

Spring 2019

Volume 3, Issue 1



October Hill 
MAGAZINE

October Hill

M A G A Z I N E



Volume 3, Issue 1

Welcome to October Hill Magazine



In many places in the northern hemisphere, Spring signifies the rebirth of nature; and in our corner of the world, it also signifies the birth of *October Hill Magazine*. For us, the words Volume 3, Issue 1 have special meaning - a celebration of our third anniversary as a literary magazine, a significant milestone.

We began our work with a mission to create a platform for new and aspiring authors of short stories and poetry. Two years later, judging from the quality and sheer volume of written work we have received, we believe we have created that platform and accomplished our mission of becoming the magazine of choice for new writers.

Of course, none of this would have been possible without the belief of new writers who have entrusted us to bring forth their best new works. Nor would our publication have taken flight without the commitment of the staff members who have worked so tirelessly to bring forth those works in their best possible light: Selin Tekgurler, *Short Story Editor*, and Kaitlynn Berg, *Assistant Short Story Editor*; Aria Ligi, *Senior Poetry Editor*, and Emilia Cottignoli, *Assistant Poetry Editor*; Dominique Marchi, *Social Media Manager and Associate Editor*; and, of course, Samantha Morley, *Managing Editor*, who has orchestrated our entire publishing process, almost from the start. We owe them all a profound thanks for their resourcefulness, hard work and dedication.

Spring is most of all a time of growth and renewal. Those of you who have followed us from the beginning will observe some new rings of growth and efforts to branch out into new directions. We believe that our best years of growth and development as a publication are now laid out in front of us. And so, on our third anniversary, we also renew our pledge to be the go-to publication for new and aspiring writers, and the literary publication of record for the best in new short stories and poetry. Come and grow with us!

Richard Merli *Editorial Director*

Samantha Morley *Managing Editor*

Meet the Team Photo: Edward Lee

Edward Lee's poetry, short stories, non-fiction and photography have been published in magazines in Ireland, England, and America. He is currently working on two photography collections: *Lying Down with The Dead* and *There Is A Beauty in Broken Things*. His blog/website can be found at <https://edwardmlee.wordpress.com>

Meet the Team

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Interested in joining our team? Send an email with your resume to OctoberHillMag@gmail.com

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Fiction



Leaning Tree by Edward Lee

When We Gave Birth

By Keith Maros

Sheryl grimaced and swung her swollen feet out of the Ford Focus. When she leaned her heavy abdomen against the doorframe, I let go of the door handle and moved to help her.

She shook her head and grunted, “*Now* you want to help?”

I wordlessly withdrew my extended hand, and Sheryl inched herself out of the car, eyeing me suspiciously as if she feared I would let go of the door. A moment later she stood near the curb, one hand under her large belly, and the other hand still on the roof of the car, balancing herself, with the exhaustion of the day showing on her face.

I wanted to offer encouragement, to assure her that I understood her discomfort. Instead, I only said, “I’ll park the car and be right back.”

She took her hand off the car, steadied herself, and mumbled, “I’ll be inside.”

Sheryl’s hazel eyes seemed to blame me for this pregnancy. Her Masters work, the 10K races, the trips she’d planned – all were postponed indefinitely so *we* could have a baby. *My* life as a math teacher and an assistant basketball coach went on as usual; hers, of course, did not. I slid back in the Ford, and she waddled toward the entrance of the medical center.

Seven months ago, however, those same eyes were closed when 300 million of my sperm swam into her like Olympians on steroids, no longer the victims of sticky pile-ups against a rubber wall when our lovemaking involved a practical pause and a condom. Finally free to explore, my sperm located her ovum and connected the Allen Nathans’s with the Sheryl Simmons’s. Now we needed Lamaze classes.

I parked the car.

The classes took place at the Meridian Medical Center, and Kathy, our cheerful Lamaze instructor, called us all Moms and Dads although none of us were officially parents yet. This was our first session, and I couldn’t resist comparing Sheryl’s belly to the other three wives’ stomachs.

Bigger, I observed. *Way bigger*. It was like this was a competition, and even before we left the starting gate, Sheryl and I were winning. *That's a good thing, right?*

After introductions, we all sat down on the carpet with the cushions and the blanket that we had been directed to bring. I helped Sheryl sit, joined her, gestured my forehead at Kathy, and whispered into Sheryl's ear, "When do you think *she's* due?" I asked because I was worried.

What if Kathy gives birth before our Lamaze classes end? Who will take over? If no one, will we get a refund?

Sheryl inhaled. Her eyes tightened, showing a face my mother used when I would leave my clothes on my bedroom floor instead of putting them in the hamper.

"She's not pregnant," Sheryl admonished me. "She's overweight."

Overweight? I angled my head to get a better view of Kathy's profile. With her fleshy arms, nurturing smile, and wide middle, Kathy resembled Mrs. Santa Claus.

We were the last couple to arrive, and the two other couples smiled politely at Sheryl and me. They already seemed poised for a family portrait, their faces full of expectation and wonder. *What do our faces look like?*

Kathy took attendance – Phil and Debbie, Terence and Angela, Allen and Sheryl – and passed out a copy of *American Baby* magazine to each couple, its cover displaying a smiling child cuddled in his mother's arms. Maybe he was a she – who can tell when they're all wrapped up like that? The mother, dressed in a thick pink bathrobe, was smiling down at the infant, clearly having forgotten her swelling, nausea, and labor pains.

I showed the magazine to Sheryl and tapped the cover. "What about the Dad?" I whispered. "I bet he's outside raking leaves."

"Please, Allen. Don't say anything to Kathy," Sheryl hissed at me.

I readjusted myself on the carpet and studied, one at a time, Phil and Terence to see how they were treating their wives. I wanted a model of how *I* should behave. Both simply sat cross-legged,

forearms on their knees and their eyes on Kathy, waiting for directions. Terence, however, leaned forward and itched Angela's ankle for her. *Who is this guy?*

Terence stopped scratching when Kathy asked us, "So, tell me your goals." She sat with us, stretched out her legs, and smiled with both her mouth and eyes.

Goals? We're supposed to have goals? Isn't the baby the goal?

Phil answered first, his small chin disappearing every time he opened his mouth. "This is our first baby so we're kinda anxious about all this. We just want to be sure we do the right things to keep our baby healthy." He smiled at Debbie who, on cue, smiled back. Then she smoothed her green blouse over the basketball that was tucked under it and leaned into him. That made Kathy beam.

"Rookies," I murmured in Sheryl's hair.

"So are we, Allen," she mouthed back. Then her face grew solemn. *Quiet*, it said. *Stay quiet*.

Next, Kathy nodded at Terence and Angela, who had to nudge Terence, a bulky, power-forward type, to speak for them.

"Oh," Terence said. "We also want our baby to be healthy. It's going to be an eye-opening experience for us." He said the last words while chuckling and exchanging quick glances with Phil and me, as if silently asking us, "Hey, man, isn't this whole pregnancy thing wild?"

Maybe I should have spoken next, but I was still trying to absorb Terence's "eye-opening" reference. *A baby popping out of his wife's vagina would open his eyes. Hadn't he ever seen his wife's vagina?* I'd seen Sheryl's many times.

I paused too long, so Sheryl took the lead. "I want my mother to help me out at home after the baby comes. My sisters have had babies. She helped them, so I'm expecting her to help me."

Surprised, I turned to her. "I'll help," I declared.

Sheryl's eyes widened, and she started to speak, but Kathy chimed in, "That's great, Allen."

I was ready now to contribute. "We want to be surprised about the baby's gender." I gave a sideways smile to Sheryl. "But whatever the baby is, I don't want it to look like me."

Kathy stared at me, her face a question mark. "What?"

Why aren't they laughing? I waved a hand in front of my face, directing where I wanted the others to look. "See? Ugh! Right?"

"Allen, please." Sheryl whispered to me. Then to the group, she said, "He's just kidding, trying to make a joke."

Kathy nodded politely, and the two other couples exchanged glances.

"No," I jumped in. They clearly didn't understand. "I'm kinda worried if we have a girl and she ends up being six foot four like me," I explained. "Boys usually don't like tall girls."

Sheryl's head drooped a little, and she sighed, deciding now to open the *American Baby* magazine and to check out the table of contents.

Kathy said, "Oh, well, yes, Allen, that could be awkward for some girls, but it's not *that big* of a problem."

"Yeah?" I said. "Tell that to my Aunt Sue. She's fifty-nine and unmarried. She's only six two."

"Let's move ahead," Kathy announced, and she stood up to handle a flip chart labeled "The Birth of a Child." The first oversized sheet revealed an internal view of the uterus, which looked like a topographical map of Rhode Island.

In turn, she flipped through posters of the ovaries, the womb, and the sperm. She even showed us an illustration of a penis stuck inside a vagina. Like a voyeur, I stared at it. *When the illustrator was drawing that*, I wondered, *what was he or she thinking?* He or she had to decide how big to make that penis. And the penis in the illustration was *really big*.

"Let's talk now about some of the difficulties of pregnancy," Kathy said. Her face bloomed with empathy. "What do you know already?"

"I've heard stories about women going through labor for twenty-four hours," Debbie offered quickly, like she had been waiting impatiently to say this. Angela nodded, apparently signifying that she'd heard the same thing. Sheryl listened calmly, her palms facing up and her fingers interlocked beneath her belly.

“Honey,” Angela added, her soft face turning cold, “I’ve heard that it feels like your legs are getting ripped from your pelvis.”

Sheryl’s face still didn’t move. Her eyes were clear, her cheeks smooth and still. I scooted toward her, put my right arm around her shoulders, and kissed the hair above her ear, like that simple gesture would reassure her somehow. But Sheryl’s face didn’t change. She shifted back to lean on her hands, making my arm fall off her shoulders. I wanted to empathize, remembering the last time I was in the hospital. *Isn’t this like the time I had my appendix removed?*

“No doubt it’s painful,” Kathy chuckled, trying to soften the blow. She gathered us in with her eyes. “There is definite discomfort, but the level of pain depends on the individual woman. We’re going to practice some relaxation techniques to help you through it.”

She directed the women to lie back on the cushions as if they were at the beach, and she guided the husbands as to where we should massage our wives’ bodies. All of us had our own pillows and blankets, and I gloated that our blanket was thicker, our pillows newer and fluffier. Sheryl was prepared.

Terence caught my stare. “Got an extra pillow?” He eyed the second pillow under Sheryl’s head.

I followed his gaze until my eyes met Sheryl’s, whose narrowed look told me how to answer. “No, man. Sorry.”

Terence then tried Phil who also told him no, so he unzipped his denim jacket, balled it up, and set it beneath Angela’s head.

We massaged our wives’ necks and arms while violin music played from Kathy’s CD player. Sheryl placed her hand on top of mine. “Not so hard,” she pleaded, her voice like a weight in the air.

“Sorry.” I wanted to be on target with this. I realized that I would be a father later, but for now, I just wanted to be a good husband. I tried again.

After several moments, Sheryl sighed again. “That’s better, Allen. Much better.” She leaned back onto the pillow, and my heart thumped with accomplishment.

Later, I drove us home, feeling the same way I did last season after my JV team won the conference basketball championship game, and in bed that night, I put my arm around Sheryl’s shoulders

and tugged her into me. I slid my other hand under her knee-length nightgown to the rubbery curve of her lower back, then over the hard arch of her stomach, and finally onto the swollen fullness of her breasts.

Sheryl stopped my hand. "I'm too fat. I'm too ugly this way."

"No, you're not," I lied. Then I whispered even though we were alone in the house, "Didn't the OB doctor tell you it was okay to do it?"

"Yes, Allen, but I don't want to."

I let go of her, resettled onto my side of the bed, and pulled my shorts back up my legs. She turned away, the tan bedcovers piling high at her hips.

I must have sighed too heavily because Sheryl said, "Don't be angry." Her face was still turned away from me, but her words rushed at me as if each was a burden she was desperate to relinquish. Our unborn baby was already splitting us up.

"I'm not angry." To prove this, I went to stroke her hand beneath the covers but couldn't find it. According to Kathy, the baby could hear us, and I wondered if I should say anything else. I eventually decided not to because I didn't want our child to hear us argue and emerge from the womb worried about us quarreling too much. There was no easy compromise in this, and no comfortable resolution for either Sheryl or me.

"Do you want me to...?" She turned back and rested her ear on my stomach, her cheek warm against my skin, her hand sliding up my thigh.

I gently touched the top of her head, stopping Sheryl even as I became aroused. "No. Forget it. It's okay," I said. I stopped her because I realized that to let her do that was selfish. For over six months, Sheryl had sacrificed her body to carry out our baby. *What am I sacrificing* for her? Guilt washed over me.

Sheryl slid off me, rolled back to her side of the bed, and turned away.

I rested on my back, wishing we could talk about what had just happened, how sex had changed for us, how *everything* had changed. We always used to talk about our problems during that warm, under-

the-covers, in-the-dark-time just before we slept, but maybe those days had passed now, too. *Could I make her laugh by reminding her of Kathy's posters? Or Debbie asking Kathy if any woman had ever farted or pooped while giving birth?*

Instead, her shallow breathing told me she was asleep, so I stared at the puffy shadows on the ceiling, realizing my appendix surgery was nothing.

The next Lamaze class concentrated on “the rhythmic contraction of the big muscle of the uterus.” Labor, Kathy meant. She used a Toys-R-Us plastic doll that was shoved inside a navy-blue stocking cap to demonstrate how a baby emerges from the uterus. She told us about false labor. And back labor. And knowing when for sure to get to the hospital. I took notes, hoping this would please Sheryl. I'm a teacher, I reasoned; I recognized the importance of taking notes.

At that class, Sheryl learned to breathe like a weightlifter. I learned how to chart contractions with a stopwatch and a clipboard. Kathy lectured quickly, her belly jiggling whenever she tapped the palm of her hand to punctuate each point. “Exhale,” she admonished the wives, “like you want to push out the baby with air.” Lots of air, she meant. Black and Decker leaf blower air.

