris Leonhard is a writer, poet, and blogger. Her work has appeared in *Vita Brevis*, *Well Versed 2020*, *Spillwords*, *FREE VERSE REVOLUTION*, and others.

"When someone is missing, their possessions take on meanings."
–Claudia Emerson (1957–2014)

How the day lays the gray fog into rain
That presses on fallen leaves with bent stems.
Am I ready to sweep them into bags—
Gently used jackets, old woven mittens?
Tell me who needs this apparel of trees.

One leaf still clings, my father, not yet braced
To give up his old toys, schoolbooks, first gun.
He wrote a memoir that ended with me.
Perhaps he thought I would know my story,
Or he didn't want to get it all wrong.

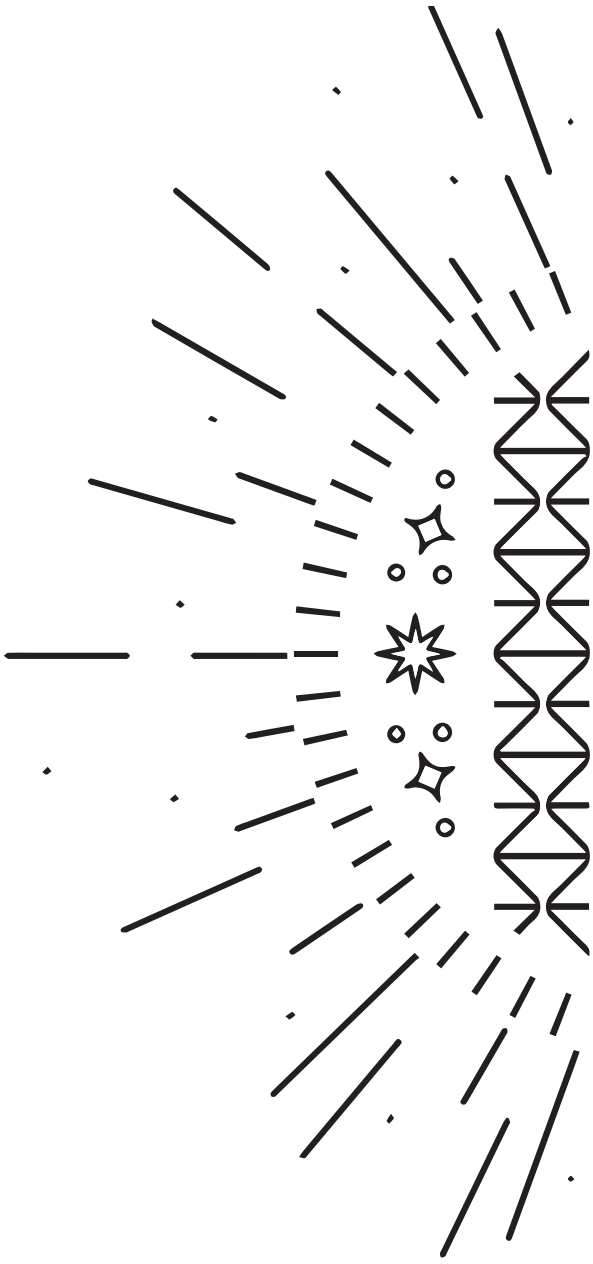
A sole leaf still being written on bark,
He cleaves to the long branch of his mother.
An ancient oak, pruned to keep her health up,
She cannot stretch her limbs out to the clouds.
Instead, her girth grows thick, her stature short,
A broad support for plumage & branches,
To which father maintains a firm handhold.

I gather their china, albums, & garlands.
I wash her face & dress her in twinkling lights.
Father lets go as I head to the sale.

Brilliance

Brianna Lamb is a poet and librarian based in Western Massachusetts. She's received BAs in Creative Writing and Psychology from Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts. *October Hill Magazine* will be her first publication.

