



October Hill

M A G A Z I N E



Volume 3, Issue 4

Welcome to October Hill Magazine



This Winter issue marks a very special time for us. It completes our third year as a literary publication. It also provides an opportunity for us to look back and to reflect on our humble beginnings and ambitious dreams, and an opportunity to look forward toward expanding our footprint in the literary marketplace.

At *October Hill*, we also believe that our success has validated our mission to provide a platform for new and aspiring authors. Unlike many literary publications, we do not maintain a simple Pass/Fail — Accept/Reject — policy on submissions. Our short story editors — Selin Tekgurler, Kaitlynn Berg and Brittany Green — have worked very hard with many, many authors to revise, improve and raise their submissions to a level worthy of publication. Our poetry editors — including Nick Pagano and accomplished poetry author, Aria Ligi — have put their skills to work refining and polishing the poetry submissions of many new authors prior to publication of their works. They have done a marvelous job!

On the social media front, Jen Curran has recently joined Dominique Marchi to bring new social media outreach to the literary market on behalf of *October Hill*. They continue to bring new ideas to the table and to our potential readers and authors.

But no message of recognition would be complete without recognition of our managing editor, Samantha Morley, who orchestrates and refines our editorial and production processes, keeps us all on track, and inspires us all to embrace new initiatives. Speaking of new initiatives, we're working hard to bring some important new initiatives to fruition in 2020. And, while it may be premature to announce them, it suffices to say that such initiatives will raise our publication to a higher pinnacle of success in the literary marketplace. That is why we feel confident that our best years are yet to come.

Richard Merli *Editorial Director*

Samantha Morley *Managing Editor*

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

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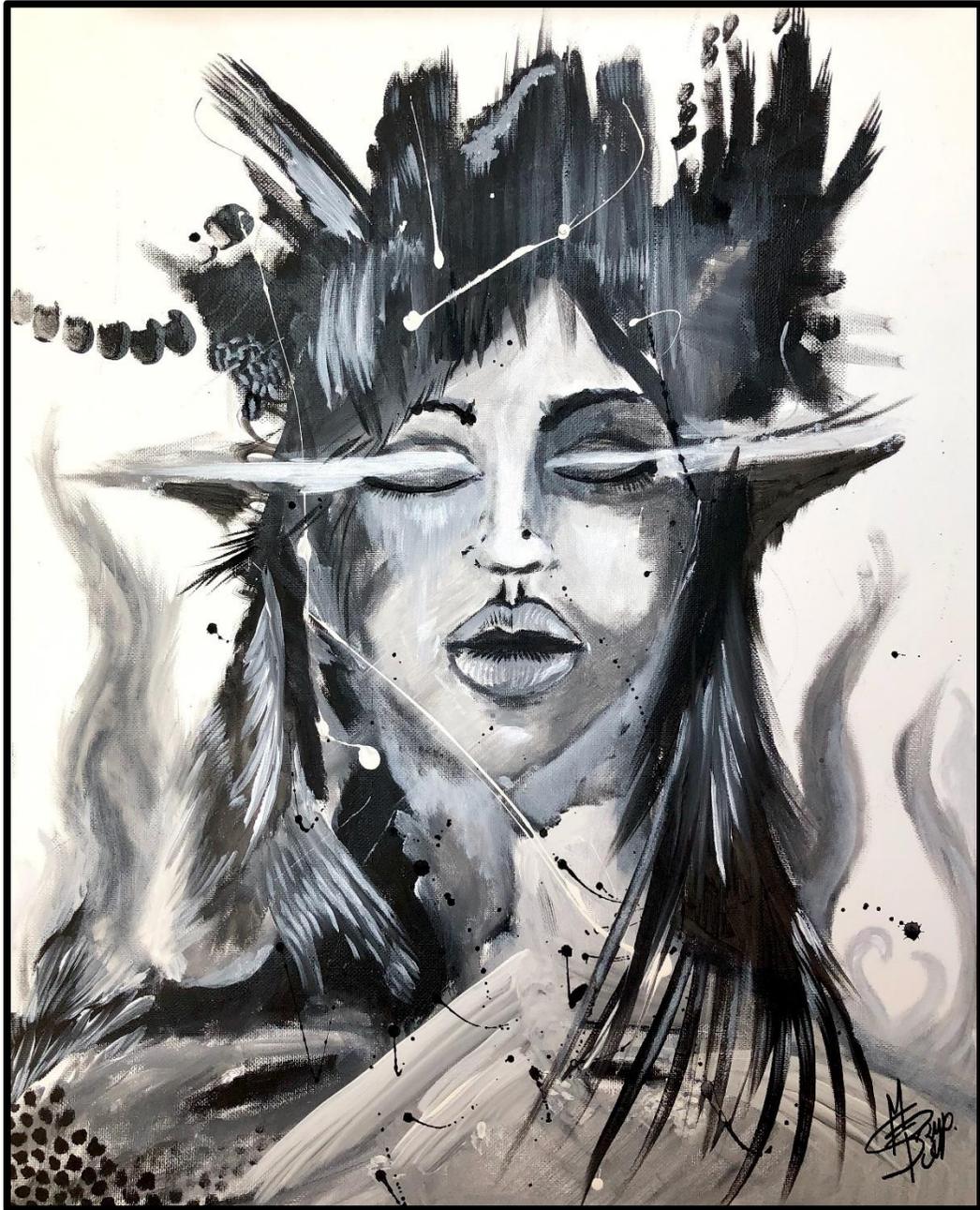


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Fiction



By Mara Szyp

The Faith Healer

By Anne Whitehouse

During that winter in the 1980s, the New York City subways broke down frequently. I was living with my husband in an apartment on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. I noticed that the problems affected the whole system because I commuted all over the city for my job. I was conducting residencies in the public schools for an artists' organization. I spent one day of the week at an elementary school in the Bronx and another at an elementary school in Brooklyn. Just after the first of the year, I began a program at a junior high school out in Massapequa, Long Island.

