

WINTER 2018

# October Hill

M A G A Z I N E



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Volume 2, Issue 4

## Welcome to October Hill Magazine



Our readers at *October Hill Magazine* will have to forgive us this month if we seem unusually excited about our new Winter issue. Of course, we are excited about the sheer quality and variety of our short stories and poems in the issue.

But that is far from the only reason why we are excited.

Our Winter issue completes our second year as a quarterly literary publication. During these two years, interest and participation in our magazine has grown tremendously. We have published many works by top-notch authors of poetry and short stories, and works by young and up-and-coming authors, too. In addition, we have branched out to add a section of Visual Submissions, including photography and illustration. We are gaining traction in this area quarter by quarter, as well.

Looking forward, we believe that our best is yet to come. We are drafting plans to create a print companion to our quarterly digital publication. We are already looking ahead to staging another Literary Contest (our current contest winners will be selected and announced this Spring!). And, with the support of followers for our IndieGoGo campaign (<https://igg.me/at/u--hO2mTaxU/x/20300710>), we hope to be able to begin paying regular stipends to our staff of volunteers, who will one day make us proud as editors of the future (Of course, we are already proud of them for their commitment, talent and hard work!).

Looking backwards, we feel proud of the first steps we have taken, the growth we have enjoyed, and the quality of the publication we have created. We believe we have every reason to be excited about the success of *October Hill Magazine*. So, please, come along and grow with us, and share our excitement for the future!

**Richard Merli**     *Editorial Director*

**Samantha Morley**     *Managing Editor*

*Cover and Meet the Team Photos: Beth Harris*

Beth Harris is the owner of The Outsider ([www.theoutsider.photo](http://www.theoutsider.photo)) and has been a Colorado resident since 2012. Her southern Illinois country girl roots have flourished into a passion for nature, wildlife, and the outdoors. She is passionate about photography and sharing her knowledge.

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*Short Story Editor*

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*Poetry*

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*Short Story and Social Media*

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

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# Fiction



# Uncle Daudi

By Wambugu Njoroge

I was once posted in Nairobi for two years as a secondary school teacher. There was this rowdy, seedy backstreet bar that I frequented. Fagilia was its name, and what a wretched affair it was. Most of its clientele was comprised of the lower class that lived, or should I say survived, in the neighbouring Korogocho slum. I purely frequented it for the heated debates that raged on most nights – ranging from politics and football to matters of the heart.

Fagilia had creaky worn-out furniture, smudged walls, a leaky roof, and a badly chipped floor. It was laden with the odious smells of unwashed bodies, stale liquor, and other unmentionables. Marijuana and cigarette smoke hung heavy in the stifling air. Drunken married hands reached for the large-bottomed barmaids and scantily dressed ladies of the night, who winked and blew kisses at prospective customers. The language employed was quite colourful, as well. Now and then, I could hear a barmaid calling an itchy fingered customer his mother's cunt, or something equally disturbing.

This particular night was devilishly cold, as it had rained all day. It was drizzling and the wind was whistling when I set foot into the bar. Despite the weather, the bar was throbbing with life as usual. Two unappealing young women in mismatched clothes and shaggy hair were drunk dancing to the music. Everyone else was seated, either alone or in chatty groups. I took a seat in the back as usual. A short, cushiony waiter with a burnt left cheek and a greasy apron came for my order.

“The usual?” she asked.

I nodded my head.

As she brought my bottle of Tusker, I saw a couple walk in, a young couple, perhaps in their mid-twenties. The man was tall, dark, and lean, while his lady was a few inches shorter, fair, slender, and achingly beautiful. The man pointed at an unoccupied table next to mine, to my left. He pulled out a chair for his lady before sitting opposite her.

“Do you have any wine?” the man asked the barmaid.

“Sorry, we don’t sell that here.”

“Then we’ll have what he’s having,” said the young lady, pointing at me. She said it haughtily and in English. The barmaid left.

By the cashmere coat the lady wore, her airs and graces, the strong perfume, shimmering jewellery, and the way she spoke the white man’s language through the nose, I knew they belonged to the upper class. What, then, were they doing in such a hellhole?

The couple looked about their surroundings. The lady was unimpressed. She scrunched up her face, her nose disagreeing with the smells.

“I guess seeing the world from many angles is good for the soul,” she said, almost to herself.

The young man thanked the barmaid when she brought their beer and glasses.

“You don’t have to thank her for doing her job, Mike,” said the young lady. “Sometimes, I think you try too hard to be liked, even by inconsequential persons.”

“Chichi, I was just being courteous,” he defended.

Next to the counter, perched on a bar stool, I saw a notoriously uncouth regular peeking at the couple as they tentatively sipped their beer. His name was Daudi: A loud, stout, middle-aged, short man with a clean-shaven head. He loved to proudly express his opinions to anyone on anything and everything.

“See the filthy bar you chose,” the lady said with displeasure, after tracing a finger on the table. “You really do have terrible taste. Next time, I pick the bar.”

“That’s true. I do have terrible taste. That’s why I chose you for a lover,” he said jocularly.

Her face quickly turned morose. He tried a chuckle, but she didn’t laugh with him.

“Keep your shirt on. It’s just a joke.”

“A distasteful joke,” she spat.

Daudi got off his chair and sauntered over to the couple’s table. His eyes were bloodshot as usual, with a beer bottle in one hand, and his beer belly preceding him. He pulled himself a chair and sat on Mike’s side. The couple regarded him suspiciously and disapprovingly.

“Mister, I can see a free table over there, if you don’t mind.” Mike said, trying hard to sound polite.

“I know that. I just want to bounce something off you real quick,” he said rascally. His voice was deep, crispy, and a little cracked, like that of an aging broadcaster.

The young lady glared at him. Some patrons who were conversant with his antics watched on amusedly amidst their gulps. They knew some sort of drama was bound to unfold. A big, dark, and scary barmaid bouncer marched to the table.

“Daudi, stop disturbing the customers,” she growled. “Let the fine couple be.”

“I’m not disturbing anyone, you old hag.” He looked at the young man. “Am I disturbing you, my good man?”

Mike’s facial expression was that of a man boiling inside. His enraged eyes peered into Daudi’s, but he didn’t answer him.

“See, I’m not disturbing anyone,” Daudi said jubilantly.

The bouncer left to cater her other customers. Daudi took a few swigs from his bottle.

“An absolute headache...I mean...knockout....an absolute knockout you have here,” he said. “I, too, had a fine woman, mate. I loved her to the moon and back.” He paused, and for a while, seemed lost in his bottle. “She left me for another man,” he said with a woebegone face.

“I wonder why, you seem quite the stand-up guy?” Chichi asked sarcastically.

“I’ll tell you why, young lady. He drove a German car, though she said it was because of my small penis.”

There was laughter from the onlookers.

“Daudi, I know an excellent witch-doctor who can make it grow till it touches the ground,” somebody shouted amid laughter. “No woman will ever leave you again.”

“That’s not necessary,” said another. “The problem with Daudi is his uncultured tongue. It only spits out rotten words. A woman’s G-spot is in her ears, not down there.”

There was applause.

I reckoned he must have gotten that from a bumper sticker.

“Are you sure she didn’t leave you due to your irritating mannerisms, like budging into people’s lives without a second thought?” asked Chichi, her voice a mixture of acid and venom.

“Careful, my good man,” said Daudi. “You’ve got one with fangs.”

“Please leave us alone,” Mike said irately. “You are infringing on our space and privacy.”

“Huh, what is wrong with this generation?” Daudi asked out loud so that his voice was heard all over the bar. “An old man is trying to counsel them, to broaden their worm’s eye view of the world. As I can see, they’re still wet behind the ears, but all they see is a leper before their eyes.”

There was laughter in the bar.

“Alright, old man. State your business and be gone,” said Chichi, her voice full of needles.

I could see some customers adjusting their seats to face the couple’s table. Others cocked their ears. Daudi turned to the young man, who threw him a wink. I suppose I was the only one in the whole bar besides Daudi to see it. Why was the young man winking at Daudi, somebody he had purportedly just met? Something wasn’t quite right. Hence, I kept on my guard to catch anything sinister.

“My good man,” said Daudi, “it pains me greatly to see you misemploying your vitality like I did mine when I was your age.”

“How can you say I’m misemploying my vitality when you don’t even know me?”

Daudi shot his left index finger at Chichi.

“Her. She’s the one burning up your youth.”

“How is she doing that? Would you please enlighten us?” Mike asked with boredom in his voice.

“She’s short-changing you, my good man. Can’t you see it?”

The two lovebirds threw uncomprehending looks at each other, and then hateful looks at the stranger who was ruining their evening.

“Let’s start with the basics, shall we?” said Daudi. “How much does it cost to wine and dine a woman these days?” He asked out loud. No one answered him. We all understood it was rhetorical.

“Let’s not forget you have to take her to the salon every other week. Take her shopping for stilettos and tight-fitting, flesh-revealing clothes. Pay her rent. Take time off work to go visit her ailing grandmother. If she has a car, you fuel it for her, and if it breaks down, you sort the mechanic. And if her cat gets sick, you pay the vet.”

He paused to catch his breath and take a swig from his bottle.

“Come now, where does this madness stop? She could even be making more than you, yet she bleeds you dry like a tick without a care in the world.”

“A woman’s motto - my money is mine, your money is ours,” somebody hollered.

“Yes. She fondles you lovingly with one hand while the other is rummaging around your pockets,” shouted a man who was chewing khat. He was in the company of a lady half his age. She frowned at him.

“And what do you get in return?” asked Daudi, raising his bottle to acknowledge the man. “That’s the million-dollar question.”

“I’ll tell you what he gets in return,” cut in the bouncer-barmaid. “He gets the unconditional surrender of her mind, body, and soul.”

“Will it still be unconditional if he is somehow unable to provide as he used to?” asked a seasoned-looking man.

“Yes, it will,” another barmaid answered him. “We women are not like you men. The fires in our hearts are not as easily extinguished as they are in your hearts. Plus, there's nothing wrong with taking care of your woman.”

“He gets the ever-lasting love of the woman!” a petite female customer shouted.

“Don’t you mean the ever-withering love of a woman, especially when the children start popping out of her?” asked the seasoned-looking man.

“So, the love of a woman can be bought?” demanded another man.

“No, I didn’t say that,” said the petite woman. “But a woman needs to know you can provide for her and that the children will not go to bed hungry, or to school tattered.”

“With your logic, you mean penniless men have no right to date and marry?”

“Yes, where do you think all those street children come from?” a light-skinned lady with big round earrings asked. “They come from the loins of such paupers I see in this bar, such pitiful excuses for men.” There was loud laughter from the women, and even some men.

This was turning out to be a bar-wide debate where anyone could chip in their opinion.

“Some men are just cheap bastards, like Daudi here,” said the barmaid who had served me. “He has been pursuing me for some time now, yet he doesn’t even want to buy me a decent meal in the restaurant across the street.”

“Cheap bastard,” the women chanted.

“A woman who marries for love will have bad days, but good nights,” said a lady of the night. “Personally, I would rather have it the other way ‘round.”

There was a fretful silence. Everybody eyed the philosophical prostitute.

“Well, let’s not get bogged down with paupers and cheap bastards,” said Daudi, cutting down the silence. “The bottom line is that love is simply an excuse used by women to fleece men out of their hard-earned cash.”

“Just because you have been unlucky in love in the past doesn’t give you the right to soil the happiness of those thriving in it now,” shouted Chichi, her dazzling eyes as cold as dawn. “You old, bald, overweight, smelly scrotum, you.”

There was rapturous laughter, followed by whispers.

“Daudi, not all women are like that,” the bouncer-barmaid said. “Many financially carry their men. Others even help their husbands pay for their very own dowries.”

“A rare breed they are, like cats that love water,” said Daudi. “Most women want you to slaughter a bull for their breakfast. You would then wonder what size of beast they expect for dinner.”

Some men cheered.

“The way you talk mister,” said Mike, “It’s like you have a deep-rooted hatred for women.”

Some women cheered in approval.

“I have nothing but respect for the female species,” protested Daudi.

“I think you should leave our table now,” Chichi said disdainfully. “We have indulged you enough.”

“I am leaving, my good lady. Just indulge me one more minute,” he said, and leisurely swallowed two mouthfuls of beer, evidently enjoying the cynosure role he was playing.

“My good man, answer me this one question and I won’t pester you again.”

The young man nodded. “Alright.”

“What else do you get out of this relationship besides the love?”

When Daudi said ‘love,’ he gestured to show that it was in inverted commas.

The young man thought for a while and pulled at his goatee.

“The sex is good,” he said unashamedly.

“Ah, the sex,” Daudi said amusedly. “But don’t you think it’s a steep price to pay, an arm and a leg, just so that she can let you slither between her thighs?”

“You said one question,” admonished Chichi, her voice as harsh as a whip.

“It’s a follow-up question, my good lady.”

“No, bugger off. We are done humouring you,” she shouted. Her chest was heaving with all the anger that she was locking up.

Daudi ignored her. “Young man, I happen to know for a fact that you can get way better bed-breaking, toe-curling, neighbour-torturing sex, and for much, much less.”

“I can?”

“Yes, you can.”

“Mike, stop encouraging him. If he doesn’t want to leave, we should leave. Pay the bill and let’s get out of this ramshackle with its peasants.”

“Hey lady, don’t interrupt,” said Daudi. “Can’t you see the men are having a talk here? Go to the kitchen and whip us up some omelettes or something.”