Next, we watched a video of an actual childbirth. Sheryl tapped my shoulder when it ended to let me know I could look up. I got to see the new mother, a Mediterranean-looking woman with flushed cheeks, breathe like a nervous pearl diver when the doctor lifted the baby above her. She asked to see the baby's fingers and toes so that she could count them.

The class concluded with all three couples on the carpet, breathing, massaging, and whispering as the CD player played crashing waves. Kathy turned out the lights.

Phil, however, was not touching Debbie at all. Instead, they were curled up next to each other, like kindergartners at naptime. Kathy ignored this transgression in Lamaze. Instead, she kept adjusting the sound of the CD player.

Later, as we drove home, Sheryl stretched her hand across the back of the seat and scratched my neck. “Are you mad that I don't want to know the gender?”

I watched the traffic. “Of course not.” I *did* want to know, but I didn’t want to repeat our argument we had three months ago when the OBGYN’s technician asked us, as she did the ultrasound, if we wanted to know.

Sheryl twirled the hair just above my neck. “I know how much you want it to be a boy so you can coach him in basketball.”

“Girls play, too, you know, but if it is a girl,” I smiled, “I’ll try to thrust deeper next time to give the boy sperm a head-start.”

Sheryl got serious. “What if our child doesn’t want to play any sports?”

Not play any sports? Of course he or she will play a sport. Didn’t we discuss this? Another rift in the space-time continuum. “Well, I guess we can just wait and see.” I was purposely vague and didn’t reveal my plans to install a basketball hoop in the driveway, the expensive kind with the adjustable backboard.

Sheryl’s hand left the back of my head, and she watched buildings go by out the passenger side window. I placed both hands on the steering wheel. *Not play any sports? Is she kidding?* None of this made sense.

After two more Lamaze classes, we received a paper certificate and handshakes from Kathy. Sheryl went to her OB and proudly showed him the certificate. “Congratulations,” he told her, but it turned out that the baby’s size and its position near her pelvic bone could not accommodate a natural childbirth. “We’re going to proceed with a Caesarean section,” he informed her. A common situation, he declared. Four out of a hundred women have pelvic bones like hers. “There’s nothing to worry about,” he added.

So, as if planning a wedding, we set the date: September 6. We even packed a suitcase a month in advance. Then we waited.

Ten weeks later I watched a HGTV home improvement show while I waited in the prep room adjacent to the birthing room. Two aides had wheeled Sheryl into that room fifteen minutes ago and had instructed me to wait. The television was bracketed onto the wall opposite me and next to the clock. 1:44 PM. The couple on the show was attractive and funny and really smart about fixing up a home, but I kept turning away to glance at the birthing room door.

“Be patient,” the plump nurse – I think her name was Beth – had told me. Realizing that she had to get me scrubs to wear in the birthing room, she examined me up and down and chuckled. “I don’t know if we have greenies to match your height.”

She was correct. The cuffs of the green pants were three inches above my ankles, and the shirtsleeves pinched my biceps. I shifted on the plastic chair and worried about Sheryl, wondering if she was asking about me. 1:53. I checked the door. I listened for any sounds. I adjusted the paper shower cap on my head.

The home improvement show now displayed the young couple dismantling kitchen cabinets. First, they unscrewed the cabinet doors. Next, while laughing, they tossed the drawers into a pile on the tiled floor. After the debris had been carted away, they complimented each other’s efforts. *When was the last time I gave Sheryl a compliment?*

Sheryl’s mother was down the hall in the lobby. Mrs. Simmons pleaded with the nurses to be allowed to join me in the birthing room, but the nurses said absolutely not. Only the father was permitted.

Beth’s instructions to me were clear: When they let me into the birthing room, I must stand by Sheryl’s head. I must watch Sheryl carefully and help her relax. I could ask questions if I wanted. I promised Beth that I would follow those directions.

1:58. Beth popped her head out the door. “We’re ready for you,” she announced, smiling, having pulled her surgical mask beneath her chin. “Put on your mask,” she reminded me and then escorted me into the birthing room. Beth pointed to the head of the surgical table. “There’s a stool there, so you can sit or stand.”

I decided to stand. Sheryl lay on her back, her abdomen covered by a tent of green sheets. Dr. Inman, the OB, stood on Sheryl's right side and bent over, using a felt tip pen to mark the lines of incision.

I used my hand to brush Sheryl's hair off her forehead. I smiled down at her, forgetting that the surgical mask covered my face.

Nevertheless, she looked up at me. "I'm going to have our baby," she said.

I smiled back. I remembered my role. I gripped her shoulders, ready to massage them.

Sheryl shrugged me off. "It's okay, Allen. I'm good."

Isn't this my job? Aren't I supposed to massage her? What else should I do here? I felt useless, my presence in the room a waste of space, maybe even a distraction.

"Here we go, Sheryl," Dr. Inman declared, and he and the two nurses hovered over Sheryl.

The anesthesiologist sat on a gray metal stool on Sheryl's left side near her head. He also wore green scrubs and a Jesse James mask, and his dark eyes focused on the dials of the monitor at his side, slowly turning them with his right hand. On another monitor, Sheryl's heartbeat registered a slow, submarine sonar-like beep.

"How do you feel, Sheryl?" asked the anesthesiologist, his eyes on the monitor.

"Numb. I've lost my middle."

"No pain or dizziness?"

"No," she breathed.

"If you feel any pain, let me know."

"Okay, we're ready," Dr. Inman chuckled. "I'm going fishing." He leaned even more over Sheryl's abdomen, his pudgy stomach pressing against the side of the surgical table.

I needed to do *something*, so I stroked Sheryl's hair. I reminded her to breathe. I watched Dr. Inman, as if I was evaluating his competency in preparation for the story I'd tell later in court, if necessary.

"Now I'm cutting through the abdominal wall," Dr. Inman explained. "How do you feel, Sheryl?"

“Fine . . . okay.” She blinked hard. The opening in her stomach was obliquely reflected in the domed glass covering the florescent lights above her. A nurse handed Dr. Inman gauze pads, which he used to wipe away Sheryl’s blood.

“That’s good. If you feel any pain, let us know.” He chuckled again, surprising me. *What’s with the giggling? What is so funny about all this? Our child is in there somewhere, just get him or her out.*

A green sheet stretched over Sheryl’s chest, blocking my view of her lower body, and the urge to step to the side of the bed and peep over it came and went like waves. I could handle the blood but not the cutting.

“Now I’m cutting through the uterine wall.”

Like that tight, uncertain moment before the jump ball in a championship game, I felt useless. *If I can’t massage my wife, what else is my purpose here?*

“How do you feel, Sheryl?” Dr. Inman’s eyes stayed laser-focused on Sheryl’s pelvis. His hands were inside her now.

“Like my insides are getting moved around. I know you’re in there, but I don’t feel any pain.”

Dr. Inman nodded, his eyes on his hands. The reflection told me he was reaching for our child. “You’re doing fine, Sheryl. Just fine.” He dug some more, his eyes wide and moving, his forehead wrinkled and damp.

I stopped resisting the urge to look and moved toward the side of the bed. A nurse moved out of the way for me. Blood streaked Sheryl’s stomach and Dr. Inman’s gloves. The plump nurse applied more gauze, and then suddenly the pink flesh of a round scalp appeared.

“Here’s the head,” Dr. Inman said and then pulled our child out of Sheryl’s midsection.

I turned away, unable to watch anymore, and started to worry. *Shouldn’t our child be crying by now? Shouldn’t that special noise fill this room? Has something gone wrong?*

Then: “It’s a girl.” One of the nurses said it.

Our daughter shrieked, gulped in air, and kicked her tiny legs. Dr. Inman chuckled again and asked if I wanted to cut the umbilical cord.

Did he think I was a surgeon?

“No,” I said.


Our daughter was covered with a milk-colored mucous and splashes of blood. Beth whisked her away to a padded table against the wall like she was a bag of groceries.

Suddenly tired of standing, I sat on the metal stool and watched Beth gently scrub the blood and mucous off our daughter and then wrap her in a pink towel. She wasn't ours yet. The hospital owned her.

Dr. Inman returned his attention to Sheryl and stapled the incision shut. I went back to Sheryl's head and gripped her hand. Her eyes were on our daughter, not me. *Is that our future? Will her attention always go to our daughter? Will I do the same?*

Minutes later, after Dr. Inman finished, Beth handed Sheryl our baby girl, whose nose was no more than two pencil tip holes under a fingernail of flesh. Her head was kept warm by a frayed stocking cap. Her eyes remained tightly closed against the bright lights, and her round face reddened from all her crying and the cold. Beth took a picture for us.

The photograph captures Sheryl still flat on the operating table with half-opened eyes, smiling through her exhaustion. I'm next to her still wearing that silly green shower cap, my brown hair dripping out the sides. The mask is bunched up at my neck, and I'm giving one of those “We won!” smiles above Sheryl and our Danielle, whose head sticks out of a pink blanket cocoon, with all seven pounds and eleven ounces of her resting comfortably in Sheryl's arms.

The picture, of course, doesn't allow viewers to hear me ask my wife, “If she doesn't play a sport, what about cheerleading?” 

Keith Maros' short fiction has appeared in national print and online magazines like *The Mill*, *Attic Door Press*, *Hicall*, *Wrestling USA*, *Lutheran Journal*, *Storgy*, and others. He was recognized as one of Ohio's top writing teachers by *Ohio Teachers Write* magazine.

At the Edge of Azaleas...

By Penelope Ioannou

Terpsichore heard them take their seats behind her on the kitchen table. She kept her back to them until she confirmed through the window's reflection that her daughter and her husband were settled. The Pomodoro sauce slithered between the spaghetti and its redness gave her a frightening giddiness, like radical red eyeshadow on a pale face. She liked serving them. She got to observe the delicate bobbing of her kid's head that way, and she got to marvel at the way she placed the basil leaves in the very center of the bowl, which reminded her that her husband never cooked for her. He grabbed the newspaper from the counter and unfolded it in his hands. She noticed the way his shoulders, ever so slightly, inverted towards his chest, and how his chin stiffly tucked itself inwards when he read. He made the thing she loved the most look like an act of shame: that the fact that reading requires humans to look down made them submissive and turned them into slaves.

The red sauce fell like confetti across the white table cloth and grew into dense puddles, especially around her daughter's occupying space on the table. Yet it seemed like the faint red raindrops around her husband's bowl irritated a sliver of her skull more than the oozing tomato sauce around her daughter's. She noticed how the lamp above them was situated uncomfortably to her left so that the square kitchen table felt like it was way off-center. If the Earth was flat, they'd all be hanging off its edge. The light cast a shadow over the pink Azaleas in the vase that was placed in the center of the table, the same table that seemed to reject the center of the Earth. The presence of the pink flowers disrupted the existence of the red, and it worried her that pink and red were colors that never married each other, that the lamp was too much to her left like an unpleasant spotlight over her husband, the kind of light that prickles the flaws of one's skin. It also worried her that their table was balancing on one leg over the left corner of the flat Earth.

A line from Yusef Komunyakaa's poem came to her then, one that she had read earlier while the tomatoes for the Pomodoro sauce were still squirming in the pan.

"You're at the edge of Azaleas, shaken loose by a word."

Her daughter chewed on a basil leaf. She glanced over at her husband, noticing how the light not only jested with his flaws, but how it also sneered at his incapability to understand the existence of a poem. She swirled the spaghetti around the teeth of her fork.

"I cheated," she said.

The distance between them in the bed wasn't extraordinarily different compared to last night and all the other nights before, a fact that surprised her. With him, there were hardly any surprises. Rather, there were scarce moments where she found herself caught off-guard. Like that time when he came home with a printed picture of the boats in Park de la Ciutadella in Barcelona.

"It popped up as an ad and I liked it," he said, even though she hadn't asked. "I like it. There's something there."

She remembered how the sheets wrapped her body with a pinch of hope that night. Now, however, he was lying on his back, looking up at the ceiling and the falling stars that she once told him she imagined she could see and occasionally wished upon, always with indulgence because wishes never came true that way. His reply had been viciously short; he simply said he couldn't see them. He was attractive in the light, but he was less so in the dark. Words aren't a necessity in the light because eyes dance about enough to constitute as dialogue, and the visibility of skin, sun, and furniture all huddle up to create company.

In the dark, however, that isn't the case. The words one hangs on the hooks of darkness must have enough weightlessness so as to weave through the gossamer threads in space. Some people's words, the special ones, also have enough gravity to keep them from dissolving into the vacuum. She was almost certain that he'd laugh at her if she tried to explain this to him. He'd exhaled with vexation, the type you feel when the tap keeps dripping and the sound of droplets against the stainless-steel sink rings through

the silence. She was certain that she was a tap to him, expelling hesitant confessions of her thoughts every now and then in the hope that he might one day willingly stroke the nob, turn it to the right, and let the water pour down into his palms -- to let himself be the sponge sitting in the corner rather than the drain.

She allowed her mind to poke around the thought of how the springs that attach and detach to our words are looser in the dark; words bounce off the tongue with greater velocity and land farther than usual. She wondered how perhaps this was the case because there was less shore for meaning to grab onto and disguise into. She didn't feel the need to say something. She would have been lying if she said she wanted them to talk about it. She didn't want to tear through the gossamer threads she had just woven above her face. She wished his mind was made of glass right now just as she wished the ceiling above her was made of glass, too. She would shatter the first and marvel at the latter.

"That first night we met, at the bar 'Lost and Found,' I lied to you." He spoke as if every word was munched, licked, and tasted carefully in his mouth before giving them permission to tumble over his lips. He also spoke as if he made sure these words were heavily seasoned with a matter-of-fact tone, one that he found lying around in the kitchen cupboard where they kept the spices.

