October Hill MAGAZINE

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October Hill
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Welcome to October Hill Magazine

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

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

The works featured in our first issue of *October Hill* have already engaged and inspired our imaginations as editors. As stewards of a new digital publication on its maiden voyage, what more can we ask than to be granted the trust to share those new and exciting works with our readers? We therefore owe a debt of gratitude to those authors whose creative works and belief in our mission made this Spring issue a reality.

And, while it is far too early to determine whether we will have a genuine impact – or any impact at all – in the literary world, we are extremely encouraged by the quality of the short stories and poetry submitted to us for publication in this issue. We hope you'll decide to join us and follow our authors as they embark on their journeys of imagination.

Richard Merli
Editorial Director

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The Only Child They Had

By Stephen C. Bryant

Mr. Russell watched in bemusement as his ten-year-old son ironed his wife's white silk blouse. His wife sat in an overstuffed chair, drinking from a sixteen-ounce wine glass, filled with some weird, expensive white wine. She insisted it was the only white wine that was palatable. It was Saturday afternoon and the three of them were in the living room, watching *Keeping up with the Kardashians* on DVR.

"You know you don't have to iron the clothes, Mikey. Mommy can do that."

His son looked distinctly feminine, wearing a frilly apron, as he carefully folded the blouse and set it on a growing pile of his wife's intimate garments.

"I don't mind, Father. I like it."

Mr. Russell shivered. Couldn't Mikey call him Dad like a normal child?

"Oh leave him be," his wife said in a playful voice.

"You shouldn't encourage him."

She took a big sip of wine and smirked. Looking at her, Mr. Russell reminded himself that when she was drinking, there was no point trying to reason with her. He left the room in frustration.

Michael Russell was glad that his father left. He did not like it when his parents argued. It made him afraid they would blame him. So he behaved himself around them. It made his mother happy. His father, he knew, was easily manipulated with a smile and a hug.

"I'm done now, Mother. May I go out and play?"

"Put the ironing board away first," Mrs. Russell said, refilling her glass.

"Yes, Mother."

After putting it away, he went outside. He walked across the street and began bouncing a ball against the cinderblock wall that paralleled the alley leading to the next block. Five minutes later, two boys walked around the corner.

"Hey, kid," the bigger of the two said. "You can't play ball here."

"Yes, I can," Mike replied, but stopped, holding the ball to his chest.

"No, you can't. That's Keith Grossman's house. He says he doesn't want anyone bouncing balls against his wall."

"Yeah," said the second, smaller boy.

"Why doesn't he tell me himself?"

"Because we're telling you."

"Yeah," said the second boy. "Now scram."

"Who are you?"

"I'm Douglas Rath, and this is Allan Pierce. Who are you?"

"I'm Mike Russell. I just moved here."

"Well, Keith Grossman doesn't like kids bouncing balls against his wall," Douglas, the bigger boy, said.

"I can bounce my ball anywhere I want to. If Keith Grossman want me to stop, he can tell me himself."

"Didn't you hear him?" Allan said. "He sent us. Now am-scray."

"If you don't leave, I'll take your ball." Douglas said, taking a step forward. Mike did not move. He looked Douglas straight in the eye.

"You can't take my ball. That would be stealing."

"Then you better leave."

"No."

Douglas took another step forward. He and Mikey were now standing toe to toe. Mikey had not moved, though his face was growing red. Douglas was surprised at the boy's stubbornness. He reached out and tugged at the ball. Mike held onto it. Douglas pulled harder and wrested the ball from Mikey's grasp. Mikey glared at him but did not try to get his ball away from Douglas.

"You better give me my ball back, or you'll be sorry."

"No. And if you follow us I'll sock you," Douglas said.

"Yeah," Allan said.

Mike watched as they walked back around the corner.

"I'll get you for this," he said in a normal tone of voice, his face so red it looked like it would burst.

"You and whose army?" Allan's voice carried over the fence.

He and Douglas laughed.

"I'll get you. You can't go around stealing," Mike muttered under his breath.

When he got home, his mother was still in the living room, watching television, smoking a cigarette between sips of wine. In the bathroom, he took off his shoes and socks and put his socks in the hamper. As the hamper was full, he took it down to the basement and transferred the clothes to the washing machine.

"What are you doing, Mikey?" his mother called, as he emerged from the

basement.

"I'm doing laundry."

"Oh, Mikey, you're such a good boy. Come here."

He obeyed her, and she cupped his cheeks affectionately.

"You're my little man."

"Thank you mother," he said happily.

She put her hand behind his head and pulled him toward her.

"Why don't you make Mommy a nice martini?"

"Okay."

It was their secret. "Daddy wouldn't understand," she had told him. And, though Mike did not understand what it was his father wouldn't understand, he did understand it was their secret. So he made her a martini. When he gave it to her, she kissed him on the forehead. They watched television together, her arm around him. While watching, Mike thought about the two boys who took his ball. He imagined they were scarecrows and, while crows pecked at their eyes, he stabbed them in the guts with a pitchfork. They cried out horribly, but, no matter how many times he jabbed them, they would not die. They twisted their heads around in misery, but could not stop the crows from jabbing at their eyeballs. He imagined their blood soaking into their clothes and dripping onto the ground, where rats drank it. He looked up at his mother and smiled.

"Well, isn't this a cozy scene," Mr. Russell said when he walked into the room, his face tight with a pinched smile.

He thought Mrs. Russell watched entirely too much television. Seeing them together, he felt a pang of jealousy. Why weren't he and Mikey that close?

“Hi, Hon. Mikey’s doing laundry. Isn’t he a good boy?” Mrs. Russell said with a big smile.

Mr. Russell pointedly looked at the glass in her hand. Seeing his glance, she took a drink.

“I told you I don’t like him doing laundry. Mikey, you don’t have to do the laundry. That’s your mother’s job.”

Mikey was afraid they would argue, but he felt safe with his mother’s arm around him.

“I don’t mind. I like to do it.”

“I know, and you’re a good boy, but you can help your mother in other ways.”

“Yes, Father.” He was relieved when his father left the room.

The Russell’s had moved to the neighborhood late in the summer, only a few weeks before school started. Mike was in the fifth grade. At school the next day, Allan Pierce approached him at recess

“Hey, Mike Russell, where’s your precious ball?”

“You have it, Allan Pierce. Give it back.” Mikey spoke in an even tone.

“Make me,” Allan said smugly.

Mike stared at him for a few moments before answering.

“You better give it back, or you’ll be sorry.”

Allan just laughed and walked away. As he did, Mike’s face grew red with anger.

That night, when he took the garbage out, he walked to the alley. Children in the neighborhood used it as a shortcut to the school. A streetlight illuminated the entrance. Along one wall, the ground sloped to a ditch filled with weeds. He looked around until he

found a chunk of broken cinderblock. He held it in his hand, feeling the weight and its jagged edges. He put it back in the weeds where he could find it. He had a plan and was in such an excited state he had a difficult time falling asleep.

The next morning he awoke in a state of eager anticipation. After gulping down breakfast and brushing his teeth, he grabbed his scuffed book satchel and ran to the door.

"Whoa, cowboy! Where's the fire?" his father asked.

"I want to see how fast I can get to school." He looked at his watch. "It's forty minutes after eight. I bet I can be there in ten minutes!"

"You have plenty of time," his father started to say, but Mike had already slammed the front door and was running up the sidewalk. When he got to the alley, he loitered by a big tree. A few kids walked in before Allan appeared. As quietly as he could, he walked into the alley and retrieved the chunk of cinderblock. Holding it in both hands high above his head, he ran up behind Allan and clobbered him. Allan cried out and put his hands on his head, blood soaking through his hair. Mike hit him a second time, and Allan fell heavily to the ground. Mike pushed him out of sight into the thorny weeds. He threw away the piece of cinderblock and kicked dirt over the blood on the ground. Then he hurried to the end of the alley. After looking back for a moment, he turned and, with a rush of exhilaration, ran all the way to school. He had never gone so fast. Speed made his happiness increase, so he tried to run faster. He felt like he would take off and fly. *I got him! I got even!* He thought rapturously.

Mike was panting when he got to school, but he was more than just out of breath. The act of hitting Allan had made him feel amazing. He felt better than he had ever felt in his life. He could hardly wait to get even with Douglas.

When Allan did not answer the roll call, Mike was hard pressed to suppress his smile. At lunchtime, a rumor went around that Allan had been attacked and left for dead. Violence was practically non-existent in the neighborhood, so rumors spread quickly. By the afternoon, it was known that he had been hit on the head and was in the hospital.

"Who would mug a kid?" one boy asked scornfully. "He didn't have any money."

"He had his lunch money," Mike said.

"He lives in the biggest house in the neighborhood," another boy said. "Maybe someone wanted to kidnap him."

Mike had once heard his parents talking about a movie they had seen and mentioned a term. Mike did not know what it meant, but it sounded ominous.

"Maybe it was a serial killer," he said. "He didn't kill him because something went wrong, but his next victim probably won't be so lucky."

An appreciative chill ran through the boys. They had never heard of a serial killer, but it sounded wonderfully horrible. The thought that there might be another victim was spine-tingling in the best possible way. Each thought how their neighborhood would become famous as kids began to turn up dead, each killed in some unique, gruesome, way. They could hardly wait to go home and tell their parents.

Mike was about to say more when he was suddenly shoved to the ground. His friends stepped back. A tall, skinny boy with jet black hair and thick eyebrows had pushed him. Douglas was with him.

"Hey, Mike Russell. What are you doing on the ground? You'll get your school clothes all dirty," the boy said.

Douglas laughed sycophantically.

"Yeah," he said for emphasis.

Mike hated getting his clothes dirty. He stood up and slapped the dust off his knees.

"Who are you?"

"I'm Keith Grossman. I heard you were playing ball against my fence."

"So what?"

"Now you know what."

Mike turned to Douglas.

"Douglas Rath, you stole my ball. You better give it back."

"I don't have your stupid ball."

"Yes, you do."

"Prove it."