There was resounding laughter. But not as resounding as when Chichi splashed the contents of her glass onto Daudi's face.

"How dare you speak to me in that manner, you filthy imbecile!" she screamed.

"Apologize to her at once," Mike said in a hard voice.

Daudi apologized as he wiped his face with his shirt.

There was a brief serenity as the customers sipped, gulped, chugged, swigged, and swallowed their poisons. One of the unappealing ladies, who was drunk dancing when I entered the bar, threw me a wink and a smile that exposed several missing teeth. I shuddered and pretended not to have noticed.

Mike didn't listen to the pleas of his lady who wanted to get out of the bar. I saw the appalled look on her face shift from glaring at Daudi to glaring at Mike, who, as the minutes ticked away, seemed more and more comfortable engaging with the intruder.

"What do you mean that I could get better sex for less pay?" Mike inquired.

"Pay the goddam bill, Mike," barked Chichi, "and stop asking questions with your ass."

"Most women, you know," said Daudi, completely ignoring Chichi, "just spread their legs and lie on the bed like logs waiting for the men to do all the work. Yet, you've spent a fortune on her."

"The story of my life," said Mike, almost to himself.

"It's not our fault if some of you unload before you even enter, like you Daudi. You let me down terribly the other day," said a voluptuous female customer.

There was loud laughter.

"Sometimes we are tired after slaving all day to put food on the table since the men of today are no men at all," said a woman. "We just want some rest at the end of a tiresome day."

The women applauded her.

"We men greatly desire a lively and explorative woman. Not a cold fish in bed," said a man with an unkempt beard.

The men applauded him and raised their mugs. The women booed.

“Tell me, my good man,” said Daudi, when the excitement had died down. “What do you do for a living?”

“I’m in finance.”

“Does Her Ladyship here go down on her knees, unzip you, and drive you to the land of milk and honey?”

“As a matter of fact, every time I mention it, she says YUK.”

This was greeted with gales of laughter.

“I concur with the lady. Nothing is nastier,” said the barmaid who had served me. “Most of us just do it to please our men.”

“That’s my point,” said Daudi. He put his arm over the young man’s shoulders and whispered into his ear, though the missus could hear him just fine. “Do you see that gorgeous lady sitting over there in a skimpy red skirt, her legs crossed, and puffing on a cigarette?”

“Yes.”

“That is a woman who would go down on her knees for you with no fuss.”

“Is she a prostitute?” Mike asked dryly.

“Yes, she’s a whore. Sex is always a thousand times better with a whore than with your missus, and that’s a fact, young sir. I’m not making this stuff up,” Daudi said, shaking his index finger.

“But, surely, procuring the services of prostitutes is illegal and clearly dicing with death,” argued Mike.

“Illegal and risky pleasures are the best kind, my good sir,” Daudi said with the air of a professor.

“All men should fight for the legalization of prostitution,” shouted someone.

Again, the men applauded and raised their mugs.

“To the prostitutes,” a drunken voice gave a toast. “May their hooahas forever be welcoming and may they never grow teeth like my wife's.”

The laughter could have been heard from two miles away.

“Mike, I’m leaving. This is more insult than I can handle,” Chichi said as she got up from her chair. She stood staring at Mike, waiting for him to get up as well. He didn’t move a muscle.

“Chichi, sit down. I want to theorize with this intelligent man some more.”

Daudi’s countenance shone with being called intelligent. Chichi’s face curled up into a sneer.

“Give me the car keys. I want to leave. You’ll get yourself a taxi.” Her voice was steely.

“Relax, sit down. We are just conversing.”

“I will go wait by the car, then.” She made for the door. The drizzle had graduated to a heavy downpour and the wind was howling angrily. In the distance, thunder boomed. Some customers had changed their sitting positions to evade the piercing rain drops that were dripping through the roof.

“To wait outside in this neighborhood, in the dark, and in that weather out there, are you crazy?” asked Daudi.

Chichi saw everyone staring at her. She froze. Perhaps her strength and will had forsaken her. Anyway, where was she to go in the dark, in the rain, and in a foreign neighborhood? She took her seat meekly like a rained-on puppy.

“A woman who doesn’t take you in her mouth is no right woman for you,” Daudi said.

The men banged on their tables. “Yes, that’s true, Daudi,” they said. “You speak with the wisdom of three chief advisors to the President.”

“Will you reciprocate the favor?” asked a female customer.

“Oh, that’s just disgusting,” a man shouted, followed by laughs and grunts of approval from the men.

“I do you, you do me. If not, hit the road,” she said.

The women ululated. When everything quieted down, Daudi went on.

“For a small fee, that lady could be yours for the night,” he said to Mike. “To do with you as you please because she never has excuses like headaches, or that she feels tired. But the best part is that you never have to meet her mother or grandmother, or take her sick cat to the veterinary, or buy her tampons.”

We laughed till our sides shook.

“She will screw your brains out and like a well-mannered guest, she will leave in the morning,” continued Daudi. “You don’t have to see her again if you don’t want to, and you will not have to slaughter a bull for her come morning. Remember you only live once. Why, then, settle for overpriced, second-rate sex?”

The rain was subsiding. Chichi appeared as if she wanted to bolt out of the bar and never look back. She looked haggard, lost, and in bitter distress.

“Do you want her to come over?” asked Daudi.

Mike nodded. Daudi beckoned the lady. She snuffed out her cigarette on an ashtray, got up from her chair where she was nursing a soda, and walked to the table. She was tall and majestic, swinging her hips sensuously. She sat on Mike’s lap and kissed him lusciously on the lips for what seemed like an eternity. An agonizing silence befell the bar. Our jaws fell to the chipped floor. Chichi wore the most horrified look on her face. It still haunts me to this day.

“I can see you’re beginning to see the light, my good sir,” Daudi said when the lady finally let go of his lips. “Do you want to take her home?”

“I would like that very much.”

The blatant act must have shaken Chichi back to reality. She stood up and gave Mike a vicious slap, and then stormed out of the bar into the murky unknown. Mike shouted after her, “Darling, wait, we can have a threesome!”

The bouncer barmaid was the first to collect her jaw from the floor.

“You dog! You men are really trash,” she said. “Why did you have to treat that sweet girl so horribly?”

“Shut up, you fat cow, and bring us more drinks!” bellowed Daudi.

Daudi emptied the last contents of his bottle into his throat and belched loudly. Everyone else went on minding their business like nothing had happened. The drama was over. Mike got out a bank note from his breast pocket and gave it to the lady on his lap. She rubbed his face to ease the pain from the slap, got up, and left without a word. I found this very strange, and stranger still when she

immediately left with a hopelessly drunk man whom she tried to support as he staggered all over the place on their way out.

“Nephew, it’s such a shame. I kind of liked this one,” said Daudi to Mike.

“Well, trust me, Uncle,” said Mike, “it’s good riddance. She’s the type that demands for the moon.”

“Just like the other one several months ago?”

“No, that one was too clingy.”

“Indeed, you are your father’s son, Mike, as finicky as an old woman’s stomach.”

They both laughed heartily.

“And aren’t you getting a little too old,” said Daudi, “to need help from your dear trusted Uncle in breaking up with your girlfriends?”

“Nah, there is a certain flair to your methods, which I must admit, I find quite entertaining.”

“Your cold heart, you didn’t get that from your dad, but from your mother,” said Daudi, with some judgment in his voice.

They drank quietly for a while.

“Oh, and how’s my little niece, Naomi?” inquired Daudi, “I haven’t seen her in a while. What’s she up to nowadays?”

“She’s preparing to join college this September,” said Mike.

“I see. Drinks are on you by the way.”

“Of course, uncle, of course.” 

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**Tony Njoroge is a Kenyan freelance writer whose work has appeared in “Kalahari Review,” “Scarlet Leaf Review,” and “Supermoon Press.”**

# **This Is How to Say I Love You**

**By Emily Odion**

You come home to me as I'm writing my thank you note to you again. It's just practice, but you're out of your mind, and I can't lie to you.

"I think I can make it better," I say. "Listen." When I start to say I love you, you're out the door and in the rain again. Maybe another day. You split my head. Everything is better before you go.

I take the note to the trash and I find my earpieces: silicon hooks that wind around my ear canals, fitted perfectly. Now, it's so easy to forget your long sigh, the deep end, the part before I wanted out so badly.

My grandfather is dying, and I ride the bus to see him the next day. You left for work already with your deep-in-thought frown, and I can tell you're making a Big Decision, but I don't want to know what it is. Any change is grating for me, like sandpaper across my belly. When I think about it, I tuck my earpieces in and set them to six. On days like today, I try to keep the setting anywhere between two and six. Two is enough to stop the obsessive thoughts; six is enough to forget what brought them in the first place.

I know that when I get to my grandfather's house, the front door will be open and there'll be at least one wild animal drinking milk off his porch. He'll pretend to be excited to see me, and we'll force ourselves to hug before I shower, recharge my earpieces, and make a list of all the inoffensive things that I can bring up during dinner if the conversation starts to go off.

Still, the shadows are long on the road. I tuck my toes under me, and I grow calm from the radio waves in my brain. It's music, warm only.

My grandfather lives in a volcano. If I was standing right here in his backyard two and a half thousand years ago, I'd have been vaporized in an instant. You'd think that with the crushing awareness

of time that comes from learning this fact, I'd be less distraught by the changes creeping into his home: a tall IV stand that's taken residence next to his bed, the shelf of medicine in his kitchen, the half-broken swing in his yard. I can't be distraught. I think, I can't be anything unless I force it until he asks me into his room on the first night, with the smell of travel still blowing off the coat folded in my lap, asking if I remember riding horses into the mountains with him to look at airplanes. They used to dip so low through the peaks that we could read what they said along the sides: UNITED, AMERICAN, VIRGIN AIR. When I was eight and I was living here for the first time, I told him that I wanted to fly an airplane some-day.

"I'm sorry," he said. "These are the last ones."

And he was right. The only planes we have left are used for the war: national defence and security. I haven't seen one since that summer in the mountains.

The power goes out every night between eight and ten, but he's always fast asleep by then. I brought a wireless and a movie, both of which you let me borrow, but I don't think you care about getting them back. He's out cold before even the first line of dialogue, so I watch it alone with his shell. It's the least lonely that I've been in a while, and it must be a blessing we both feel because the next morning, he's up at six making eggs.

"Cream in your coffee?" he asks, going out to milk the cow before I can even answer, or remind him that I don't like eggs.

Today, I'm sixteen again. I feel guilt as immense and ceaseless waves every time he goes out to get me something, anything from the garden. He comes back with wildflowers and milk. It's been almost a half hour and the eggs are burned, but he's so pleased with himself. I'd never stuck around to be with him, even when I lived here. We'd pass by each other without talking most days.

You still haven't called. I'm not ready for your absence, but I know now to wait before I slip into the better mind that is waiting upstairs under my pillow: the earpieces, ready to be set to just the right frequency. Today was a five day. Everything was a preamble to the moment that I could sneak,

undetected, into the night air and wander out through your neighborhood and towards the winking lights of town a few miles down the road. When the power cuts out, the blackness of night is only shocking until your eyes adjust, and then you can see all the stars. When I brought you here, you said you didn't like looking up at them because they were too dizzying, but your earpieces were set to nine and everything made you dizzy at that setting. You couldn't stop giggling. I never go above eight anymore, but I never go a day without turning them on.

It's peaceful to remember the things that I don't love about you. I find the divide in the middle of the road and I stare up twirling until I'm so dizzy that I collapse into a heap on the highway. My earpieces are on three, but I turn them higher until I can't even think, until I forget who I am.

One of the biggest dangers of driving on country roads in the night is the black cows that sleep in the road. The night air is freezing in the mountains, even during the summer, and the herds of cows will seek the heat radiating from the blacktop to stay warm. If the cow is black, there's a good chance that you won't see it until it's too late. I see cows out here a lot. We passed by each other once, as old acquaintances who had forgotten each other's names. Cars are less common. I haven't seen a car on the highway for days. I can lie here in the road until I remember my name and why I came here.

The first time I heard about earpieces was just after I had moved in with my grandfather, when I was eight, and when a salesman came to our door. It was the first and only time such a thing had happened at his house, and it was an event for everyone involved. There was a whole family of deer grazing on the lawn and drinking out of the birdbath. The front door was open, and my grandfather was wandering around the house, singing while he watered the plants. I was hiding in the closet waiting to scare him.

My grandfather taught me well. He told me that no one should ever be in your house empty-handed, even though it was rare for people to be in his house at all. He could go for days without company, without speaking, just bouncing around his garden and laughing at the sky. So, when he came sauntering by the doorway, swinging his watering can, I didn't know who was more startled. My grandfather invited him in, of course, falling over himself to try to be accommodating. I clambered out

of my hiding place to see the ruckus: my grandfather was practically forcing tea and bread into the salesman's mouth, while the salesman was staring in trepidation at the living room's jungle of plant life.

Once it had been established who everyone was - that the man at our door was actually a salesman - I fetched him a glass of water to steady his nerves.

"You've come a long way. We've never had a salesman at the door before."

I still remember him, wrangling the tea in one hand and water in the other, and thinking how strange it must be to see my grandfather's house from the outside, as a tourist in our life.

"I'm sorry, I just don't know if this is something I need," said my grandfather, in the manner of a debutante, when the ruffled salesman finally got to the end of his pitch.