I will wrap the night
around me.
I will wear midnight like
a silk scarf,
ruffling against my neck in
a faint breeze.
I will let it envelop me,
and grab the stars to wear
as earrings.
I will use the dusk as
a shawl
of comfort and familiarity
as I move about the world,
and the world moves
about me.
I will wear the cosmos in
the most fashionable way
I can,
and show off the universe
for anyone willing
to see.
And when I slip my cloth of night
off of my body,
you will see
I still contain the universe.



Eternity

C. Barry Buckner is a retired radiologist residing in Little Rock, Arkansas. His most recent poem to be published is "Bare Bones Reality" on The Beautiful Space website; his most recent flash fiction is "Jack and Jake" through Weasel Press; and his most recent short story, "Robert's Room," was published through *October Hill Magazine*.

A sand crab scurries along the beach
Oh, what lessons it could teach
Innocent and unfazed
Paying no attention to my gaze

Long ago, I walked upon this shore
A young man, wanting for nothing more
Yet, now I stand here feeling so alone
Seeking inspiration, my soul to atone

Toward the sea, I stare past the pier
As the sun looms near the edge so clear
Infinity revealed before my eyes
Orange and yellow hues; my lovely, only prize

I muse now, surrounded by eternity
Hidden in an ocean's swell's certainty
Cranes swooping down unbound
With their taunting, mournful sounds

A few clouds gathering up high
I sense a rainstorm is nigh
A certain sadness now I feel
This power of nature becomes all too real

The Jacket

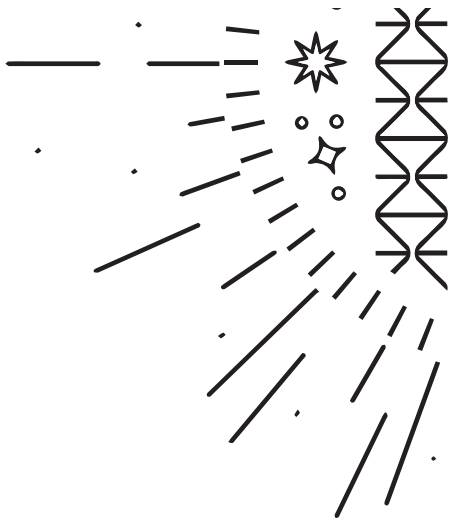
A New York City native, **Carolina Worrell** has a journalism background and has been writing and editing for more than 15 years for a myriad of publications. Her work is featured in both technical and lifestyle magazines, and in 2015, her story was featured in *The New York Times' Metropolitan Diary*.

I hate that jacket.
I hate it even more when you put it on.
It turns you into something you're not.
It makes you run-of-the-mill,
One off the old assembly line,
Typical, mundane, the mirror image of your creator.

I hate that jacket.
So black it destroys the light I know is in you.
With pointed lapels pressed to perfection,
Like the mind they brainwashed.
With buttons up to the neck,
Closing in on your once unique self.

I hate that jacket.
I hate the way it destroys the spirituality you once possessed.
It causes you to care about nothing except the physical aspect,
Of us, of me.
Take off that jacket.
It was made for you,
But you were never made for it.

My Token



Caterina Mercado is a first-time *October Hill Magazine* author but has written articles for a local New York newspaper, *The Queens Courier*. Her children's book *Calliope and The Tummy Dinosaurs* is available now on Amazon.

I can't help but remember my last words to you
Nothing profound, or dignified like you deserved
"No, you can't lie down."
Out of context they seem mean and harsh
maybe they are—
But in that moment, it's all I could say
My strong, virile father
Always a force
A mountain protecting the fields below from
the dangers on the other side
My father, the protector
Now needed protecting
"No, you can't lie down."
No, you can't give in, give up—let go—
No, you can't close those eyes
No, you can't. I won't let you. No
No

My last words to you were cloaked with fire
but filled with fear.
My desperate plea to the Lord above
My father, my protector
Please stand tall
Don't lie down—stay where you are
My last words to you were a token of my love
I didn't want you to leave—I needed you to stay
My last words to you, my father, my protector
"No, you can't lie down."