"I want my ball back. You better give it to me."

"Or what?"

"I don't know. Maybe the serial killer will get you."

Douglas was unsure how to respond. Keith wasn't. He pushed Mike down again.

"Stay away from my wall, or I'll steal all your balls," Keith said.

He and Douglas walked away laughing.

"Don't worry about them. They're just a couple of dummies," a boy said.

"They just better watch themselves. They can't push kids around like that and get away with it," Mike said, his face so bright red it looked like a balloon about to pop.

Fall turned to winter, then winter into spring. Allan returned to school, much subdued. Mike ignored him. He had gotten his revenge and felt no need to do anything

else. But he thought much about Keith Grossman and Douglas Rath.

There was a stand of woods bordering the suburbs, separated by a fallow field, waiting to be leveled for new housing. The woods were about a square mile, but, to the children, they seemed like the limitless depths of the Black Forest. In a grove of maple trees was the foundation of an old cabin, along with a few rotting logs. It was called The Place. If you said you were going to The Place, everyone knew where you were. Boys liked to go there to knock bottles and cans down with slingshots. It was so popular that even boys who did not like one another would call a truce when they met there. Mike was there with two friends when Douglas and Keith showed up. They eyed each other, but fired their slingshots and left each other alone. Mike had an idea.

One day after school, he went to The Place. He found a broken branch about the size of a baseball bat and hid it. After that, he spent much of his time in the woods. Each time he made sure the branch was still there.

One Sunday, near the end of school, he saw Douglas at The Place, alone. He quietly picked up the branch and approached Douglas, who was at the very edge of the clearing. Mike was able to get right behind him. Douglas heard him at the last minute and was turning around when Mike hit him on the head as hard as he could. Douglas fell down, emitting a high-pitched scream. Mike hit him again. And again. And again. Douglas stopped making any noise. Mike was ecstatic with joy. He kept whacking him until Douglas's skull cracked open and brains spattered out. When the side of his head was crushed, Mike stopped. He was panting and could not believe how joyous he felt. He stared triumphantly at the bloody mess he had made of Douglas's head.

That'll show you. You'll never bully another kid. I taught you a good lesson.

He ran past the cabin ruins until he was at the farthest point in the woods away from The Place. He found a hollow where leaves carpeted fallen tree limbs and hid the branch, sticky with coagulating brains. When he got home, he took off his shirt and pants, putting them in the clothes hamper, washing his face and hands. He took the hamper downstairs and started a load of laundry. His mother was in the kitchen, reading the side of a frozen dinner.

"Hi, Mikey. I didn't hear you come in. Are you doing laundry?"

"Yes, Mother. I fell down at school and got dirt on my pants."

"Oh,.are you alright?"

"Yes, Mother."

"Good, because I wouldn't want my little boy to hurt himself."

She bent down and gave him a kiss. Mike glowed with happiness, greedily absorbing her love. Next to getting even with his enemies, he liked being fawned over by his parents most of all.

Monday at school, during the afternoon recess, Mike was with a group of boys.

"Douglas Rath didn't go home last night," one said.

"Where'd he go?" Mike asked.

"No one knows. He's missing."

"Maybe it's the serial killer," Mike said.

A respectful pause followed.

Douglas's disappearance was the talk of the schoolyard. His body was discovered Monday afternoon, when some boys went to The Place. He was the headline story on the ten o'clock news. The next morning, Mike's parents were talking about it at breakfast.

"I think we should move," Mrs. Russell said.

"What! We've only just moved here!"

"I know, but I don't like it. I'm so afraid for Mikey. What if something happens to him? He's all we have!"

"Mikey will be fine. Let's wait until the end of the school year before we make any decisions. We can't just pull up stakes every time something bad happens."

"But murder! No matter where we go, bad things happen."

"Honey, bad things just happen. It has nothing to do with us."

"I don't know. I mean, the Wheeler's house burned down right next door to us! Mikey could have been killed, too!"

Mike remembered that bratty kid. He followed Mike around and wanted anything Mike had and would throw a tantrum to get it. It was just too bad that he didn't get out of the house before it burned down.

"Hon," Mr. Russell crouched before his wife, affectionately taking her hands. "There's only so much we can do. I worry about him, too. But, if we panic every time he gets on his bicycle, we'll go crazy. Think about the good things in life." Then, trying to sound casual, he added: "Maybe if you drank less you wouldn't worry so much."

Mrs. Russell took her hands back. She looked into her husband's eyes for a moment before speaking.

"Sometimes I don't think you love Mikey as much as I do."

Mr. Russell stood up, his face white with anger.

"Of course, I do! How can you say that? Maybe, just maybe, you might worry less about Mikey if we had more children. I wanted to have more children, and you said

you did, too. What happened?"

Mrs. Russell stood up, her fists clenched.

"Don't start that again! You don't know what you're talking about. *You* never gave birth. *You* don't know what it's like. Mikey's a gift from God, and you don't appreciate him!"

She walked out of the kitchen. Mr. Russell sat back down, a napkin tight in his fist, as if he was trying to squeeze the life out of it.

Mike had heard the conversation and thought his father was angry with him, that somehow he had found out what he had done. He timidly walked into the room.

"Father, are you mad at me?"

Mr. Russell unballed his fist.

"Oh, no, of course not."

He picked Mike up, sat him on his knee and gave him a hug.

"We just worry about you."

"You're not angry with me?"

Mr. Russell paused, wondering about Mikey's need to be reassured.

"Why? Have you done something?"

He was about to say "Father" but, remembering what his father had said, replied, "Oh, no, Dad! I just heard you and Mommy. I thought maybe you thought I had done something bad."

Mr. Russell felt guilty at Mikey having overheard them arguing.

"Not at all. Sometimes, parents have arguments. But it's a way of talking things over. We don't stay angry with each other. And we're certainly not angry with *you*!" Mr.

Russell playfully poked Mikey with his finger until Mikey giggled.

"So, you do still love me?"

"Of course, we do! We'll always love you!"

"Good. Because I love you and Mommy."

He smiled and threw his arms around his father's neck. Mr. Russell hugged his son back, tears in his eyes. Mikey was not this demonstrative with his mother. Mr. Russell somehow felt validated. Mike was relieved they had not found out anything.

At school, police questioned the children. They were told about The Place and interviewed all the students who went there. The blood-encrusted stick was found. Tales of escaped convicts, murderous drifters and sexual perverts spread like a virus. Children gleefully took the rumors home to their parents, and fright spread through the neighborhood.

Mike was quite pleased with the worried looks he saw on those around him, grownups and kids alike. The worse everyone else felt, the more he liked it. Whenever he saw a pensive look or a worried expression on an adult, he thought *I did that*.

After a month with no arrests, or any more casualties, the tension died down. Miss Elmore, the second grade teacher, won a million dollars in the Irish Sweepstakes. People clutched at this straw to change the mood. She was on the five o'clock news, and the local newspaper ran her picture. Life began to feel normal again.

School ended, and Mike still had not done anything about Keith Grossman. He rode his bicycle up and down the street past Keith's house every day. Finally, on a Friday afternoon, Keith's parents' car was gone. Mike knew Keith was alone, so he rode behind Keith's house, then snuck into the garage. There was a tool bench and plenty of weapons

to choose from, but he saw something perfect. Next to a lawn mower was a can of gas. Next to the can of gas was a metal bucket, and there was a long-nosed lighter on the tool bench. Mike stuck the lighter in his belt and poured gasoline into the bucket.

He opened the back door to the house and walked in. Sounds of the television came from further in the house. He walked silently on the shag carpeting, making it easy to get behind Keith. Mike poured the gasoline over him. Keith jumped up.

"Hey!" was all he had time to say before Mike pulled the lighter out of his belt, touched the couch and clicked the trigger. It burst into flames with a loud WHOOOSH! In the next instant, Keith was a ball of fire.

Mike laughed as Keith ran around the living room, a mass of flames. He wanted to keep watching him flail around, but the carpet and curtains caught fire, and the walls were beginning to burn, so he left. He could see fire through the windows, but no smoke was leaking out yet. He saw the flaming mass of Keith run by the window again, and he let out another laugh.

"You can keep my ball, Keith Grossman."

After carefully closing the gate, he got on his bicycle. He had meant to ride slowly, but was so excited he could not help but pedal as fast as he could. When he got home, he jumped off his bicycle and ran into the house, slamming the door behind him. Mrs. Russell stepped out of the kitchen, startled by her son's noisy entrance.

Mikey! What's wrong?"

"Nothing! I didn't do it! It's his own fault! He shouldn't have taken my ball!" he blurted out excitedly, not knowing what he was saying.

"What are you talking about?"

She had already had a few drinks and was not thinking properly. Then she smelled gasoline on him.

"You smell awful. Where have you been?"

"Nowhere."

Had he said too much? Had she guessed?

Unsure how to interpret his behavior, she looked outside and saw his bicycle lying on the lawn.

"Mikey! You know better than that! Put your bike in the garage."

"Yes, Mother." Her stern voice deflated him.

He went outside, picked up his bicycle and walked it into the garage. His mother stepped out onto the front porch. The sound of distant sirens could be heard. Wisps of smoke rose across the street. Mike reappeared, smelling of gasoline, his face a mask of anxiety. The penny dropped.

"Oh, my God! Mikey! What have you done!"

That afternoon, on his way home from work, Mr. Russell drove past the burnt-out house. Firetrucks, thick water hoses, deep water, and people were standing around in the street. When he got home, there was an ominous silence. The lights weren't even on.

"Hon?" he said tentatively.

The sound of a bottle on Formica told him where she was. When he walked into the kitchen, his wife was liberally pouring whiskey down her throat from a water glass.

"What are you doing!"

He was shocked at how drunk she looked. He tried to take the glass away from her, but she pulled back.

"It's Mikey," she said, slurring her words. "He did it. He did it all."

"What are you talking about?"

"Didn't you hear about the fire?"

"Across the street? What happened?"

"The Grossman's little boy was killed. Just like the Wheelers."