"Well, you say that," bristled the man, swiping a leaf from a low-hanging plant out of his face in the process, "but really, you'd be amazed by some of our testimonials. This is the kind of technology that changes lives. People are saying it's the most ground-breaking system of its kind since the rise of the internet. And it's just this little earpiece, downloaded with various emotions, "Sensations," as we call them, that are ready to be transmitted safely through the ear canal in the form of radio waves. It can make you feel anything, any type of emotion! Even the ones that you've never dreamed of. We actually think that the technology can get smarter as it learns more about each individual and his or her needs. Would you like to try it?"

"Good God, no. I wouldn't have even let one of those things into my house if I'd known what they do." A beat of silence. "But aside from all that, it's been a real pleasure talking to you. Is there anything else I can do for you today? Can I show you the door?"

And the man left, perhaps just thankful to be leaving the house intact.

"Can you believe it? What'll they think of next?" my grandfather barked at me.

"What's wrong with it?"

"What's right with it? It's a drug, you know. They're masking it under all this tech bull-shit, but it's another mind-control thing. People just get sucked in and lose their sense of self. Watch out, or you'll

turn out just like your parents. They couldn't control themselves. I'm sure that in a few years, that shit is going to be illegal."

But this time, he was wrong.

On the fourth day of my visit, my grandfather and I don't talk at all. He's sad when he wakes up, hands me a copy of *Living with Little*, and then goes back to sleep. I read under a single lamp until the power goes out, and I wait in the silent darkness for it to return. Being here means that I'm awash in memories. Nothing turned out the way he had wanted it to when I moved in all those years ago. Parents always expect you to be little cartoon versions of themselves, but grandparents just want you to be warm with love. When I first moved in, I couldn't stand it from him. I wouldn't stare into the sun.

You and I, when we first got together, were a disaster of contradictions. I was worried about how to tell you about my parents. There was nothing digestible about it. It poked me this way and that way through my insides, and on some days more than others. Even now, I don't know what there is to say. I didn't even know where to start until you asked:

"When am I going to meet your parents?"

I had to say something.

"They don't live here anymore. Not in our world." And you didn't know what I meant so I took you to see them in their beds; side by side, like blank white pages. Afterwards in the hospital cafeteria, you pushed the cardboard juice box to me with your index finger and let me stew in the silence of my own making. Everything was white. Outside, it was snowing. The wind stuck flakes to the tree trunks and to their long pine needles. Half and Half. One side buried, one side protected. Even now, my grandfather hasn't moved my mother's stuff from her room. It has stayed exactly the same as it was when she had moved out at eighteen years old. He wouldn't even let me go in there when I came to live with him.

"I wish I was anyone else," I said finally, and you just tilted your head like a dog hearing a new command.

“Oh, Christ,” you finally sighed, and gripped your mouth in disgust. “This juice tastes like Prozac.” And you smiled and leaned over the table and reminded me: “Don’t be sad. Everyone’s sad. Be something new.”

You didn’t know, either because I didn’t tell you or because you couldn’t see, that my sorrow grows from the same soil that poisoned my parents. My sorrow has roots.

I have my mother’s hands. I don’t look anything like my parents, like either one of them, except for the hands. They’re an exact replica of my mother’s. I didn’t notice it until we were together, and then I couldn’t stop noticing – while I was cleaning the dishes, searching for my earpieces, or cutting bread. I would wash my hands so furiously that they’d turn pink and raw. This was the first warning sign. Then came the sedation: every day when I got home, I would sedate myself for hours in front of my computer screen. I’d turn on the earpieces and lose myself in “Sensations.” Months passed, and I got neither better nor worse until the evening that you came home and found me in the bathtub, waterlogged and half-drowned with my earpieces on ten. You dragged me down the stairs and onto the driveway, and then called an ambulance.

“Thank you,” I said. But it took me weeks to realize I meant it.

Months have passed in this volcano in the mountains. I haven’t heard from you. A nurse has moved into the spare room across from my grandfather, and I’m sleeping downstairs on the couch. The nurse tried to convince me to take my mother’s room, but it’s been untouched all these years and it would be a curse to change it now. Besides, my grandfather wouldn’t like it.

I’ve built myself a fortress around the couch: dirty laundry, used plates, and an anticipation in which I’ve been living for a week or so. I’m up to seven most days on my earpiece setting. The only times my grandfather is himself are in the mornings when he’s listening to his favorite radio show and trying to make breakfast, opening all the drawers and staring at the contents, like a pilot asked to perform heart surgery. I follow him around, turning off the stove and cleaning. By noon, he’ll either be napping

in his room or complaining about not being able to nap in his room. His insomnia will come and go, but there's no cure that he's willing to try.

One time, he sees me when he comes downstairs to get water. It's so rare now that he'll truly look at me and see me. I've stopped sneaking out to turn on my earpieces. I leave them on all night sometimes. He won't notice if I come to breakfast after a night that they were set to two for some calming emotions. I might not even notice. They don't tell you that you build a tolerance for "Sensations," the ones that you replay over and over again.

But he sees me this night. He sees the silicon shining out of my ear like a death omen. I'm waiting for it, the big one, but it doesn't come. He just retreats, slow and waterless, without any color in his face. I see myself run after him, but it's only in thought. I can't approach him. I can't even look at him. He'd sense the fulfillment radiating off me, the bliss that can only come from silicon emotions, from the earpieces. Distant, I note my self-hatred, my hatred of him, and our failure to be better at our relationship. If he told me not to use them, I never would have, I tell myself. Mostly I feel nothing, just the calming relief of the earpieces. I set them to six and settle in.

I know already that tomorrow he won't recognize me, and that he won't recognize me again. He'll come down the stairs and stand in the kitchen, staring at the appliances with no idea what to do. I'll try to say I love you, and I miss you, but it will be too late.

They say that people aren't really afraid of heights, but that they're just afraid of getting up somewhere high and wanting to jump. I've always wanted to jump, the whole way up. Everything I do is asking the question: can I jump yet?

Once I crawled out onto the barn roof, nine years old, bold and weightless, and I tumbled off the edge onto my wrist, snapping it. I remember that I didn't cry, not until after the hospital when I was home in bed, cradling my bulky arm and plagued by the stabbing memories that hospitals had brought to my life so far.

You taught me not to take things too seriously. You tried, anyways, and I tried to learn. Now that you're gone—a past tense—I love you for that— a present tense.

The morning after my accident, my grandfather was in the yard outside my window when I woke up. He was planting a rosebush for me to look at from my place in bed. He never said that he was scared, that I'd worried him, or that he wanted me here, but I felt it all the same. Tomorrow, I think I'll bring flowers for his bedside.

My grandfather's existence has been plagued by ups and downs, by false starts. One moment, he's the quickest person in the world, and the next, he doesn't even know where he is. It's always been this way with the two of us: there are days when we hardly speak, and days when we can barely let the other finish talking. We can't seem to get the energy right. If we were lost in the woods at night, we'd wander around flashing our lights at just the wrong moment, when the other was looking away, never finding each other.

He had a lot of theories about how to live your life, but I don't think he always followed them. Most of his life, before I came to live with him, was a mystery that I had never bothered to solve, but I remember on the very first day we met, he crouched down to my level and told me to feel the dirt between my fingers while I still could. "It's a living thing," he said. "When you're close to birth and death, you get to experience the primal things; bookend your life with your fingers in the dirt."

In his last few days, we didn't speak at all. I took him outside to look at the mountains and the sharp volcanic lip. All the way down into the valley from his backyard was a meadow, with daisies just starting to poke through. He laughed at the sky, a laugh that was as coarse and honest as he was, and for the first time there, I laughed, too.

This is how to say I love you: you whisper it into the casket on its way down the stairs. Don't forget to check the house for stray animals before you leave.

The morning they moved my grandfather out of his house, I climbed out onto the roof from his bedroom window to see his view. I could see over the ridge, all the way into the mountains and a tiny green valley that sliced through the walls of rock.

I never think about you anymore. Next time, I think, I will do better. My grandfather would say that we should live every life as though it's our last, but I've already lived so many lives. I know this one won't be the end. This is not my final formation. Dust will settle; I will grow accustomed to living without him. But I'll do it here, in this house in the mountains. There is no place better. 

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**Emily Odion is a recent NYU graduate, an entertainment journalist, and PA. She has never had her fiction work published. Emily grew up in Oregon with horses and dogs and lots of nature, which creeps into almost everything she writes.**

# The Swim

By LB Sedlacek

The old school auditorium hadn't changed much except for the picture. The faded gray soot outlines polished around the rectangular square where it had hung was the only acknowledgment to its existence. The white walls were the same but with a fresh coat of off-white paint. The blue curtain was the same, too. Cleaned, maybe. It looked new. The blinds, though, were exactly the same. They were long metal slats hung in an odd fashion, not quite reaching the top of the window, and leaving some room to spare above the doors. Small bodies could bend heads – if tall, if necessary – to escape through one of two doors leading outside. Underneath the balcony, a set of iron pipes crisscrossed from one side to the other, feeding a set of ancient sprinklers.

The balcony had new paint, too, and looking at it now, it didn't seem so steep, or so high, as it had when I was twenty inches shorter and weighed forty-five pounds less. The seats were the same—they had to be pushed down to sit on and pushed back up to walk by. The faded Partridge Family bus was multi-colored and the blue, the lime green, the pink, the red, and the orange material seats had been removed. They had been replaced with a dull, off-white color that was almost as attractive as the walls. The color was nothing special. It was a white shade of bland.

The ceiling was the most striking difference, one that even the dullest brain would notice, and one that even the worst memory would be able to recall. It was blue. A deep, navy-like blue, but not navy, and not royal, and nothing with a hint of purple or red. It was the crisp blue of soundproofing material. Along with the walls, the sound proof slabs were made of a tough cinder to keep out the noise. Street sounds washed out the rest. In the lobby entrance, there were more bland white walls and a built-in window seat.

The window seat was a different color. It was a magenta that looked orange or rust. Whatever color it was, it was memorable because it was such an ugly one. Photographs, all black and white, filled the walls. There were pictures of the earliest graduating classes in the old city high school, beginning in

the twenties, the roaring and happening twenties, with a whopping twenty or so seniors graduating. The stairwells were the same, too, with their iron banisters capped off at the ends like tiny roofs on top of flat, iron houses. I recognized little, except for the auditorium. The old school had been turned into apartments. It was nothing like it was when my parents and their parents attended Simpson High.

I stared at my grandfather, a Simpson High graduate. He sat in an overstuffed chair. His apartment was one level up from the auditorium entrance, No. 314. When I had gone to Simpson High, on level three, in the right-hand corner of the school, the classrooms were empty except for my class, the special class. The school was not a high school when I attended; instead, it was called Simpson Middle School. It had been closed, and then re-opened for a few years as a Middle School because someone on an important committee decided that it shouldn't sit there unused. I laughed every time I came to see my Grandfather thinking that he had ended up in my special room, the special class.

“Grandpa. Gramps. Hey! Are you awake?”

He muttered something. He sighed and stayed still with his eyes closed. I leaned over and stared at his nose. His lips quivered as he breathed.

I looked above him at the blurry glow of Christmas lights blinking in the courtyard, the paved-over sidewalks, and the platform around the flag. The platform was the same round oasis with a cement bench. A traffic circle curved around the flagpole now, and tall round sidewalk lights marked the way in burnt orange like an airport runway.

A few cars were parked to the left of the circle, mine included. I drove a red sedan that served as a crisp reminder of youth, although my kids and wife were quick to point out my gray hairs, the creases in my skin, and my short-term memory loss. My Grandpa didn't have a car and hadn't driven in twenty-plus years. He had about fifty dollars to his name.

I stood and moved away from the windows, stopping in front of the first dollar bill my Grandpa had earned. It hung in a cheap black frame from a dollar store. The bill was wrinkled and faded with a small tear in the top right corner. The dairy farm had supported three generations of Millers and I was working on the fourth.

Grandpa was the only one left of the original three partners. I sat on the bed and watched him sleep. The TV blared some game show in squeaky tin voices. I pulled off my jacket. My face was unlike his, but we were similar in character, mannerisms, and speech patterns. I had no accent, no Southern drawl which was blamed on my four years in a private college in Vermont. I leaned on a pillow. The room smelled like old cologne. The windows were new. The ceilings were high - they were the same high ceilings that I would stare at when I was a student at Simpson Middle. Grandpa sighed, shifted in his chair, mumbled something about shoes, or maybe socks, or even Jell-O, but he did not wake up. Every Saturday night, I would leave my wife and kids and drive forty miles along dark roads until I reached the town square parking lot in front of what had been Simpson High School, which was now converted into a Middle School. I grabbed the remote and flipped through the channels knowing that I wouldn't find anything because the Saturday night choices never changed much.

It was a night like this one that brought about the end to the school. Maybe it was the high school memories, the silent laboratories where classes were held, the gym, and everything else that looked like it had been siphoned right out of a movie from the fifties or sixties, which made us feel more grown up. There was a football team, a basketball team, and a softball team, too. Rodger had been on the football and basketball teams. Rodger's Dad owned the biggest factory in town, and he was being groomed to take it over.