You will always stand tall, with me, by me, inside me, a part of me.
"No, you can't lie down."

Conquer the Mountains

Duane Anderson currently lives in La Vista, NE and volunteers with a non-profit organization as a Donor Ambassador on their blood drives. His poems have been published in *The Pangolin Review, Fine Lines*, *The Sea Letter*, and several other publications.

Turn the hills upon man
turn the past against man
so that he may forget
and continue on making
mistakes more easily than before.
Go before man
and demand justice.
Go before the world
and demand peace.
Go before God
and demand that he not
change your life
or your memories
or let the people close to you die.
Be not afraid,
stand
speak.
The world is not a complete master.
The controls are owned partly
by you,
use them.

Missing: A Red-Bellied Parrot

Elizabeth Crowell has a BA in English from Smith College and an MFA in Creative Writing/Poetry from Columbia University. Her work has been included most recently in *Bellevue Literary Review*, *Tishman Review*, and *Raven's Edge*. Her essay, "War and Peace," was the 2018 nonfiction prize winner at *Flying South*.

In this picture, thick-stapled to a pole,
the eyes, not the belly, are the darkest red,
a cummerbund of orange breast
accent the ashy body.
Beneath the picture, with no exact date,
it says Call if you see or hear Leonard
missing for two weeks.

That is a long time, though for Leonard
perhaps, freed from a green-painted cage,
five bedroom home (four baths to pluck his water from)
there are treats enough in the thick-grassed yards,
the echo chambers of recycling bins,
well-meant, bitter-tasting compost piles,
scattered with Cheerios and kale.

One day the owner himself appears
masked in a purple bandana
like what? a prophet? a thief?
clawing a flyer in his bare hands.
He tells me that the parrot has seen
on my very street, in the scar-barked beech
with peachy, rattling leaves.
And there have been reports of words in the wind,
a kind of broken speech, hatches of meaning
spilling like seeds from a beak.

Oh, my doubts.
In all the pandemonium of parrots in this world,
how does he know that this one bird is his?
At the last appointment, I asked the doctor
if I will have another Christmas after this.
The numbers are back to good.
She shifted ever so slightly,
not yes nor no, as if the stage I've gotten to
troubles hope, the flick of it, the fact it has to land
its two-toed feet curled on the thinnest branch.

For a while I cock my head towards bare trees,
or the leaf-filled bellies of the gutters,
as if Leonard could be hidden in them.
Trying to sleep, I begin to hear
an odd, hushed one-way conversation
outside the curtained window,
and soon, we are talking to each other,
this strange bird from another continent,
another home; me, with a breathy prayer,
he with a crisp, single-worded refrain.
The shape of the sound is there,
but what it is, he (nor I) cannot exactly say.

Blueberry Secrets

Elizabeth Fletcher's poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *The Schuylkill Valley Journal*, *The Poet* (Childhood Anthology), *The Scarlet Leaf Review*, *Ariel Chart*, and others. Her nature essays about sea turtles and snowy owls have appeared in *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. She lives and writes in Swarthmore, Pennsylvania, a small town known for its trees.

(Lake Paupac Pocono Mountains)

At the farthest edge of the mountain lake
Born of July sun and
sweet spring water
Blue heaven berries

No one else knows this spot
this hidden inlet
We tie up our canoe
Plunge into the dense maze of bushes
heavy with blue crowned clusters
We pick and gorge
Pick and gorge
Royal purple berries
bursting juicy sweet on our tongues

We are robbing the black bear
Defrauding the birds
Berry after fat berry plinks into the tin cans
strung around our necks
Cans our mother and grandfather filled
during their Julys
at their secret spots
Brought home full of triumph