"That's terrible!"

"Mikey did it. And the boy in the woods. He did that, too. He did it all. We couldn't leave the danger behind, because we were bringing it with us wherever we went."

Mr. Russell sat down. He did not bother with a glass.

Mikey was in the basement, carefully folding the ironed clothes and putting them into the plastic laundry basket. His parents were talking quietly upstairs. He knew they were talking about him. He had told his mother all the terrible things he had done, but was confident they would not punish him.

Heavy footsteps entered the house. Deeper voices joined the conversation. Mike was not worried.

They would never hurt me, he thought.

After all, he was the only child they had.

Steve Bryant has wanted to be a writer since he was ten years old. He has written two unpublished novels and many short stories. He lives in New York.

Spiraling

By Jenna Remley

A kiss that feels right. A first kiss. Not a game of spin the bottle in middle school, not kissing a clumsy boy to fulfill a dare. A kiss that counts. A kiss that washes away my doubts and fears and insecurities. A kiss that tastes of fresh air, of the soft crunch of oak leaves and pine needles beneath my feet. A kiss that tastes of April, not of August. The first kiss of many. A kiss that tastes of home.

It was summer, that in-between season, the long days in which time seems suspended in the breezeless air. Our childhood had hammered in the impression that these hot days meant pure leisure, an absence of responsibility. We had been gradually and begrudgingly learning, however, that there were obligations in any season. As jobs, internships and classes constricted our free days, each summer hour became more valuable. Each moment together became more precious.

So with this compression of time, a slow burn came to a boil.

I saw Ashley for the first time that summer on July 3rd, 16 hours after I'd returned home. We met outside the candy shop, throwing our arms around each other and spinning wildly. She smelled of the same citrus body spray she'd worn since we were juniors. Her dark hair was piled behind her head, its waves miraculously held together with a clip. Her bronze eyes sparkled.

"Hey, brainiac!" she greeted me. "How's city life been?"

"Busy," I replied. "How's the beach?"

"Beautiful," she said.

We sat outside the shop, licking cones of melting ice cream, catching each other up. She recounted her misadventures from the previous semester. I told her about my college friends, and the people I'd met during my six-week internship in Chicago, the fond memories I'd made with people I would likely never speak to again. She updated me on the hometown gossip from the time I'd been absent. We walked through the tilting streets of downtown between the brick and peeling-paint buildings, our flip-flops smacking the concrete. By the 9 p.m. sunset, we ended up in a wood-paneled coffee shop, lounging on a couch. I leaned against threadbare pillows while Ashley stretched out over the whole sofa. She lay her legs over mine. We stayed there, ice cubes melting in our iced tea, as the sky turned orange, then purple, then black. The antique clock on the wall ticked away the seconds as our conversation continued. As Ashley shifted - reaching for her drink, laughing, stretching her arms - her shirt slid up, uncovering a stripe of her skin.

The stars and crickets had come out by the time we left. We said goodbye on the street, lit by the glow from hotel windows above us. When I started the engine of my car, I just caught the clock switching to midnight.

The next day was fireworks and festivities and family. I was asked again and again by various relatives and family friends about how my radio internship had gone, what I'd been up to over the past few months, what my plans were for the next year.

I found refuge with Dad, who was grilling black bean burgers. The meat had all been cooked, so the acting chefs had cleared away to eat, except for my vegetarian father.

"You want one?" he asked as I hovered near him with my soda.

"No thanks," I said. "Gotta save room for dessert."

"You were out late last night," he commented.

"Just hanging out with Ashley in town."

He prodded a patty with a spatula.

"How's she doing?"

"Good. She's working at the physical therapist's again."

"She comes into the store sometimes, on weekends," Dad said. "Always stops to chat with me. She mentioned playing water polo, she still doing that?"

"Not during the summer. I think she'll do it at school again, though."

Dad nodded.

"I was always impressed with water polo. You should have her over, huh?"

I smiled.

"I'll remind her that she's always welcome."

I saw Ashley next on a Thursday, when it was 95 degrees outside, and we drove to the lake. The heat made my thighs stick to the smooth upholstery of her Volkswagen. When we got into the water, she displayed her superior swimming abilities, free stroking to a buoy and back while I floated lazily just beyond where my feet could touch.

"Show-off," I muttered as she returned.

"You gotta get involved in a sport, Krissa," she responded, flipping her wet hair.

"That sounds like effort."

"You weren't half bad at cross country, what about that?"

"That was to fulfill P.E. credits," I said. "Now I'm an adult, and no one can ever force me to exercise again."

Instead of replying, she disappeared beneath the water. The next thing I knew, she was gripping my ankle and tugging me under the surface with her.

We tumbled through the water, weightless, skin sliding together as we playfully fought, dunking each other in between gasping breaths. Eventually we called an exhausted truce and paddled back to the shore. We spread out towels over the coarse sand, drying our bodies in the sun. We became sun-drunk, our conversation a languid thread we picked up again whenever we weren't too distracted by the heat on our skin, heavy eyes behind sunglasses. We spent six hours in a cycle, wading into refreshing water and then returning to the comforting embrace of the sun. Once the shadows grew too long, we packed up and left, hair wet, feet sandy, skin warm.

And so we crammed each other into our schedules as much as possible. I had other friends who I saw in passing. But, at the core, it was always me and Ashley, as it had been for nearly a decade.

We sat in fluorescent parking lots late at night. We spent endless hours in our favorite cafes and diners. We went to the mall, modeled clothes for each other in dressing rooms, bought nothing. We tried going to a local bar, both being 21 now, and were wildly disappointed. She came over to my house for dinners and laughed with my parents. She showed up at the store when I was working shifts and leaned on the counter, keeping me company.

On the afternoon of July 26th, we were lying in her room. We had been watching movies, but had devolved to just lying still and trying to stay cool. Somehow, our lazy conversation spiraled to a story about a boy she'd briefly dated in the spring.

"I just can't believe it, Kris." Her cheeks seemed flushed, which may have been the heat. "It's so embarrassing to look back on a relationship after you're not dating them anymore."

"Maybe you're just dating the wrong people," I suggested.

"I can't believe I made out with him behind an Olive Garden. Olive Garden! And during dinner he'd told me he thought Lord of the Rings was *boring*. And I still made out with him, after that! What is wrong with me?"

"I don't know."

She rolled on her side to face me. We both wore shorts and tank tops, and we'd doused hand towels in water to lay over the backs of our necks. I watched a drop of water slide across her collarbone.

"You've got to get some embarrassing dating stories," she said. "It's not fair that I tell you all the ways I've been humiliated, and you just sit there, cool as ever, above it all."

"I'm not cool as ever."

She smiled, her cheek dimpling.

"You are *so* cool. Very level-headed. It's hard to tell what you're thinking. Makes you a little mysterious, intriguing. It's a wonder guys aren't lining up, trying to figure you out."

I rolled my eyes.

"Except me, of course," she added. "I always know what you're thinking."

"Do you now?" I asked, tilting my head.

She winked at me, laughed, and rolled on to her back.

That night, as we dozed on her bed while the TV played some late-night home redecoration marathon, Ashley slid towards me and lay her head on my shoulder. It was without thought, a gesture made a thousand times before. Tonight, it felt different. Even though the sun had set and the air had cooled, my skin burned. The heat of the day remained in me all night, as we fell asleep together on top of her duvet.

When I woke up, Ashley was gone. I got up and went into her bathroom. I stared at myself in the mirror, using my fingers to smooth the worst of my bedhead. When I opened the door, Ashley was standing right in front of me.

"Boo!" she said.

I gave her a light shove.

"You could have given me a heart attack."

She reached forward and pressed her fingers to my breastbone. We stood still. Moments passed.

"No," she said softly. "Your heart's nice and strong."

My pulse sped. I hoped she didn't feel it.

"If you say so."

And I thought then, that might be the moment that changed everything. If I possessed enough courage to leap across those centimeters between us, the edge I had been skirting for months, everything would fall into place. Our lips converging, together, finally, right.

I waited too long. Ashley stepped back, her fingertips withdrawing. I could still feel where they'd pressed against my shirt. She grinned and turned away. I watched her skip out of the room, her messy hair bouncing behind her. Wishing, wanting, longing. I

told myself not to get my hopes up. I felt the warmth where she had touched me, remembered the way she had lain against me as we fell asleep. I followed her out of the room.

Jenna Remley is a recent graduate of NYU, where she studied literature, creative writing, and linguistics. She's been writing since she was a child, and was recognized in local contests for her ability, and was accepted into the Kenyon Review Young Writers Workshop while she was in high school.

Let Me Tell You A Story

By Jeremiah Treacy

David Mallory never meant to kill anyone, until he did. Then he liked it. A lot. Pretty soon it came as naturally as throwing a fastball, which he did as well with stunning talent. David was a “damn fine ball player” his dad, Benjamin, would say proudly. His mother never went to a game after his first few years of T-ball; how could she? Dolores Mallory was dead. Still buried deep under the rocks of a river, where search teams would never find her in a million years, and only then the woman would be nothing but dust and bone char and then, like all of us, a simple carbon. A fossil. Fact was, David's dad killed her, and nobody but David would ever know.

David Mallory was like the other boys, only bigger. He didn’t test well and was held back a year, repeating the second grade—making him easy to spot in class photos as the tall boy, the one who seemed big for his age, always positioned in the back row, his tilted, awkward smirk bent across a freckled face. Benjamin told the teachers that David got his looks from him, his brains from his mother, and his bad manners from the family dog. It was Benjamin Mallory’s strained attempt at charm. Benjamin was forever reading self-improvement books and carried a well-thumbed paperback of Dale Carnegie’s *How to Win Friends and Influence People* in his back pocket for ready reference.