Rodger Hollinsbee was nothing like a dairy farmer's son, nothing like the dark-headed, green-eyed, tall and pasty boy that I was. Rodger was blonde and fair, tall and skinny, fit and confident. Rodger knew what to say, when to smile, and how to get the teachers to overlook his missing homework. But Rodger had one flaw. It was something that his Father couldn't fix. He was sick, decaying a little every day, with no medicine to make it better, and no untried experiments that worked. His days were numbered and then shortened from the moment he was born.

Rodger was the class clown, the top-at-everything in the class, all of it. He rarely spoke to me the two years that he was in my class. I knew the kids blamed me, and even suspected me. Rodger's Father had it in for me until my Dad convinced him that Rodger was only a class acquaintance.

Rodger's Father said it was Russian roulette. Two kids in a barn, hiding behind some cows, our milk cows. They were playing with a pistol that came from Rodger's Father's study. No one talked about how Rodger got the gun.

It wasn't the first gunshot I'd ever heard, but I wasn't expecting it at midnight, on our midnight swim night. It was me and my brother, his girlfriend, a couple of my friends from seventh grade, and a couple of my brother's friends. We hadn't even changed into our swimsuits. The blast was deafening.

Rodger's buddy, Lucas something, survived but with a bullet through half his brain, and he became paraplegic, eventually ending up in a nursing home. It was a game from a movie or a video game. It was from something because Rodger, the one who had it all, couldn't have possibly done anything like that. It was whispered that it was suicide, or maybe even a pact. The golden boy was anything but golden. He was unhappy in his mansion that overlooked the school and was nowhere near the dairy farm. The police questioned me for days, "How did I know Rodger?" or "How well did I know Rodger?" and "Was I hiding a gun amongst the cows?" or "What was I hiding if anything?" and "Why were we planning on going swimming at midnight when it was so cold outside?"

It hadn't been my idea to swim. It was my brother's idea. It turned out that it didn't matter. They found the gun powder burns on Rodger's hand and on Lucas' hand, as well as empty beer bottles and some pot.

Rodger's friends were sad for days avoiding me, but they had avoided me even before his death. Some wouldn't look me in the eye because it had happened at my family's dairy farm. Business went down. Rodger's Father hired a private investigator. He found nothing. Lucas, poor plump Lucas, another son from another prominent family, never returned to Simpson Middle. One year later, the school was closed.

I squinted through the windows. I could almost see the High School, my alma mater, from the windows. My stomach rumbled and I grabbed a couple of peanuts from a candy dish sitting on the windowsill.

I popped one in my mouth, and I was midway to popping the second when my Grandpa woke up. He glared at me. “Are you into my peanuts, Larry? What did I tell you about that?”

I shrugged my shoulders, sighed, laughed, grinned, and did all of the assorted gestures a young child would do when he was caught doing something he shouldn't be doing. “I was hungry. I've been watching you sleep for like an hour. I thought you wanted to eat.”

“Why didn't you wake me? You're just sitting here, watching my TV again? You don't have TV at your place? Your wife is too cheap to let you have it?”

“Yeah, that's it, Grandpa. Lisa won't let me have cable.” I clapped my hands together and jerked his sweater off the bed. “Here you go. Come on. We can still find some place to go.”

He grabbed his sweater from me by swatting my hands back. “I can put on my own sweater.”

“I know, Grandpa. I know.”

I plopped back down on the bed. He glared at me again.

“I just made that bed. You don't go and get that all wrinkled now. Your Father was neater than you.”

“I know. I know.”

My Grandpa was the last living connection to the dairy farm except for me and my brother. James had moved to California, working in some kind of microchip company. He had signed over his share of the dairy farm after our Father passed away. Our Mother went before him in a car accident. Our Dad had been surprised one night in the barn. A heart attack was the final ruling, for he was found beneath the cows about five feet from where Rodger Hollensbee had lain. My Grandpa blamed Rodger's Dad even though he had nothing to do with it. Some people said the old barn was haunted. Me, I didn't want to take that chance, so with a loan from James, I demolished the old barn and I built a new one twenty feet away under a willow tree.

My Grandpa turned toward the windows staring at the same blurs, lights, and sunset through the trees as I had done an hour earlier. “You driving?”

“Sure. You know where you want to go?”

“Course. To the fish camp. Like to get me some flounder. The cafeteria in here don’t do it much good.”

“Yep. I’ve heard that.”

He flipped the light switch, pulled the door closed, and locked it with a tiny click. The hallways were silent except for muffled TV noises and an alarm clock blaring at the end of the hall. I closed my eyes and I thought of my classes -- English, Science, History, and Music. I thought about walking these same halls. We passed the auditorium. I peeked through the window. The picture was still there.

Right after Rodger’s death, the portrait had shown up. It was of him in his class picture, with a royal purple background. Underneath it was a plaque listing the year of his birth and the year of his death. There was never an explanation. One day it was just there.

After the school closed, it hung in the shadows untouched by human eyes until its renovation into retirement apartments. It stayed there as the auditorium was refurbished to be rented for public events.

It disappeared after the renovation. In our small North Carolina mountain town, the picture of Rodger had the same infamy as the one in the book by Oscar Wilde. It was rumored that the portrait had been removed and was buried with Rodger’s Father.

Rodger’s Father’s Will specified that I was to read it. The portrait was left to me.

The picture didn’t reveal one odd thing of that night in the barn. Lucas and Rodger were never friends. It was no accident that the picture ended up in the now-demolished barn on my dairy farm.

Both boys wanted to be team captain on the basketball team, taking over from me. I had been captain in the sixth grade. I could dunk shots on a whim. They fought, unable to decide on a captain. I told them if they wanted to settle it, they should settle it like men.

They got Rodger’s Dad’s gun. They went to the barn. It was settled.

That put an end to our midnight swims. The pool was filled in. The portrait, however, still hangs in my new barn that I built under a willow tree twenty feet away from the demolished one. Every so often someone asks me about the blonde kid whose picture hangs on my wall. 

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**LB Sedlacek's short fiction has appeared in such publications as "Rapid River Review," "Duct Tape Press," "The Tea Weekly," "Monarch Mysteries," and others. She publishes a free resource for poets, "The Poetry Market Ezine."**

# The W.I.L.F. Next Door: Diary of a Funny Widow

By Alyssa Kessler

## Prologue

*Dear W.I.L.F. Diary,*

*I don't why I'm calling this a diary, really, except that I guess I'm a bit old-fashioned. The kids these days call them "blogs."*

*Everyone has a blog, right? A blog about traveling to Europe as a vegan, a blog about the latest, gluten-free diet, or one about a mommy's daily set of challenges. We live in a world driven and defined by social media, where every experience, every breath we take, is broadcast live for everyone to see.*

*How lame of me to follow suit, but I feel compelled to share my new experiences with the world. It's not a choice, really. It's just something I must do. What makes this even more bizarre is that by nature, I'm a total introvert, a sarcastic and ironic loner who pretends to be social. I guess if you were to give me a label, you'd call me a "social-introvert" or an "introverted extrovert"? I can certainly act the part, smiling and co-mingling with people around me, but the truth is, I'd rather be at home, mentally mocking the small-minded, snobby women in town. I would rather die than share my private thoughts, but suddenly I find myself transforming by the second. It's as if someone turned on the lights, and I can see and feel things for the first time.*

*So, today I traded in my high-waisted, mom jeans for a pair of black lace panties and a push-up bra. No one can see them, but it makes me smile knowing that I have this little secret. My unintentional W.I.L.F. revolution was subtle at first, but before I knew it, I had completely evolved.*

*So, what is a W.I.L.F., you ask? Well, that's a bit tricky. Bear with me here and keep an open mind.*

**W.I.L.F. – to be used as a noun, a verb, or an adjective. From the Urban Dictionary meaning, a “Widow I’d Like to F\$\*%!.” (But let’s keep things classy and just say “Love” instead).**

***“That widow is so hot; I would like to love her right now.” “Wow, what a W.I.L.F.!” “Girl, I am getting my W.I.L.F. on tonight!”***

*And just to set the record straight, I don't wear six-inch heels and a mini skirt (well, not all the time). Actually, despite the acronym, being a W.I.L.F. is not about sex at all. Being a W.I.L.F. is more than just an act, more than just a physical attribute. For me, a W.I.L.F. is a total frame of mind.*

*I'm that ordinary girl you see at the market, your neighbor getting her mail and giving a casual wave. But that was before everyone began treating me like I was walking around with a giant scarlet “W” on my chest. Without warning, I've become a complete outcast, an invalid, a poor dog with a cone around its neck. Because I have no desire to become a recluse or to be cut out of my house like I was on an episode of “Hoarders: Buried Alive,” I need to make every effort to be “normal.” And for me, normal requires this new name. The woman I used to be is long gone. I'm now the “W.I.L.F.,” and the only way I can make sense of these changes is to write this blog. Suddenly, I need to be free of that ordinary girl with her average looks and sleepy suburban life. It just doesn't fit anymore.*

*I'm quickly realizing that my set of self-imposed rules was all a figment of my imagination. Many of us spend our entire lives following the rules, being the perfect wives, mothers, daughters, and sisters. So, by my definition, if someone feels the need to break a few rules, and destroy a few stereotypes, then that person is most definitely a total W.I.L.F.*

*Is anyone out there? Can anyone understand this firestorm in my head? Maybe I'm just writing a diary to myself after all. Who knows? The one thing that I do know is that my fifteen-year marriage and my identity, as I formerly knew it, are now over. My W.I.L.F. journey began the day my husband died, and I will never look back. Not even for a second.*

*-The W.I.L.F.-*

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I sat at my kitchen table sorting through a week's worth of mail as my mother poured coffee for my grandmother. It had been three weeks since the funeral, and they were still staying with me and the kids. I stared at my name on yet another medical bill: Mrs. Steven Brown. Who was that? Mrs. Brown? Was I still her? Mr. Brown was dead, so now my name made me feel like an impostor. I didn't think I could be Mrs. Brown anymore. I had another last name once and I happily gave that up when I got married. Why only now did that decision bother me? Resurrecting my maiden name didn't seem to work either. *I am unidentifiable!* My last name branded me as Steven Brown's wife. His woman. His property! We belonged to each other, but now, I belonged to no one. So, who was I? Ms. Brown? Madam? Ma'am? The widow Brown? *Oh geeze—not that!* And that was how my widow-identity crisis began.

As my mother unwrapped a piece of leftover cake, I heard a neighbor quietly let herself in. My house had become this modern, hippie commune with a revolving door of friends and family trying their best to be helpful. There was the day-shift dropping off meals and straightening up around the house and the night-shift who made sure my kids had eaten and showered.

As we sat at the table, the scheduling commenced. *Jewish food-planning 101*. The process was so typical of my Jewish culture. Everything, and I mean everything, was accompanied by a meal. As far back as I can remember, all major (and minor) life events had taken place around a table with a cup of coffee and a good piece of cake. Whether it was a crumb, coffee, babka, mandel breit, rugelach, or the assortment of bakery cookies, there was always eating ,or talk of eating, while we sat around the table.

“Soooo, where should we go for dinner tomorrow?” my mother asked but then quickly answered her own question. “Oh, let's go to that new café for lunch. That way, we can go to the outlet stores right next to it. And then we can pick up a rotisserie chicken and a few sides at the fresh market for dinner. Will the kids eat that?”

When our entire day's-worth of meals was properly planned, we moved on to their next favorite subject: complaining. The women in my family seemed to have the art of kvetching down to a science and there was always a story or a comment that required a detailed analysis.

Half of the family had been excluded from Cousin Sonia's kid's Bat Mitzvah. An outrage!

“Not to reciprocate when we always invited them to all of our affairs? Well, that’s the end of that. I won’t invite them to anything again. Nope, I am done!” My mother pounded the table as my grandmother nodded in agreement. This banter could continue for hours. The truth is, they weren’t even that upset. It was just their dysfunctional way of bonding, I suppose.

Up until this point, I hadn’t stopped moving, as I existed on pure adrenaline. Even in my post-funeral fog, I still felt the need to keep up conversation, and crack a few jokes. But I had reached my limit of mindless chatter, and since my family was incapable of sitting in silence, I took the opportunity to run a few errands—the ATM, the pharmacy, and Starbucks, to be exact. I hadn’t been out much since the funeral, but a casual stroll through CVS seemed like the perfect slice of normalcy.

I looked in the mirror and pulled my wild, black hair into an elastic band. *When did all of these wiry greys take over?* While grabbing my sneakers, I glanced around my closet at the stylish shoes that I once wore. Now they just collected dust as a reminder of my former stylish self. *Yeah, I don’t think they quite work with my yoga pants.* I suppose that I had lost sight of my looks back when I entered mommy-hood. Yes, it must have been around that time when I gave up using hair gel, allowing my spiral ringlets to revert back to their frizzy, natural state. It was when my children took my undivided attention and when I stopped making time for make-up (or fitted clothes, for that matter). The fact was, I had been pretty content with my lack-luster looks and extra twenty pounds, *until now.*

I was not expecting to run into so many acquaintances along my short journey that morning. On a good day, I could typically go without speaking to another human until the kids came home from school, but I had no such luck when a fellow soccer-mom came running my way at the pharmacy. I was just about to covet the *As-Seen-On-TV* items when her words disrupted the soothing, classical music playing over the store speakers.