"I didn't like your tattoo. I hated it actually. I remember thinking, 'Who the hell gets a tattoo of an orange?'" I kept thinking that the only word appropriate for it was 'kitsch.'" She focused on the glass ceiling above her, trying to eject the sudden realization that the words levitating about in the dark belonged to a person lying a few inches away from her.

"Half the time you were talking, I was trying not to look at it. And the other half, I was wondering how you spell the word 'kitsch,' with a 'c' or an 's'?"

If hatred was a person, he was it. He lay there more unattractive than ever. There was no light to accentuate his pale cheekbones, the way they rose ever so slightly like patted-down ski slopes. A halo of bitterness exuded up and out and around him, seeped through their bed sheets, and leaked into her side of the bed. His words had slammed into her gossamer threads, clumsily ripping them apart.

“It’s a tangerine, not an orange.” The words sprung off her with the slightest of efforts, fusing with the transparency of her glass ceiling.

“Same shit.”

The next morning, while the light was present, he was absent. It reminded her of that one random Tuesday morning where she found herself leaving ‘Madman’s Coffee Shop’ with a surprising melancholy because the Italian barista who she’d been observing behind the bar for two weeks straight was no longer there. Her coffee tasted different that day; there was a tinge that suggested change, and it took her the whole day to shake it off.

She sat outside in their backyard. She wore the silk skirt that she saved for special occasions, which she always left hanging at the very far corners of her closet. The skirt, to her, was so beautiful that she couldn’t stand to see it every day. She feared that the mundanity of repetition would make her eyes immune to the way that the silk made her skittish every time she’d lure it out of the dark. It was her way of preserving a feeling.

She watched the gardeners who she’d called earlier that morning plant rows of pink Azaleas, and she thought of how the silk hugging her lap was similar to the way in which the soil cuddled the roots being laid in it. The bundles of Azaleas around her bathed in their fragrance, slightly annoyed that her skin was stealing its particles. She asked the gardeners if they could trim the bushes, too, even though she knew that the plants didn’t really need it.

She wanted to postpone the moment where she’d have to acknowledge the loneliness. She hadn’t thought about her tangerine tattoo in a while. Trying not to think about it after the event of the previous night was like trying not to read the subtitles when watching a movie. The act of revisiting the tattoo was exhilarating. She felt its presence on her skin as if the tattoo artist was tracing over it again with his needle.

She had gotten that tattoo a few hours after her Cambridge interview. Her interviewer, a buff English Literature professor with a name that suited him perfectly -- Micha -- gave her a poem on the

spot. ‘Snow’ by Louis MacNeice. He asked her to pick her favorite word and she picked “bubbling.” It was impulsive, like the kind of “no” that you spurt out when someone asks if you have a crush on that one person who you indeed have a crush on. It was impulsive, but she never wished she could take it back.

He looked at her as if he was looking through his eyelashes rather than despite them, pacing himself inside the pool of intimidation that was oozing from his fingertips. He was silent and expectant, desperately waiting for her to jump up, and desperate to recover from her impetuosity, but she never did.

He leaned forward, set his copy of the poem on the table, and said “Okay. Why?”

Her arms oscillated as she spoke, as if conducting an orchestra.

“When I saw the word “tangerine” in the beginning of the poem, I thought about the way its juice swaddles my taste buds every time and bubbles in contact with my gums. So, when I saw the word “bubbling” in the third stanza, I, for some inexplicable reason, began to repeat the word again and again in my head until it felt like the word “bubbling” was the one bubbling on my tongue!”

The tattoo was done in an intoxicating surge of panic at the thought that the mind is incapable of retaining every single trifle of life, and that one day, the moment that just elapsed will be visible only through a fug; terrified with the thought that everything happens in an eruption of the present, leaving its victims fumbling for words when it’s over.

She had told her husband all of this that first night they met, but it now turns out that he was too preoccupied with other things to retain this information. She wondered, for a brief second, whether it was her fault that he didn’t find her story interesting enough; whether it was the way that she told the story; or whether it was simply she who unimpressed him, which he mistook as her tattoo’s fault.

She began to think of all the things that she could no longer remember, like what was going through her mind during their first kiss. How can we think of the things that we’ve forgotten if we can’t remember them?

She suddenly wished that she could lie on her back and disintegrate into the grass. Her eyes would know the color blue so well that they'd forget that any other color ever existed. She'd invite Chagall, the painter, to lie next to her. He'd paint awkward figures in the sky and force colors that have never spoken to each other to hold hands, like the pink of the Azaleas and the red of the Pomodoro sauce from the previous night's dinner. She'd have him paint while she spoke. Picasso said Chagall was the only one who understood color, and that gave her some kind of hope that he'd understand her words. She wanted to talk about the things that she knows she hasn't forgotten yet, feelings that plummet into her consciousness like flakes of salt falling out of the shaker.

She'd tell him, tucked inside the dampness of the soil, how she imagines her body to be full of buttons, of various sizes and purposes; how no one's ever pressed the right one; how every man thinks the only way to press them is with their hands and mouth; how no one ever thought to use words, words in the light and words in the dark; how she misses the first whirling sensations of wooziness when she realized she could finally write about 'adult things,' like the exhilaration of sex; how she wished that she could go on a date where she'd spill the wine all over the table and he'd spill all his thoughts on top of it; and how the bitter tang of a bubbling tangerine is her version of butterflies in the stomach.

"Are you sure?" she asked her husband.

"Yes. I wanna know what happened."

"Are you-"

"Yes."

"Fine. Okay. So I- I- I was sitting by the window because I loved how it was huge and wide open and how it felt more like summer the closer I was to it. I was already a little drunk off the wine and the hot air, so I hadn't realized that he had come over and sat opposite me. He brushed his fingers along the side of my thigh, which was bare because I was wearing that silk skirt of mine with the slit. I remember thinking that silk also made it feel more like summer. Anyway, we talked for a long time. He kept touching the candle on the table, and then my cheek, so his hand was warm, warmer than summer. I was

making fun of him because he was missing a button on his shirt. We analyzed this poem by Elizabeth Jennings. It's called 'Remembering Fireworks.' It's so beautiful. I accidentally spilled the wine all over the table, but by the time I was able to register the mess, we were kissing. They were feather kisses, occasionally overruled by harsher ones, light and crisp like the crust on the bottom of a cheesecake- "

"Yea. Okay. Spare me the details. What happened after that?"


"I-I- well- I don't know. That's when the doorbell rang and I realized that I was zoning out, like I was in a trance, looking out the window-"

"Y-You- What?"

"So-I-I quickly went to answer the door, and so I don't know what happened after that. I don't know how it ended."

She hadn't moved since the gardeners had left, not even when her husband walked into the kitchen. She knew that she was feeling something, a kind of agitation that seemed to have found permanent residence between her breasts. She wondered whether it was guilt, and whether it was tied up in a balloon ready to burst the moment her skin grazed his. She knew that she hurt him. She knew that behind his glass eyes and skin there was a lab that knew how to manufacture vulnerability. She was confused, however, by how excessive this feeling of liberation was. From the very first moments he laid his eyes on her and her awkward tangerine tattoo, he made sure that he was solar so she could do nothing but orbit him. The room was dim now, desperate for her to switch on the lights, and she looked up at the lamp which she couldn't bear the existence of, hoping it would light itself up so she wouldn't have to move her muscles. She let out a clumsy sob of relief, the kind that could easily be mistaken for a laugh, at the thought that she was burning like a star. She wasn't shining, which is a common misconception that people have about stars. Instead, she was burning wonderfully, and she was nowhere near his diameter.

She watched him sitting opposite her, exhausted because his lab never learned how to manufacture words when he needed them the most. His glass eyes made an incredible effort so as to only

touch the spectrum of light that conveyed the deep-seated colors of accusation towards her. She saw the colors refract off his crystal eyes. He sat there, his lips slightly parted, panting as if recovering from a marathon run, furious with his lab and its incapability to help him, searching helplessly for ways to pull her back into her orbiting pattern. She then realized how she wished that he would stand up, jump about in a fury, and spit out tons and tons of words, so many that they would flood their kitchen like a bathtub, even if they oozed hatred. She yearned to see him spill them all out on the table, advocating for his heartbreak, quoting some cliché love poem, knocking the vase of Azaleas to the ground, and opening up his heart in unison with the splitting of the glass. But he didn't. He just sat there like a statue peeled from the sides of a Greek vase. 

Penelope Ioannou shoved her passion for creative writing under her bead and indulged in English Literature A-level, which was ever so slightly less frowned upon by the mathematically oriented culture of her tiny Greek island. She fell in love but it was the kind of love that sucks the life out of you. Penelope thought that she was never going to write again until she came to NYU in New York four months ago. She could sit in the park and write the worst poem ever and not care because she knew that she could turn around to the old bird man sitting next to her and tell him she wants to be a writer one day, and he'd smile and tell her that he really hopes she'll make it.

The Family Tree

By G.L. Keady

The cry of a baby cut through the ambient traffic noise. It was a constant reminder to the residents that they were living in crowded Manila, one of the largest cities in the world. In her mid-twenties, petite and as effervescent as a person you could ever hope to meet, Mirabelle Santos – Mai – wiped a patina of perspiration from her brow. The stifling humidity from an approaching typhoon had turned the small room in which she worked into an oven. The only reprieve from the oppressive heat was to gulp a trickle of fresh air that whispered in through the small open serving window of the Sari Sari store. The tiny shop that sold staple food essentials to the local poverty-stricken residents was partly owned by Mai's mother. It was annexed to their small residence.

Mai turned her attention to her sixteen-year-old sister's two-month old baby, Tippy. It was her responsibility to nurse her while her sister attended high school. Running the Sari Sari store for her ailing mother provided the Santos family of five with just enough money to get by, with only a precious amount leftover for Mai to afford to study business administration at the nearby Manila Polytechnic University. There would have been more money for them if her mother's greedy 50-year-old investor-partner Jun Sorris didn't take 70% of the profits. Mai didn't like him at all, the way he hung about like a vulture at dusk every Friday to collect his blood money. More so, she detested his undressing glances and, more than anything, the sordid way in which he had once told her that if the weekly take were less than his expectations, he would expect her to work it off with him in the back of his car.

Mai's older brother Paulo had moved to Australia for work. They were hoping that he would send them money, but times were tough in 1996, and he hadn't been able to manage.

Mai started work at 6 a.m. when her sister caught the bus to school. At 7 p.m., following dinner, she cooked for the household, and then took a 30-minute tricycle cab ride through the streets to the

University. After her studies ended at around midnight, almost out on her feet, she would take another tricycle ride back home.

This day while nursing Tippy, a customer came to the store window.

“Is there anyone serving here?” the elderly woman bellowed impatiently.

Mai laid Tippy down on her blanket on the floor and rushed to the serving window.

“I’m sorry. What would you like?” she said courteously.

“Mai Santos?” The woman questioned curtly.

“Yes, that’s me,” she said, cheerfully ignoring the crying baby.

“I have a letter from your uncle,” the woman snarled, stone-faced.

She handed over an envelope and then added bluntly, “I came all the way from Pampanga on the bus...Six gruelling hours to give you that envelope and I did not expect to be kept waiting!”

It was customary for a girl to show respect to an older female and take criticism without rebuttal.

“I’m sorry if I’ve caused you any inconvenience, ma’am. I am indebted to you for your generosity.”

“And so you should be young lady. I’ll take a kilo of rice for my trouble.”

“I’m sorry, ma’am. I can’t do that. This is not my store. My mother only owns only a small percentage.”

The old woman cut her off mid-sentence. “All I seem to hear from you is ‘*sorry*.’ Your uncle warned me to expect arrogance from you. Now, give me the rice, and you can work it out with the owner in your own time. It is small recompense for my travel time and for having to put up with your crying child.”

Mai handed a kilo bag of rice across the counter, knowing full well that it meant that her family would go without for the next week after she paid for the rice out of her paltry wages. As the old lady strode off carrying her bounty, Mai — feeling miserable — opened the letter. After reading the contents, her tears dotted the paper.

The sky darkened; the ominous approach of the typhoon increased the anxiety that Mai felt. Wiping away the tears, she crushed the letter in her hand, hoping to extirpate its contents, but a sharp clap of thunder evoked a pang of guilt. It was as though God had spoken and was rebuking her for her disdainful treatment of her uncle's behest. She opened her hand, unfurled the letter, and made up her mind. The first drops of rain pitter-patted on the tin roof, so she moved quickly to close the shutters. Once done, she took a deep breath to muster her courage, picked Tippy up, and went to confront her mother.

Without notice, her destiny was determined that day.

Mai's concern was that she had planned to be the sole master of her future, not an uncle that she didn't even know.

"I have been expecting this!" Mai's mother said sternly after reading the letter from the comfort of her armchair.

Mai looked at her mother's heavily bandaged left foot. Three of her toes had recently been amputated due to gangrene caused by smoking. Even after that, she still refused to quit. She looked up at the cigarette burning in her mother's shaky hand and thought, *You obstinate, silly old woman*. Gazing at her mother's dispirited expression, she shielded Tippy's eyes from a cloud of exhaled cigarette smoke and said, "If you were expecting the letter, why didn't you tell me?"

Typical of her mother and her generation, confrontation was out of the question.

"The family tree has provided for us for half a dozen generations. Tending the tree is the responsibility of the next of kin to your uncle, who is Paulo, but he is in Australia, so it falls to your son."

"But William is only six years old. Besides, he is not the next of kin to Paulo. I am."

"But you're not male," her mother said curtly.

"Arh, so that's what this is all about. There is no man old enough to inherit the obligation."

Another bellow of smoke added more haze to the already claustrophobic atmosphere. The sound of rain on the roof grew more intense.

“It is a job, Mirabelle, not an obligation. Hmm, the wind is picking up outside. I suppose you forgot to close the shutters?”

“Of course I closed them,” Mai grimaced, annoyed that she wasn’t trusted. “So, we can forget the request for Paulo or William to tend the tree then. Besides, you would never get me to go to Pampanga.”