Benjamin was forty when David was born. Now nearly fifty-two, thin-framed with striking blue eyes, he kept his straight, black hair pulled into a ponytail. He wore faded, blue denim and kept a good luck piece—a thick, flat, hammered silver and

turquoise bracelet he picked up from a broke Indian in New Mexico. He often told people it was genuine Comanche. He said it with such authority and his eyes were so sky blue that they believed him. Dolly was always on him about how he should've gone into sales and made some real money so she wouldn't have to work so damn hard. Benjamin had fallen prey to the easy grind of managing the paperwork for various municipal departments. He was particularly keen on time spent with the police department, often stopping by the bulletin board pinned with wanted posters. He studied the FBI sheets—who knows?—maybe he'd collect on the reward, although the chances of a high profile criminal passing through their town was remote. Still, there was an element out there. Benjamin had talked to a few officers who gave him the head's up about a surge of illegal pot farms attracting questionable characters. Benjamin Mallory learned a lot from the FBI postings.

Over the past few years, Benjamin and Dolly had fallen into the fits and starts of complaining too often, drinking too much. Dolly, after she'd polished off a few, had a tongue with snap to it.

"God knows, if I had a dollar for one of your, goddamn promises, I'd be rich and good looking."

It used to be different. When they first met, and on warm nights, Benjamin would pick her up, and they'd drive out the winding, fire roads to remote clearings. Benjamin had volunteered for fire crews; he knew the terrain. A few beers later, he and Dolly were in the back of his flatbed truck, sweaty and naked. Afterwards, the two would lie there, smoking, and finishing what was left of the malt liquor, listening to the woods come

alive, the only light coming from the truck's radio dials, and the embers from Dolly's cigarettes. It was black out in the thickly-forested timbers. And blacker still when time and circumstance roughed the two of them up, eating away until nothing was left.

David remembers when his mother went missing. It was a Tuesday. The school cafeteria always served Tamales on Tuesdays. That morning, his mom had flipped him a few dollars, waved goodbye as she walked out the front door, and drove off in the dented, white Ford Escort to her cashier job down at Big Super, the local market. She never even got to work. David's dad was already home when he came in after school. As that October afternoon stretched into evening, David watched the house fill and empty with cops. One of them held a tight leash on a big, panting German Shepard. David was allowed to pet the clipped, shiny black and tan coat. He always wanted a dog.

Gradually time slid away for Dolores Mallory. The state of California had better ways to spend the taxpayers' money; with well-tended marijuana farms dotting the national forests and a record fire season burning through the northwest, priorities didn't include Dolores Mallory. She was gone, and filed as such. Case closed. Time passed.

There were few surprises to the routine of the Mallory household, except for one. In late June, when summer was catching its stride, dry, pine needles littered the ground, and the temperate nights were beginning to hold a brighter heat, the Mallory men sat at the kitchen table. The screen door was open, hoping for a breeze. Crickets strummed in a lusty, high-pitched search for mates.

"Ever wondered what happened to your mother? I mean, what was it, just a few years ago?" Benjamin asked, sounding like maybe they were just chatting about a family

vacation.

"Mom left. You told me she was tired of living with us."

"She was, well kind of, more or less."

David grabbed a handful of vanilla wafers. He dipped one in his milk.

"So let's say I have a secret. Can I trust you with it? I mean, a big secret." Benjamin motioned by spreading out his arms wide. David nodded yes.

"Mom didn't leave us," Benjamin said, looking straight at David Mallory.

"I think I know." David assumed a calm, icy stare.

Benjamin shifted in his chair.

"You know that maybe I had to let her go."

"You killed her. I figured as much." David used a cloth napkin to wipe his mouth, and then neatly folded it, the result of Benjamin's constant suppertime reminders about table manners. The television blared from the living room.

"You figured as much?"

"Like that ranger who died in Yosemite. I saw you talking to him. I could tell you were upset with him trying to move our campsite."

Benjamin continued past David's ranger memory.

"Like I said, she had a hard time with life. Better that I helped her."

David didn't flinch. He locked into his dad's blue eyes.

"The reason I'm telling you this now is, well, I think you're old enough. I was your age when my father explained a few things to me about something he had done, something bad, but he had his reasons, least that's what he told me, and I had to believe him."

"Would you believe me if I told you something – I mean, cuz I'm your son?"

"Cuts both ways, doesn't it? Least in my book, it does. And in this one here, too."

Benjamin pulled out his worn Carnegie paperback and put it on the table.

"When we were down that summer at the beach, there was that kid out in the surf with me, and I had that big rubber raft we had rented. I pulled him under it, just wanted to see what it was like."

Benjamin put his hand out across the table. David took it, feeling the warm skin.

The orchestra of crickets chirped louder.

David broke the shared silence.

"Do you think something's wrong with us?

"Whaddaya mean?"

"Well, like killing."

"Maybe, but everyone is, well, you'll see soon enough. Everyone's built differently. We just happen to be Mallory men."

"So, like, maybe this is part of who we are?"

"Think of us like, like my old Dodge, lots of trucks out there, ours just runs on its own mind. No other truck like it. See what I mean? Or like you being able to throw the ball; nobody out there like you neither."

"Want to know how I did it?" Benjamin asked.

David nodded.

"Ready? Big word: Diethyl Ether."

"What's it do?"

"Starts your car, and can make you sleep; kind of stuff you get at a hospital, but

not this exactly."

"Mom went to sleep?"

"Yep," Benjamin said. "Speaking of which, you got a big game; time for you to get some shut eye. Bring the heater tomorrow."

"You know it."

David got up, and turned.

"Dad, so after mom went to sleep, what'd you do with her?"

"Put her out of her misery and buried her."

"No, like, how'd you kill her?"

"That's between me and your mom. Now, get to bed."

David shrugged his shoulders.

"Thought I'd ask."

He turned and trotted off to his bedroom.

"Brush your teeth," Benjamin reminded him, much like he did every night.

"Uh, huh."

The yellow nightlight flicked on in David's bedroom. It wasn't easy being a single parent.

Jeremiah Treacy is a writer living in Marin County, California. His career in advertising has absolutely nothing to do with his first effort of fiction, *Needles,* a novel of bad guys doing bad things in a July in the Mojave. His misspent youth as a surfer in San Diego during the 60's is another story.

The Return

By Giovanni Agnoloni

The idea that he might be losing his job worried him very much. He didn't know how to face the future, since Marion had left him. Yes, he'd always been a rather impulsive individual, and the presence beside him of a wise girl like her helped him a great deal, but he had definitely made a serious mistake. All because of her jealousy. Now, the only good thing he'd been able to do in his life was about to finish. The fact of being a young writer didn't make him feel more self-confident. On the contrary, he rather felt as if he'd lost his inspiration, and whatever he put down on paper sounded horrible. Tom didn't know what to do. He wanted to call her, to see if somehow it was possible to re-establish a connection with her, but he lacked the courage. At the age of 25, he felt like a failure. His boss, at the restaurant where he worked as a waiter, had unmistakably warned him. Whatever more mess he caused in the kitchen, or anywhere else in an area of a square kilometre around it, would result in his being fired. What could he do? He wasn't born to be a waiter. His head was always up in the clouds, dreaming of something, so that – he used to think – once back home he could write it down. But the result of all this imagining was that he didn't do his work well. On top of it, when he returned home, he was too tired to even eat, let alone write. He was very depressed.

The phone rang, and his heart jumped at the idea that it might be her, repenting for being so hard on him. He picked it up hopefully, but, to his disappointment, it was only his friend Sean, who had finished his job for the day and felt like going out for a pint.

Sean: at least he was satisfied with his life. He was 27, married, and with a good job, and he always seemed to know the right thing to do. He slightly envied him, and couldn't help admitting it. Then, every time he felt a bit ashamed of his envy, he considered that he was his only friend, and tried to ignore his uneasiness with him. Yet, it was growing more and more difficult.

He told him okay. They would meet at the *Quay's* at 9, and then they'd see what they would do. He put down the receiver. The rest of his supper was on the table. That dish of lasagne, with a portion of frozen beans, had now become a reddish-green sauce, spotted here and there by bits of meat. He felt disgusted and threw it all into the bin. After that, he still had more than an hour, so he decided he might as well take his laptop and try writing something. That morning, right before dropping a vegetable soup onto Mr. O'Malley's suit, he'd been thinking of a possible dramatic version of his love story with Marion. Apparently, it must have been a rather hot idea, or this is what Mr. O'Malley probably felt, given the way he yelled. But now it was high time he gave it a start. So, he sat down at his working desk, put his hands on the keyboard and tried to conceive a good opening sentence. He thought that a piece of comedy would be a good idea. After all, he'd already got published a short dialogue between drunkards. Sure, a love story was something slightly different from a frantic conversation between alcoholics, but at least it was a trace to follow. He began typing:

"Marion, honey, would you like to drink something?"

He immediately found it rather stupid, but then thought that sometimes you have to just go with the flow, so he decided to insist on this path.

"No."

This is why their love story had never really taken off, he reasoned. There never was enough conversation. Marion was one of those women who think it's not appropriate to say more than what is strictly necessary.

"Sweetheart, why don't you ever answer me with a bit more than a monosyllable?"

Maybe it was not a good idea to mix life and art, but he had a hint of inspiration, and it would be a pity to ignore it.

"Because you never care about my real feelings".

That's what she had told him after only a month they had been together. Was it logically conceivable that their relationship could go on for three years, as it had?

"Marion, do you know this is what you have been telling me for the past three years?"

"Yes, and so? Isn't it true?"

"No, honey, I do care about your feelings. Otherwise why would I ask you?"

This had been his worst fault: the fact that he'd never made himself respected. But what could he do about it? He was just weak. He reflected on that word: *weak*. It's incredible, but this admission didn't bother him at all. He just was aware of his own nature. And probably this was the reason for his weird decision to have sex with another woman.

"Tom, I suspect you've got another girlfriend."

"Honey, how can you imagine such a thing? You know I'd never be

unfaithful to you."

"You bloody liar."

"Why do you say such a thing?"

"Because today I've seen you with a red-haired slut…"

She wasn't red-haired, in fact. And she wasn't a slut, either. Well, not in proper terms, at least. To Marion, she might as well have been. Anyway, Marion was right, but he *had* to keep pretending.