“I’M SOOOOOOO SORRRY!” She launched in with what I now call the widow trifecta: A head tilt and a pouty lip followed by some extremely slowed speech. There was an extra bonus if she patted my arm at the same time. I awkwardly smiled, thanked her, and got out of there relatively unscathed. I went over to the ATM next and one of Steven’s golf buddies was behind me in line. He couldn’t even

make eye contact. Thankfully, our exchange was brief, but I couldn't help feeling contagious, as if he was afraid of catching death from the widow. I shook it off and just assumed that I was being overly sensitive. Finally, I got to what I thought would be my safe haven. Nobody spoke to each other in Starbucks. Everyone just looked down at their phone, which was just the way I liked it!

But while I waited for my venti latte, a group of moms came sashaying over. These weren't just any group of moms - they were *THE* group of moms. Apparently, even in adulthood, there was still an *in-crowd*. Unlike back in high-school, or in every teen angst movie from the eighties, I had no desire to join them. Our children happened to be the same ages, which constantly brought us together in similar social circles. I secretly referred to these mom-bots as the town vultures. They could smell blood from a mile away, and they couldn't wait to feast! Of course, if you wanted to hear about the latest couple divorcing, or about the husband who was caught with a male prostitute, then this was the right crowd for you.

Before I knew it, I was surrounded by perfume and Gucci bags. I attempted to smooth out my wrinkled Old Navy t-shirt, abruptly bothered by my own unkempt look. As I pulled up my yoga-pants to conceal a substantial muffin top, the vultures made their descent.

“OH, LIFE ISSSSSS SOOOOO UNFAIRRRRRRR.”

“I KNOW HE IS LOOKING OUUUUUUUUT FORRRR YOUUUUU!”

“HOW ARE YOU? HOWWW ARRRRE THE KIDDDDS?”

“WHAT WILL YOU DO NOWWW?”

“WILL YOU HAVE TO SELL THE HOUSE?”

“WILL YOU GET A JOB?”

“DO YOU THINK YOU'LL DATE AGAIN?”

My tears came on without warning as I frantically scanned the room for the closest exit. The noises in the coffee shop seemed deafening. The clanking of plates and the beeping of a coffee timer screeched in my ears.

Maybe I had ventured into the real world too soon. The sound of beeping brought me back to that night in the ER, the night I sat listening to the beeping of the machines, and the night the beeping had stopped.

On my drive home from the coffee shop, I felt like I was wearing a pair of 3D glasses, and my entire body felt weak. The exhaustion hit like a tidal wave as my mind raced with fears about what dreaded looks and questions I was in for when I brought the kids back to school.

I came home and made a beeline past my houseguests, darting straight up to my bedroom. I closed my door, grabbed the TV remote, and plopped down onto my bed. The adrenaline that I had been surviving on had clearly worn off, and I could no longer keep on my hostess hat. I stared blankly at the TV as my body melted into my bed. A television was always on in my house. I don't think we ever turned the darn thing off. The BRAVO network was playing, and I didn't bother to flip through the channels, expecting to fall asleep any moment.

An episode of *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills* was in progress. I watched a lot of reality TV. I wasn't not proud of this, but I didn't see much harm in a little *television-junk food* from time to time. As my eyes strained to focus, I watched these well-to-do housewives begin to act like caged lunatics.

The *Housewives* reality show was made up of six very attractive, middle-aged women. Nicknames like M.I.L.F. and cougar were being used to describe them. Was that a thing now? An entire category for hot, middle-aged moms who were well-preserved and impeccably dressed? It reminded me of how plus-sized models were being referred to as "curvy," another title that I was extremely pleased to hear about instead of identifying as a chunky, stay-at-home mom, perhaps I could aspire to be a curvy cougar! Before I was married, I had worked in the city where I had made a concerted effort to dress in smart-looking suits and had splurged on department store make-up. But now, my idea of a put-together look was a good SPF moisturizer and some tinted chap-stick.

In this episode, the *Housewives* had been attending a dinner party where a psychic was the guest of honor. The psychic was visibly drunk as she began to tell each woman exactly when they would die

and whose husbands were cheating on them. This chick must have been bullied in high school because she clearly wanted revenge on all the pretty mean-girls later in life. As the drinks kept flowing, the comments got more obnoxious, and the fighting began.

Two women began arguing with each other about whose Playboy centerfold was more “tasteful,” while another woman was upset that she was being ignored, and yet another woman was screaming that the psychic was unfairly targeting her with outlandish predictions. Ah, it was a thrill to watch such ridiculousness unfold. Ultimately, two of the women found out that they had cheating husbands, so maybe the drunk psychic was legit after all!

At first, I didn’t hear an actual noise. It was, more or less, a bubbling up from within my chest. My lungs filled with air and out coughed this pathetic little sound. It wasn’t until I wiped a tear from the corner of my eye that I realized that I was actually laughing. I felt somewhat guilty for being capable of laughter only weeks after my husband’s funeral. I closed my eyes. This emotion was practically unidentifiable at the time, but I was relieved nonetheless.

For the first time in weeks, I caught a glimpse of the old me, and it felt good. Because the *Real Housewives* helped me to escape my life for just a few moments, I knew that I was still in there. I also realized that there was a common thread among my favorite reality and comedy shows. They were all based on extremely strong, independent, and funny women. Bethenny Frankel, Patti Stanger, Kathy Griffin, and Amy Schumer—they all made me laugh. These women never held back and often said exactly what I was thinking, no matter how brutally inappropriate.

It was at that very moment that I decided that I would channel the traits of these strong women and declare a new identity for myself. It would shield me from anyone who pitied the poor young widow who lost her husband in the prime of her life. I would never succumb to the insensitive comments of my fair-weathered friends. My new identity would give me license to fly solo in a world full of couples, and it would also give me the legs to stand on when every ounce of my body wanted to collapse. I would be sexy, strong, and full of life rather than an old spinster-type sitting alone in a rocking chair. Yes, it was genius!

Impulsively, I opened my laptop and began to recount my awful morning. With a tear-filled smile, I documented my observations and inappropriate encounters with vigor and satisfaction. I wasn't quite sure just what I would do with this snarky diary entry, but somehow, I knew that it was the beginning of something more.

So, there I was, watching a crazy episode of the *Real Housewives of Beverly Hills*, while a houseful of family and friends were scurrying around, trying their best to be helpful. I could hear someone taking the vacuum out the closet and rolling it across the already spotless floor.

I closed my eyes and exhaled, feeling thankful for the few moments I had to myself and for the brief laughter that had surfaced. In a moment of clarity, I recognized that my life wouldn't be easy, and that it may never be the same, but with my new W.I.L.F. armor intact, I would write and laugh, and I would get through it all – one reality show at a time. 

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**Alyssa Kessler, a former NYC dweller, with a career in advertising, now resides in northern New Jersey where she raises her two children. Her short story, “The W.I.L.F Next Door” was adapted from her debut novel which is loosely based on her own life as a modern widow. When she is not striving to get her first manuscript published, she is fast at work on its sequel and contributing to Friendspast.com where she blogs about the funny side of widowhood.**

# Wake Up Call

By Myra King

He always felt that he was living on the edges of other people's dreams, peripheral. Avoiding emotions, a non-swimmer caught in the riptide of life. Sure, he tried to pretend that he was like other people, but humor, as pale as a prepubescent dawn, was the closest he'd ever gotten to feeling anything, anything remotely like passion. Until he met Marny.

Met wasn't the right word.

He'd answered an early morning call on the landline - it was no one he knew - about eighteen months ago, his heart pounding with the 'fear of the unknown' and the certainty that a 2 a.m. call could only mean death or worse. He believed in worse. "A negativity bias," his psychiatrist called it. But the call was a wrong number - until she offered her name, Marny, and he told her his, Kyan.

She had tones of an older voice, one that was even familiar. But he didn't mind older women. When he was young and newly sexual, he'd preferred the same age, but slamming forty had its way of changing that. And so they talked until well after the morning cracked the sunlight and speared through his window with inadequate blinds, piercing its wake-up patterns on the bedroom wall.

He never asked who Marny had been calling, and she never offered. He severed the apology, saying that he hadn't minded being woken at such an hour, and that nothing much affected him, brought him to anger, or stirred him to anything. She'd questioned that, her voice rising with incredulity. It was what she saw in him, he guessed, which made the monthly calling interesting. He was like the space between paragraphs, the held note of disdain in arguments, or the black shading which gave a picture its depth.

Eighteen months. Eighteen phone calls.

She often told him that he was the most unusual person she had ever known. Perhaps that was it. Although the way Marny said 'unusual' didn't sound complimentary.

*'So, Kyan, you've never been in love?'*

'No.'

*'Got lost in a movie?'*

'No.'

*'Book? Taken for the fictive ride. Surely?'*

He paused, gauging his truth, not wanting to lie. No need to lie to an almost, complete stranger.

'Um... no, not really.'

He thought of the latest book that he'd read by William Shatner. Bite-sized humour. Lightweight.

*'A good dinner, then? Something exotic? Greek, Italian? Chinese, for Christ's sake?'*

'Never been one for eating out.'

And then Marny asked the question, the one that had to come up. He almost laughed at his own pun.

*'Sex, Kyan? A bloody good knee-trembler? Making love in the sea? Hay up your arse? Sports car challenge? Gear stick in your groin?'*

Kyan knew now that she wasn't so much asking as she was telling him her experiences. Her preferences. Most of these conversations were one-sided. They were her side.

But the real truth was, even though he'd had sex, he hadn't gotten much from it. Relief, perhaps. He was like the proverbial critic, or eunuch, seeing it done, knowing how it should be done, but never fully experiencing it.

That morning, the phone rang once more. It was Marny.

*'Hi, Kyan. That time, again. Aren't you glad I changed it to Saturday night, though?'*

'No, not really. I have to work tomorrow.'

*'Bullshit, Kyan. On Sunday? Easter morning?'*

'I'm working. Extra money. Double time.'

He thought of his job as a waiter. Appropriate. He was always waiting.

*'Is that it, Kyan, does making money give you a thrill?'*

'You don't give up, Marny, do you?'

*'Nope, but you seem to have.'*

'Marny, you don't know me.'

And he knew this was the truth. How could anyone know him when he didn't even know himself? Even his name was crap. What sort of a name was Kyan anyway?

He longed to have someone explain himself to himself. He was continually angling at answers like a fisherman at a place where fish could never be caught.

Soon after the phone calls began, he wondered if extreme sports would spark the adrenaline. Jumpstart his life. So, he'd tried it. Tried tandem parachuting. There had been something then, a rush stronger than gravity as they'd plummeted down. And when he'd sprained his ankle upon landing, he had felt another sensation apart from the pain, one that he'd never experienced. It was a feeling he liked, but he could not bring it to words. His obsession began after this. He'd never told his doctor. Psychiatrists need words.

*'Is that what your obsession is, making money?'*

Kyan laughed. His snorts prickled his nose until he coughed.

'Hardly.'

*'Come on, I know it started after that tandem parachute jump. Did you sue them?'*

He hadn't. But that experience had made him want to test the waters of fate, and he needed money for that.

His travels were successful. He'd been mugged in the Bronx, raped in Soho, shot at in Cairo, and beaten up at King's Cross in Sydney.

His holiday memories held in his mind, REM sleep alone, shuttering the scenes.

And then there were the physical battle wounds. A broken collarbone, which had not set properly. Knife scarring on his arms and back. A missing finger. The album of his body to remind him of those 'special' moments.

To feel alive, he needed to step close to death. That was his obsession.

Kyan let out a slow breath. He could hear Marny clutching the phone. Perhaps her hands were as slick with sweat as his.

'Money has its advantages.'

*'You know, Kyan, I reckon it would be a sort of freedom. Not feeling anything much.'*

'How do you figure?'

*'Well, I get so screwed up in my emotions sometimes that I'd love to be like you ... you know?'*

'Numb?'

*'Numb? Really? Is it that bad?'*

He didn't say anything. There was a grain of salt to the truth of what she said. And he wondered if he'd been honest with his psychiatrist, about what had really happened in his life, whether he could have helped him. Instead, he'd spun happy childhood lies of cricket and camping, a mother of sunshine, chocolate cake, and birthday surprises. Although the 'birthday surprises' were shaded in truth.

*'Kyan?'*

For a moment, Marny's voice, the familiarity that was held in its vowels, made a runaway memory come racing back, breaking down any barriers that he'd built so tightly. Had he always known? These past eighteen months, for all the time they'd been talking, all those calls, had he always known? Known who Marny really was?

*'Kyan, are you still there?'*

His mother. His mother! Pretty, young, and slim, her back to him receding to nothing as she left. There were other women, who were older, behind an impossibly tall counter. He knew now that they were social workers, and that his mother had given him away. A ward of the state, like he was their prize.

*'Kyan, I can hear you breathing. You are still there! Answer me!'*

'Kyan, I'll be back,' he remembered his mother saying. 'I'll be back. Just getting you a present. A nice birthday present. You're a big boy now. Something special for a big boy.'

He'd glowed inside until she turned her head, looked over her shoulder, and her stride faltered for an instant. In that fractured second, he saw that she was lying. But it was too late to stop her.

'I was only three years old, Marny. My third birthday.'

*'Kyan? Oh god, Kyan. You remember?'*

'How could a mother leave her child, Marny? Just like that? And I was waiting for hours sitting good, just like you told me. Until they took me away and gave me something, something to stop me crying and to make me sleep.'

Have I ever woken up?, he thought. He certainly had now.

*'Kyan, I was so young. We were so young. Me and your dad, Kyle. He was only a year older. Only eighteen when you were born. That's why he left. I couldn't cope on my own. It was the best thing. My mother told me not to look back, but I did. Did you ever wonder about your name? Kyle and Marian. Ky...an. Bloody clever, hey?'*

'Why Marny?'