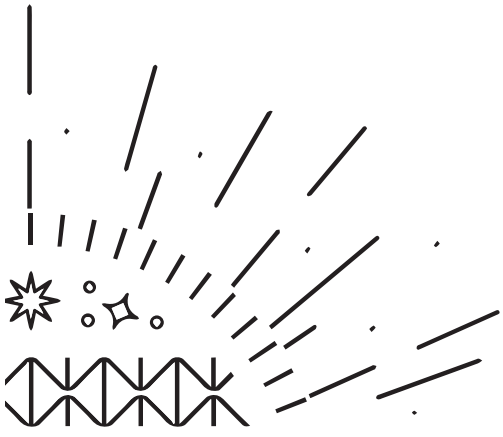
Yet we know our berries are the Queens of Lake
Paupac
will make the most luscious blueberry pie
The most glorious sticky jam
Taste like our summer
Become family legend
No one else will find our spot
Sister
Except for that bear

Graveyard Etiquette

Emma Deimling is currently studying English, Creative Writing, and Classics at Ohio State University and works as a writing tutor in the university's writing center. She has been published in numerous magazines, the most recent being *The Broadkill Review*, *Wilderness House Literary Review,* and *Dark Lane Anthology* (forthcoming).

Don't dig yourself a grave
So that nobody can bury you alive
My sister once told me as
She cultivated her own death,
Snatched up fistfuls of dirt soiled with apologies
And poured them all over her body.

The shovel is cold and slicked with shadows in my
Hands as the fading starlight webs through the night.
Around me, frail woods and even frailer moonlight sulk, but
I am silence; I am still as soft summer
Twilights with no clouds in sight.
My heart drowns inside my chest,
A ship craving to be wrecked as
I search for myself,
The one I forgot to bury,
The sister who remembered me.



The Rewilding of Silver City

Jenny McBride's writing has appeared in *SLAB*, *Common Ground Review*, *Sou'wester*, *Streetwise*, *The California Quarterly*, and other publications. She makes her home in the rainforest of southeast Alaska.

The shore of Lake Superior
Has rebuffed the pennant of tourism.
Rugged wilderness, she smiled
While the hotels welcomed and guidebooks featured
But she knew there was nothing here
For boy scouts.
Gitchigumi has her sweet days
But when she rages
Even the sky shudders.
Rocky remote refuge
For a few outcast souls,
Copper mines abandoned to a world economy.
The general store has closed its sour door
And gas pump where
A "for sale" sign begins the ghost town era
With potato chips stacked three years ago.

And now, every piece of real estate
In Silver City is for sale.
The first crumbling of empire
Has whacked off the trickle of travel
That gave life to lakeshore cabins.
"Closed until" gasps the supper club marquee.
A few miles away a black and white splotched wolf
Stands in the middle of the road
Weighing which direction to take.
Knowing eyes meet my grateful gaze
And instinct calculates the rewilding
Of a site intent on daylight.

A Field

Josey Bryant is a student at the University of Kentucky. He has been writing most of his life. He uses poetry to understand himself and the world around him. His work has been published in the *Trajectory and Dreich* magazine (forthcoming).

If I were to leave, would the grass and weeds turn brown and dry up?
Would the trees stoop low to the ground in mourning?
I look out at the field from my window, and wonder what things it has seen.
At night, surely figures dance and engage in conflict.

Far from their homes, as they might be, the field remembers them.
Holds the echoes of the life that played out in it, an epitaph in the form of bright flowers remains.
Houses of stone and wood, recording constantly the events of the day.
Who will hear them, or witness unknown characters performing daily?

I feel haunted when gazing on such places, but I feel them to be of significance.
Someone is thinking of these natural time capsules, and the figures that inhabit them.
In their minds, the figures take on identities and they are breathed back to life.
I fear the day that the memories stop, and the characters turn to shadows and remnants.

I look at the brown field from my window, and wonder if its color is a result of being lost to passing time.

Intimation of Eternity

Mark Mitchell has been a working poet for 40 years. His latest full-length collection is *Roshi: San Francisco*, published by Norfolk Press. He lives with his activist wife, Joan Juster.

They finished repairing that star
on the anniversary
of a forgotten disaster.

The sun remained
discreetly hidden allowing
his sister to shine.

Fires vanished
and earth inhaled time
then held her breath.