“William can’t tend the tree but you certainly can!” the mother said emphatically.

“The last time I looked, mum, I wasn’t a man.”

“The last time I looked, you were my daughter, and you will do as I say.”

At that moment, the typhoon chose to strike with all its might, releasing winds in excess of 120 kilometers per hour that caused their flimsy weatherboard house to shudder as though the end was nigh.

Mai sat in class, unable to concentrate on the lecture. Her plans for her son’s future now lay in tatters. Her uncle was old and no longer capable of tending the family mango tree. Traditionally, that responsibility befell the next male, but never a female. For the first time in six generations, there was no male to accept the inheritance. Mai’s mother had argued that this was her chance, as a female, to break an age-old tradition and take on the responsibility of the tree that her family relied on. But Mai was concerned that by taking up the challenge, which excited her, she could be walking into the trap of being nurse to an aging old man more than the family tree. He, after all, had no one to look after him, and she wasn’t prepared to give up her plans to be an age-carer. Suddenly, the distant sound of her tutor’s voice cut through her revelry.

“We must live in the now,” he said.

It was a revelation to her, a prophetic insight – *what am I worried about? I’m over 21. If it doesn’t suit me, then I will just come home! Mum is right. This is a chance to stand up for women’s rights, for my rights. But who will take over my duties and look after Mum and my sister’s baby? Who will run the store? Wait, Mum is the one telling me to go, so that responsibility should be hers.*

Two weeks later, Mai and William were looking out the bus window in route to Pampanga. Mai was still pondering the possible ramifications of the move. One huge doubt still nagged her: *How will Uncle Vic react to me presenting myself as heir to the family tree?* She had wanted to phone and ask him, but mother had said her Uncle had no phone. *Was that an indicator of his penurious existence, or was it normal for someone living in the province?*

The air brakes of the dilapidated old bus hissed one last time as it pulled to a stop at the Apalit City bus terminal. It was right then that reality struck Mai with an avalanche of apprehension. It had been a grueling journey. The bus wasn't air conditioned, and the passengers had been crammed in like sardines. From the bus window, she observed the terminal that doubled as a wet market. There were busy people everywhere, going this way and that – either catching a bus somewhere or buying produce from the market. The background sound of human chatter in a dialect she couldn't understand made her feel even further from Manila.

Mai and William stepped off the bus into the heat of the day and the intoxicating stench of hung meat, dried fish, and humanity. Shopping stalls, hustlers, beggars, flies, and dust surrounded them. It was such a culture shock that she felt they'd accidentally slipped back in time. But being a good sport, she took a deep breath and got on with it. Next, they needed a taxi to transport them the six kilometers to the village of Sampaloc.

There were at least 50 tricycles parked at the rank, each with its driver either sprawled out on his tricycle, sound asleep, or sitting on the pavement in a group, smoking and playing Tong-its (a Filipino version of poker). Just like in Manila, all tricycle carriages were gaily painted, some with beautifully hand-painted religious iconography, others with comic strip heroes, such as Superman, and others plastered with witty slogans. It was a cultural thing and a good way of telling one tricycle from another. Mai was used to dealing with tricycle drivers, for, like most Filipinos, these guys were the scourges of the taxi world and they were never to be trusted. Stories abounded of young ladies being driven into dark

alleys and raped. With William in tow, Mai approached a group of card players and boldly asked for a ride to Sampaloc. It was midday, so the sun was at its hottest. The drivers looked her over, shook their heads, and without a word, continued their game. With the cloud of smoke from their cigarettes half-choking her, she ambled off to try another driver.

William noticed a red tricycle with Spiderman painted on its side. The young driver was sitting upon it proudly like he'd just won it in a raffle. William dragged his mum over to the young man and said, "Hey, mister, we want to go to Sampaloc."

The dark-skinned skinny man, wearing a dirty white singlet, shorts, and flip-flops, held up ten fingers, then closed and reopened them six times. A deal had been struck for 60 pesos. Mai proudly patted her son on the head and they climbed into the flimsy carriage.

On a number of occasions during the 20-minute journey to Sampaloc, the driver was forced to pull the tricycle over onto the dirt shoulder of the narrow road to allow a car honking its horn to pass. By the time they arrived at her uncle's small house, they were covered head-to-toe in dust and grime. She paid the driver, and with only one small bag containing everything they owned, the two of them walked silently towards the house and their futures. They stopped at the front gate for a solemn moment to take in the view.

It was a ramshackle old house with a rusted iron roof. There was white paint peeling from the weatherboard cladding and an unkempt overgrown front lawn. Within the high grass were remnants of a white picket fence, and at its center was a rusted half-open gate. Towering over the house from the backyard was the biggest mango tree Mai had ever seen. It was so big that half of it draped over the side fence and into the neighboring property. She eased open the hip-high squeaky gate and let William lead the way to the front door.

They stopped at the open door and Mai called out respectfully, "Hello, Uncle Vic, are you there?"

After a pause came a raspy reply. "Come in. The door is open, isn't it?"

Mai patted down William's ruffled hair, checked that he was presentable, brushed the dust from her knee length blue dress, and then gave her son a reassuring smile. As they clasped their hands together, she sighed for courage, and feeling a little weak in the knees, she led her boy inside.

"In here. The second door on your left," the gravelly voice bellowed.

They followed the instructions and came into the living room. It was dark and musty and old. Reclining in a brown lounge chair that had seen better days was a man with his back to them. By his thinning grey hair, Mai presumed him to be Uncle Vic.

"Come here around the front where I can look at you," he ordered.

"Uncle Vic?" she asked.

They stopped in front of the old man. Though his voice was gruff, she saw that he had a kind face, and she could see the family resemblance to her mother.

"Hello, Uncle Vic. I'm Mirabelle and this is my son, William." She took her uncle's thin hand and placed his fingers reverently on her forehead: this is called *Mano*, which is the customary manner of greeting and honoring an elder. She gauged from his reaction that he appreciated it. Then she noticed that his eyes were watery like he had been weeping. In his frail hand was a letter.

"Are you all right uncle?"

"No, I am not all right. Sit," he gestured at the old moth-eaten, two-seater leather lounge.

Mai and William sat opposite him and waited for him to speak.

"I was expecting your brother, Paulo."

"Paulo went to Australia. He has been there for six years."

"Your son is too young to tend the tree – and that privilege will not be given to a woman, if that's what you're thinking. It never has and never will be – that is what my father decreed and his father before him ... and so on."

"I'm not..."

He signaled for her to stop talking. "But it doesn't matter now because the bank is taking the property. I received the notice today," he said, his voice wavering with emotion.

Mai was lost for an adequate reply. The skinny old man struggled to hold out the letter for her to take and read.

After a moment, Mai looked back at her uncle and said, “It says that you have defaulted on the mortgage repayments.”

“Yes, that is quite correct. This year, for the first time ever, the tree produced only half the harvest. By the time I paid the usual bills and gave the other members of the family their share, there was nothing left for the bank.”

“You shouldn’t have paid the family for their share...”

“They depend on that money. Don’t be ridiculous,” he snapped angrily.

“I know, I know. But now they might be faced with never receiving a share again.”

“What would you know about business, young lady?” he snarled.

“She knows a lot, uncle. She’s really smart,” William spoke up, looking proudly at his mother with loving eyes.

“Hush, William. You must show your uncle respect.”

“I like your boy. It’s a shame that he’s not 20 years older, otherwise he might have been able to help. Anyhow, it all means nothing now. You’ve come all this way for nothing. My sister should have been sensible enough to send me word and saved you the trip. She’s always been an obstinate woman, your mother, even when we were kids.”

“It is lunchtime, uncle. Let me prepare some food and then we can talk about it. Okay?”

“They say I’m as about as friendly as a basket of vipers.”

“I wouldn’t know,” she said as she stood up. “I’ve not seen a viper. At any rate, I take you at face value, and to me, it looks like your hiss is far worse than your bite.”

He laughed, and it made him cough – showing his old age – but her sense of humor had broken the ice. The wrinkles on his old face had formed into a smile, and his eyes told her that underneath that tough wrinkled old exterior dwelled a kind heart.

The next morning at breakfast, Mai kissed William goodbye. “I’ll be back later,” she said.

“Where are you going?”

She held up the letter. “I’m going to visit the bank.”

“You’re wasting your time. They’ll pay no heed to a woman,” Vic growled.

“Anything is worth a try,” Mai said confidently.

After she had gone, Vic took William outside to show him the mango tree.

William said, “Mum will fix everything, uncle. Don’t you worry.”

It was late in the afternoon when Mai returned home. William had held vigil on the front porch while uncle was taking an afternoon siesta. William ran to the squeaky front gate to greet his mum who was struggling with shopping/grocery bags.

Amazed, William asked, “Mum, all this shopping, where did you get the money?”

“Help me get them inside and I’ll tell you.”

William took a couple of bags and ran inside shouting, “Uncle Vic, mum’s home, and she’s got shopping!”

Mai was setting the shopping bags down on the kitchen table when a tired Vic, with sleep still in his eyes, entered, assisted by a walking stick.

“What did you do? Rob the bank?”

Mai smiled and gave him a peck on the cheek.

“Well, some people might call it that. Sit down. Let’s have merienda and I’ll tell you.”

A look of glee came to the old man’s watery eyes when he sighted a plate of three large ensaymada.

“It’s been a long time since I’ve had one of those. So, tell me, what happened?” he asked after sitting down.

“Well, I met the bank manager and convinced him that it wasn’t in the bank’s best interests to foreclose the property. I told him the tree that has provided us has only done so because of our family’s care over generations, and that this tradition needs to continue.”

“And what did he say?”

“All the bank is interested in is the payment of the mortgage. So, I offered the bank the first profit from the next harvest with a guarantee of a ten percent override.”

“And?” Vic asked, his eyes the size of dinner plates.


“He accepted.”

Vic looked as though he was about to fall off the chair. With tears tracking down his cheeks, he threw his arms around his niece in appreciation. He said, “I don’t know how to thank you.” William joined in on the hug. “Where did you get the money for all this?” Vic asked, gesticulating at all the shopping.

“Oh, the bank gave me an overdraft as well.”

“See, uncle, I told you she would do it.”

Mai was happy to have been able to use what she had learned from her business studies to solve the problem, and in doing so, she graduated to be the apple of her uncle’s eye. Though she had expected resistance as a woman, she instead found appreciation for her abilities, an appreciation that had been missing from her mother who had taken her for granted.

Mai never formally took possession of the family tree. She didn’t have to, as it was, after all, the family tree. 

Born in Sydney, Australia in 1951, G.L. Keady is an accomplished and qualified writer, film director, and composer with a large range of credits in film, television, sound recordings, and composing. He currently has two books in publication.

The First Snow

By John Martin

When I was growing up, the first heavy snow of the season always arrived like a holiday, especially if the snow had fallen during the night and we only discovered it upon waking, with the branches heavy and close to the ground and everything else buried beneath a coverlet of stars. The sidewalks would always be clear by the time we walked back home from school, as if by magic, though we never knew why our fathers went to the task with such urgency. Those were the days when keeping a clean house was still something mothers aspired to do. Had our fathers not shoveled the sidewalks, they would have gotten an earful when they came home.

That job of clearing the snow has fallen to me now, and if there is any magic involved, then I am a magician and the blade on my truck is my wand. But I don't feel like any kind of magician today. What I feel is the dead weight of my body as I sit up in bed and slowly bring my feet back in touch with the floor. It is only with that first sip of coffee that I feel my limbs begin to loosen and my brain once more restored to an organ of thought rather than one of dreaming.

After a shower and several more cups of coffee, I fill up my thermos; put on my coat, hat, and gloves; and head out to the truck. When I turn on the ignition, the engine throbs back to life like a great metal beast breaking out of the ice and declaring itself to the world. I suppose I love this truck the way that cowboys love their horses: a mixture of love, respect, and gratitude that is not come by easily, and that can only be earned when the loved one expects only to serve, and by serving, to fulfill its purpose. So I, too, in making my way out into the snow just before dawn, with only a few streetlights to illuminate what the snow hides so well, am I called to fulfill my own purpose. Perhaps there's still a few mothers who, upon finding snow tracked through their houses, will curse you under their breaths. If you still believe in such things, those are the curses presented for reckoning at your last judgment.

“Damned if I didn’t take out that fire hydrant,” Willy finished his story, looking from one face to the next in a last bid for sympathy.

“It’s ‘cause you drive that thing like a tank,” I said. “What do you expect?”

“I don’t know,” Willy grumbled. “It just seems unfair.”

“Now fire hydrants are unfair! You’re just being an ass.”

“You fellas plan to sit here all day?” our waitress Peggy scolded us as she topped off our mugs. “Snow is still piling up out there, in case you hadn’t noticed.”

“Just one more cup. Then we’ll get out of your hair, Peggy.”

“It’s not my hair you should be worried about,” Peggy said, taking a quick stock of her locks with a hand vainly positioned against the side of her head. “I got enough worry about this hair to go ‘round for everyone.”

“And we appreciate that,” I said, drawing a brief round of laughter from the men at our table. We all knew that Peggy was right. We’d all be working late into the night just to keep up. “If you wouldn’t mind, would you fill up my thermos before we head out?”

“I’ll need to brew a fresh pot. Can you wait?” Peggy asked. “We’re going through coffee today like coke through a movie star’s nostrils.”

The rest of the men slid out of the booth to settle their bills while I waited for Peggy to come back with my thermos. But instead of handing it to me upon her return, she sat down in my booth and looked at me earnestly, the way that a doctor might address a sick patient. “My mother’s real old,” she began, as she looked at the snow through the window, “and she depends on me for most things these days, you know, like the shopping and cleaning, that sort of thing. Here’s the thing,” she said as she pushed the thermos across the table, “I always shovel her walks in the winter and my shift isn’t over till seven, and the boss is already hinting at overtime. Besides, I don’t think my old beater would even make it up there.”