*'Like I just said...'*

'No, why do you call yourself Marny? That first phone call? Why didn't you say who you were?'

*'I did. Don't you remember what you used to call me? Marmee? Like from that book, Little Women. It was what I was reading at school, when I was carrying you. And when you were just beginning to talk, I got you to call me that. I liked the sound of it better than mommy.'*

*And that first time I rang, I did say I was Marmee. But you'd just woken up. You thought I'd said Marny. I couldn't be bothered to explain. But I still wanted to talk. It's been really hard for me, you know, Kyan.'*

Kyan looked down. The receiver grew alive for a moment and then died in his hands. Marny was still talking, but he was no longer listening. Everything else was shimmering, breathing, alive, and awake. And this time, when the morning light sliced the blinds and flickered onto the wall, he stood and dropped the phone, as final in its cradle as the sound of goodbye. 

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**Myra King has survived flood, rape, fire and a particularly aggressive and venomous snake whilst having a shower (her and the snake) so feels qualified to write about “Life” in fiction. Many of her short stories and poems, which have won awards, have been published in New Zealand, USA, Australia, where she resides, UK and Ireland.**

# **This Old Earth**

**By Caroline Stern**

## **I.**

You tiptoe down to my room, past Momma's and Jims, and past Grandma June's. Whenever you have a nightmare you end up in my twin bed with pink butterfly sheets from that catalogue with the pictures you that stare at for hours. Ever since you, baby Cara, and Jim moved in two months ago, the leak in the roof is worse, and I hear the drippin' from my bed. I miss the peace and quiet.

It's summer, and the air is so heavy that we keep the windows closed. But when you sneak in I pretend I'm asleep until you slide them open. I act like you woke me up and I mumble "shut it," but I know how much you love the sounds of the cicadas hidin' right beneath the peeled-paint sill.

It hasn't rained in a while but clouds have covered the cornfields all day. Jim said if we didn't get rain soon, he would make us go out there with pails of water.

You climb into my bed. Liftin' the sheet carefully you sit and slip both your feet in, and then slowly lower your small torso, rolling your spine back until your head reaches the pillow. Miss Nancy just taught us all about different parts of the body. You're so close I can feel your paper-thin nightgown scratching my legs, but it's okay 'cause I know how scared you get.

I hear a noise and I think someone else woke up, but the pangs come too fast to be feet. A crack of thunder tears open the sky and a bolt of lightning flashes so bright I can see the Saint Matthew cross on the other side of town in the black charred night.

You grab my arm tight and I start cooin' "it's okay." I nestle your head into the crack of my arm as I turn on my back to see the window. The rain hits the sill like bullets hittin' a metal bucket and the wired screen looks like a warped rainbow goin' on for miles.

I hear your breath get heavy and feel your chest rise into my ribs. I start to nod off when the rain doesn't sound like rain no more, but instead wails like a sick child.

You wake me in the early dawn and I feel your nails diggin' into my shoulder. You're on top of me and your forehead is already startin' to sweat. Your face is speckled with shadows of lightnin' bugs that had searched for shelter from the storm.

"Tatz, Tatz, did you hear the screaming last night?" I don't know why you started callin' me Tatz instead of Teresa. No one else calls me that.

"No one was screamin' Janey. A bad storm spooked ya," but I'm not too sure 'bout that either.

## II.

I remember the day mama brought the baby, you, and Jim home. She told me Jim was a special friend who was gonna stay to help with the harvest. Ya had this ugly green and brown plaid dress on and you were suckin' on your thumb like it had Jesus in there himself. Momma never brought anyone home, so I knew you two was special. I didn't realize that now that ya'll were here, you weren't gonna leave.

Ya'll didn't bring much with ya. He carried two suitcases and you didn't even have any toys. He dropped the bags and kissed my Momma on the lips. I stood there in shock, and you had this smile on your face like you fell in love. One time, Bobby Lee smiled like that at me and I punched him right in the nose. Jim bent down and said "I hear you're a strong one. You can help me clear the rocks from the fields this year," and then he looked at you with your stupid thumb back in your mouth, "ya'll are gonna be like sisters, I tell ya."

"Teresa here is eleven now." Momma grabbed my shoulders.

"Is she now? Well she'll be a good example for my baby girl here," Jim rubbed your head gently.

And that was that. Four months ago.

As soon as you entered this house, the dead hydrangeas bloomed, and Grandma June stood for the first time in twenty years—at least that's what Momma tells me.

I asked you where ya'll were from and you said:

"We have always lived here."

I turned to Momma to see if she had heard your nonsense, but she was already at the stove cookin' that night's stew. Before I could call her name, you wrapped your arms around me so tight that I couldn't breathe.

You whispered into my ear, "I'm the special one. Daddy doesn't know why I'm so special. He wanted to lock me up with the crazy people, but I know. I'm Mother Nature. My bones are branches, my blood is pollen, and my brain is a beehive. I know who you are and now you recognize me. I'm your Daddy. I'm everything." I looked into your big eyes and felt warmth from ya. I didn't understand it then. I didn't realize what Momma had brought into the house.

### III.

I hear a noise, some creaks comin' from your floorboards. Yours sound different than the rest of the house because they're the new oak instead of the pine. Your door is open an inch and I see your body swayin' back and forth as your head bobs up and down. There are lightnin' bugs covering the ceiling and flashin' all over the place like fireworks at the county fair. They swarm into a bright moon and lift you off the ground, cradlin' and twirlin' you.

After a minute, the bugs lower you and your knees fall to the daisy rug. My blue eyes are starin' wide and I realize Grandma June's harp tunes are shakin' the pipes. The bugs hover above you, silent and dark.

You're only wearin' undies, and I see your smooth, curved spine with your chin tucked into your thin neck. I try to stay hidden in the shadow of the door, but I feel somethin' in my bones, and I got chicken skin 'cross the back of my neck and arms.

I burst in and the bugs fly through the open window.

"What in God's good graces are ya doin'?" You lift your head and Grandma's music stops at the same time. I hear baby Cara start wailin.' The pipes always freeze when she cries, like she takes up all the water in the house.

You turn to face me and a smile creeps 'cross your face.

“I’m just preparing,” you say, and before I can ask you what you’re preparin’ for, Momma calls us for lunch. You skip right past me and I follow you into the kitchen.

I tell Momma ‘bout what I saw and she says, “Mind your own business, Teresa. There ain’t nobody botherin’ ya. Everyone has his or her own way of doin’ things.” I know that’s the end of that ‘cause her eyes are amber right now. Momma’s eyes change colors when she’s sad or mad. She says she got it from her Daddy, and that’s why I don’t got it. If my Daddy were alive, I’d’ve asked him why he don’t got it, too.

#### IV.

I’m out on the half acre with you and Jim. We are weedin’ the squash while he sprinkles some mineral feed onto the Swiss chard. The sun is in my eyes so I keep my head down, diggin’ my small hands into the ground to get the roots out. If ya don’t pull the weeds out by the roots, then ya might as well be drinkin lemonade in the shade. I move down the row and you’re behind me.

“What are you even doin’? Help me pull.” I finally look up and you’re puttin’ all the finger-grass, chickweed, carpetweed, and thistles, back into the ground.

“Janey! What are you doin’?!” I know I’m yellin’ and I see Jim look up from a couple rows away, but I don’t care.

“A weed is just a plant where you don’t want there to be a plant. If you’re so upset, fine I’ll go plant them somewhere else where they won’t bother you.” You sigh and gather up all the piles I’d made and start walkin’ towards the edge of the forest.

“What is goin’ on over here? I asked you to weed not to start a world war.” Jim has a smile on his face, but his eyes scream don’t test me, or my daughter.

“Janey is so bright, don’t ya think?”

“What?”

“I said ain’t my daughter the smartest little girl you’ve ever seen? Especially for an eight-year-old. I don’t know where she learned to talk like that, but it’s definitely not from her mother I’ll tell ya that.”

You have a mother? I never thought about a grown lady actually loving a strange child like you. I guess everyone comes from somewhere, but where is your somewhere?

“What was her momma like?”

“Oh she was a wonderful lady. Kind and beautiful. She was smart, but nowhere near as smart as Janey. After Janey was born, things changed. She didn’t enjoy the things she used to. Her smile disappeared. She never wanted to hold Janey. Then one day she disappeared.”

“Disappeared? What do ya mean?”

“I went in for a drink of water while she was tending the garden, and when I returned, she was gone. No note, no nothing.”

“Well, Momma seems to like ya, and I know for a fact that she’d never just leave. Especially without saying goodbye.” I smile at him and he returns a warm one.

You come runnin’ up with a wide grin that is more crooked than Jim’s. You probably got it from your momma. Jim picks you up and swings you over his shoulder, your giggles fillin’ the dusty air. I sigh and return to the weeds.

V.

You make me so mad when I catch you tryin’ on my dresses from the catalogue. Take the ones Momma sews me, but not my *special* dresses.

I chase you from my room all the way out to the backfields.

“Ya know Momma, Grandma June, and me were doin’ just fine before ya’ll showed up! Now the house is cramped, the roof’s leakin’ more, and I’m sick and tired of you always bein’ in my business. Your stupid baby sister cries more and more each day I can hardly hear my dang thoughts. No one invited you here so why don’t ya just leave?”

“Momma invited us here,” you answer. You’re so still when you speak. It boils my blood.

“Don’t you dare call her Momma! She is not your Momma! Your Momma is gone or dead.”

“Maybe she ain’t even my real Momma.” You draw lines in the dirt with your bare foot.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“How do you know who your Momma is? I look more like Grandma June than you. Maybe you’re the one whose Momma is dead.” Your forest green eyes don’t leave my round face.

“What in Gods green earth are you talkin’ about?” My voice starts to shake. “Shut your hole right now! You are *not* one of us. You showed up outta nowhere, not knowin’ a thing ‘bout farmin’, thinkin’ we’ll just take care of ya’ll for free. Well, ya can’t just take over the whole house. I won’t let it happen. I won’t!” As I yell, you step even closer.

“Who said I don’t know anything about farming? I know this here earth. This soil is my home.”

“I’m tellin’ Momma you’re crazy. Ya’ll need to get out of this house before I make ya.” I push you down into the dirt and run inside.

## VI.

I stay in my room and keep the door locked. Momma didn’t believe me when I told her what you said. No one believes me.

On my floor is the cloth I bought all by myself. It took a month of runnin’ errands for Mr. Brown who’s been crippled since workin’ at the steel mill. I cut the pattern, a small dress for my doll Rebecca.

Why are you the new favorite? Grandma June even gave you a harp lesson. The one time I even thought about touchin’ her beautiful instrument I tiptoed close to get a better look at the thick strings and the carved wood. Grandma June dragged me by the ear and smacked me across the cheek. I’ve always kept my room tidy. I help Momma with the cookin’ sometimes. And I’ve only gotten one bad mark in my whole life when Daisy Jones tried to cheat off my test and when I shoed her away Miss Nancy thought I was helpin’ Daisy.

I accidentally cut the cloth too far and that's it. I can't take it anymore. I jump up onto my bed and cry into my pillow. Between my sobs I hear a light tappin' on the door. Maybe it's Momma with some supper.

"Who's there?"

"It's Janey."

I growl to myself. Why is she botherin' me now?

"What do you want?"

"I made this for you," is what I think she says, cuz the door muffles her quiet mouse voice. My head is under my pillow, but I smell something amazing, like peach pie and Momma's nice soap. I peak over to the door and see a crown, made of lavender sprigs and marigolds from Momma's garden. It's beautiful.

I open the door and there are your knowing eyes again—piercingly green.

"Thank you," I say with a smile.

"I'm sorry about your dress." You pick up the flower crown with the flowers fully blossomed. Without another word, you put it on my head, and float down the hall.

## VII.

I finally calm down. Momma's rhubarb pie calms folks down in one bite, but sometimes if you're real mad, it takes longer. She bakes for the whole town when there is a drought, or when a Pastor gets locked up for stealin' money from the church. It lasts 'bout two weeks before you need some more.

I'm peelin' potatoes when I hear a low rumble comin' from outside. It's about to rain and I gotta bring the wheelbarrow in before it gets all soggy again. I leave the screened-in back porch to find you in the middle of the newly planted carrots.

"Get out of there! Ya gonna mess up all of Momma's hard work," I yell, but you don't hear me.

The field feels like sponges beneath my feet. You move around the rows like the wind twists branches. I can't help but stare at your swift feet. I've seen on the television when they do funny lookin' dances in these big gyms. You're more graceful than they are.

Your feet are sinkin' into the ground inch by inch while your arms are above your head. Your hips sway and your hands twist 'round each other. It's the same dance I saw you practicin' three weeks ago. The wind picks up and catches pollen from the flowers surroundin' the house. Together, they revolve around you while pickin' up dust and droppin' pebbles to the ground.

"Janey! Janey!" I yell, but the wind is too loud. I think you're gonna be sucked into the sky when the fertile soil starts eatin' your feet. I can't move my own feet, like there are weights or somethin' holdin' me back. The earth grabs and claws at you, like it's starvin'. It's movin' so quickly that it's already up to your neck.

There's that creepin' smile again.

Your deep green eyes stare at me with the calmness of a sleepy faun at dusk.