I got up early, especially on the days that I went to Long Island. The apartment was dark. Nervous that I would oversleep, I usually awoke before the clock radio's alarm and turned it off so as not to wake my husband. He was in graduate school. He stayed up late at night studying and slept late in the mornings. After I got out of bed, I made coffee in the cold kitchen and drank it while I dressed by the hall light. I arranged my teaching materials in my canvas shoulder bag, put on my coat, and left with a subway token ready in my palm. I always tried not to have to wait in line at the booth in the mornings.

I was amazed by the sea of people who flooded Penn Station at seven a.m. I was going against the prevailing tide, out of the city rather than into it, and it was difficult to get from the subway into the station.

After I boarded the train, I relaxed. The train was pretty empty and dirty. At first, I read the newspaper, and then I closed my eyes and dozed a little. I had the railroad timetable in my hand. The conductor called out the long list of towns where the train stopped, but then he neglected to announce each stop. When it got near the time for my arrival, I had to keep alert enough to read the signs on the station platforms. From the Massapequa station, I had to take a cab to the junior high school.

That was how I met Brother Bob on my first day. He was also waiting for a cab, and there was only one.

He was a short, stocky, light-skinned black man. A gray fuzz covered the back of his head, and its top was bald and shiny. When he turned around, I saw that he wore glasses and was dressed in a suit and an overcoat. I thought at once that he had a mild face, and that's why I asked him if he minded sharing the cab, though he was technically ahead of me in line. "That is, if we're going in the same general direction," I said. "I'm not sure where the junior high school is. But if I don't get this cab, I'm bound to be late for my first class."

"I'm willing," he said. "I think it's not far." He had a West Indian accent. "I'm going to the prayer meeting in the Arena. We have them every Wednesday morning."

I didn't know what he was talking about. But since he agreed to share the cab, I decided to leave it up to our driver. We were both wearing bulky coats, and it took a few minutes for us both to settle into the backseat. I used the opportunity to quickly study his face. I guessed that he was about sixty, but his face was surprisingly unlined.

We told the driver our destinations. "Which is first?" I asked.

"The school is last."

"That's okay. I'm glad to be in the car. It's freezing on those platforms."

We pulled away from the station. I told myself to pay attention to the route, and then forgot to. My companion was speaking to me.

"Yes ma'am, every Wednesday morning, the sick and the weak in spirit come to our meetings, and they get cured. I minister to the afflicted. I have the power."

I looked at him, this time openly. The light coming in through the cab windows was white and bleak. Behind the lenses of his glasses, his eyes were magnified. He spoke without urgency, his expression steady and calm. He seemed absolutely assured of himself.

"You mean, you're a faith healer?" I asked.

"That I am. They call me Brother Bob from Barbados."

We drove through a commercial district of shops and businesses and made a series of turns. I clutched my bulky shoulder bag in my lap. Brother Bob sat elegantly, his hands folded in his lap. I wondered if he would try to convert me. He wasn't anything like the Jehovah's Witnesses who regularly rang my doorbell or the self-proclaimed prophets I often heard on the crowded avenues who screamed of doom to passersby. He didn't seem to need anything from me.

"How do you do it?" I asked him.

He didn't answer at first. Then slowly he began, "I don't know. It's God's energy and grace coming through me. I sense trouble in people. It's a gift, and I'm an instrument to help them. There it is," he said, interrupting his explanation. "You can let me off here," he advised the cab driver. "Then you don't have to go around."

I saw a large ugly building with a big parking lot half full of cars and a sign out front like a movie marquee with removable letters. They advertised the "Evangelical Church Prayer Meeting." Brother Bob gave me two dollars, his half of the fare. "Have a nice day," he said to me. Coming from him, it really sounded like a wish.

The junior high school was ugly, too, in a similar 1960s style. The secretary in the office directed me to the faculty lounge, where she said I could hang up my coat. The lounge was crowded with teachers, and it was smokey and loud. I overheard the teachers teasing each other, complaining and gossiping about their students. They were so engrossed in their conversations that they didn't seem to notice me, and I felt too shy to introduce myself. I had a creative writing residency, which meant I visited this school once a week over a ten-week period. I worked with the classroom teachers in two eighth-grade classes and one seventh-grade class. One of the eighth grades was "accelerated." Except for that class, I found my students hard to motivate. They knew how to read and write, but

they didn't want to. When I tried to initiate discussions about life and literature, I had to struggle to persuade them to participate. I was surprised by how little curiosity they expressed about the world outside Massapequa, or even about each other. Their imaginations seemed cut-off and perishing. By and large, the whole experience was tiring and thankless; and on my way home, I realized that my encounter with Brother Bob had been the brightest spot.

"You know, he didn't even try to convert me," I told my husband that night.

"I'm sure he didn't know you're Jewish," my husband said.

"No, and I'm not going to tell him. In New York, people don't usually guess I'm Jewish because of my southern accent. But still, he knew I wasn't an Evangelical, and he didn't try out any of the usual speeches. Not a word about Jesus dying for my sins. You know, I think he's really nice. There's a reassuring quality about him."

"I find it hard to believe that he actually heals people," said my husband.