“And ‘up there’ is where?”

“Congress Hill.”

“Must live in one of those grand old Colonials. Your mother must be well off.”

“House has been in our family a long time. Built by my great grandfather. But there’s the upkeep,” she added in a tone of rebuttal.

“I need to make one more pass round the Motor Lodge, and then I’ll head up. Write down the address for me.”

Peggy wrote down the address on the back of my check, saying, “I really appreciate this, Randy.”

“Glad to help,” I said, although, in reality, a trip up the hill would put me back home well after dark. On the other hand, I could never turn down an old friend. It was just as unthinkable as Peggy refusing a customer service.

With the last of the snow pushed off the drive round the Motor Lodge, I headed back into town where Main Street dead-ended at Barnacle Park. Peggy’s mother was about five miles up the hill. There were already lights in a few windows as I began my way up, and my body instinctively longed for the warmth of those rooms and the fires that no doubt burned in those fireplaces. My reward for the day’s work would have to wait, with dreams of my own hearth having to suffice until then.

The snow appeared to be falling with greater intensity as I turned onto Applecart Road, and it was becoming harder and harder to tell if the mounds of snow along the curbs were only snow, or if there were cars buried beneath. I held to the middle of the road just to be safe. Peggy had told me that her mother lived in the very last house at the end of the road, a detail that I grew ever more thankful for as I advanced through the neighborhood, where snow-laden trees obscured most of the street numbers.

I trudged up to the front door to make sure I had the right house and, once confirmed, began clearing the snow from the walkway leading up to the house and from the sidewalk in the front. It took me less than half an hour to complete the job, but just as I was throwing the shovel into the bed of my truck, I saw a light turn on in the house and the silhouette of a coiffed head appear in the front window. I offered a wave, hoping to give some reassurance that I’d been expected, but the figure did not move. She remained so still, in fact, that it unnerved me a little, as if she might be a ghost, and I repeated the

wave, hoping to elicit some reaction. When she still did not move, I went up to the house and knocked at the front door.

After what seemed like a very long time, the door slowly opened, revealing by ratchet degrees a tiny woman with hair as white as the snow on the ground and the collars of no less than three sweaters visible below her throat. She asked if I was the man that her daughter had told her would come, and when I said that I was, she asked me to step into the house. “I have some firewood I’d like you to fetch,” she said, without so much as a thank you for the work I’d already completed, and then began making her way with slow, tentative steps toward the back of the house. We passed through a room with a fireplace and a TV, on which some woman was selling laundry detergent, until we came to the kitchen, solely illuminated by a single bulb above the stove. I cast a look back at the collection of photographs arranged on the mantle and the large seascape centered above them, with a small fishing boat headed back out to sea. “The wood’s in the shed,” she said, and placed her hand on the backdoor knob as though to coax me outside. Somehow, I think that she took it for granted that I wouldn’t refuse her request.

Resigned to the labor before me, I opened the door and plunged headlong into the snow, which was at least a couple feet deep and stopped me dead in my tracks more than once as the stilts of my legs struggled to find purchase. It took me a full hour to clear enough snow from the shed that she’d pointed me to, by which time I was spent. Piling a healthy portion of the split logs into my arms, I brought them inside. “Where would you like them?” I asked. I made no attempt to disguise my resentment.

No answer. I went into the room where she was sitting in front of the television. “Where do you want your wood?” I asked again, at which point I noticed the empty rack beside the fireplace and moved to deposit my load.

“Another three or four trips should be enough,” she said, without looking up from the television, the light from the screen making a death mask of her face.

My gaze fell on her two waxen hands whose knuckles were as knobby as acorns. “I’m going to rest here a minute next to the fire, if that’d be all right.”


“Throw another couple logs on before you sit down.”

I was so out of breath by this point that I kept taking big gulps of air like a dog that had been out in the sun for too long. And while the warmth of the room had initially felt welcome, it soon became oppressive. I slipped off my cap and unzipped my coat. I asked if I might get a glass of water, in answer to which she lifted a tired hand and waved at the kitchen. I still had not earned her respect, or even her sympathy.

Putting my coat on once again, I returned to my work, trudging back and forth from the house to the shed and depositing my load onto the rack until it was full. When I was finished, I sat down one final time to warm my hands. Suddenly, she turned off the TV, and with great effort, pushed herself up from her chair. “Time to turn in,” she announced.

“Would you like some help?” I asked, sure that my offer would go unacknowledged. But then she gave me her elbow and looked at me strangely, as though she’d only just remembered that I was there. Or was she finally grateful?

“These stairs will be the death of me,” she said with a sigh, as she gripped the banister and took a first tentative step. She advanced very slowly, so slowly that I feared she might topple backwards. When we reached the top of the stairs, I noticed a lamp on in one of the rooms, and it was to this room that she turned, walking like a very drunk person for whom every step was an accomplishment. “You can see your way out.”

Glancing about one last time, I gave the embers a final stir on the grate and headed out the front door, testing the knob from the outside to be sure it was locked. As I shoveled the walkways for the second time that night, I remembered the old lady’s silhouette in the window when I’d first arrived at the house, and how for one magical instant I hadn’t been able to tell if the snow was still falling to earth or funneling back into space. Magic was still possible, even for men doing the hard work of clearing the snow, and even for wizened old ladies who, for when all hope is lost, a man appears on their doorstep holding a shovel. 

John Martin is a writer and artist who makes his home in Colorado. His work has previously appeared in *Per Contra*, *Bias Onus Quarterly*, *Black Lantern Publishing*, *The Externalist*, *Curbside Splendor*, and several others.

Forty Percent

By Frank Diamond

Here's the setup. Flex's nephew, Jake (his brother's son) is married to Paula. Paula's brother, Danny, kills himself. Danny is—was—artistic, brilliant, funny, and even joyful, but emotionally fragile. Then this manipulative, conniving young woman swoops into Danny's life. This Stacey Lark.

Talk to her and you would think that butter wouldn't...well, you know. But that's exactly how sociopaths do. They're charming and intelligent, blading charisma in and twisting it, all with a smile.

Stacey Lark and Danny move in together after only a month, and anybody in this broken world can predict that (it/they) won't settle. Stacey talks Danny off his antidepressants. Danny goes crazy, gets institutionalized for 28 days. When Danny's away, Stacey starts living with another man. She's using and dealing, too.

When Danny gets out, Stacey ignores his already teetering existence. Danny blows up her phone. She changes her number. He comes around. She gets a restraining order and won't let him get his stuff. Danny doesn't even have a winter coat and, baby, it's cold. Flex hears that Danny even had to go barefoot for a day, wandering like some pilgrim in the Middle Ages.

Paula (again—Danny's sister) won't have it, tells her little brother to move in with Jake and her—that'll fix him up. And Danny does.

Jake (again—Flex's nephew) owns four guns, but he gets three off premises because ... well, Danny. But Jake keeps one gun in the home safe in his and Paula's bedroom for protection. Jake, Danny, and Paula go out one night because, hell, it's time they had some fun, right? Some laughs? Danny gets drunk, picks a fight with a bouncer (of course), and gets beaten up. When they arrive at Jake's, Danny sprints from the car, into the house, and up to the bedroom.

Jake's right behind, and kicks the door in. Just in time to see Danny pop himself.

Now think about that. Dwell there for a beat.

Imagine having that burned into your retinas.

Slight detour, here, but Michelle Chambers gets convicted for manslaughter at around this time. Remember her? She texted her boyfriend into killing himself. Well, Stacey Lark doesn't leave a trail. Noooooo, sir. Too smart for that.

"I hope you're feeling better, now, Danny, I really do." Those were the sort of messages from Stacey Lark that they discovered later on Danny's cell phone.

One day, Jake says to Flex: "She hides it real good, Uncle Flex. You'd swear she had nothing to do with it. A total psycho."

Flex nods. They're in his kitchen, with streaming sunlight fuzzing the edges.

Did she have anything to do with it?

"I think that she killed Danny!" Jake's response startles Flex, and not just because of its intensity. Some thoughts Flex verbalizes and some thoughts he doesn't, and he doesn't always keep track. Jake amends: "She might as well have!"

Flex asks: "What's she up to now?"

"With another guy!" Jake says, slicing the air like he's running for office. "That's how she rolls. She uses dudes, gets what she can out of them, and then moves on."

"Is she beautiful?"

"I don't think so," Jake snaps. "Look." He holds his cell phone up so Flex can see the image. "The thing of it is, Uncle Flex, the thing of it is: It's what's inside, and what's inside her is not good. She's a real sicko. Mental."

Flex's cough revisits; it's a fit, really, like a motor not quite turning over. He's carried it for a long time. Flex turns, spits into the sink, and looks out the window. On the street, Mrs. Calloway walks her dog.

Flex wheezes out a question when the cough subsides a bit.

"Is Stacey Lark mentally ill or is she evil?"

He seems to be addressing this to the oblivious Mrs. Calloway, who's just pulled a plastic poop-scooper baggie from her pocket, and mutters at the sky. "Because that fascinates me. At what point do we hold the mentally troubled morally accountable? And what is your ethical responsibility? If you met Adolph Hitler in 1930 having foreknowledge of what that man would unleash, you'd have a moral obligation to kill him, would you not? You'd be wrong not to kill him. Even in the midst of a civilized cocktail party, you'd throw yourself upon der Fuhrer. You'd do it for humanity."

He hears Jake grab the check that Flex had laid on the kitchen table.

"You're paying me too much, Uncle Flex," Jake says. He's repaired a ceiling fan, and replaced some hinges.

"A lot less than I would pay a stranger, and a stranger would screw it up," Flex says.

"Yeah, but you helped me."

Flex did. He is one of a loosely formed crew who are close, but not too close, to the Danny tragedy. They work some nights and Saturdays to get Jake's house ready for sale. Paula doesn't want to live there anymore; who could blame her? She'd cradled Danny's bleeding head in her lap while waiting for emergency response. Spattered in blood and brains, she was.

Another coughing fit, and after it passes, Flex says: "I am happy to help."

Then he turns, but Jake's already gone.

Flex isn't exactly oblivious to this reaction from people, even loved ones. Flex knows he's a bit strange, knows that people think he's a character; silent until some trigger unleashes goofy ideas tumbling out like clowns somersaulting from a Volkswagen.

Jake just had to get out of there. Flex takes no offense.

Focus! Stacey Lark must die!

Flex can get away with it, too. Nearly 40% of homicides in the United States go unsolved. And even if Flex doesn't get away with it, what does he have to lose? He's been adrift for, like, always. So, he goes to prison. So what? He's been a toll booth operator on the Pennsylvania Turnpike for 32 years,

for jiminy sake. Prison gives him more elbow room, without the endless stream of cars crawling toward emptiness. It's the price he'll pay for doing good.

And he owes the world, Flex figures. Because years before he yelled "jump!" to a man on an office building ledge and that man obliged, suddenly shadowing out of the sun like a meteor. Flex's friends (this was back when he had friends) consoled him. Flex thought it was a workman, but still.... Flex can now atone.

Yes, of course, there'd been a before and after in Flex's life.

And it's simple: He'd fallen in love, once. Her name ... well, what does that matter now? And when another young man took her, Flex had been devastated, but resigned to still worship her from afar, willing to wear that emasculating badge of a "friend." He'd wheedle his way back in, is what he'd do, stay close to her in some capacity. And when the new relationship floundered, as it inevitably must.... But then God or fate or life or an uncaring universe took her and that ending was forever. Hope left Flex and never returned. He was 25.

In dreams, he and him at 25 chat amiably. Young Flex tells Older Flex how it all unwinds if the girl had stayed; if she had lived. And it's a good life, wherever it's being played out. They marry, have three children. She encourages Flex to reach further, find more fulfilling work, and he does. He becomes a history teacher, in this alternate, and he's one of the cools who can reach the kids. He moves up in the union, speaks at school board meetings, and negotiates better contracts for his members. He's respected and needed. He may even run for township council.

"You just had your first grandkid," Young Flex announces on the recent visit.

He sits cross-legged in the corner of the bedroom, smoking Newports. His hair is male-permed; if it's good enough for Mike Schmidt, the greatest third baseman of all time, it's good enough for Young Flex. Older Flex, of course, knows he's dreaming, his subconscious massaging his anxiety. Still, he's transfixed.

"And what are you up to these days?" Young Flex asks.

"Same old, same old."

And Young Flex smiles, and Older Flex can't quite figure out what that smile means. If it's supposed to be kindness, it misses, coming off a bit as condescending. Something else in it, as well. Relief?

Flex awakes, wiping sweat on his brow while getting his bearings.

Another dream.

The alarm clock says 2:22 a.m. He goes to the bathroom, and when he comes back, he swears he smells cigarette smoke.

Pull it together.

And he does, like always. Sleep deprivation keeps Young Flex at bay. Eventually, though, Older Flex succumbs to slumber's depths, and that's OK for a spell because Young Flex stays away, though he will return eventually. He always does. But for now, Older Flex has a mission, and Young Flex, wherever he is, seems content to simply watch.

Yes. Stacey Lark must die.

Within six months of Danny, Stacey Lark's gone through two more men, and gotten two more restraining orders. So, enough time and drama have passed. She's riled more families, if not the boyfriends (or marks)—for they all blame themselves. Somehow, it's their fault. They defend her, even after being used. Like Danny, who absolved her in his suicide note. Oh, she's good at what she does, this Stacey Lark.

Flex has got a plan, an approach, a modus operandi. First off, absolutely no Internet footprints. No searching for anything remotely connected to the mission. No more questions for Jake, either. Nothing. Flex gets his information drip by drip. Very retro. When Jake talks about Stacey Lark at family gatherings (which happens less often), Flex pretends to be watching the game, any game.

Flex goes to the bar on Route 13 that Stacey Lark frequents. Before setting out, he switches his license plate for one that he'd found at the toll booth. This is a risk he needs to take. On his third visit, the door opens behind him and the bartender calls, "Stacey! What's up?"