This day will never end.

Options for the Afterlife

Megan Cartwright is a fledgling poet and secondary school teacher hailing from Australia. Her work has been published in the literary journal *Authora Australis*.

i. burial
The law requires that buried bodies be contained,
constrained within a box of suitable material,
a forgotten egg carton at the back of the fridge.
To go back to nature seems amiss
when we came into the world by way of a miss—
or a stern lady doctor in a lab coat.
Blind Oedipus could not find his way back to her.

Decomposition takes longer this way.
There can still be hair and remnants years later,
after the moisture leeches out.
Unless they embalm you for an upmarket, open casket
affair, so they can stroke the freshly brushed hair
that seems to grow as the flesh shrinks away.

ii. cremation
Place me in a furnace, a handmade pinch pot in a kiln.
I am never warm enough in life,
but I think this should be enough.
Fire seems cleansing, but I have heard there can be
remnants
fragments
of bone, a filling.

This way you get the last laugh
when a gust of wind sets the ashes off course
into the face of an unsuspecting relative
or friend, mouth agape.
What choice is there then but to laugh?
Just ignore the gritty crunch against your teeth.

iii. other
Carbon emissions are a concern
A first-world dilemma: How to be environmentally conscious in death?
(And to what end when it is the end?)
Perhaps a beeswax shroud that can be washed
and wrapped around the next
sushi roll (gluten-free), snug in a balanced lunch box?

Leave me to the vultures who circle mountaintops
or floating on a sea of alkaline hydrolysis.
Decomposition by earth, ocean, or the elements
are on the table if you can navigate the legalities.
A veritable buffet of options for the afterlife.
I have gorged and now I am ill.

Double Elegy

Peter Mladinic has published three poetry collections: *Lost in Lea*, *Dressed for Winter*, and *Falling Awake in Lovington*, all with the Lea County Museum Press. He lives in Hobbs, New Mexico.

An outdoor bar shaded by palm trees,
your husband's arm around your shoulder.
On the bar, two margaritas. You smile
in this picture taken four years ago.

It's displayed with others up on the screen,
pictures of you from your teens
till the present. Their lights and shadows
differ from the light and dark
at midday in the chapel. You're up front,
laid out, except it doesn't look like you.

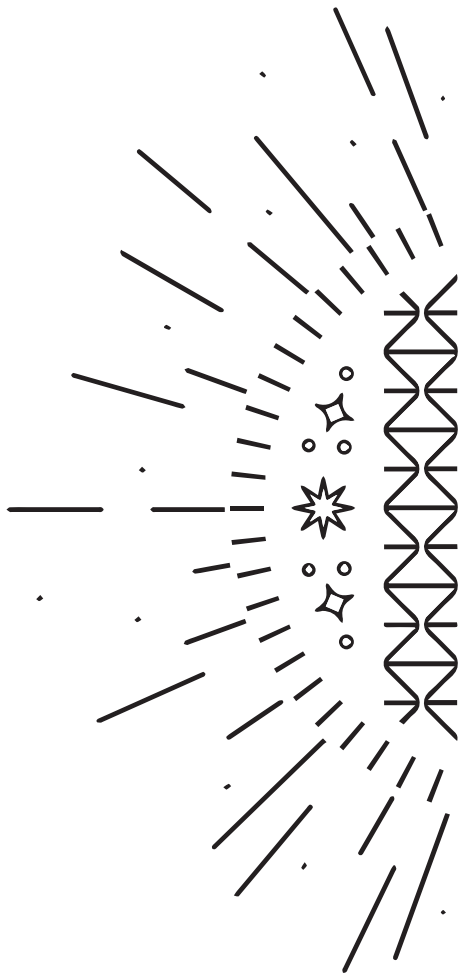
At Johnson, Miller, I'd sit across your desk
from you. Take a vacation, I would say.
I'd sit across your desk from you
and you'd make me laugh so hard I'd cry.

Years ago I kissed a girl at a drive-in movie.
Later she became a woman.
Then a woman dying in a hospice.
Her ashes were scattered off the Florida coast.