"Yeah, I guess I do, too."



But the next week, as I got off the train in Massapequa, I found myself looking out for Brother Bob on the train platform, and not just because I wanted to save the two dollars. I glimpsed him from the back, wide-bodied and short, walking ahead of me. Hurrying, I caught up with him on the staircase leading down to the taxi stand.

"Hi," I said. "Hi, Brother Bob."

"Well, it's you." He smiled. "I wondered if I would see you again."

"How are you?"

"Thank God, I'm fine. And yourself?" he inquired politely.

"All right. Do you want to share a cab again?"

"I'm agreeable."

"How was the prayer meeting last week?" I asked him when we got into the cab.

"So many hurt, sick souls needing help. So many injured in body and mind. It's our times." He shook his head gravely. "So much evil. We're drawing more and more of the afflicted to us. I live in Brooklyn, but I go all over, and this is our biggest meeting. There's no end to the work. In fact, we're hoping to televise these meetings," he confessed eagerly.

"Really?" This news, which thrilled him, didn't thrill me, but in fact tarnished the image that I'd been forming of him. For the first time, I felt let down. I wondered if this would-be television minister was like all the rest of them.

"What a wonderful way to reach people, to really enter into their homes," he expounded, oblivious of my unspoken disapproval.

"Are you going to cure people over television?"

He replied seriously, ignoring the irony in my voice. "No, I can't. That requires the personal touch. But television is a tool, a way to bring people to us whom we otherwise wouldn't reach."

"Yes, I'm sure that's true."

Maybe he was a fake, maybe he was for real. I didn't know, but I cared enough for the rapport that we had established not to want to challenge or antagonize him. Yet the idea of television publicity and the contributions that would undoubtedly be needed to pay for it made me more suspicious of his beatific smile, and I wondered how much self-satisfaction was behind his humility.

I wondered what the prayer meetings were like, if the worshippers carried on, crying and wailing and working themselves up into frenzies. I wondered what he did to cure the sick. I pictured people coming up to him in wheelchairs. He put his hands on them, and then they got up and walked away. Perhaps some people came with boils or disfigurements, which instantly disappeared when he touched them. Let's say I didn't really believe in him, and yet part of me wanted to. I felt curious and half-afraid to see him in action.

I also wondered if the congregations attracted to these meetings were all black, and where they came from. There were very few blacks at the junior high school, maybe one or two in a class. In fact, a train conductor punching my ticket had told me the town was locally referred to as "Matzohpizza," and it was true that most of the kids I taught were Jewish or Italian. It seemed an odd location for an evangelical church.



By the third week, I felt that I was settling into a routine. I recognized the cleaning lady in the women's restroom in Penn Station, and I remembered from which window to purchase my round-trip ticket. I looked forward to sharing a cab with Brother Bob, but I didn't see him on the platform in Massapequa. I was surprised by how much I missed him. While I was the only passenger, the cab driver followed a different route to the junior high school without passing the Arena. The drive was shorter, only about five minutes.



The following week, it was snowing heavily when I woke up. I let the radio play, turning the dial anxiously, until I found a deejay announcing that the Nassau County schools were open. I considered going back to bed anyway, and then getting up in an hour to call the school and cancel, but I was already half-dressed. I thought about how we needed the money and decided to go ahead.

It was so early that the sidewalk to the subway hadn't been shoveled yet. The falling snow was gritty, stinging my eyes like ice or sand. After one stop, the subway broke down. For half an hour, we were stuck in the tunnel before Ninety-Sixth Street. I was grateful I had a seat, but it was still horrible. The subway car was filthy, and it stank. Its walls were covered with graffiti. Wearing their heaviest winter coats, people were crammed together so closely that I felt like I could hardly breathe.

My heart raced with annoyance. The minutes crawled. There was no explanation of the delay. I glanced at my watch. I'd missed my train. I knew that everyone else was also thinking about being late. We were all anxious and helplessly resigned. I tried to calm myself. There was nothing I could do about it. The engine wheezed, and I saw the other passengers' hopeful expressions. Then the engine died. More minutes passed. I felt faint and sick. Finally, after another wheeze, the subway started, and like a wounded animal, in fits and starts, it lunged downtown.

At Penn Station, I considered going home, but decided against it. I'd already come so far, I reasoned, and if the next train was on time, I'd only miss one of my classes. Because I had already made the effort, I didn't want to give up now.

By the time we got to Massapequa, the platform was covered by a thick layer of snow. I left my footprints in it. Again, there was no Brother Bob. Perhaps he had already arrived on the earlier train, I speculated, or maybe he wasn't planning to come at all. A bitterly cold wind blew across the platform, cutting through my heavy coat. The surrounding streets were almost deserted. Not a taxi was in sight.

Down at the taxi stand, the dispatcher told me that I'd have to wait half an hour for a cab.

"I can't believe it." I turned my face, so he wouldn't see me burst into tears. I had tried so hard! Against my better judgment, I'd come so far, and now I had failed. I would miss my first two classes. I was worried that I wouldn't get paid, that I'd have to make up for this day. I'd already spent so much money commuting, and it was wasted.

In this state of mind, I called the junior high school from a phone booth. The receiver was as cold as ice against my ear. The edge of my voice was ragged with tears as I begged the secretary to find out if a teacher was free in the lounge, who could come pick me up, so at least I could teach part of my second class. Hearing my desperation, the secretary complied, and about ten minutes later,

Lois Sherkin, the teacher of the "accelerated" class, the one I'd already missed, pulled up to the station. She was the nicest teacher I worked with.