In the mirror behind the bar, Flex sees a woman in her early 20s with much ink and some piercings. Athletic. Trim. Beautiful, but not too. Is it the Stacey? Flex hadn't gotten a very good look at Jake's phone photo that day.

Luckily, it's early—45 minutes until happy hour—and the overheads in the place haven't been dimmed. People can scope each other. The girl glances in Flex's direction and he sees the cast in her eye. That's Stacey Lark, all right.

Flex returns two more times, figures out which car is hers. Then, one night, he follows Stacey Lark home to a unit in an apartment complex off Newportville Road. Tailing somebody turns out to be easy. When she parks, Flex parks not too far from her. He gets out, and she glances over at him and sees just an older man walking to his residence. Or maybe it's an older man visiting a friend. Or an older man who might be lost. She probably doesn't give it much thought, even as she enters B14.

Stacey Lark keeps irregular hours, and she leaves at about midnight. When she pulls away, Flex gets out of his car, and whistles softly as he heads to B14 carrying a grocery bag with his hands coated in skin-toned paper-thin plastic gloves. He pulls out the keys, finds the one, turns the lock, and enters.

That's huge!

Flex figured that, with the kind of life Stacey Lark that led, she may have asked the landlord to change the lock. But she hadn't, and that makes this so much easier.

Flex had found the key under Danny's alarm clock when he was cleaning up after the event. Looks like Danny had taken a black marker and scrawled "SL" on it, and Flex knew right away. He'd guided it off the chain, pocketed it before finding Paula downstairs, and handed the other keys to her.

Paula held them up by her thumb and index finger, angling them as if they were a specimen. When Paula asked: "Where's that little bitch's apartment key?", Flex stepped back, but the question hadn't been addressed to him.

Jake responded: "Oh, Danny threw it out. He told me."

Danny may very well have meant to, but he'd obviously hadn't gotten around to it. Or maybe Danny's plan had originally been to hang himself at Stacey Lark's place. They'd found a stool, rope, and duct tape in the trunk of Jake's car. Whatever, this minor stroke of dark luck Flex takes as a sign.

Go on.

Flex doesn't turn on the lights. What if Stacey Lark or one of her friends passes? No, this is where it becomes cat-burglary. Rummaging by flashlight.

"Anywhere and everywhere," was what the television show said. That special about the opioid crisis and where at-risk teens hide their stashes.

He places the grocery bag on the counter in the kitchen, and hesitates for a moment.

Do it!

Queasiness syrups down Flex's chest and into his legs and feet as he bumps into Stacey Lark's bedroom. Suddenly, someone outside shouts once and Flex flicks his flashlight off, his breathing sputtering in the pitch. He waits—one-Mississippi, two-Mississippi, three-Mississippi—but the single wayward note echoes off.

Then - shit! - he starts coughing. Nerves.

Flex grabs a bottle in his pocket, tilts his head back, and swigs cough suppressant laced with codeine. He waits until he's breathing easy again, or as easy as he can breathe with another fit gurgling down there like lava.

Not one more cough! Get this done!

Flex extends his hand, shuffles over toward the wall, and finds the dresser. He kneels, then flicks the flashlight back on, pulls out a drawer, and feels underneath. Nothing. As Flex replaces the drawer, his light inadvertently flashes across a form on the bed.

No!

He refocuses the beam, and sighs with relief. A stuffed animal is all it is. Kermit the Frog.

You scared the living shit out of me, Kermie.

But wait. Flex stands, takes three paces, and grabs the Muppet. He fingers the stitching under the little purple driver's cap, finds the opening, and feels the plastic. He pulls the baggie out.

Hello.

It could be baking soda, but it's not. Flex knows it's heroin, Stacey Lark's drug of choice. Flex needs to be even more careful now. He creeps back to the kitchen, opens the grocery bag, and pulls out his tools: a half-faced respiratory mask, nitrile gloves, and a prescription. Over the sink, he pours the contents of the pill bottle into the baggie, reseals it, and shakes it a couple of times.

The heroin is now mixed with enough fentanyl to kill 10 people. She'll be dead within a minute of snorting or shooting. As he makes his way back into the bedroom, Flex lets his mind drift a bit. He wonders if the people close to Stacey Lark—parents, step-parents, siblings, half-siblings, misused friends—had yet reached the point where they'd washed their hands of her. When news of her overdose reached them, would they think: "Thank God!" Probably not. She's too young. Some people still hold out hope. It will be a large funeral with a lot of young girls in tears.

But Flex knows at least somebody who will celebrate. He can just hear Jake: "Ding-dong, the wicked bitch is dead!"

Flex stuffs the baggie back into Kermit's head, and replaces the Muppet on the pillowed throne. There's no such thing as the perfect murder, but still—remember now—40% do go unsolved. Not bad odds.


He'll have to return to the bar on Route 13 periodically. Never showing up again might register with a bartender or one of the regulars. And, for all he knows, one of those regulars might be a cop.

Flex pauses after repacking. He's tempted to linger. He gets it now why arsonists return to the embers. What a rush! Flex holds the power of life or death, and he made his decision.

And the world will be better for it.

Flex shakes off this reverie, and gets the hell out of there. He drives a few blocks, pulls into a roll-off, and puts his real license plate back on. He's tempted to throw Stacey Lark's apartment key into the woods but decides that it's too risky. He'll melt it down instead.

Flex knows that he won't sleep this night. Hell, he might not sleep for days, with the thoughts racing and banging about like particles creating a strange energy. He hasn't felt this alive in like.... Flex can't recall.

I can get used to this. 

Frank Diamond's poem "Labor Day" was nominated for a Pushcart Prize Award. His short stories have appeared in the *RavensPerch*, *Innisfree*, *Kola: A Black Literary Magazine*, *Empty Sink Publishing*, and several others.

The Harvest Festival

By Cynthia Gralla

Magda began her creaking descent. It was the first of several she would make that day since her bedroom was located on the second floor. As soon as she arrived in the bucolic town of Housatonic, she moved into the home of Agata Murach, a great aunt she'd never met before. After her first trip up those steep stairs, they had a small argument.

"I'm going to give you the downstairs bedroom," Agata insisted.

"No, please. It must be so hard for you to get up those stairs." What Magda didn't add was that it would be warmer to sleep on the ground floor because, like other Polish houses, Agata's was heated by the clay stove in the living room. The second-story rooms were chilly at night, even in September, the month of Magda's arrival.

Agata protested, "I've always slept up there, ever since my husband built the house thirty years ago. I would feel so lonely sleeping downstairs. All of my memories are up there."

Agata had left Poland forty years earlier to join the boy to whom she'd been betrothed since she was sixteen. He had emigrated first, aiming to make his fortune in the New World. While he didn't achieve anything on a grand scale, he cobbled together enough, through back-breaking labor and a carpenter's apprenticeship, to eventually send for his bride. After decades in the Berkshires, Agata spoke English competently, but she was still challenged to voice certain consonant blends or traipse through the thorniest gardens of irregular verbs. When Magda had first seen Agata, she saw not so much her thin face, but the liberating force of the defiantly convoluted Polish language. Since Agata's husband died five years earlier, she'd had far fewer opportunities to speak it. And since the loss of her son who recently perished, she'd had far less love as well.

“But you have me here now,” Magda reminded her. “We’ll make the downstairs bedroom cozy for you.” So they had, and a few weeks later, Agata admitted that she was much warmer at night now. “And not just because I’m closer to the stove.” She squeezed Magda’s hand.

When they first met, Agata told Magda how pretty she’d grown. The only photograph of her that Agata had ever seen, sent to her in a Christmas letter, was taken when she was ten years old, skinny and scowling. But Magda knew the truth, which was that the past year had taken a toll on the slight beauty that had flared and flourished during her love affair with Jakub in the early years of World War II. She didn’t care much about that loss; survival alone had been flushed to the foreground of her concerns. She felt more regret over losing her financial security at one blow. The fabled family wealth had vanished, as if in a puff of smoke. In the midst of a massive world war, this was a minor point, but as time wore on, she missed her family’s money. In the first months of the occupation of Poland, Magda heard that the Nazis had commandeered her family’s *dwór* outside Zamość. At the time, she was too absorbed with Jakub and the secret teaching network to grieve for it. In any case, she had assumed that eventually the forces of good would prevail and the mansion would revert back to her family. The Germans, at the time, seemed like a stain that could be washed out by rain. But, in the end, they were more like a tidal wave that ravished the Poland she knew, leaving the detritus of continents in their wake. Magda guessed that the Zamość Uprising had probably finished what the Germans started. The lovely *dwór* would be trashed, left behind like the bones of a defeated beast from storybooks.

She missed the house. She missed having wealth to despise and react against, knowing always that her belly would be full and her future secure. But, above all, she missed Jakub and her cousin Klara, the resistance member who’d been shot. And Poland - she missed her country, too.

2.

Magda left Poland by the same route that Klara had woven into the snow when she worked as a ski courier during the first year of the war. She had ushered people and information out of Poland via

the Tatra Mountains, the one escape route still open. But by the time Magda got to the Tatras, things had changed. A contact had arranged for her to meet a courier by a windmill when she got to Zakopane. The man who guided her over the mountains was not noble Klara. This courier took one look at her, leered, and said that her money would not be enough. Magda's hand moved toward the interior pocket that she'd sewn into her blouse and the jewels contained there, but before she could reach them, it became clear that what she feared was what he meant. The courier grabbed and kissed her, then pushed her roughly to the floor.

What choice did she have? The dirty floor of the windmill, his stinking mouth, the loss of everything but pinned limbs.

And again, in a hut at the top of the world, in those depths.

Slovakia, Budapest, London. It took months. From London, she sent a letter to Agata explaining her situation and begging her for sanctuary. America had tightened immigration requirements since the war started, and she understood that she might not get a permit to land in New York without Agata's intercession. But she worried this was too much to ask from a woman she'd never met. By reputation, she knew Agata to be a god-fearing woman who, for as long as anyone could remember, had attended mass every morning. Magda judged it unlikely that she would turn away a relative in need. Nevertheless, she fell to the floor with relief when she retrieved the letter that welcomed her into Agata's home and promised her help.

Aside from Agata's sponsorship, she would need a favor from someone in the Polish Government-in-Exile in London in order to get a transit visa. A big favor. This time, she exacted it not through her own sexual exertions, but through the promise of her mother's. When she learned the name of the government's new Minister of Cultural Affairs, Magda couldn't believe her luck, for this man had been obsessed with Salomea, her mother, since the 1920s. Magda had watched him struggle to get her interested in his bouffant hair and sad, dull eyes on countless evenings at her salon. She submitted her

mother's name as she asked his secretary for an appointment with him. A few minutes later, when he saw it was Salomea's daughter, instead, his face fell, but he recovered quickly.

Sweetly and seductively, Magda promised to intercede with her mother, who was (she assured him) on her way to London. "She wants me to get to New York, to my aunt's house, because she worries about me so much. But she wants to stay here. She said she's lonely and is looking for the company of other Poles in London." A few more hints about just how lonely Salomea was and Magda had a promise of the visa that others could not have bought with gold. It took four months for the minister to secure it, during which time Magda spun increasingly fantastical tales to explain her mother's delay.

Magda spent a seven-day trip on the heaving seas, more sick than sleepy. She huddled with the other women in third class, the sisterhood of their retching her sole consolation.

After being processed at Ellis Island, Magda kept going. A long afternoon's bus ride brought her the 150 miles from New York City to Stockbridge, Massachusetts. She felt anxious, realizing that whatever life she found in Housatonic was the one she was going to have to live from now on. She had left Lublin just before Christmas 1941. It was now early September 1942. The first splashes of red dared on the leaves like the painted mouths of teenage girls.

"Just wait," said the elderly man seated next to her. "The leaves are stunning when they've all turned."

"'Turned?'" she repeated, unsure what he meant. The truth was, she'd understood very little of what he had said throughout the bus ride.

"When they change color. In the fall, the leaves change from green to yellow and red."

"Oh, I see." She nodded, forcing herself to smile.

"This area is famous for its fall foliage."

"Foliage" was another unfamiliar word, hitting her ears like the missed high note of an amateur, but she felt too tired to ask what it meant. She got the gist, anyway.

The old man was still talking: “And we have some wonderful harvest festivals. Well, not in wartime, of course. But when the war’s over, you’ll enjoy them.”

At the bus station in Stockbridge, an old woman waited for her, smothered by a coat too heavy for early autumn. Later, Magda guessed that her aunt had probably not even noticed which coat she had grabbed from the stuffed closet in the tiny foyer, for she was as nervous as Magda about the meeting. The elderly lady sported tightly curled hair the color of pewter and a smile on her round face. The resemblance to Klara—in that roundness and the light green eyes—was simultaneously eerie and comforting.

Agata had borrowed the parish car, which was being driven by a man at least as old as she was and, judging by his responses during the fifteen-minute ride to Housatonic, was half-deaf as well. Magda looked out the window as they drove down a road, dotted by abandoned paper and textile mills, that ran parallel to the Housatonic River. With their punched-out windows and bold colors, they looked like children’s drawings that someone forgot to praise. Gradually, these gave way to large rickety houses, some with incongruously sweeping porches. After a few minutes, they turned onto a side street and stopped at a porchless house across from a large cemetery.

Over the next few weeks, Magda came to understand Housatonic as a ghost town. Almost all of the young people had left to find jobs elsewhere, often Boston or New York City, because few were to be had locally ever since the mills started closing. The biggest, Monument Mills, was still open, but just barely, and they weren’t hiring new workers; in fact, every season for the past decade—war or no war—they had let more long-timers go. The emptied paper mills were still haunted by their ammonia-and-sulfur stench, and the mood was of a desaturation of spirit, which was in sharp contrast to the color exploding everywhere. (The man on the bus had been right: the fall *foliage* was spectacular.)