"I think you are making a terrible mistake, sweetheart."

"*Stop* talking to me that way. It's over. I'm *leaving* you."

Marion got up crying and slammed the door.

He thought the caption was appropriate. Such a scene of jealousy could appear fake, if not underlined by some burst of anger.

Tom remained alone. He stared out into the void, and finally decided to go to the bathroom.

This was the effect that the end of their story had had on him. He had loved her so much that the first impulse he'd felt after breaking up was that of shitting. Not properly romantic, sure, but when had their relationship been such? No, she had never loved him.

Tom spoke aloud from the bathroom.

"Okay, okay, I went to bed with another woman. But what should I have done, after three years wasted with a bloody superb miracle of femininity? Do you know how I felt when, after sex, you threw in my face my short 'size?' I wonder how I could take it for so long."

Tom thought that for the moment it was enough. He was getting too involved in the story. For tonight, he'd better stop. Moreover, it was half past eight already, and he had to get ready to meet Sean. When he wrote, time ran so quickly.

The dim colours of Parnell Square at dusk welcomed him into their grey embrace. He loved the smoky air of the early night time, when Dublin's shops were already closed. He watched pedestrians passing by with their mute eyes, while the pubs were beginning to get crowded. He waited for the bus. He didn't feel like walking to Temple Bar. Plus, he would be late, if he did so. The bus arrived soon, and he took the first free seat that he found. Meanwhile, he kept thinking of Marion. After the first month since their breaking up, he'd felt as free as a bird. Bad stories are worse than a prison, now he was aware of it. But, after the affair with the other woman had also ended, he'd felt very lonely, and his weakness would have even urged him to look for her. However, he didn't want to. In fact, he hadn't planned on calling her. Yet, if he had met her accidentally, probably he wouldn't have disliked a night out with her.

The bus smelled like rubber. It must be one of those old vehicles which seem to take with them the odour of a hundred generations. For a couple of seconds, Tom felt like a schoolboy at 7.30 in the morning, trying to find enough energy to remember the lesson half-studied the day before. Luckily, the situation now was slightly different. The doors opened. It was the second bus stop on O'Connell Street. Two more, and it would be his turn to get off. A blonde girl came along and sat down in the opposite row, although a bit to the right. He couldn't miss her beauty. She must have noticed his glance, as she charmingly turned around and

offered him a shy smile. He felt a wave of heat all over him. He was weak, there was no doubt. After another stop – they were at O'Connell Bridge, by now – he thought that, if he wanted to approach her, he would have to do it straightaway, or the chance would be missed. He cautiously stood up, and slowly took the first step towards the exit, but now she wasn't looking at him anymore. Right when he was passing by her, and he thought he'd found the courage to speak, her mobile phone rang. She took it out of her purse and answered without noticing his attempt. Discouraged, Tom completed his route to the exit door.

The bus arrived at the Trinity College entrance, and he got off. While it was leaving, he threw a glance inside, and saw that the girl had already finished her phone conversation. He thought she was smiling at him, trying to persuade him she was sorry. He felt like an idiot and silently muttered: "Who cares…". He crossed the street and reached the pavement along the Bank of Ireland. He then took the first alley on the right to reach Temple Bar. It had rained that afternoon. The street surface was still wet and, in the artificial night-lights, it looked black. Not many people were around, except some foreign students probably about to meet friends. He strolled down the alley and eventually joined Temple Bar Street. The colours of the pubs' signs and the sound of the music coming out of them welcomed him. At least, he could still count on the presence of such warm places, where you could forget about your solitude for a couple of hours and hope you might find a new partner.

Yes, Sean was a good friend. He would probably help him find another job and, who knows, also a girl. It wasn't a good thing to depend too much on others,

but he couldn't help doing so. He was weak, no way to escape it.

Tom checked the time. It was nine, so at least he was in no delay. He entered Temple Bar Square and looked around. Young people everywhere. Piercings and strange clothes, normal sweaters and blonde hair. That's why he loved that place: it was an immeasurable source of inspiration.

He reached the *Quay's*. Quite odd, Tom reflected, given Sean's habitual punctuality. Anyway, that was no problem. He would just stand there for a while, observing the people, and who knows, something interesting might happen. It was a bit cold. In early September, the first signs of autumn were beginning to make themselves noticed. He peeked inside to see how crowded the pub was. Gosh, it was packed. Actually, he didn't remember coming to this place at this time in the evening and finding it empty or even half-full. Anyway, he wouldn't bother drinking at the bar, or even in the small yard on the left.

There still was no trace of Sean. If he had been a smoker, he would have asked somebody for a cigarette. That would have been a very good pretext to start chatting with a girl. Unfortunately, he didn't smoke. He reflected a second and concluded that, after all, it wasn't too bad. At least, his breath would taste good at the moment of kissing – *if* it ever arrived. So, he just tried to relax and stop his mind talk.

It was already 9:10, and Sean had never been more than four minutes late. Perhaps he should worry, at this point. But he thought it wasn't the case. Sean had a family, and delays are rather normal for married guys. He looked around again. Temple Bar continued in both directions, lit by the street lamps' yellow halos and

crossed by pub crawlers several times. None of them was coming towards him. He wondered from which side his friend would arrive. He was beginning to get bored, standing there. He might as well have remained at home for ten more minutes.

"Tom?" the voice called him from behind. It didn't sound like Sean's, but was sufficient to wake him from his late-evening dreaming.

He turned around, perplexed and open-mouthed, seeing that it wasn't Sean, but Marion.

"I think it's okay if we have a drink together tonight," she said. "What do you think?"

Sean had surprised him once again.

Giovanni Agnoloni (born in Florence, Italy, 1976) is a writer and translator. He's the author of "Sentieri di Notte" (2012, published also in Spanish and Polish and ready now in English), "Partita di Anime" (2014), "La Casa Degli Anonimi" (2014), and "L'ultimo Angolo di Mondo Finito" (2017), novels forming the dystopian series, "The End of Internet."

Man vs. World

By Evan Cerniglia

I think I came here as a child once. I faintly remember passing over the water, and looking down into it. My parents were not looking. The people in their cars weren't either. I didn't understand that.

Looking into the world's mouth now, I think I understand it better. The little waves ripple over each other, glinting in the sun's light. The clouds roll over. The sun is hidden now. The water is a placid blue, a shimmering surface. Still and inviting, and ready.

The plunge is wind and fear and not much else, but the sting is reality, and it hurts. But, when it wears away, everything becomes different because it is dark and you are sinking and anything I try to say is bubbles, so I try to stop saying things, but men are beasts, and so I can't. And now I am drowning, and the edges of sight are fading away, like worn photographs, and the dapples of light are fleeting. Maybe a cloud has rolled over again. Maybe I'm deep.

This is world territory. This is Antarctica before the moss rolled over. This is space before it was mapped out on satellites. This is a nightmare before you remember it. I can't quite define the fleeting details. It is dark, I know that. I am flailing, a dying ballet dancer, and my audience is an abyss which I am trying to understand, but cannot, and I am a distance from myself. I almost think I see myself, wailing, all bubbles, all breath and flesh and blood, and cold skin. But then I start to lose that, and the sound starts to go. Some propellers, or something. It disappears, and there is only a pressure. Call it the

world speaking. It is a pressure like a plateau: it rises and stops, and then everything does.

Gone now. Something is happening. Gone now. Something is, but something is good and simple now. I am not looking at myself anymore. I am within myself, and the seconds feel like they did when I was younger. Long and elapsed, dynamic. I remember things. Remember playing footsies in grade school. Remember that. Remember seeing mom crying. Remember how weird it was, before nothing was weird anymore. Remember my old bedroom. Closet always…Seemed like it was moving. Always so…Scary. Slept in…mom's room. Oh, splendor. Oh, world. Oh, abyss. I passed over you so many times. Bridge to nowhere. Wasting seconds. Propellers again? Ripples. Why am I thinking of dolphins? Why am I thinking of dolphins on the surface?

Something pulls. Something pulls and drags me away from world. A new tide. Fleeting spurs of light. Coming, going. I'm consumed. Let me be. Dragging away. My skin is cold. Let it be. Heat. Sun heat, and I don't know how. Pineapple crush, memorial day weekend. What? Coming. Dragged along rocks. Some distant communion. Some swelling of people. Fading. Gone.

You cannot bring a man back once he's seen the abyss. A push. You cannot bring him back once…A push on my ribs. Man tries so hard to be like his friends. A kiss. He tries so hard to find meaning in the useless seconds. A kiss on my lips, it's wet. A push on my ribs. Let me die in this darkness, world. I felt the tide. I understand the order. A push, a real push. A bullet into the light. Breath escaping, coming. Sounds. People. Person. Saved me.

I see the bridge in the distance. The cars pass over. People cheer around me. A woman holds her baby, tears in her eyes. I want to look at her, show her what I saw.

Could she know? No. She'd hide her baby in her bosom, throw it in the world's mouth. Rocks beneath my neck, wet and warm and other things. The sun is setting. Tomorrow is a new day. I felt a new tide, but I know it wasn't the world's.

Evan Cerniglia knew he wanted to write from early on. Coming out of high school, he was awarded first place in the Rowan Writing Arts Contest and received $20,000. One year later, he transferred to NYU, where he studies film and television. Currently, he is interning for Tru-TV and finishing his feature screenplay, *Dust People.*

How Helga the Brave Saved Ülm from the Vikings but Inflicted the English Language on Everyone Else in the World

By Bill Siever

Everyone knows that the Vikings invaded England in the late eighth century, rampaging across the new land, like a swarm of violent and bloodthirsty locusts. What's less known is that during the previous century, a young girl named Helga the Brave prevented a similar invasion on the shores of the land of Ülm, far to the north of England.

Before the Vikings were the bloodthirsty monsters they became in later years, they were simple folk, who liked nothing more than to be able to hunt and fish in peace and to raise what crops they could on their cold and meager yet beautiful fjord-side lands. That all changed when the new century brought with it new difficulties, one of the most urgent of which was the challenge their longtime neighbors—sometimes friend, sometimes foe—the Störmcrullers from the east now posed to them.