I thanked her profusely. "I really appreciate this. I feel terrible about missing your class. When I found out I had to wait so long for a cab after all that I've already been through this morning, I started to cry."

"Relax, you're here now, so don't worry about it." She was kind, and I realized that I'd be paid, even though I had barely enough time to give my second class an assignment, and I had to tell Lois what I wanted her class to do in my absence. My third class was usually the dullest, and today was no exception. They weren't even enlivened by the snow.

I chalked the day up to experience. I decided that, the next time it snowed, I'd play it smart, stay home, and make up the day later. I realized that I was always trying harder than people seemed to expect or even want. I wasted my energy in efforts that didn't matter.

But at least I'd be paid, I thought. That was the important thing. We were so poor that every dollar counted. My husband was a full-time student, and my artist residencies in schools were limited. I wasn't always sure when I'd receive more work. On the following Monday, I withdrew a hundred dollars from our joint checking account, hoping that I could make it last the entire week. I went straight from the bank to the grocery store. I felt a little nervous, carrying so much cash, but I needed to shop, and I didn't want to make two trips. I spent twenty dollars and came out of the store with two heavy bags of groceries, the maximum I could handle by myself. The snow had melted, but the weather was still chilly and damp, and the wind was blowing. I was in a hurry to go home.

I didn't notice the man right behind me when I unlocked the front door to my building. Without realizing it, I let him into the lobby. It was eleven o'clock in the morning, and except for us, the lobby was empty.

"Who do you know in this building?" I asked as soon as I saw him. We were both just inside the front door.

"I'm visiting my cousin."

"Oh." I was suspicious of him, but not scared. He was a tall black man, not young, maybe in his late thirties. He was neatly dressed in khaki pants and a windbreaker. Like me, he carried two grocery bags. I thought to myself, *He could be telling the truth.* I've seen a couple of black people in the building. Because I wasn't scared, but suspicious, I forced myself to discount my suspicion. Having grown up in the South during the Civil Rights era, I'd witnessed racism all my life. *People are always being unfair to blacks,* I thought. I forced myself to walk across the lobby, and he followed me. I pressed the button for the elevator; its door opened, I stepped inside, and he came in after me. The door closed. Even before he pulled the knife on me, I knew that I had made a grave mistake because after I pushed the button for four, he pushed three. I knew that no black person lived on the third floor.

The knife was a switchblade. He poked its end at my side. "You think you're so smart," he said. "I want your money."

He was much taller than me, and the elevator was small. I wasn't looking at his face, but at the knife. I never doubted that I would give him my money, but it was taking me time to react. I felt hypnotized by the knife.

"I'm crazy," he said. "I could do anything."

"Don't worry, I want to live." Before I spoke, I didn't realize what I was going to say. I must have dropped the groceries, though I have no recollection of it. I got out the wallet from my purse. He did not snatch it from me. I opened it. I think all this took no more than a few seconds, yet it seemed to me to be happening in slow motion, in which I realized with surprise that he was as frightened as I was. Inside the billfold part of the wallet, I had also accumulated bank receipts and

sales slips. I reached for my money, and then I did something that was maybe crazy. I guess I just couldn't stand the idea of giving him all of it. I withdrew three crisp, uncreased twenty-dollar bills fresh from the bank. I kept one back.

He took them from my hand. Our fingers grazed each other. His head was far above me, and I still didn't look at his face. He didn't ask for my wallet or my wedding ring or my watch. Sixty dollars was more than I usually had on me, and maybe it was more than what he expected to take. I was wearing jeans. I didn't look too rich.

Later, it seemed unbelievable to me that all this happened in the interval that it took to go from the first to the third floor. It seemed to me that the whole time I was mostly thinking about the knife.

The elevator stopped, and the door opened. He stepped out. "You better not scream," he threatened.

"I won't."

He snapped back the switchblade, and he disappeared. I remained in the elevator while the door closed. He'd left his shopping bags behind. I saw that they were full of garbage.

I got out on the fourth floor, but I didn't go to my apartment. Instead, I rang the service elevator. Ramón, the porter, brought it up. I burst into tears of relief when I saw him. "I've just been mugged," I said.

While I waited in the laundry room in the basement, Ramón went out to call the police from a payphone in the street. Two policemen arrived quickly. I left my groceries in the basement with Ramón while I went with the policemen to the precinct.

I filled in forms, answered questions, and looked at photographs, but I didn't recognize my mugger. Though I doubted that he would be caught, I felt that I ought to cooperate as much as I could. As I did what was asked of me, I thought to myself, *I'm really very lucky*. I wasn't hurt; all I

lost was sixty dollars; and I still had my wallet with all my credit cards and my driver's license and my Blue Cross-Blue Shield card. I even managed to keep back some money, and that's like a secret triumph. *Really*, I told myself, *it's not so bad*. Yet when I remembered how the mugger had said, "I'm crazy, I could do anything," my breath failed me, because I was thinking about how it could have been.

I met the officer assigned to my case who gave me his card. "If you ever need to reach me, call me at this number," he said, "day or night. If I'm not here, someone else will be."

"Thank you," I said. I suddenly felt exhausted. I took a cab home from the precinct, a definite luxury in those penny-pinching days. The same busy streets I saw all the time now seemed fraught with hidden dangers. I relived the events of the mugging. I wondered if he had followed me from the bank. *No, he couldn't have*, I decided, for I'd spent so long in the grocery store. On the other hand...