"Everyone has his or her own way," is all I can mutter before your fingertips disappear beneath the earth. 

---

**Caroline Stern is a senior at New York University studying Sustainable Urban Environments and Creative Writing. Originally from Cleveland, Ohio, she plans on staying in NYC after she graduates in May. She loves to read and make maps.**

# Moonchild

By Jenny Butler

From the dark and secret depths of winter, you came. First, silver glints on the snow, and silver light intensifying into a ray. You emerged fully, wholly formed into an iridescent bubble within the ray of light, so beautiful in the surrounding darkness. Amid the scent of pine trees, sharp and sweet, the bubble slid down the light, burst as it touched the ground, and with a gentle thud on the flattened snow, you solidified, a coalescing of dreams and thoughtforms into your diminutive self. You came from a starless and lustrous blackness, a world where creation is different, a concave world that folds in upon itself in viscous waves, without spiralling out of dust and debris in spacious expanse.

You were conceived in a dream at twilight, a glimmer in my quivering eye, and your conception was at that point of day that becomes night. The nocturnal ceremony, a time of danger and delight, is what brought you forth. The required items were gathered, a baby's milk-white bone, containing marrow placed on the gossamer of spiderwebs, and wedding veils dipped in dew and the salt from my tears. Crumbled verbena leaves for success, and angelica for purification, both of which were used to cleanse you of the gulch in which you were begotten. I called to you in ritual incantations, and you heard me and saw the light ray, for you were a wholly different light, so bright and white, protruding while reaching bluntly into your black and glossy realm. You followed the light-ray out of your tar-like demesne and you came to me, the holder of the light, wielding it within my circle that was patted out in the clean white snow.

I'd dreamt about you, and perhaps you were in existence before I even made you. I thought, and therefore, you came to be, concepts sprung forth into the light of the world I inhabit, with intentionality in the dreaming. You are part-dream, but I can't know what you dream of, your tiny form in your bed of yarrow and dried moss, shuddering and restless. Did you have a part of you that travelled, exploring this new astral plane, or did you try, desperately, to squeeze your spirit-form through cracks in the walls to get back to your abysmal blackness?

When day became night, or night became day, you would be shaky and irritable, as if something was coming to pull you back in, but you resisted it. Though sexless, I always thought of you as a boy. There was something boyish in your face, waif-like and elfin. As any mother would, I showed you things, like glittering baubles that shimmered in the moonlight on the lake when I walked with you in my arms after midnight. On clear nights, we watched moths flying to the window with candles in their sights, thumping lightly against the skylight, and I explained that in confusion of their transverse orientation, they thought the candles were the moon. One night, a Luna Moth alighted on the window, which was open just a crack, looking like a crazed lime-green dancing fairy. With her antennae, she touched you, seeming to know you as a night-creature akin to her. We three looked at the size of the moon, or the size of the moon as it appeared to us.

With rapt attention, you watched small, strewn lights casting shadows, shaken glittering snow globes, gleaming glass beads in candlelight, and bright twinkling stars. Twinkle, twinkle, I am a star, made of stellar remnants, and you are of the cool and shining ooze. Your favorite, a shining lump of jet on the mantelpiece, with pale thin arms reaching for it, perhaps reminding you of home. To soothe you, dimmed lights, and swishing treacle on a stone floor, made pools of black into which you'd stick thin, pallid fingers. Naked (never cold), your black pupil-less glimmering eyes would stare up at me, with my Harp Seal eyes. The power of love, like magic, lasts in secrecy, and it is an energetic purity that is not sullied by the thoughts of others.

As you grew bigger, you became less tractable, and more wilful. In the ritual way, there were precise timings for your moonlight inception here, but once in the light of this world, your autonomy could not be subsumed by mine. The primordial time and space that was your home was expansive, like swimming into the depths of the ocean, and there were consequences to bringing you into the light. To bring into light one from the darkness is to release them into a new yet restrictive world, for there are startling bright dangers in this world that are not known in the soothing cool blackness of the abyss. Fascinated by my breath misting mirrors, you tried and tried but you could not do it, because there was no life-breath in you, just imitation of the movements. In your obliviousness of trying to get out in

daylight, you were frantically swinging from the door handle, pulling and clawing at the heavy window drapes. It took all my energy to keep you, a fragile and ethereal being, safe.

And when, a year and one day after your birth, it was time, you knew. The circle cast black ash on the snow once more, the ground opening like an earthquake, and a horrible shaking taking place. A new chant: black ash to black ash, stardust to stardust. You couldn't speak in words, but your face beseeched me, panic-stricken, with your small fingers grasping tightly at my dress, twining into and pulling my hair. You didn't want to go back. 

---

**Dr. Jenny Butler's writing is inspired by magic, myth, and the strangeness of life. She has had short stories published most recently on [Spillwords.com](http://Spillwords.com) and previously in “The Same Literary Journal,” “The Raven's Perch Literary Magazine,” “Fictive Dream Magazine,” “Literary Orphans Literary Magazine,” “Corvus Review,” “The Flexible Persona Literary Journal,” “Tales from the Forest Magazine,” “The Roaring Muse,” “Mulberry Fork Review,” “Killjoy Literary Magazine, Firefly,” “The Ginger Collect, Foliate Oak Literary Magazine,” “Flash Fiction Magazine,” and “81Word Story Challenge.” Her piece titled “Apophenia” was nominated for the Best Small Fictions Anthology 2018. You can read more about her on her website [www.drjennybutler.com](http://www.drjennybutler.com). You can also find her on Twitter [@jenny\\_butler\\_](https://twitter.com/jenny_butler_) and on Instagram [@spiral\\_eyed\\_grrl](https://www.instagram.com/spiral_eyed_grrl).**

Poetry



## Troubadours

By Robert Cole

Singing from an old French  
hymnal: Songbirds twitter from  
dream-holes, Voices as silly as  
sainthoods, In miserichords, in  
choirs, Old wish fulfilment,  
augmenting, A peasant's  
inventory, exploits On the field of  
battle, Placating Mars towering  
above, Evident good faith, The  
organ plays from the loft  
  
in sonata form, a fugue: piping  
gracenotes, Venus Urania perceived in the  
dust motes, Sunlight filters through  
hornbeams Frass & wormcasts coughing  
From the pipes Ossian airs Played on the  
chanter To eclipse of a platoon Taradiddle  
on a side drum: Solomon in all his glory  
Wasn't dressed in such a costume:  
  
Pulling out all the infantry: We are a  
peace-loving people, Wandering freely  
over fields of Asphodel From the North  
to the South We march through

rainstorm: Follow me will-o'-the wisp  
Looking over the shoulder of Yddragsil  
A raven wall-eyed, a white apparition,  
Returning to Rome with Boniface,  
Taken flight feathers from Noah's Ark

Rocking on Arrat a grieving army: A  
flock of lost sheep slaughtered from Sinai  
A wan hope troop picked off stragglers,  
Placating Mars towering above, A  
Saracen's head on a stave, The first  
crusade via the court of Roi Rene,  
Troubadours singing of martingales  
Praising ladies in their towers In the  
margins of Books of Hours Songbirds  
twitter from dream-holes

Of horn & ivory the passing fancy Borne from  
the netherworld Into the quietus of a choir The  
trickery of the avery Parakeets & popinjays  
playing the fool, Strict time signatures pricked  
out on parchment The bars of the dulcimer,  
the psaltery, Instruments are hidden in the  
sacristy, Toc H, wafer, & wine ready to  
sustain, the Knights Templar,

Mary mother of God ever pregnant: Songbirds  
twittering in the branches of a cherry tree, Pleasing to  
the choristers their voices cracked in a ring, Borne  
from the netherworld Persephone. 

---

**Robert Cole was born in London in 1951 and has since lived in India and Mexico. He now lives between Paris and Brittany. His poetry is published in literary magazines and journals in the UK and USA. Robert also has a number of poetry collections including “Spool” (Oversteps Books) and “Inheritance” (Mandeville Press).**

# Abandon Hope

By James Sale

*Abandon hope, ye who enter here – Dante*

Savage as it sounds: “Abandon Hope” –

Pandora’s box and one last good

When opened... open now: the door

Ahead before the darkest wood

Where letting go’s that one belief:

We could be saved, we might enjoy

Eternal life, the living Lord.

Instead, hopeless, this drowning buoy.

Death so final. To contemplate

Makes dizzy our dim intellect;

Let reason, then, revoke that thought –

All will be saved through Love’s pretext.

Ah, happy plan, but not real hope:

Just wishful thinking, saving face,

Denial at its most extreme –

For who can, steady, see the place

Where hopelessness assumes true form?

Can look upon gyrating shapes

In restless passions never still,

Lost in a maze where none escapes?

Abandon hope, you who enter,  
Who self-select, decide you will  
Take on the King of Heaven, and  
Be damned – who need pay their last bill?

It seems not hurtful while light lasts;

But how it fades at last, how fades!

The paradise of colour bleeds

And grey and greyer go the shades. 

---

**James Sale has been a writer for over 50 years, and has had over 30 books published, including 8 collections of poetry, as well as books from Macmillan/Nelson (The Poetry Show volumes 1, 2, 3), Pearson's/York Notes (Six Women Poets), and other major publishers (Hodder & Stoughton, Longmans, Folens', Stanley Thornes) on how to teach the writing of poetry. In 2017 he won 1<sup>st</sup> Prize in The Society of Classical Poets annual competition and one of his winning entries was subsequently republished in New York's The Epoch Times.**

## Frances Farmer... (Three Parts)

By Kevin Kiely



*Frances Farmer*

*Farmer (b. Seattle 1930) screen goddess and Hollywood maverick of the 1930s concealed her chaotic home life and radical politics which led to incarceration in a state mental asylum for five years, wrongfully diagnosed as 'insane.' William Arnold's biography Shadowland (1978) unveils the famous anti-establishment actress, her alcoholism, toxic parents, and the institution of Steilacoom, Washington where she endured rape, ECT, and a lobotomy. Arnold evokes Farmer possessing inspiration for the oppressed as an astonishing survivor, artist, writer, singer of the American Civil War ballad 'Aura Lee.' Will There Really Be a Morning (1970) is her harrowing autobiography.*

### **Frances Farmer: of Sorrows and Acquainted with Grief**

*Tells me tonight of Culver City, Venice Beach, Sunset,  
Yucca*

up the hills for the night drive and the long front  
seat

the boss in the penthouse tears off your  
silks

the usual freeway route to screen  
credits

we want a woman in a gown with a sweet  
ass

get a back-street abortion, keep it out of  
*Variety*

or get the bus back home

on down time, it was Mocambo like another movie  
set:

smokers drinking to find laughter and the smoky table-  
lamps

like smouldering fires

Frances, if you really had the unwanted, unloved  
childhood

show us that pain, we can light you better and you gotta  
cry

better, then sing

stare into the painted smelling scenery, it's no  
good

try it again, remember those folks who buy  
tickets

we can shoot a car scene all night, we have the people on the  
payroll

we can fix the dialogue but the box  
office

### **Frances Farmer: So You Wanna Be In Pictures**

*To be alone is to believe no footsteps will approach your  
door*

*and grief-school opens with exercises in self-  
pity*

*sorrows arrive with the magpies and the  
rain*

*the streetlights glare through the wire-glass  
panels*

*the plain room is a danger zone*

*come in and sing Aura Lee while you hold a glass of  
wine*

*sing it for me, I promise you no conflict, no  
argument*

*I want to hear your every word*

*Frances, so you didn't want to be in those  
pictures*

*the movie titles burlesque and mock your life  
story*

*Exclusive*

*Rhythm on the Range*

*Too Many Parents*

*The Toast of New York*

*Ebb Tide*

*Ride a Crooked Mile*

*Among the Living*

*The Party Crashers*

*No Escape*

*but you had to lick the academy of motion  
pictures*

*in Makeup they pluck eyebrows, in Wardrobe the  
carpenters*

*and paintshop boys peek, flirt and tug your slinky  
robe*

*It's a circus Frances, an assembly line, the pretence to  
sing*

*through the 1930s; what is an actress but a clothes  
hanger*

*arts gratia artis on a napkin for the  
ashtray*

*And your Chaplinesque sob-story family  
plotline:*

*the harridan mother Lauren, and the scared-off, sly runaway  
Pa*

*a recipe for melodrama without a drop of  
Shakespeare*

## **Frances Farmer Under Committal and The Last Act**

cut to the asylum like any prison set and you can forget the Hayes  
Code

roll up for the hydro-baths, locked up for hours or days, the cast of  
loonies

real sound turned up, no special effects, no  
script

Dr Freeman wields lobotomy tools, shock-treatment with Dr  
Frankenstein

orderlies hosing you down or whatever they desire or  
take

and you encountered the self that the artist is always  
watching

watching you failing to live, so you knew this diverse-  
converse

of the twins on the same journey, not always  
parallel

two bottles of Scotch on bad days, cold food growing a  
fungus

on the greasy plate because reading Dr Jung makes  
sense

*alcohol is spiritual for the untenanted*

what a finale: tricked as the carer for unfaithful  
parents

released from Steilacoom insane after being stamped  
insane

uncommitted while previously committed

by parental legal seal and  
signature

the afternoon TV show, the Ford Edsel for  
appearing

on This is Your Life like an asylum  
matron

just time to write the memoir with a pallid Emily Dickinson  
poem

narrative of unremitting pain, unforgotten drunk-driving  
charges

from the ever present past, police cells, court  
appearances

lover after lover, marriages and  
divorces

as publicity and career profile

cut to a domestic swimming pool, some good  
neighbors

the last lover (female), and to do death solo off  
camera 

---

**Kevin Kiely is a poet, novelist, literary critic, raconteur, and Fulbright Scholar. He has a PhD in Modernist Poetry from UCD. A few of his publications include “Quintesse” St Martin's Press New York, 1985; “A Horse Called El Dorado” (O'Brien Press, 2005); “Breakfast with Sylvia” (Lagan Press, 2006); and, “Francis Stuart: Artist and Outcast Official Biography” (Liffey Press, 2007; Revised Edition, 2017). More of his work can be found at: [www.kevinkiely.net](http://www.kevinkiely.net)**

# Captivity

By Dick Bentley

I was welcomed here.  
This room, clear, golden  
And dark as a medieval chamber,  
Is love on an autumn night.  
The fresh perfume of some lotion,  
The dark hair and pale and  
Hardly visible face,  
And the lace of reflected street lamps  
Across the ceiling  
Scored by window frames  
And the folds of curtains.  
The perfect unburdening of disappointment  
Into tenderness. The perfect response  
Of one body answering the other,  
And the slow journey  
Toward that captivation of our senses,  
Into that country  
Whose mountains seem alien and overwhelming  
Tinted peach at sunset  
Vast presences seen and unseen.  
And then,  
Sweet sleep. 