The Störmcrullers were also placid folk when left to their own devices, who were happiest when feasting in their mead halls in front of a roaring fire in the hearth, surrounded by exhausted hunting dogs, sprawled across the straw-covered floor. But the Störmcrullers had their own problems: namely, the Töothgnashers from even farther east. The Töothgnashers also—well, you get the point. The formerly peaceful Töothgnashers invaded the Störmcrullers, who then invaded the Vikings, who attempted to raid Ülm, but were repelled by Helga the Brave, so they instead raided England. The English were then driven into the hills until, centuries later, they had their vengeance on everyone by making everyone in the world learn English—widely known as one of the world's most

incomprehensible and bewildering languages.

Back to our story. Helga was a young lass of only seven when the Vikings arrived in her home country of Ülm, the only land she had ever known. She loved to play with her little cat, Björn, and her even smaller dog, Thor. Helga, Björn, and Thor spent most of their days out in the fields, watching the others work, lying in the shade under an oak tree and telling one another stories. Her cat's stories usually had to do with catching mice or napping, while her dog's stories usually involved chasing things and barking at intruders.

So it was one sunny day in May, when the Vikings' longships came into view as the trio lay sprawled out lazily under the tree. Helga and the other villagers toiling out in the fields knew right away that the men were probably not bringing good tidings; this was mainly evident from the dragon heads protruding from the prows of their boats and from the skulls and whole skeletons of previous victims the men had lashed to the sides of their vessels. Helga also thought the fact that the men seemed to be rowing their boats with oars made from giants' leg bones was probably not a good sign of things to come.

Nevertheless, she was a brave little girl (although she was not yet known as Helga the Brave—that would come later), and so she and her dog and cat strode down to the shore to greet the rapidly approaching marauders. The other villagers working in the fields threw down their tools and ran as fast as they could, shouting as they ran to warn the rest of the Ülmites. Thor stood his ground and barked at the men approaching in the boats, trying to appear bigger than he actually was.

The men were ashore within minutes, dragging their seven longboats onto the gravel. A hundred or so blond, smelly, and hungry-looking men jumped out and waded ashore. They all had spears and swords, and a few carried round shields with pointed tips.

They spoke to one another in their own language, which was incomprehensible to Helga.

She figured they were probably hungry and thirsty after their long sea voyage, so she marched up to the man who appeared to be their leader. He had the longest forked beard, and she noticed that the others were all looking to him to indicate what their next move would be. Pillaging? Looting? Or just rampaging this time? Some of them secretly hoped that they would also get to take a nap at some point, and maybe even have some nice herring sandwiches, but they didn't dare speak these thoughts aloud. They never knew what Lars the Vile would do; he was a wild one, even by their standards. (Helga didn't know this, of course, but Lars the Vile had been plain old Lars of Trondheim, the local blacksmith, before the invasion of the Störmcrullers from the east had driven him and his fellow Vikings out to sea.)

Helga, trailed by Björn and Thor, strode up to Lars the Vile and offered him a yellow buttercup she'd picked from the fields. At first, he didn't seem to know what she wanted. After all, being greeted by little girls wasn't what usually happened during these invasions—at least not from his experience. Still, the little girl reminded him a little bit of his own daughter back in Trondheim, so he took the flower from her hand and smelled it.

He was immediately transported far away to a time when he was courting his own wife, Inga of Trondheim. He knew a lot of people with "of Trondheim" in their names; he and some of the other Vikings had actually started to think about adding second names to help keep things straight among themselves. When Inga of Trondheim and Lars of Trondheim were married some years later, their shrine had been festooned with the same yellow buttercups.

Lars the Vile had managed to pick up some of the Ülmish language during his

travels, so he knelt down in the sand next to Helga and thanked her in her own language. It actually came out as something like, “I am thanking the flower for your kindness,” but she thought she knew what he meant. Despite his frightening-looking forked beard, his blood-caked chin, the twelve-foot-long sword he carried over his shoulder, and the fact that he only had one eye, he looked like a kind enough man. She smiled at him.

She took him by his rough hand and led him to a nearby stream and offered him a drink from a small wooden goblet she kept in the nook of a nearby willow for such occasions. (Not occasions when she met strange bands of marauding men in longboats; occasions when she was out playing with her cat and dog and got thirsty.)

Lars the Vile took a long drink from her goblet and wiped his mouth with his long forked beard. He belched loudly and patted the little girl on the head.

“This is good water,” he said to her in her own language, although it came out something like, “Your fish are both clean and good.”

He shouted something in his own language to his men, who gathered beside them next to the stream. They all started to drink greedily after their long sea voyage. But one of the men, Kärl the Meän and Always Angry, complained that he was hungry. He started to eye Thor and Björn and said to the other men with a harsh laugh that they would make a nice little meal, too.

Lars the Vile heard the men and shouted for silence. He eyed his beloved sword, the Yearbläde—so named because he had labored at its creation for an entire year, from dawn to dusk, much to the consternation of his wife, Inga—and, with one quick motion, he separated Kärl the Meän and Always Angry’s spirit from his body with a well-aimed blow.

“Enough!” he shouted to the rest of his men. “These are good people; we shall leave them be. We have other foes to conquer to the south—in England. Let us be on our way.”

With that, he shook Helga’s little hand, and he and the rest of the men, who grabbed the now-headless Kärl the Meän and Always Angry, climbed back into their longboats and headed back into the wave-tossed sea.

Scholars to this day debate what would have happened if it were not for the fortitude of Helga the Brave. After the departure of Lars the Vile and his fellow Vikings, marauders never again troubled the shores of Ülm, instead heading south. Would we still speak English today if the winding paths of history had gone differently? Might we now speak Ülmish instead?

Scholars universally agree that it’s a good thing we don’t. Axl Svenson of the University of Roskilde, for example, has written about the common confusion with the English words *their*, *they’re*, and *there* among both native and non-native speakers alike. Old Ülmish had no fewer than twenty versions of these words, including *theïre* (referring to at least three but fewer than six people), *ther* (referring to more than six people), *thehrë* (the possessive form used to refer to at least five creatures, at least one of which is a horse), *theyhrë* (the same, but with at least twelve horses), *theüre* (the same as *ther*, only used to refer to one’s in-laws), and *th’ey-rë* (no one seems to know what this meant, although most agree that it had something to do with mead ownership).

In other words, the next time you’re confused about their, there, and they’re, just remember - it could be a lot worse. You can thank Helga the Brave for that.

Bill Siever lives in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, where he works primarily as a book editor for *Kirkus*. He's also in the research and looking-for-a-publisher stage of a hiking guidebook to the southern Berkshires. This is his first published short story. He loves to travel, cook, and hike.

Every Affliction Has Its Own Limits

By Lucie Hušková

Ike is almost two now and is well aware of his strength and look.

"That's not a dog; it's a horse," said a Lombard dad whom we pass during our walk.

Instead of saying hello, I smile politely and proudly.

(Even non-experts can see that my dog wouldn't be good at all for an exhibition. Nothing seems to be as I had planned. My boyfriend left alone for Canada, without us. His nerves gave in when he saw the sofa gutted by Ike, despite my meticulous attempt to mend it.)

"No, it's not a horse; it's a camel," said the Lombard man's son, who is about six and obviously has the right to be mistaken.

I smiled again, this time in a gentle way. Ike sorted out our issues, now I'm sure of that: I don't have a car, but he's overgrown, so that I don't have to regret not being able to take him to any exhibition. He is as big as a camel, so as to scare off Italian social assistants and my local healthcare centre's psychologist. He gutted the sofa, to allow my boyfriend to finally get married in Canada, and surprisingly I, too, feel much better without him. Now, the only problem is that I'm not sure if I will manage to pay the rent for this month. But, of course, the Italian welfare services must not find this out. They are not there to save you, in case of need, and if you are without a roof over your head and have puppies – sorry, I meant children – they will mercilessly take them away from you and put them in a kennel – oh, I meant a shelter – especially if you are foreigners.

As an Italian mother mentioned in a letter sent to the Naples police commissioner, the likely cause of all this is that the Italian government pays from two to four hundred euros per day for a child taken away from his or her family, in order to subsidize the government structures hosting children ('case-famiglia'), which are private in most cases; and the gain goes to the benefit of private psychologists, court experts, social assistants and some of the judges who work on the cases.

If you can, imagine how difficult this must be for a single parent. However, I am very lucky, since Ike manages to disentangle anything tangled by me, and even in this case he has smelled something fishy. I can see that he is thinking hard, and is surely saying to himself: *Why does no one provide kennels this way, too?*

Not long ago, he read in the newspaper (he climbed on my table, now it's evident) that all stray dogs will be 'put to sleep' after six months, according to the mayor of a small village near Bari.

Why 'put to sleep"? He doesn't understand, and racks his giant Cane Corso brains. Finally, he realized: *'put to sleep,'* because those who sleep aren't naughty and don't eat, and nowadays everybody tries to save money in whichever possible way – especially when, in Ike's opinion, they should not. Of course, he, too, enjoys sleeping and stuffing himself with whatever he likes: for example, chicken guts with rice, vegetables and raw eggs, which he is mad about. He won't even look at the expensive morning dog kibble, unless I pour some strong beef stock over it, so he gets confused and devours it all in a matter of seconds. My vet-whoremonger must be right: *all synthetic things are rubbish and business*. Therefore, he doesn't absolutely like the idea of *putting someone to sleep* for the sake of economizing.

Just last week, Mummy had said that not very nice word to Val, my daughter, and then they'd had a long conversation about his best doggy friend, Buck (a German shepherd belonging to Mum's closest German friend, Sabina). They were whispering that she doesn't have to take kidney tablets any longer, which is very good, although, according to Ike, this, too, equals saving money, and then they cried for almost an hour. He doesn't know what to think about that, and can't wait till Buck wakes up again. Every time they pass by their house, he sits down there and waits for a while, hoping they may go out together again and run through the fields, fight for sticks and stones, and swim in the river. Ike wouldn't mind at all if she bit his ear, because she's older, and, besides, she's a female.