My imagination wouldn't stop. I saw mothers wheeling strollers on the sidewalks, and I wondered how they could stand to be so exposed. *What if I had had a child with me?* I thought, my nerves racing. Now terrors swept over me, but I was glad that I had remained calm in the elevator. I realized that my fear and surprise must have numbed me.

Ramón had kept my groceries in the cold basement for me, and they were still salvageable. Profusely, I thanked him for helping me. After I went home, I didn't leave my apartment.

I couldn't reach my husband at school. He was either in class or in the studio. That night, when I told him what had happened, I cried. He took me in his arms and cried with me.

"It makes me so furious that something like this could happen to you, and I wouldn't be there to protect you."

"But how can you protect me all the time? No one can."

"I know. I feel so powerless."

"I do, too."

The next day, I didn't have to teach, and I didn't want to leave the apartment. I stayed in, and my husband called regularly. But I needed to shop at the fruit stand, and I said to myself, *This is ridiculous*. It won't hurt me to go two blocks.

It was about four o'clock in the afternoon, and a lot of people were out. I bought a carton of milk and some vegetables and left the fruit stand. I was waiting for the light to cross the street when I spotted him, my mugger, from a block and a half away. He was standing in front of the drug store on the ground floor of my building, smoking a cigarette. I wasn't close enough to see his features; I recognized him from his clothes. He was wearing the same clothes as yesterday.

Instantly, I felt adrenaline surge through me. In a second, I was trembling with nerves. I saw a phone booth nearby past the corner. It was empty. I dialed 911. After I poured out my story, I was told that the police would come and that I should stay where I was.

But today the police took their time. As I waited, I watched the mugger from a block and a half away. I saw him finish his cigarette and start walking away slowly in the opposite direction from me. For a while, I kept track of him, and then I lost him. I got tired of waiting, and I phoned the number on the card the officer had given me. He wasn't in. I was told to wait for 911 to respond.

A patrol car pulled up at the corner. I approached the window. "Are you the ones for me?"

They weren't. They were just making their rounds. I explained what was happening.

"He's getting away," I said. "Already I can't see him. He's gone past where Broadway curves."

As I was speaking, a police van pulled up behind the patrol car. Inside were three policemen. They were the ones who had come for me. They told me to get in the back, and I did, and then I got nervous.

"Look, if I finger him for you, I want you to let me out first, before you pick him up. He knows where I live, and I don't want him to see me. I lost forty dollars, and I'd like to hold the line there."

"All right," said the cop who was sitting next to the driver, but his tone didn't entirely convince me. Part of me felt relieved when we drove around all the neighboring streets without finding him.

"Are you sure you saw him?" asked one of the cops.

"Yes, because my heart started going like crazy. It's true that yesterday I was looking more at the knife than at his face, but this man was wearing the same clothes."

I filled out another report at the precinct, and this time, I made myself walk the half-mile home. I guess I needed to prove something to myself.

But I was still nervous, and I asked my husband not to work at the studio that evening. I was grateful for his steadying presence. He helped me to clarify my thoughts. "You know, in a way, the mugging was my own fault," I reflected, "because I was suspicious. I should have acted on my suspicion; and when I saw that he was inside the building, I should have said, 'Oh, I forgot my keys,' and gone back outside and waited in one of the stores for a while, until someone could check for me that he'd gone away. But I didn't let myself do that, and you know why? Because I grew up in the South around bigots. I worried I was being prejudiced. But you know what? I don't think a black woman would have hesitated in my place if she'd been suspicious."

My husband stroked my hair with concern in his eyes. "I know this was a terrible experience, but I wish that you could put it behind you."

"But I'm afraid it's not over. I got awfully nervous this afternoon when I saw him. I didn't want them to find him. Will you go down to the precinct with me? I need to talk to the officer on my case."

"Can't you call?"

"No, I want to talk in person."

My husband didn't really want to come, but he wouldn't let me go by myself. The officer who had given me his card the day before wasn't there, but another officer, sandy-haired and middle-aged, came to speak to us.

I repeated to him what I had said to the policeman in the van. "What I want to know is, would they have let me out before they picked him up? I want you to get him, but what if you can't keep him? I'm afraid for my safety. What if I see him again?"

The policeman's eyes were serious, but he stroked his chin, and I couldn't help but wonder if he was hiding a smile. "They would have let you out," he said, "but you shouldn't worry. Let me tell you something. These guys aren't motivated by revenge. He's not going to remember you. He probably hardly looked at you. You know how all black people look the same to white people? Well, all white people look the same to black people, too."

"What makes me nervous is that he came back the next day."

"I guess he figured that the pickings were good. He's probably a drug addict. Not too bright. Look, for these guys, it's like a game. They figure that they'll get away with it ninety-eight times, and the ninety-ninth time, they get caught and have to pay the piper. So, they go to jail. They're used to jail. They're comfortable there. It's no big deal to them, like it would be for me or you. Be sure to let us know if you see him again." About to dismiss us, he offered a last thought. "We may call you to come in and look at more pictures. We may ask you to participate in a lineup. But don't worry, there's a one-way mirror. You can see them, but they can't see you."

"Give me a break," I said to my husband when we'd left the precinct. "Could you believe that part about black people all looking the same to white people, and vice versa? It's a typical racist comment. And do you believe that they're really 'comfortable' in jail?"

"I have no idea. That comment was too much, but maybe he's right about not wanting revenge and paying the piper."

"Maybe so, but you know, it really doesn't make me feel any better."