There was a sleepy beauty to the place nonetheless. Across the street from Agata’s house lay the large graveyard, the greens of its grasses like a million soft whispers. If Magda exited the front door and turned left, she would come, after passing half a dozen houses, to both the end of the road and a bend of

the Housatonic River. By mid-October, the area was overhung with leaves of such a vivid red that they appeared as a floating river of blood. The color bled into the sky like the days of her new life into one another, before rushing on.

3.

It took no time at all for Agata to become the beloved of Magda. She was a kind, adorable woman, made all the more so by her tendency to fret over everything. It was a blessing that she didn't worry about whether the sun would rise the next morning. Instead, she confined herself to concern over inflation; atomic bombs; the leaky roof of her house; the collapse of etiquette amongst the young; rapidly changing sexual mores; the decline in church attendance; the possibility that morning mass would be discontinued due to poor attendance; the denigration of the Polish language in the expatriate community; the wisdom of teaching Polish to children born in America; problems with these children assimilating into American society too much; problems with them assimilating too little; and so on and so forth. Magda found most of her anxieties charming, yet whenever Agata brought up amoral behavior, she cringed inwardly, hoping that her aunt would never find out about her affair with Jakub, a married man, back in Poland.

Agata always wanted to speak Polish with Magda. Magda insisted on talking in English, which she had started learning in London. After a while, both took it for granted that Magda would ask a question in English and Agata would answer it in Polish. Agata's English was overcast by a queer depression that her animated Polish lacked. Eventually, Magda decided that the one gift she could give her housemate was the opportunity to speak her native tongue every day. But she continued to speak in English as much as possible, because its acquisition was proving to be a challenge to her.

Compared to any language she had previously studied, English was maddening. With so many words borrowed from other languages, its vocabulary seemed endless. When reading the newspaper, she felt as if she were wandering through a rococo palace, dumbstruck time and time again by the excessive

embellishments everywhere she turned. Amidst this strange place and foreign language, she was grateful for her aunt's company, which was one of the few things in her life reminiscent of home. A home that was irretrievably lost.

4.

In 1945, just after the war ended, Magda finally found a job she enjoyed. Up until that time, she'd been eking out a pitiful wage cleaning Housatonic's Catholic church several times a week (a task she was horrible at) and teaching Polish to the grandchildren of the town mayor (a task at which she excelled). Agata's pension was small, and even by pooling it with Magda's tiny earnings, they struggled to cover their groceries and utility bills. Luckily, the son of one of the old women who frequented morning mass with Agata worked as the director of Tanglewood, the Stockbridge music venue that had been the summer home of the Boston Symphony since 1937. The concerts had been suspended during the final three years of the war, but now that it was over, the director was eager to develop Tanglewood into a world-class destination for composers, performers, and promising music students. Excitedly, Agata informed Magda that he was looking for an assistant proficient in French, German, and Italian to help him book acts and liaise with European musicians.

"And you speak Russian, too! On top of Polish..." she reminded her unnecessarily.

"If only I spoke English," Magda remarked in Polish.

Agata poked her with a soft stubby finger. "Your English is very good now. As good as mine. As good as all of my friends!" This last was probably true, although the length of time it had taken Magda to achieve it—a long time, compared to her childhood adventures in language-learning—discouraged her, augmenting her feeling of being old and broken even though she was only in her late 20s.

As it turned out, she needn't have worried about her English. Mr. Bishop, the director of Tanglewood, was a great admirer of Polish composers, and he hired her on the spot when he found out that she had written about Chopin for her college thesis and heard Szymanowski play in her home. In the end, she was happy he did. By helping him schedule acts for the 5,000-seat auditorium and recruit students for the Berkshire Music Center, Magda was able to make use of her linguistic gifts and engage in an enterprise she found worthy, something she had not experienced since she left occupied Poland and the wartime secret teaching network over four years before.

Her life had been thrashed with a mad storm, but slowly, she began to find logic in it again.

5.

Walking up the driveway after work the following October, just as the fall leaves were reddening the river once more, Magda was blindsided by something in the mailbox.

A letter to her, addressed in Jakub's hand.

Jakub is alive. For years, she had not known whether he'd survived the war. She'd expelled him from her apartment in Lublin when the threats to Jews and resistance workers - Jakub was both - had become impossible to ignore. But she'd also done it because they were fighting, because she knew her married lover would return to his wife if he chanced to survive the war.

She hadn't heard from him since he fled Poland in November 1941. He lived or died according to the day and her mood. She didn't try to find out his fate because she couldn't endure hearing that he'd died because of her decision to force him out. And she felt that she did not deserve the relief that flooded her now.

The letter hadn't found Magda easily. Its envelope bore the marks of misdirection like so many stigmata: a spattering of postmarks, stamps, and the address of Klara's house in Zakopane—the only

place he was almost certain to find someone related to her—crossed out. Next to it, in her uncle’s careful script, was her current address in Housatonic.

She shrank inside the house, anxiety pleating through her. After giving Agata the most cursory greeting, Magda dashed upstairs. Her room was ice-cold. She crawled into bed, took a few deep breaths, and tore the envelope open.

The letter inside was mercifully brief. He hoped that it found her well. He had been worried about her, not having had word of her since 1941. He was teaching at Columbia University in New York City. His wife and daughter sent their love, too. God bless her. (*Whose God?*)

He seemed to take for granted that she had survived, which rankled her at first. But maybe, she realized later, that conviction was the lone bud on the wintered branch of his faith.

There was another page inside the envelope. A news article in Polish. It explained something called *Aktion Erntefest* in German. In English, it’s called “Harvest Festival.”

At first, she thought that she was forgetting her native language because she didn’t understand the words. Then, she couldn’t process the scope. On one single day, tens of thousands of Jews had been murdered in Lublin, at Majdanek, and elsewhere. It occurred on November 3, 1943, almost two years after the day she kicked Jakub out.

At the bottom of the page, Jakub had written just three words: *Uratowałeś mnie.*

You saved me.

For a long time, she sat staring at it. For a much longer time afterward, she wondered if we could only do good by accident. Maybe, she decided, we are only good by comparison to history, itself just slightly less world-mangling than time. How can we be otherwise, when God does not intervene?

Whose God? 

Cynthia Gralla is the author of *The Floating World* (Ballantine) and *The Demimonde in Japanese Literature* (Cambria Press). She holds a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from the University of California, Berkeley, and lives and teaches in Victoria, British Columbia.

Postcard Perfection

By Harrison Abbott

His articles had branched into the erratic before. But his words had lost all discipline by the final incident. They *had* to fire him after that, even though they were all afraid of what he might do next.

It all erupted after Peter McGraw's filmed rant outside Westminster Palace. He spoke with such a frenzy that it gave a violent soundtrack to the murky accusations clasped against the government. His video rampaged across the media. And yet, it was only McGraw's one use of a curse word which technically got him sacked. This was ludicrous, considering the content pouring from his tongue. By firing McGraw, the national media had given him a new kind of power.

Because his words, after he continued to blog and preach non-fiction, with that same rollicking frenzy, sparked an international momentum. This was one man flirting with the very tenements of lofty London. And the city's inhabitants began to mobilise in response, a grass-roots form of unrest, which had been building for generations. And not just within the capital, but across the entire British Isles, which had juggled control of four nations for centuries, and never as precariously as now.

Things were scary. And in Peter McGraw's hard, handsome eyes, wild with the pent-up sickness of the U.K., the fear was finally being channelled somewhere. McGraw was good looking, yes, and young, and belonged to neither left or right political wing. And he had his gloves within the fickle influence of the media. He was loved by a whole mass of people, and quite hated by another. Or rather, he was not loved, so much as *clung* to by the distraught chunk of a population. He was a beacon of current affairs.

A beacon which proclaimed the phrases the national media avoided. University closures; supermarket vegetable shortages; fruit price pandemic; Visa fraud scandal; Nationalist pipe bombs; homelessness explosion; martial law in Northern Ireland; constitutional blackout in Scotland; industry exodus from London; retail giants entering administration; passport applications suspended; acid attack

crime soaring; drone crime soaring; football hooliganism makes a comeback; Church of England collapses.

This had all been growing for an era of which none of the bespectacled gentlemen within Whitehall could fathom. They'd been childish enough to augment the ideal of the Empire for the length of their lives, and now that civil war was making its foundations all around them, they were too ancient to see it coming.

And thus, it only took two things to finally tip London, and then Britain, into pandemonium.

One thing was the murder that Whitehall sanctioned, which had been caught live on film. The other thing was the fact that it was August, and temperatures were astronomical.

A white man from Manchester was shot just outside the House of Commons. He was a student, 23, who fashioned a thick black beard and who naturally had dark skin. He was on holiday with his girlfriend, walking by the parliament gates, when four robotically-clad policemen shot him dead. For what, the video couldn't show, because there was no apparent reason. The 'mistaken identity' excuse had been used too many times before, and when they did try to use it again, the media had already been beaten to it by an individual reporter.

Peter McGraw, on the 6 o'clock news, was venting his outrage over the death of this young man who was gunned down in silhouette before the postcard perfection of Westminster Palace.

That, and the temperature. It had been a solid average of 30°C for weeks. The scientists couldn't predict how far the heat would rise. The climate was doing unprecedented things, surpassing statistics. One would have expected full sunshine to weather the first riot. But it was raining heavily, which caused a great humidity, when the rioting began, the day following the murder of the student.

Beginning as a march to Parliament, the protesters darkened the city centre, thickening it with bodies. Tourists had vacated, and vehicle transport was rendered impossible. Then, when the protestors cordoned off Westminster Bridge, across to the Tower Bridge – all the famous parts of the city centre – the authorities evacuated the Parliament. They sent up helicopters, where they could scout the best angles of black-billowing cars, hooded youths, megaphones, and the flaming Union Jacks. Yet they couldn't

trivialise the event by solely depicting such aggression. For there were so many other people present, such as elderlies and children, who were simply standing around, holding their city's stance.

An arrest warrant was issued for Peter McGraw. Guido Fawkes reincarnated 400 years later, with a successful dose of gunpowder. In a strange push for conformity, the national media repeatedly replayed McGraw's televised rant on the dead student. They didn't omit the swear-word, as if the old British sense of etiquette would revolt against such profanity.


And perhaps it did, because McGraw was forced to escape London. And he couldn't blog or communicate for fear of being tracked by the State. Had he partaken in the Westminster riot? Nobody knew, and yet he was being labelled as its mastermind. Was he masterminding the subsequent riots? Glasgow, Birmingham, Manchester; shopping mall shutdowns; high street bank sieges; petrol bombs in rich suburbs. This was anarchy in Great Britain; the world was both wide-eyed and thrilled.

Eventually, the rioting stopped. It was quelled and lost its own determination. The protestors grew hungry, and the police had better gear for fighting, and the sun and rain were too powerful for any of them. It was as simple as that. It had lasted for a fortnight. More people had died within the U.K. in the last two weeks than in the last two decades' worth of terror attacks and police-custody-killings combined. Now that the whiff of revolution was over, Mr. McGraw needed capturing. Even the demonstrators had attributed an iconic status to him. He was the public symbol of the riots.

McGraw had fled to the obscure north of Scotland. An old friend of his had a remote cottage in the highlands where he could hide in the deep wilderness, of lochs and mountains, where he could pretend to be safe for a while. Except, he'd already executed himself, and was too unselfish to become a martyr by handing himself in.

For three weeks, McGraw was quarantined inside that tiny cottage, left alone with his mind. He couldn't follow the media, or contribute to it. He also couldn't contact his friends save the one who'd helped to hide him. All he could do was write. Write his epitaph, his final treatise on the subject of the United Kingdom, and what he felt had happened to it across his 30 years as an eyewitness.

This mammoth piece of writing was sprawled out on his laptop. And it was never read by anyone or released to the web. The police destroyed the laptop when they stormed the cottage. McGraw's friend had betrayed him to the police, misled by the promise of a pardon should he leak McGraw's whereabouts. The police shot the friend upon entry. McGraw, hearing the police race up to his room, dashed his wrists with a penknife.

They kicked the door in and barked orders for McGraw to raise his hands. McGraw didn't answer. He sat in a chair by an open window, which overlooked the vast loch and mountains outside. The August air was now cool, and the evening light in the sky aquiline. His wrists were painless, and the surface of the loch appeared completely seamless with the sky's reflection. It was as if his eyes saw little need to differentiate between what was happening on the land and in the water, and what was happening within the air. 

Harrison Abbott writes prose and poetry in Edinburgh, Scotland. He has an ongoing blog: <http://harrison-abbott.tumblr.com>


Poetry



Branches, Moss by Edward Lee

The Secret of a Late Spring Night


By Dominic Windram

When at last the diurnal light dies
And the skewed, spectral shadows lengthen,
Slowly a profound stillness arrives
Cloaked in a velvet gown. Birds settle
In their nests of twigs and thistledown
And flowers close their drowsy petals.
There are only lullabies of sound:
A time of sweet repose so subtle,
Where in wild woodland nooks and crannies,
The small, surreal creatures gently stir.
In leafy murmurs of warm breezes,
They dart between bush and conifer.
Under a harvest of stars, the owls
And bats have taken flight on noiseless,
Beating wings; softly nurtured and crowned
By the moon's mysterious caress.
My spellbound pen is inclined to transcribe
The deeper beauty of this potent night
And the secret realms where dreams are woven;
Which our ordinary senses suspend. 

Dominic Windram's works include but are not limited to publications in *New Poetry* 2018, as well as *The Pangolin Review*. He resides in Hartlepool, Northeast England.

Memories for Sale, No Refunds

By Edward Lee

Charity begins with divorce,
death, heart-breaks, and break-ups.
Clothes and jewelry,
full of reminders,
fill black bags,
ready to ship to the charity shop,
sit on shelves,
hang on hangers,
for a handful of euros,
nonnegotiable,
maybe ease a life,
bring a smile,
help the donator forget
whatever it is
they wish to forget
but are unable to rend, rip, burn, bin
to do so. 