On her deathbed she asked a friend,
Is there something after this?

The Woman

From a nurse to a writer, **Joanne Hattersley** changed careers and blossomed with success. With a poetry and a children's book arriving on the shelves this year, she has also seen articles published in online magazines.



I turned to see the woman
Watching from far away.
I turned to see the woman,
Wondering how was in her day.
I turned to see her coming.
Walking straight at me.
I turned to her preparing.
Wondering what would be.
She started a conversation.
Just words, they made no sense.
She started the conversation.
Just words, they seemed so dense.
I wasn't sure what to say back.
Was she expecting a reply.
No idea what to say to her.
The woman started to cry.
Noticed that the woman,
Had looks the same as me.
Blonde hair and brilliant green eyes.
The eyes, they were the key.
I followed where they were looking.
I wondered what she could see.
Then in a flash I realized that the woman, she was me.

Hallmark of the '90s

Tara Kareta was born in Concord, NH and has a BA from The Culinary Institute of America in baking and pastry. In addition to a normal corporate nine-to-five, Tara is a part-time yoga instructor, a retired professional bikini competitor, a pretend farmer, and most likely a witch.

The house where I grew up had a creek in the backyard.
It ran through our little patch of woods
past the lawn my Dad mowed every weekend,
a place my brother and I were the only ones that ventured out to.

After pushing past bramble and pokeweed,
tiptoeing around the skunk cabbage
dropping pennies into the spring upstream;
this infinite small hole in the earth became my wishing well.

Sometimes I would go into the woods and dig up watercress.
The bright slippery greens all pepper earth
shrank and muted with red wine
vinegar once I went inside.

A flat rock next to the creek
the perfect height to dangle my toes above the water
I would sit there sheltered and rest on that rock hoping for something:
some change,
a shift,
just one of my one-cent wishes.

Head heavy,
if I dipped forward
I could have laid down in the shallow stream.
The silt flowing over me in velvet.
Tucking me into the scenery.
My body the bed for greens to take root,
pushing forth another plush of wood violets.
How worthy I would have been to be the base in which you could grow
but you saw me through the trees to call me in for dinner.

We all thought we were hidden then.

One Spring afternoon surrounded by new green
I lit a candle leftover from Christmas.
The Hallmark wax melted over the slate as I read from a book on Nature.
I dreamt of moving objects,
moving me from where I was
stuck
unmagical,
veiled in the tragic ordinary of it all.
Hidden by the commonplace of these feeling
Children raised with the rehearsed line,
"Fine, thank you, and you?"

The day before another name was on the mailbox
and my key would not open the door,
I walked out to the lawn,
past the bittersweet
but there was no stream,
no watercress, no wishing, well not even a whiff of skunk cabbage.
I expected to see the red wax
my bench rock.
It was just bramble and dirt.

Turning back towards the house
I felt a weight plant on my chest burrowing out to my limbs.
My unrooted body glancing down toward the ground
spotting a small patch of violets
Almost hidden from view above the other wild things in this unvisited place
as my brother and I had left for college a decade ago.

Tilting their lavender love heads to me
their coal eyes shone with familiar features,
reflecting back from a small puddle and a handful of weathered pennies,
smiling.

Your Tender Heart

Wil Michael Wrenn is a poet, songwriter, and musician. He has published three books of poems—*Songs of Solitude*, *Seasons of a Sojourner*, and *Enid Lake Mosaic*, the latter two published by Silver Bow Publishing in British Columbia, Canada.

Your tender heart touched
my lonely soul,
found me on my island,
and washed some of the loneliness
and emptiness away.
Your loving kindness granted me
a grateful reprieve
from the sadness of this life
and gave me a glimpse of God
in a hurting, cruel world.
Your compassion reached down
deep into my dark well
and lifted me up
into the light of day,
giving me renewed hope
that goodness will live on,
shining from the lives of a few.
Your tender heart touched mine,
rescued me from a distance,
and I bless you for that,
stranded here alone
on my desert island.