I was still in a bad way. I didn't sleep well that night, and I dreaded the commute to Massapequa even more than usual. Once again, the subway got stuck in the tunnel but this time it was only for five minutes, and I was still able to make my train. I didn't even try to read the paper and closed my eyes. At the Jamaica interchange, I listened drowsily to the conductor calling out the names of the stations ahead, past Massapequa, all the way to the end of the line: "...Amityville, Copiague, Lindenhurst, and Babylon," he ended. The names had a nice ring, which I appreciated, but I was pretty tired.

"Hello, hello." The voice was behind me on the Massapequa platform, but I didn't mistake it. It was Brother Bob from Barbados. I turned, and he smiled his sunny smile, and I realized that I was truly glad to see him.

"Hi, I haven't seen you for a couple of weeks," I said.

"No, the snow kept me away last week. The rheumatism in my leg was acting up."

"You mean you can't heal yourself?" I teased him, and I discovered with surprise that I felt kind of happy. "I should have stayed away last week, too. It was very difficult to get here. I missed my first class, and most of my second, and, believe it or not, I burst into tears right here in the snow." Embarrassed by my confession, I glanced away to the taxi stand. "I see a cab down there that looks like it's waiting just for us."

"Very good," he said.

He followed me down the stairs and got the cab. We gave our directions, and the driver pulled away, but he had to stop almost immediately at a traffic light. I felt Brother Bob looking at me intently, seriously.

"You know, I was worried about you. I thought to myself, *That girl is in trouble*. I wanted to see you. I felt it so strongly. Even if you're not of our faith."

"No, I'm not," I said.

"But the Jews are God's Chosen People."

"How did you know I was Jewish?"

"I knew it when I first saw you."

"But people don't usually guess that about me."

"No? I knew it at once. But it doesn't matter. We're all God's children, after all, and this morning I thought to myself, 'I hope I see that girl, because she's been through a bad time, and maybe I can bring her some comfort.'"

We were moving, and I was quiet for a moment. The swish of the car over the streets and the exhalations of the heater wove a net of sounds under me. I felt suspended over the day, suspended over my life. It was as if I were looking back at myself from a vantage point in time: I had survived. A feeling of gratitude washed over me, enabling me to speak.

"You know, I really was in trouble. Something bad did happen to me."

"Of course," he said. "I sensed it." And he put his hand over mine, the same hand that the mugger's hand had grazed, and I didn't mind at all. His touch was gentle and somehow disinterested. I felt it was all for my benefit, but still I held back.

"A faith healer," I mused, not caring whether he heard me or not. "And whose faith is it?"

Brother Bob smiled his enigmatic smile. "And would you need to ask that if you were healed?"

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Stack Lee and Me

By Dennis Vannatta

It didn't happen on Christmas like some folks claim, I guess to make it seem more tragic or colorful or whatever. In my book, dead is dead. Am I wrong?

It was a long time ago, of course. 1895 was the year. Although I couldn't tell you for a fact what month it was, it sure as hell wasn't Christmas, not winter at all. The night was real clear, and the moon was a strange yellow, lighting everything up like a big sulfur streetlamp. I can still hear the wind blowing through the trees. Make that tree. Not many trees in that neighborhood of north St. Louis, then or now. Just that one at 34th and Price, the wind whistling through it and the leaves red and yellow tumbling down through the air. So, it must have been fall. I think it was Mississippi John Hurt who put Christmas in there when he wrote his version of the song, not that he was ever in St. Louis. After that song came out, you couldn't swing a dead cat around your head without hitting six guys who claimed they were there, most of them not even a twinkle in their daddy's eye when Stagger Lee shot Billy Lyons. It was me, though, only me. I was the only one who saw it all from first to last.

It was night, with a clear, yellow moon, and I was standing under that tree on the corner of 34th and Price with the wind knocking the leaves down around my ears when, from down the block at the alley, I heard my bulldog, Fatboy, bark.

I went down to see what he was barking at, not that I really cared because with that dumb son of a bitch it was just as likely to be his shadow as anything else, but mostly to shut him up. In that neighborhood, if somebody took a notion they didn't like his barking, they'd open up on him with a Winchester. Fatboy wasn't much of a dog, but he was the closest thing to a companion I'd had since my wife, Mabel, ran off with the soda jerk from Lowry's Drugstore. But that's another story with not even a violent ending to spice things up.

Anyway, I get down there and shush Fatboy and glance down the alley. There were two men hunkered down doing something, I couldn't tell what. Then I heard one of them call out, "Little Joe the Wrangler!" so I knew they were gambling there in the dark, not even a fire in a trashcan or anything. If they could have seen what they were doing, there might not have been the argument about what number Stack threw, and Billy might be alive today. Of course, he'd be older than dirt now, like me.

Stack. Not Stag or Stagger, sure as hell not Stag'o. Who came up with that shit? Stack Lee Shelton was his name. But if you want to call him Stagger Lee, have at it. No skin off my nose.

So it was Stack and Billy, two men from the neighborhood who did whatever was at hand to earn a few dollars, with Stack running numbers for awhile, and Billy mostly pimping; when they weren't doing something useful like that, they gambled — loved that gambling — gambled early in the morning, gambled late at night, wherever, whenever.

I walked down the alley to watch because I didn't have anything better to do. A man who doesn't have a woman in his life has to find ways to spend the hours in his day, and there are a lot of those hours, too damn many. It's worse at night because although you're all alone in the daytime, too, you can fool yourself into thinking it's not so bad then. At night, though, there's no fooling yourself about anything. That's why I walked down that dark alley and was almost on them before Billy said, "Who dat?" — jumping up — and out comes that razor, finding what little light there was, gleaming like it was on fire. I didn't even take a step back. *Go on, do me*, I said to myself. I can't be no lonelier with my throat cut.