Edward Lee's work ranges from poetry to photography and has been published globally. Currently, he is working on two photography collections: "Lying Down with The Dead" and "There is a Beauty in Broken Things." <https://edwardmlee.wordpress.com>

Love in Time

By Jack Harvey

Darling, I never knew
a rose like you,
in innocence prime;
virtue, like the glaze
on a Sung vase
enfolds you;
what was love
before your bold grey eyes?

Studious in spring
beside the restless sea

wind-blown
we read and reclined;
the gorgeous evergreens
creaked like beds
and taking the lead,
do I have to persuade you,
my heart's desire,
youth is gone in a moment;
your beauty gone in a blink;
let's take the time,
make hay
while the sun shines
and the wind blows clean
and strong through the trees.
Sweetheart, sweet
love of my life,
do I need to tell you
youth, like the tents

of the Arabs,
steals silently away;
sooner than you think
it dies and love dies,
becomes indifference,
becomes age in disguise,
becomes something worse;
hateful, questioning,
probing its very existence.


I'll save myself the trouble
of wasting your time and mine;
the grape shall not die on the vine;
my savor, I say, shall not
die in the cask.

Your selfish abstinence,
my selfish desire soon enough
gone to the earth beneath.

Unlike us,
our lust and our chastity,
the sea, for one,
cold and serene,
lasts an eternity
with no release,
no satiety.

I looked at her
she, like a lioness,
far-seeing,
observing the veldt,
the impala, fragile
and airy, beckoning

she smiled,
touched my cheek and
evening came and
the cold.
We got up to go;
her dress, her lovely hair
blown by the ceaseless wind.

On we strolled,
until the shore, the trees,
the bitter windy sea
disappeared from sight;
the cold moon
loomed low in the sky
and we knew our time,
like a bird of passage,
had passed us by,
and with it, in despite,
our hopes and love,
our desires and regrets. 

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

Last Night #2

By Milton Montague

last night
I supped with
The Ancient Gods
atop Mount Olympus

sipped ambrosia from
large cups of gold
as we reclined
upon silken
cushions

my heart aglow
by a mellifluous harp
singing in the background
whilst I held you in my arms
last night, for the first time ever

I fell in love 

Milton (Milt) Montague discovered writing at 88. Now at 94, he has almost 200 published poems. A native New Yorker, Milt uses his experiences in raising three daughters, surviving the Great Depression and World War II, and leading several businesses as inspiration for his craft.

Behind Glass

By Kimberly Wright

A head full of permed black-dyed hair, she
hunches her old, elongated Easter Island face over
and gazes at the confections behind glass -

precious, tender morsels of newborn great-grandchildren
bundled in the nursery. So many valuables – see, don't touch.


glass also a medium to cast light behind
its solid flatness captures and refracts
faraway faint impulses for the study
of that which would otherwise remain
hidden in the dark, shelled on sea beds,

surging through veins, spinning in the ether.
Though most memories are left to mold,
any we lock away behind glass, protect from moisture

and dust we promote to relic, kept clean of all
but the reflected phantoms of onlookers

distorted, the world behind them,
the red-letters of an exit sign
looming behind their heads

Oh look, finger smudges.

This will not do. 

Kimberly Wright's work has appeared in a number of publications, most recently *Into the Void* and is upcoming in *Panoplyzine*. She resides in Atlanta.

Patience & Urgency

By Keith Moul

A sandy stretch where no wave has borne in for a while.
The fisher who could have been on the sea but got old.
A necessary dose of reason held, which he had supplied.

And still everything thought, most things known, failed.

The sculptor toiled, often almost falling into the brazier;
he who would hesitate may have won, but in a lesser way;
such raw value suffused in the shape need not be annealed.

And still failures mounted. The heron stepped. And fished
where it sometimes knew success, but certainly not always.

Forged, a mask hides identity, finally to distort the message.

Fish deplete, for which the fisher, insensate, cannot mourn. 

Keith Moul, a poet and photographer, has had his work published in various publications. You can find his pieces in 2015 *Finishing Line Press* and 2017 *Aldrich Press*.

Awaiting Rebirth

By Ivanka Fear


In the dead...

Skeletons of their former selves
withered grey arms splayed against bleak grey canvas
shivering stark naked yet standing proudly unabashed
reaching skyward for signs of salvation.
Birds desperately clinging to them for solace,
they offer what little they can though their bodies have faded.

Frozen in time...

Diamond statues cold to the bone
elegantly clad bodies displayed on pure white dance floor
sparkling crystals encrusted with sugar coating
shimmering outwardly yet cracking within.
Sun bearing down, melting their silvery facade,
they shed their broken pieces leaving behind an empty shell.

The awakening...

Harbingers of hope incarnate
fresh green faces ripe with expectation floating in a sea of blue
exploding fireworks popping colour out of the grey
renewing faith in miracles.
A host of living creatures revelling in their glory,
they joyously share the wonder of their resurrection. 

Ivanka Fear is a retired teacher and writer from Ontario, Canada. Her poetry and short stories have appeared in *Spadina Literary Review*, *Montreal Writes*, *Spillwords*, *Commuterlit*, and are forthcoming in *Canadian Stories* and *Adelaide*.

A Spring Storm

By George Freek

The spring floods have arrived.
The river is swollen
by an incoming tide.
Boats move in and out,
like a door was suddenly opened.
Only last week
they were frozen to the shore.
Spring stirs thoughts
of new beginnings.
Flowers will emerge again.
In a gentle spring rain,
I momentarily forget winter
I forget I'm fifty-six.
But night brings a chill.
The stars are far away,
and when the moon's rays
break through the clouds,
they shine on my wife's grave.



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

Time


By Peycho Kanev

The manuscript of my unfinished novel
is almost finished.

And I write by the candlelight.

The moon shines through the window and
illuminates the paper in my hands.

The halo of the flame.

A minute in the fire is an eternity in ash. 

Peycho Kanev is the author of four poetry collections and three chapbooks, published in the USA and Europe. His poems have appeared in many literary magazines, such as: *Rattle*, *Poetry Quarterly*, *Evergreen Review*, *Front Porch Review*, *Barrow Street*, *Off the Coast*, *The Adirondack Review*, *Sierra Nevada Review* and many others. His new chapbook titled *Under Half-Empty Heaven* was published in 2018 by Grey Book Press.

5.7.12

By Kate Schneider

breathe, I tell myself
 walking into the bathroom
 what did I just do?
 why did I just lie like that?
 he made me, I sigh
 as I shut and lock my door

water running now
 filling up the tub
 tears, looking in my drawer
 mission to find what I need

I then pull it out
 and I hold it to my skin
 my mind flashes to
 the hitting

as I submit to desire
 there is pain

each time, each jab, feels like he's punching me again


grab the bottle first
 then my water next
 swallowing them is easy

turn the lights down and step in
 water surrounds me

sitting, trying to calm down
 just breathe
 it will all be better now

my breaths are getting shallow
 I feel drained and weak
 the water turns red

I feel I'm slipping under

breathe, I tell myself
 everything is going to 

Kate Schneider is a life-long resident of New York City, an undergraduate student at NYU, and a lover of film, live music, and live sports. Kate writes a lot of fiction and poetry in her free time, but this would be her first in publication.

Marjorie's Lilacs Parts I and II

By Mindy Ohringer

Part I

Prick finger...

Slumber of monogamy and child-rearing unfolds.

Awakened – awake to all possibilities.

I partake of none.

Shadows weave together and apart,

Stretching, stroking,

Naked torso elongated,

Fledgling epidermal bridge spans atomic bays.

Everything starts with a kiss.

I am so tired of words!

Everything starts with a kiss.

I am so weary of words.

Under cloistered lilacs,

Everything starts with words.

Everything ends with words.

I am so weary of words.

I am...a kiss.

Part II


He's come to see what's left of me,
He's come alone, left his wife at home,
He's here to learn what I've become.

Mid-life Marjorie, her good looks have faded,
She's ordinary, so ordinary, perhaps a bit of a bore?
Only youthful dreams of greatness truly made her more...

I've embraced conventional happiness and been a pretty bride.
If I'd been born in Europe,
I would not be alive.

My love has built a fortress, planting lilacs beneath stone walls,
My love has defied disappointment,
Even the most perfect man has flaws.


Ghostly Michael Eden hovers, my highballs toast his memory.
The transitional man you truly love,
Is the one who sets you free.

Someday, Wally, you'll have a daughter and a son,
And then, you'll truly know
What it is I have become. 

Mindy Ohringer's politically charged short stories, essays, and poetry have appeared in *Terror House*, *The Thieving Magpie*, *Rat's Ass Review*, *The Times of Israel*, *October Hill Magazine*, and *The Greenwich Village Literary Review*. In 2018, she participated in Marge Piercy's juried poetry intensive. Her blog "Union & Utopia" (<https://mindyohringer.com>) explores how the personal and political intertwine. Mindy graduated from Barnard College and earned an M.A. in Politics from New York University.

To Lot's Wife


By Erren Kelly

I would rather sing a
Song of salt
Then know loneliness
Would rather a poem
Of half a loaf
Then no memory of
You
Like an understudy
I'll wait for the performance
That might never happen
I'll hold your hands as if
I'm holding prayers
I look into your eyes
And know what love is
Feel the island breeze
Caress me like God's
Hand
I'll hold irises as I hold
You
Taste your memory
Sharp as salt 

Erren Kelly is the author of the book *Disturbing the Peace*, as well as a two-time Pushcart nominated poet from Boston. She has been writing for 28 years and has produced over 300 publications both in print and online, like *Hiram Poetry Review*, *Mudfish*, *Poetry Magazine*, *Ceremony*, and several more. Kelly received her B.A. in English-Creative Writing from Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge. She loves to read and travel, and encourages others to keep an open mind, as she does with her inspiration for content.

The House Above the Line Marked W

By Jacob Kobina


The backyard is silent. The light flickers in the narrow corridor and goes out. I can only hear my mother's voice. But the door between the two worlds, a memorable evening and a protracted existence, is locked. I hurry up to the kitchen, wearing her grandmother's cloth, the skin I have obtained through birth. I ask for my smelling bottle. She stands in the front of a canvas on a wooden easel. She wears her hair in bun. I smell the yarrow flowers in the wet air she paints. Inside a mirror in a house she has spent almost two hours working on, I do not at all resemble my father, and I am glad of it. I am quite a discourse on impudence in answering questions behind the curtain. She adds a vision, viewless to my eyes, and a water vapor begins to gird around my thought. She encloses my future in the hands in the darkness and I embrace the invisible being. I perceive streaks of gray light edging the window curtains. She points to a room in that house on the border without boundaries with a pointer. 

Jacob Kobina Ayiah Mensah is the author of new hybrid works *The Sun of a Solid Torus*, *Conductor 5*, *Genus for L Loci* and *Handlebody*. His individual poems are widely published and recently appeared in *Rigorous*, *Beautiful Cadaver Project Pittsburgh*, *The Meadow*, *Juked*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, and several others. He is algebraist and artist and lives in the southern part of Ghana, Spain, and Turtle Mountains, North Dakota.

A Dissection

By Munia Khan

I dissect my heart into shreds
to keep it in repair
for it has five chambers instead of four
The atria and ventricles are filled with love
And the fifth one in the middle contains 'you'
It is located between the retrospection of my love and life
Each day it pumps about two thousand gallons of blood for you
The blood of my passion and faith
My hope and desire.
Being expanded and contracted,
it beats one hundred thousand times a day
Only for your life


But I no more carry this heart of mine
I only bear my memories
And my memories are bearing my heart 

Munia Khan of Bangladesh is the author of three poetry collections: 'Beyond The Vernal Mind,' 'To Evince The Blue' and 'Versified.' Most of her works are poems of different genres, short stories and articles, and have been translated into various languages in anthologies, literary journals, magazines and in newspapers.

Golden Storm

By Mara Szyp


Absorbed inside my own thoughts
I walked alone for hours.
Behind me were sunny afternoons,
Behind you snowy winter mornings.
I got lost in your immensity.
Honey gleam covering you
Soft under my feet
They're sinking in you
The silence makes space to
a lower deep roar, my body trembles
numbing my senses.
The sky above suddenly is at war
Mystified by its magnificence
The flickering of thunder mixed
With subdued rhythmic steps
I stand still along your edges
It dances within you and moving her
Above the clash of light and darkness awakens
But it's with a golden sword
That defies you
Conquering it all, ending the calm
Under your waters raging
A performance unmatched
Nature itself is at awe
When the golden storm
Takes the stage
Dancing within your shores,
Seducing the sand and rocks
The moon and the sun, spectators
Sunset of rain turns gold

And everything else,
Falls short by comparison. 

Mara G. Szyp is a highly accomplished Victoria, B.C. artist. She specializes in making multi-size scale acrylic and oil paintings. She has also illustrated two children's books, been featured in *Here! Magazine*, and participated in numerous shows and exhibitions. www.szyp.ca

Soul Blossom

By Priyanka Raj

Once under the Gulmohur blooms
Rejoicing sweet love and charm of scenery
My soul got captured in the beauty of nature;
and in colourful petals dancing and swinging
In the melody of soft breeze around
And I was feeling a butterfly inside my heart
Fluttering my wings of desire,
In glittering Romance of garden;
For a while I was wondering,
Am I only the wanderer?
And before I sing my last song ---
All of sudden my soul vanished! 

Priyanka Raj is an English poet and an enthusiastic young researcher hailing from Shillong, India. A poet, journalist, photographer, researcher, blogger, she also has a love for nature, art, and culture, and is a believer in peace and harmony and well as an advocate for humanity. She is an author of her debut poetry book *Social Blues; Beyond Solemn Balladry* recently published in February 2019. Currently, her poems are featured on Realistic Poetry International, in Arizona. She is further recognized as an International Star English poet, by Realistic Poetry International Organization.