Pandora's Box

William Miller's eighth collection of poetry, *LEE CIRCLE*, was published by Shanti Arts Press in 2019. His poems have appeared in *The American Poetry Review*, *The Southern Review*, *The Penn Review*, *Shenadoah*, and *Prairie Schooner*. He lives and writes in the French Quarter of New Orleans.

On Carrollton, beneath the canopy
of a live oak tree, at a green picnic table,
she makes the last snowball
for herself.

Shaved ice and Grand Marnier,
white soaked to orange then almost black—
she holds every frozen bite
beneath her tongue.

This is the best time, the families,
the couples, the lonely old men
who linger for her dark red hair,
ice-white skin, azure eyes

have wandered home.
For thirty years, they've come to buy,
savor a cold respite, even after Katrina
when the syrup and warm water

at the bottom of a paper cup
was all she had to offer.
Still beautiful, still herself, the girl
who did bad things, had bad things

done to her, she never learned
her lesson on a Mississippi farm.
She loved to lie naked beneath
a spreading oak, picked lovers

from the hard-shell proud.
The preacher and the preacher's son
shared a secret sin when they
lay beside their plump,

obedient wives. There was magic
between her long white legs,
on sticky fingers licked for a taste
sweeter than raw sugarcane…

Children loved her best, the children
of the Storm, tough as pine boards,
always laughing, crazy dancers.
Hope was a snowball eaten

in the afternoon shade.
the snowball lady, their wicked,
older sister with steps of her own,
never told them no.

Sunset Strip

Gary Duehr has taught poetry and writing for institutions including Boston University, Lesley University, and Tufts University. Journals in which his poems have appeared include *Agni*, *American Literary Review*, *Chiron Review*, and others. He has published four books of poetry, including *In Passing* (Grisaille Press, 2011) and *THE BIG BOOK OF WHY* (Cobble Hill Books, 2008).

Just look at all the stars
Embedded in the sidewalk: between the stares
Of prowling tourists, in the shiny glare
Of sun that's really setting. Where?
From way past Vine, beyond those figures lost in shadow.
A homeless guy, nowhere to go,
Is squatting on the edge
Of a wire-mesh trash bin, like it's a ledge
That he's about to jump from.
Wild-eyed, feral, he snarls at you: *I'm no bum.*
The light from stars, he rants, has died
Before it reaches you—a homicide or suicide?
I was born beneath the sign
Of Jack Daniels, no light was ever mine.
In fact, the garbage in this can is actually a diagram
Of my digestive system: who I am.
The stuff that goes through me goes through this whole city,
And it's not pretty.
You want respect, you voyeuristic motherfucker?
Then pay me what you owe me, sucker!
What's funny is, he looks a little bit
Like Paul Auster, the novelist, if Auster's work had turned to shit
Along with everything. And yet
The life that this guy leads, no debt
And no restraints, is not without attraction.
To blame the world, to bark at passersby—what satisfaction!
Nyargh, nngh, urghh, whatever.
I hear you, brother.

In the Rain Before the Flood

Ivanka Fear is a retired teacher and a writer from Canada. Her poems and short stories appear in or are forthcoming in *Spadina Literary Review*, *Montreal Writes*, *Adelaide Literary, October Hill Magazine*, and several others. She has completed her fourth novel and is looking for a publisher.

I saw her standing there in bare feet
and short pigtails with fine hairs curling
across her dirt-smeared innocent face.
Our eyes locked briefly across the street—
I turned away in embarrassment.

A hand-sewn dress flapped across her legs,
and she shivered, though not from the cold.
So out of place in this modern world...
And I thought she must be a lost child
hoping to find shelter from the rain.

Through the window I watched her get drenched,
soaked to the skin, thin fabric clinging
to her yet undeveloped body.
The raw purity of youth unleashed,
she stuck out her tongue and cupped her hands
to catch the rain as it slipped away.