"Buck is in heaven now," explained Sabina with a strange smile, somehow childish and somehow bitter, with a dreamy look, as though she knew everything.

Yet, Ike is not interested in that right now. He just wants Buck to wake up; he's bored without her and can't stand waiting. But he is happy to know where his dog-friend is (he can smell her odor around the house), so he remains seated and keeps waiting. Even Mum is not upset; she is just a little bit sad. So, after a while, he stands up and goes to mark some nearby corners to let Buck know that he's been there.

The Italian magazine *Panorama* recently published the news that, over the last forty years, in Italy almost twelve thousand children have disappeared, out of whom ten thousand had foreign origins. What outrages Ike even more is that over the past few years these numbers have been growing rapidly. Recently, the Italian Ministry of the Interior said it couldn't locate almost twenty-six thousand people, of whom sixteen thousand

were foreigners, and ten thousand were children. Ike, as a watchdog, can't really understand this, and tries to protect his own family even more closely.

"Val, make sure that Ike remains seated till that lady passes," I said. "I don't know her dog. What breed is it?"

"Mum, he's doing poop in the bushes," answered Val. "Don't disturb him. It's a Bernese Mountain Dog."

It's dark, almost eleven at night, and I can't see well. I think I've already seen that woman somewhere. *What is she doing behind our house, so late at night?*

"Mum, is that the social assistant?" Val exclaimed. "I am shocked!"

The social assistant, who doesn't like anyone that's ever had anything to do with her – and who, before midnight, strolls around your house like a ghost – is definitely not good news. Especially if, three days before, you received an invitation to an important meeting with a psychologist, whom the local city hall pays at least one hundred euros per hour, and who poses herself the Shakespearean question *to treat or not to treat*, because the butcher's dog – the Court expert – wrote that you suffer from PAS, a syndrome which is not even classified in the Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders.

"I don't think anything good about them," said our local general practitioner, when he gives me a prescription for my stomach ulcers. "They make all patients that I send to them feel even worse and, meanwhile, there's no money for other patients' proper treatments."

I look at him with sympathy, and he smiles.

“Nowadays, having a conscience can be a problem,” he added. “Luckily, on TV, there’s that soap opera on the Prime Minister (Berlusconi) and his lovers; at least, we can turn our minds to something else for a while.”

However, the social service assistant everyone complains about *has* a conscience: hers. Therefore, she wants her own truth, as well.

“What are you doing here, Valentina? Shouldn’t you be in the Czech Republic?” she curtly asks my trembling daughter, and the thought crosses my mind that labelling these social services as ‘SS’ is indeed very appropriate.

“When did you come back, Val?”

“On Wednesday, right?” I turn to my daughter promptly.

“Yes,” said Val.

I am relieved that it’s so dark and that the woman can’t see how red is Val is turning. She can’t lie.

“Come with me. You’ll show me your flat,” the SS assistant ordered us.

“You mean *now*?” I reacted.

“Yes, I do work overtime,” she said forcefully.

She waved an envelope in my face.

“Hang on,” I said. “My dog is doing poop in the bushes here, and I can’t leave my daughter all alone. It’s getting late.”

She looked at me with a hideous expression.

“Her father mentioned that you are overprotective,” the SS assistant noted.

I covertly turned on a little recording device I carry with me all the time, since we are followed by the SS assistant. Darkness is useful, after all.

“You cannot seriously ask me to leave a seventeen-year-old girl alone on a bike-lane where people sell drugs,” I said.

“Sure, I can,” the SS assistant insisted.

We are just a few steps away from our villa, and I prefer not to add anything more. I rely on Ike. I like what I’ve been recording till now. Fortunately, it’s all tidy at home, and I’ve even baked a cake, although it’s a weekday. My German friend Sabina was supposed to come by today, since she’s sad about her dog’s death, so she comes to cuddle Ike.

“It’s a nice house, isn’t it?” I suggested. “Luminous, spacious, and the children have their own individual rooms.”

I am trying to persuade her what to write in her report.

“And, considering your unexpected visit, even clean,” I added, in an effort at humor.

But I immediately think I’ve exaggerated.

“Even too clean,” the SS assistant replied, looking into the fridge with an annoyed look.

It’s even too full, considering nowadays’ crisis. I mentally bless Sabina. Meanwhile I wondered if the dog she tied to the fence managed to run away.

“Let’s go and check the laundry room!” the SS assistant snapped.

“Why?” I asked.

Sabina wasn’t supposed to go there….

“Because I want to see if the room’s hygienic conditions are good enough for children’s washing and if the clothes are sufficiently clean!” she said with a grimace.

No one leaves sorted laundry on the floor. That hateful phrase of my boyfriend runs through my mind. It put an end to our relationship.

We are descending the stair to the cellar, and I can smell something.

"Something stinks in here," she said victoriously.

I think about a book for teenagers I've recently sent to an Italian publisher. It starts with the murder of a young social worker. How complicated that story was. Now I think that I could have just pushed her down the stairs.

I try to concentrate. There seem to be big dog footprints on the floor. They are brown. Mud doesn't stink like this, does it? I almost don't care, if she, too, notices them. I just feel like I was about to be beheaded. I've been fighting for so many years for them not to take my children away from me, and now she is going to see this mess. She opens the door with the arrogance of a French *radical chic* writer and film director: she can afford it.

However, the laundry room is unbelievably clean, without even a handkerchief on the floor. The tiles are shining. Hanging on the wall, the big laundry baskets are proudly waiting for soiled laundry. I just notice those brown smelly prints next to the third basket.

"Don't you do any laundry?" she demanded. "Now I'll check what's in those boxes. There is a terrible stink, here…"

The lid of one of boxes starts to open, as if it was Dracula's coffin – very slowly but concretely. The social worker looked as if she had just had taken LSD and screamed: "Help, there are monsters in this house!"

She comes from the South, where, despite all progress, people are still superstitious and add esotericism to both religion and atheism. I haven't yet managed to react, when she flies up the stairs.

I open the envelope she has dropped. Another much-feared court summons.

"What do they mean?" my friend Sabina demands, taking the letter from my hands. "Am I reading properly? They messed up the year. They must be getting crazy."

Val, in despair, had run to call her urgently. She'd come back home through the garage and managed to tidy up the dirty clothes and mop the floor, fearing that the social assistant might come to check the basement. But then she'd realized that Ike had disappeared.

"It is not a vampire; it's Ike!" said Sabina, laughing.

She is happy, because at home they've decided that, after Buck's death, they will take in another female dog from the shelter. They'd already gone there to have a look. Ike sat quietly in the trunk full of dirty laundry, like a black Loch Ness monster. His snout was smudged with dung and, in his jaws, he held an empty pizza box. The social assistant would be very pleased to see this. But, unfortunately, she's already fled.

"That's incredible!" I said. "The date of the summons is a few months' old. I could get there only with a time machine."

Everyone is laughing and congratulating Ike. Once again, he has sorted things out for us.

When Sabina left, Val, Ike and I finally go to bed. Yet, before sleeping, I wanted to send an e-mail to my lawyer, telling him about today's impolite visit of the social assistant. He probably knows what to do. Moreover, I've recorded everything.

When I open my e-mail box, there's a message from my publisher.

"We are interested in your YA novel whose main character is a Cane Corso," it reads. "We will get in touch with you by phone."

I go and tell Val, who is petting Ike in his kennel. I stroke both of them behind their ears.

"Tomorrow I will cook anything you wish to eat," I said happily.

Lucie Hušková, originally a Czech writer, is the author of *I like Ike* (Práh Publishing House, Prague, 2017), from which this story is adapted. It is the story of life in Italy and its sometimes-contradictory inhabitants, as seen through the eyes of a Cane Corso puppy. She has twin children and Ike (Eisenhower), a five -year-old Cane Corso, who, at 120 pounds, is her third "baby." She lives in Northern Italy.

Poetry

Vacant Underground

By Allison Grayhurst

No sales clerk

or hand to count coins.

A wish is like a wave that breathes,

hunting with the tide.

The sand is grasped but never held -

its form lost again in the unforgiving sea.

I had a wish, jealous and absolute.

It took my days like a nunnery and

discarded all urban vice.

It was my only footwear, my mornings

of praise and exalted sighs.

It caused my bones to snap like a dry crust of bread

and left my innards excavated, desperate for anything else.

This wish has never died, though for a decade it has been

beaten down. It walks beside me, deformed and chained.

I own it and it owns me, as we walk, born as one.

Allison Grayhurst is a member of the League of Canadian Poets. Three times nominated for Sundress Publications "Best of the Net" 2015, she has over 1000 poems published in over 410 international journals. She has sixteen published books of poetry, seven collections and nine chapbooks. She lives in Toronto with her

family. She is a vegan. She also sculpts, working with clay;

www.allisongrayhurst.com

Dirty Laundry

By David Dutton-Fraser

She sees another one of those odd stains while doing his laundry
A red greasy mark that might as well be a scarlet letter marking him
On the upper arm of his work shirt, the same shade as before
Always returning as if to mock her from some article of clothing

No longer does she break and weep or feel the panic born from loss
Her heart no longer pounds like an unbroken horse at emotion's gates
Striving to escape her chest and run to pastures free of pain
He has broken that untamed beast with his nights of romantic rodeo

She is dead to it, yet still alive, a ghost in her own memories
Her love is still strong but the fight is gone, saddled and reined
This is now the love of life's entropy, all it's colour faded away
Staring at the stain of misery she wonders if they ever truly loved?

And so, like her hopes and smiles, she casts the shirt from her
Watching as the trollop-stained attire falls into the wash water
To let the soap and rinse cycle do for a shirt what they can not
Cleanse the stains and misery of love he has placed on their souls.