---

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

# Winter's Coming

By Neetu Malik

November draws me  
into bleak arms

I wonder where the leaves  
have gone--

though I know, yet I walk in  
nameless hope  
of miracle  
in this ghastly fog

so dense, so deep that  
I am lost

stepping on crumbled  
autumn stalks

I remember your face  
with wisdom drawn,  
how it still shone  
after its light was robbed

but now there's just me,  
the part that's left of your artery

the purple sunset a reminder  
of approaching dark,

who I am and how

mortal we are. 

---

**Neetu's poetry is an expression of life's rhythms and the beat of the human spirit. She draws upon diverse multicultural experiences and observations across three continents in which she has lived. She has contributed to "The Australia Times Poetry Magazine," "October Hill Magazine," "Prachya Review," among others. Her poems have appeared in "The Poetic Bond Anthology V and VI" published by "Willowdown Books, UK," "NY Literary Magazine's Tears Anthology" and "Poetic Imagination Anthology (Canada)."**

# The Malevolent Angel

By Joe Cusack

She lives at the edge of the field

Breath on your face, the end of the world.

Stale lace shrouded in a wisp's knurl

Tree-lined ways, a charmed curl

Waits at the break in the road,

Draped in locks, her coils unfold.

Fragrance entices a fool's gold

Inherently morbid, a fervent soul.

Dew floats tentacled with angled aim,

Shonky foothold, you're taken away

To where no one can hear you

with death your bride

Handheld tight and swathed in lies.

She lives at the edge of the field

Wraith presence throughout your days

Her cold breath maps a privet maze

Vaulted rooms high, filled with space

And shackled joy bears pain with grace.

Strokes the back of your neck, poised to infect.

Just around the corner, the always corner

Beyond your grasp - your fingertip touch.

Misty blur lies cold across the ground,

Frosted folds fall numbed on muffled sounds.

Beyond your grasp and outstretched reach,

Feathered hex will pulled sinews deep.

Fractious loins fuel neurotic harm

Taken from shelter for violent charm.

Damp soil with layered winter air,

Pulls strings of honest fear

Rolls dice with chancers care,

Devours futures in decaying lair.

Underground and covered in earth

Buried futures beneath the turf.

Enveloped across, gulped apart

Depart your leanings as a captured heart.

And skewered insides with nowhere to start.

She lives at the edge of the field

Around the always corner,

beyond your fingers reach, out of sight

Leaves notes in your pocket at peripheral light.

Knowing, fearing, a warmth, a care;

Fingers delicate through your ruffled hair

Red lips mist on your warmed face,

Red lines drip the pristine lace.

To earth and soil, to flesh encased.

She lives at the edge of the field

Waits and holds her whispered screams

And hovers perpetuate in your dream,

Forced and feint, covers everywhere

She touches your things when you're not there,

Baits a promise with a malignant prayer.

She lives at the edge of the field

Just around the always corner

On the tip of your tongue.

Whispered tales from eunuch males

And daisy chains pressed in decaying entrails.

Footprints lead to a dark tree line,

Inner calm shields hidden skies.

The malevolent angel grinds its teeth,  
Sharpened intent for a faithless leap  
to a disordered pattern of lines and queues  
Lost near the edge, just out of view.  
The ethereal rumour that raptures all takers,  
Forced to accept, Battered and shaken.

Glance fleets instant as she passes you by,  
Cold shudder ripples throughout your insides

She lives at the edge of the field

She sits and waits. 

---

**Joe Cusack has worked primarily as a journalist and ghost writer for various publications such as the “Daily Mail” and “Chat Magazine.” He resides in the United Kingdom.**

## Still, Not Spring

By Juliette Sebock

All too often,  
it seems like people forget  
that Valentine's Day is  
still in wintertime.

I guess it's because it's so  
long after the "real" winter holidays,  
tucked well into the new year with its  
promises of love and dinner by candlelight.

Still,  
we often get snow on Valentine's Day,  
White flakes falling on red hearts  
like the coconut filling from chocolates in a pink and white box.

Still,  
people drink champagne,  
not mulled wine, not cocoa,  
and toast to their romance or lack thereof.

Snow is lovely  
and so is the day of love. 

---

**Juliette Sebock is the author of "Mistakes Were Made," a poetry chapbook, and has appeared in publications such as "Cauldron Anthology" and "Royal Rose Mag." She is the editor-in-chief of "Nightingale & Sparrow," an online literary magazine, and runs a lifestyle blog, For the "Sake of Good Taste."**

# One by One They Stacked the Men

By J.C. Peeples

One by One, they stacked the men  
Each lived in luxury  
Upon the bones of rusted frames,  
Displacing poverty.

Two by Two, the poor all fled  
There was nowhere else to go—  
The wolves disguised their gilded plans,  
Presented by a speaker's bureau.

I reject the modern cause,  
It does not fool me  
2018—common men are watched,  
The clockround eyes of the enemy.

Three by three, let's leave in groups  
Until we find hidden land,  
The home of peaceful tribesmen  
Finally welcome us in.

Onward! Upward! Launch the rest,  
The force will leave the universe  
While the landlocked angels wake from sleep,  
They greet the four of us. 

---

**J.C. Peeples' work, mostly journalistic, has been published in the "Manhattan Times," "Bronx Free Press," "Education Update," and "REsident Magazine." He lives in Queens, NY, but grew up in central Texas. J.C. is currently inspired by the life of David Thoreau and Emily Dickinson and is exploring new ways to write sustainably and holistically.**

# Gigs

By John Grey

The final set  
is the longest,  
the weariest.

The crowd has dissipated,  
bartenders stop hustling,  
just the drunken losers remain.  
Whatever they've been drinking,  
you feel in your head.

All that they've lost  
you taste in the smoke.

You slow down the mood,  
the modulation,  
deepen it like the dark outside.  
And, every now and then,  
even the scattered stiff  
get into it.

But mostly you find a sound  
that's just about you,  
a cry of pain sweetened,  
a joy that settles blissfully

into a long careening solo,  
and it doesn't matter  
if nobody claps  
when you're done.

Then lights dim,  
noise fades,  
you pack up your gear,  
and move on out into the street alone.

You collapse on the bed,  
sleep until midday,  
and then do it all again.

What else is there?  
Even brushing your teeth,  
cool lips blow a corresponding instrument. 

---

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

# With No Tears

By Munia Khan

I  
see  
a ray  
of star  
falling away  
It crawls through  
the unwanted sadness  
on a dark maze surface  
and tries to conceal the dents  
I start to feel the tepid warmth of  
the hollowed - out sorrow running  
down the thin pale skinned cheeks  
that can only taste the salty water  
Every drop, in the name of love  
and in your name satisfies  
the thirsty dents. And I  
weep with no tears 

---

**Munia Khan is a poet and short story writer, born on a spring night of 15th March. She is the author of three poetry collections: “Beyond The Vernal Mind” (Published from USA, 2012), ; “To Evince The Blue” (Published from USA, 2014),and “Versified” (Published from Tel Aviv, Israel, 2016) Her first ever non-fiction book, “Attainable,” will be released in Winter 2018 by Motivational Press, CA.**

## Fatal Attraction

By Slava Olchevski

Bubbles are rising to the top of my glass  
Your eyes are on me. If you want, I undress  
I feel your desire, just under the surface  
You want me to get drunk, no wonder, on purpose

The night is still young, the Moon's getting full  
I am waiting, my prince, my darling, my fool  
You whispered the words of love in my ear  
Be brave, don't give up, my dear, my dear...

I'm your Terra Incognita, so go on your quest  
You touched the right places, please, be my guest  
You are my knight, I'm your dame in distress  
I will dress your wounds, I will kiss and caress

The moths are attracted by a bright shining light  
They are eager to die... and that is all right  
I will die for you, for the night full of passion  
My darling, my fool, you - my fatal attraction. 

---

**Slava Olchevski writes rhyming poetry on contemporary topics, mostly of satirical and humorous nature. Never published, she works in I.T. She is mostly interested in invention, poetry, and treasure hunting. Slava lives in Northern Virginia and is married with two daughters.**

# Tracing Paper Whispers

By Stephen Mead

Smudges-----

There's some kind of music coming through-----

Those shapes, tones, erasures

of outlines & now,

how these fingers,

color-smearred, breathe pastels...

I didn't know the flesh could sing within

onion skin; had never dreamt of the possibilities

voice-rich & ladling images air sheer...

Drawn forth, here's an orchestra:

brass sapphire, ruby sandalwood & deep green

burnished streams

growing glaze clear across

layers of hues freshly startled by this

composed

angel fire. 

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



Finding at last his old flat intact still  
despite nightmares  
he passed two old women on the ground floor  
huddled around a small fire in a brazier  
and he scented the death of books  
in their smoke  
spotting a spine curling into brief incandescence.

One woman said to the other

*Have you heard? The Hermitage is open again.*

Something in the name and the memories it bore  
turned him around and he limped out again  
into the snow  
finding his way there  
through the great doors  
stepping up those curving stairs

into hall after hall

of empty frames

some lying broken

others leaning against walls

defiant.

As a young woman emerged from the gloom  
shadowed in a coat too large  
he wiped moisture from his eyes.

*Do you remember this?* she said  
pointing to a space on the wall.

At first nothing came  
and he leaned on his stick his phantom leg cramping  
bringing sweat to his brow.

*Canaletto's busy harbour on a warm Venetian day,*  
the woman said and that world rose before his eyes  
until he could almost feel the heat.

He smiled and gazed at the next wall.

*And over there, he said, that field of wheat.*

She nodded taking his arm and moving on.

*Here was Judith with her sword*

*and the head of Holofernes. How I wish I had her guts.*

He chuckled. *Just there, he hobbled closer*

*A Stag at bay. So much detail for the death of a beast.*

*Let's forget Breughel's snow scenes, she said, with a shiver.*

*And I don't want to remember Still Lives with poultry, fruit and lobster.*

She groaned. *My stomach wouldn't stand it.*

*Here, he said, Do you remember the young Napoleon?*

*That sharp jaw and eyes?*

*An invader safely dead.*

*And Empress Catherine, he said. She reminded me of my grandma.*

The young woman laughed. *I had a teacher once, like her.*

They moved on again until he sighed

*And here was my favourite. A girl with bronze ringlets*

*and sad far distant eyes. Just like my...*

*She's still here, the young woman said. They're all still here.*

*You're right, he cried grabbing her arm. As long as someone remembers.*

Hearing their voices other souls joined them  
touring the empty halls telling their own stories  
pinning back memory piece by piece  
until someone said

*I've never had such fun in this museum before.*

Laughter broke out in clouds from frozen lungs

and the tours went on with changing faces

the air-raids                      and the artillery

were just echoes of a passing storm. 

---

**Duncan Richardson is a writer of fiction, poetry, haiku, radio drama, and educational texts. He teaches English as a Second Language part-time, in Brisbane, Australia.**

# Highland Girl

By Aria Ligi

O' Highland girl where art thou  
Out within the meadow, dancing in kilt and corn  
A flowering maiden ner forlorn.

O' Highland girl, brightest dower.  
Yee tore a blaze  
A perihelion slicing thru the maze.

And netted verse, Plato er Milton  
Descending into sweetest Italian.  
A conversazione at first recondite.  
A meteor sparking and daubing the air  
Then dipping the sheets with thyr polemic fare.

O' Highland girl the corn in the meadow  
Woven kilt adorned,  
Thou art a praeternatural Phenom.

O' Highland girl Yee art a Literal balm!  
Flush the fields,  
Animate and wield the horn o' the poet's invincible song! 

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**Aria Ligi has been writing poetry for over forty years. “Temple of Love” and “Blood, Bone and Stone” are two of her works. Publications include: Z Publication’s “New York’s Best Emerging Poets” anthology, “Light Journal,” and “The Australian Times.” She is a frequent guest on Progressive News Network’s “Blog Talk Radio.”**

**Thank you for reading.**



*Illustration by Dominique Marchi*

**We hope you enjoyed our Winter 2018 Issue “Love in Wintertime”**