But Stack said, "It's just that white fucker Vincent. Put that damn thing up before you cut yourself, Billy."

And Billy put the razor up and sat back down.

When I was in short pants, the neighborhood was all white, mostly German and Irish with a few Italians thrown in. Then a couple of black families moved in over on Crescent Avenue; and in ten years, there weren't enough white people left to get up a game of three-handed pinochle. At the time of the Stack-Billy killing, I was the only white person living on the block except old lady Prentice in the wheelchair. My sister had moved with her family to Creve Coeur, and she said it scared her to death to think of me still living with all those darkies, as she called them. But I like black folks just fine. Some are pretty friendly to me, in fact, and those who aren't mostly ignore me, like wallpaper in a closet. Who cares whether it's there or not?

Stack and Billy went back to their game like I wasn't there.

Stack threw the dice, which I could hear better than see. "Hot damn, seven!" he said and reached out to sweep up the coins there on the pavement because folks in that neighborhood were too poor to gamble over folding money.

Out comes that razor again, which Billy laid right on Stack's wrist and swore that he'd cut his damn hand off if Stack didn't lay that money back down. He didn't throw no seven, Billy said. Stack threw eight.

Now, from all the talk, all the versions of the song you hear, you get the idea that Billy was trying to cheat ol' Stack. I think people have it backwards, though. I mean, there'd be an easy way to tell what number Stack threw: just look at the dice, right? But Billy couldn't do that because Stack had snatched the dice at the same time that he swept up the money. Why would he be in such a hurry to grab the dice unless he didn't want Billy to take a good look at them? I think it's more likely that Billy really did see the number, saw that it was eight, and wasn't about to let Stack con him.

The song doesn't make it clear what happened next, which was Stack dropping the money and Billy picking it up and sticking it in his pocket. I know it because I saw it, but you could figure

it out just by reading between the lines. “I can’t let you go with that,” Stack says, not “I can’t let you get away with that”—can’t let you get away with claiming I threw an eight instead of a seven, in other words.

Think about it. Sure, he’d be pissed if Billy claimed he threw an eight, but it’d hardly be a killing offense because — and here’s what folks seem to ignore — an eight isn’t a losing number. He hadn’t lost anything with an eight — not yet anyway — and had six opportunities to make his point: 4&4 (2), 3&5, 5&3, 2&6, 6&2. Along with a six, an eight is the best point number you can throw. Would Stack kill him because Billy was going to make him throw again with an eight as his point? Naw. Stack killed him because Billy took his money at the edge of a straight razor.

Now, Stack really did say, “You have won all my money,” like in the song, but it leaves out the rest of it: “and you got about fifteen minutes to spend it. Enjoy, motherfucker.”

Other details are garbage. The bit about “and my brand-new Stetson hat,” uh-huh. Stack never wore a hat, Stetson or any other. The only fellow I know who wore a Stetson on a regular basis was a colored fellow everybody called Cowboy, about three bricks shy of a full load. Lonnie Spears, I think his name was. He wore a Stetson, cowboy boots, and a sheriff’s star cut out of a tin can lid. When the iceman came around hauling blocks on his wagon, Cowboy would try to climb up on the mule’s back. Comical as hell.

Anyway, no Stetson for Stack.

Whether Billy took Stack’s threat seriously or not, who knows? I don’t remember him saying anything as he walked past me and out of the alley, then turned east in the direction of At Ease, the closest bar, on the corner of 33rd and Price.

Stack sat there on his haunches a minute, then got up and went on up the alley. I followed a step behind, him pretty much ignoring me, a thing I was used to.

He seemed real calm, which worried me more than if he’d been ranting and raving.

“Don’t do anything stupid, Stack. It’s not worth it,” I said.

He just barked out a laugh and said, “Yeah, too bad I’m not a smart fella like you, Vincent, because you walk on roses all day, right?”

He was talking about me reading books. I’d spend several hours every day in the library on Laclede and would bring books home to read in the library off-hours. Does that make me smart? Books helped pass the time, that’s all. In that neighborhood, walking around with a book under my arm put me in just about the same category as Cowboy Spears; only I never tried to jump on a mule so no one ever ran outside to watch me when the iceman came.

Stack walked off up Price in the opposite direction Billy went, to wherever he lived, no doubt. I don’t know where that was.

I didn’t follow him. Why would I? I was more concerned with Fatboy. Where had that damn dog gotten to?

I was about to take off looking for him when here came Stack with his .44, according to all the songs, but I don’t know the caliber for a fact. I don’t know guns. Never held one. I’d be afraid to have a gun in my hand, afraid of who I’d use it on. Namely me. I couldn’t tell you what I had to live for back then. Must have been something. I’m still here.

Wouldn’t surprise me if the guy who wrote the song said it was a .44 because it rhymes with a lot more words than .45.

According to the song, Stack said, “I’m going to the barroom just to pay that debt I owe,” but that’s more baloney. He never said a word, just walked on by me. From my experience — and if you lived in north St. Louis long enough, you’d acquire a lot of experience, my friend — when a fellow decides to kill somebody, the talking is over with. He just goes and does it.

I stood there trying to decide whether to follow him or look for Fatboy, but curiosity got the better of me, and I headed off toward the barroom, too.

And there he was, pacing up and down outside like he couldn't decide whether to go in or not. I couldn't make up my mind to cross the street. Yes, I wanted to see the action, but I didn't want to be in the middle of it, not if shooting was involved. I don't know why I valued my scrawny neck — I really don't — but a fellow's only got one life, such as it is, and it's hard to give it up. I guess that's why Stack was pacing on the sidewalk, wanting to do in Billy Lyons but not looking forward to the idea of getting his neck stretched for it.