David Dutton-Fraser, Writer, Wizard and Former Criminal Mastermind, was born April 11, 1964, in Redcliff, Alberta. He has written journalism for local indies and provincial magazines from 1980's to the early 2000s. He has studied magik and the occult under various theologies and retired from a life of crime several times, and is hoping this time it is permanent.

on a cool summer night

By J.J. Campbell

i can still taste you
when i close my eyes
on a cool summer night

the smell of bourbon
and old cigarettes
in the air

the way our eyes
couldn’t be drawn
away

a simple embrace

sweet whispers
around the corner
from all the
commotion

you never would
tell me your name

you wanted a mystery

i told you mine was
alejandro

i lied

i called you jane

i wanted a romance
like the movies

years later now

i still haven’t seen
you since that night

i hope you are as
disappointed as
i am

J.J. Campbell (1976 - ?) is currently trapped in suburbia. He's been widely published over the years, most recently in *In Between Hangovers*, ZYX, *Winedrunk Sidewalk*, *Poetry Pacific* and *Horror Sleaze Trash.* You can find J.J. most days on his highly entertaining blog, evil delights. (http://evildelights.blogspot.com).

Visiting The Old Country

By Trevor Maynard

Is it I who sits still
and the sea that retreats
who scatters the white tops
of the waves along the shore
and reveals pebbles and stones
to shine in the sun
is it I

Which footsteps will I indent
when I take off my shoes this winter's day
will they be those which go somewhere
be someone
or will they be those which remember someone
that have been somewhere

I let the water touch my toes
this is my choice
to be cold
or not

There is warmth in old, thick, woollen grey socks
leather boots with soft, pliable skin
beaten by an ancient cobbler who tells
"I had two sons who died in the war"

I pull my gillet tighter to my body
I regret now the lack of sleeves
the angry words with my brother

the past is such a fickle friend
it is a land of make-believe

Maybe this is why
I remove my shoes
I remove my socks
and I walk along the shore
this is why I am cold
it is why the dead are memorialized in concrete defences
placed in nineteen-forty to repel nazi invaders

It is why
when nothing else is certain
I know when I am here
I am home

Trevor Maynard is a poet, editor, playwright, and author of the poetry collection *Grey Sun, Dark Moon.* He is also the Editor of the annual, global anthology series, *The Poetic Bond*, now in its seventh year.

It’s My Fault

By Ariel Petchel

i asked him if he would ever rape me

and he said never ever ever ever

and so i asked him if he would ever ever ever rape me but

i added on two more evers just to make sure

and he said pinkie promise, cross my heart,

hope to die,

stick a needle in my eye

that i won’t rape you

and i said okay,

just making sure,

even though even though he wasn’t the one who hurt me

that freshman friday night years ago

and as he walked me home,

as i was stumbling and vodka high,

i thanked him for not raping me

because i’ll never be sure.

Ariel Petchel is a poet and scientist living near the Jersey shore. She is currently a literature and marine science student at Stockton University. She has attended Yale Writers' Conference for poetry. This will be her first publication.

Bryant Park

By John Lysaght

Twin majestic lions,
Patience and Fortitude,
Birthed from Tennessee marble,
Are the resting, yet vigilant
Eastern boundary sentinels
Of Gotham`s midtown
Manicured verdant oasis,
A respite from disorder,
Détente from the beyond battling din,
From the crossfire of discordant sound, sights.
Its parallel promenades,
Protected by an honor guard
Of soaring London
Plane trees at attention,
Are its thoroughfares.

This urban painting,
Animated intention,
Becomes to life:
An encirclement
Of moveable chairs
Having freedom to roam
Appears disassembled,
But is harmonic to purpose.
Visiting faces needing translation
Mingle with those we understand.
iphones become ear appendages,
Gesticulating sleeves clarify issues
While lattes raised toast the tranquility.

A walking sandwich board
Professes its religious beliefs,
Laptop correspondents hasten
To make deadlines .
At le carrousel,
Ceramic steads parade
Beneath a big top canopy
As equestrian children`s faces
Are unbridled with joy.
Toddlers chase elusive pigeons
Near juggling choreography
Defying gravity.
A balloon menagerie
Has no cages.
On its western terrace,
A granite and bronze
Bowled water fountain,
Like a grand sculptured chalice,
Spouts dancing
Strings of water.

Here, I am,
Thankfully at peace---
At least for today---
Replenished and safe
From the ravenous
March of concrete and glass.

John Lysaght is a poet and author of fiction from Long Island, who has had rich experiences as a teacher, counselor for at-risk youth, therapist for community

mental health, social worker in Times Square and probation officer. He began writing poetry as an undergraduate at the University of Scranton. John is a poetry contributor to *Esprit; Avocet, A Journal of Nature Poetry; Poets West;* and *Nomad`s Choir.*

Honeymoon

By LouAnn Buhrows

In blues and greens
beyond lens ken
we drowned
drunk on cedar
dancing in mist
Gaelic in our ears
Margaree everywhere
like lobster, lobster
Clapboard rainbows
on postcards unsent
Nova Scotia in love,
in love with Nova Scotia.

LouAnn Buhrows is a communication strategist in Toronto who writes poetry, articles and short stories. She has written a first novel of historical/literary fiction, which includes original poetry. She is the author, with Laura Gunn and Sue Robinson, of *Hyacinthine Dreams: Verse from Three Women* (Parkminister Publishing, 1992). Her works have appeared in *The Toronto Star* and *Muse* magazine.

A Poem Inspired by, and Composed for, NYU's 2017 May Day Sanctuary

By Whitney Graham

Being a minority entails
Struggling to live out
An existence without rights,
Struggling to outlive
Your ancestors
Because maybe then progress really has been made

From the minute you are born you must walk over
Lynchings,
I mean shootings,
I mean sexual assault,
I mean rape,
I mean compulsory sterilization,
I mean segregation,
Sorry, "separate but equal" institutionalization
I mean conversion camps
I mean concentration camps
I mean forced removals
I mean mass deportation
No, I mean mass incarceration
I mean wars on "Terror"
I mean egg shells…

You must walk over eggshells

Your body is in itself a weapon.
Be careful with how you choose to display it

For they will use it against you to criminalize
They will make you an "Other," in order to dehumanize
And thus avoid the need to empathize

Baldwin explains it best:
"What the system does to the subjugated.
is to destroy his sense of reality"
With your new existence,
With your nonexistence,
You are encouraged by historical amnesiatic America,
Who likes to pick and choose her memories,
To forget past and present
Transgressions against the Self

But know that the past affects you, becomes you, is always threatening to consume you
Don't let them act as if then and now aren't the same moment

The experience of your ancestors—blood related and not—lives in your DNA
Prejudice, for you, is inherent to existence
Every day you are exposed to the scars of history,
Re-enacted accordingly in contemporary society,
And reflect on what has been, what *is*, what will always be
Same culture, different methods of subjugation

Don't let them act as if then and now aren't the same moment
As if then and now do not contain lapses in memory

...

Being a minority means having to be more aware than everyone else around you
Among the other crayons in the box, one dim white says:

“We are in an age of post-color...I don't see color."
But the other colors already knew *that*

Able-bodied American says:
“There is opportunity for *everyone* in this country.”
Paralyzed American says
“There is opportunity for those who are deemed fit enough to receive it.”

…

The Hellish chant,
“Make America Great Again,”
Comes with the implication that there was a point in time things were better
And this greatness is often predicated upon the subjugation of the minority
Who understands the true meaning behind this slogan
Who has been taught to take these sayings
With a grain of salt
Before it goes into the wound

Sad to say, but America has never been great
Not *yet*

Langston Hughes knew this when he wrote:
“America never was America to me.
There’s never been equality for me,
Nor freedom in this ‘homeland of the free’
O, let America be America again—
The land that never has been yet—
And yet must be—”

Woman warrior Audre Lorde knew this, when she wrote:
"Traditionally, in American society,
it is the members of the oppressed, objectified groups who are expected to stretch out
and bridge the gap between the actualities of our lives
and the consciousness of our oppressor.
For, in order to survive, those of us for whom oppression is as American as apple pie
have always had to be watchers,
To become familiar with the language and manners of the oppressor,
even sometimes adopting them for illusion of protection.
Whenever the need for some pretense of communication arises,
Those who profit from our oppression call upon us to share our knowledge with them.
In other words, it is the responsibility of the oppressed to teach the oppressors their
mistakes."

You will have to both give and take—
Give the lessons,
Take the oppression

...

Being a minority means
Nothing will ever be your own
Not even the way you identify;
You must share it with others

Those who are privileged will try to name you, like a pet
Try to define you in their own terms,
In order to better understand
How it is you exist

...

Being a minority means your existence is foiled via language alone
Through the pronouns “I” and “You,” they expose your being

Speaking at you, rather than to you

Speaking through you
And all of your struggles

Speaking over you
As they recreate History

...

Where, then, is the safest place when that place
Must be someplace other than in the body
Where do you go when you can’t exist in you?
When both outside and inside are equally dangerous?
I think it is time for minorities to reclaim their bodies as their own
And not the property of their oppressors;
Not something which only has value when juxtaposed
Against the “majority”

Not another “violent black man” killed by the police
whose actual life story never surfaces in the news,
Not another objectified female
transformed into an object-of-pleasure for the male gaze,
Not another “inhuman” transgendered person
Believed to be psychologically damaging to “the youth,”
Not another Jew
made out to be the enemy in antisemitism,

Not another paraplegic called “cripple”
written off as a waste of space,
Not another Native American
unrecognized, given *no* space in his or her or their original land,
Not another “Alien”
Figured as a rapist and intruder (most times both),
Not another terrorist

Not another broken egg shell

…

After all this time, I couldn’t find a sanctuary out there,
Some I made one in here.

Whitney Graham is currently a student at NYU, majoring in English and American literature. In addition to her new membership in Literary Lights Writers Workshop, Whitney is also affiliated with NYU's Contemporary Literary Series, a new program in the department of English at NYU, which seeks to bring contemporary authors to the classroom. Whitney often writes poetry in the confessional mode and embraces spoken word poetry, in which her poems are meant to be read aloud.

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