The puddles between her feet grew deep
as nature's misplaced fury struck her
with baptismal waters turned bloody.
I looked on with shame and did nothing.
Then the flood washed the barren street clean
and took with it my camouflaged tears.

I saw her there for just a moment,
but then she vanished into thin air.
And all that was left was the shadow
of the lost girl who was swept away.

June

Dale Cottingham has published poems and reviews of poetry collections in many journals. He is a Breadloafer and won the 2019 New Millennium Award for Poem of the Year. He lives in Edmond, Oklahoma.

A swarthy wind, all greasy, all going
pushing me to the lip of the road.
I could go the way where the land smooths out
but take the other, more hilly, less kind way
because it's more like what I've known.

Soon enough there'll be posts to set,
walls to paint. Keeping my chin up
I think this will be enough now
and for a while. Besides that,
I'll amble about the inland creek,
checking sluices, playing supporting roles.
And yes, it will seem good.
Reaches reached, patios swept.
All the train cars accounted for.
Field grass will let go,
raising many hands,

offering praise

Leonard's Last Trip

Jesús Nieto is an associate professor at the INBAL Design School in Mexico. He has published poems in magazines and contributes essays and opinion pieces in literary supplements. Memory and travels are some of his constant topics. *Memoria itinerante*, his first book of poems, is currently in press in Ultramarina.

The station is lonely.
You are sitting with your dark coat,
the hat beside you on the bench.

It's been time you don't expect to find the Lord
or any mischievous prince,
but some sort of peace which will finally bring you home.
For there isn't another home than Earth itself
and you have been longing to carve your way into it.

There is no companion for this trip.
You search for a pack of cigarettes
and find one last cylinder of joy,
one last measure of banality
which may suit you to consume
the very ultimate minutes of existence.

And so you light that piece of pleasure
and savor the smoke,
the heart beating angrily against the chest.

You suddenly realize that you aren't wearing a watch.
Probably you left it on purpose,
in order not to keep track of time,
'cause you knew deeply
there was no chance to avoid
arriving to your hour.

The train is finally whistling.
You gather up and grab the hat,
driven by your body.
You walk instinctively to the lane
and go up the stairs of the wagon.
Looking back to the clock,
it turns out it has stopped at midnight (or noon).

As you make your way inside the train,
fog gets in through the windows.
The train begins moving forward,
as it all gently vanishes into the night.

Someday You'll Burn Up Everything in the Garage

Loria Mendoza is a writer, curator, musician, and performance artist. Her work has been published in *The Acentos Review*, *Mobius*, *Subprimal*, *Fourteen Hills Magazine*, and others. Her collection of short stories, *Life's Too Short* (Fourteen Hills Press, 2017) won the Michael Rubin Chapbook Award.

the things your mother hoards
burn soprano-rose fumes as you
watch this fountain of neon wasps
raze the landscape with volcanic delirium
the soliloquy of each burning thing
spreading in the hot air, illuminating
the centrifugal nature of your childhood's exquisite ruins
each one a bone in your mother's heap
and it's as though you'd set fire to time itself
your torch groping at each dullness
made iridescent with the memory of a dying thing
this inheritance is the ash
that will bury you in its blossoming
you're the ghost they've been waiting for
the anxious slopes of your first lace shoes
rats' nests swaddled in baby blankets
small plates and still smaller spoons
you could fill your mouth with rust
or music boxes full of scattered moths
the rocking horse that broke your toes
before you scratched out its paper eyes
you never knew if it was a sin
and yet you did
each year your mother emptied you
filled the garage with
not so much the memory of who you no longer were
so much as debt
reminders of how you grew into
an unlovable thing
so much as a grave
an altar, a pyre
that bears no religion you know
so much as the automaton
that your mother mistakes for you
this girl,
this thing that burns
the moon hesitates
unsure of the fall
into her calico sky
i know she will fall
and with phoenix
rise

Jane Wheeler is a 12 year old from Massachusetts who loves art, reading, writing, swim team and horseback riding. *October Hill Magazine* is her first publication.

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