Finally, though, he opened the door and said, "Nobody move."

Or so the song says. Maybe so. I didn't hear that from where I was on the other side of the street. From this point on, in fact, I don't claim to have exclusive rights to the story because there were other people around, and some heard and saw more than I did because I didn't work up the courage to cross over to the bar until Stack was about to pull the trigger.

So maybe Stack did say: "Nobody move," and raised his gun. Not "pulled out" the gun, like the song says, because he already had it out. It was in Stagger Lee's hand all the way down the street.

What happened next is open to dispute. One guy told me that he cried—meaning Billy. I have a hard time believing that. Billy Lyons was an ornery son of a bitch, as tough as boot leather. I'll bet the last time he cried was when his first tooth was coming in. As for begging Stack not to shoot, though, that's possible. I could see him begging, "Oh please don't take my life" and so forth, just stalling for time, hoping to distract Stack until he got close enough to pull that razor and gut him like a carp.

He must have said something close to "I've got three little children and a very sickly wife" because more than one person I spoke to—right there, right after it happened—commented on it. Some men are soft on children, so you can't blame him for trying, although it probably would have been more accurate for him to say that he had thirty-three children. Billy Lyons had fathered children all over town by who knew how many different women, and not one of them his wife. Pimps don't

normally have wives, although I guess there's no law against it. And did he really say "wife," anyway? I'm suspicious of the fact that "wife" rhymes with "life." A song has to rhyme, right?

And was the woman—wife, whatever—really "sickly?" I spoke to one guy who said that Billy said "sexy," not "sickly." Makes sense to me. True, a sickly wife could appeal to a man's sympathies, but Billy would have known that Stack, packing heat and bent on revenge, wouldn't have a whole lot of that. "Sexy," though. Billy was a pimp, remember. What he was really saying was that he had a sexy woman he'd be glad to give Stack a free tumble with if Stack let him off the hook. A plea to a man's sympathies is a long shot, but a plea to a man's John Thomas is always a good strategy.

Whatever Billy really said, it didn't work. Once Stack made up his mind to go into the bar, it all happened fast; and by the time I got to the door, Billy had just turned like he was going to run—where I don't know, there was nowhere for him to run—when Stack opened up.

"Oh," Billy said when that first shot hit him in the side. He put his hand over the wound and grimaced like a man who's run too far and had a stitch in his side.

Poor boy, poor boy. I'd never had much use for Billy Lyons, to be honest, but I felt so bad for him, standing there in pain, knowing that this breath, this one right here, was the last one he'd ever draw.

Well, maybe he drew two or three more because he was still standing there, looking off toward the end of the bar, like there was something disagreeable in that direction, when Stack walked on over and put the gun against his chest and fired, and fired again, 'til Billy collapsed like an empty burlap sack.

I had some sympathy for Stack until then. I'd rather it'd been just the one bullet, like in the song, but Stack couldn't be satisfied with that, so he fired again and then again, although none of them came all the way through Billy. If it had, somebody would have picked the bullet up for a

souvenir. Now I'll grant you that folks did sell bullets they claimed they'd picked up, this one off the floor, dug that one out of the wall, another one coming to rest by the beer pull after it broke the bartender's glass. But all that was years later, after the song came out, and people would come around the neighborhood asking: Is this where they shot dice? Where did Stagger Lee live? Tourists with cameras coming into the bar—although by then At Ease had long since changed hands and was going by the name of Stagger Lee's Tavern—glad to fork over a dollar for a fragment of that busted glass, five dollars for the bullet which went through Billy Lyons. Ha. Better than the funny papers.

Although other versions of the song add details, such as Stack's being married and having kids of his own, I can't vouch for any of them. To be honest, there really isn't much else of interest to tell about the affair.

After the killing, Stack sat down at a table and ordered a bottle of Evan Williams and was halfway through it when the cops arrived. They told him to come along nice and easy, and he did. Slid the .44—whatever—across the floor to them and took one more drink. "I do like a little bourbon at the end of a long day," he said, standing up and holding out his arms for the cuffs. It was the last thing I ever heard him say, last time I ever saw him.

He was convicted, of course, sentenced to life in the state pen in Jeff City. I thought for sure he'd get the death penalty, but nobody else around there was surprised by the sentence. The bartender, a black man himself, explained it to me this way: "If it'd been a white man got killed, somebody would have gotten hung for it. But a nigger killing another nigger? The State of Missouri don't get too excited about that."

It was probably twenty years later that I ran into a guy who moved back into the neighborhood after a stint in the Army. We were talking about the old days, and it occurred to me to mention Stack Lee. I wondered if he'd ever come up for parole, and the guy said, "Stack Lee Shelton? He didn't make it two months in the pen. Somebody got him with a shiv in the laundry, how I heard it."

Ol' Stack Lee.

You might think it strange that I'd never heard that. Should have been big news, right, not just in the neighborhood but all over. But that's the Stagger Lee of the song you're thinking about, the Stagger Lee who made the Top Forty and the white kids from Philadelphia dance rock 'n roll to on *American Bandstand*.

The truth is that Stack Lee was just a guy who got in an argument shooting dice and wound up killing a man in a bar. That or something similar happened once a week in north St. Louis back then and, from what I hear, once a day now, although I'm long gone, living in Grandview Acres, a government-subsidized assisted-care facility in Florissant.

I'm closing in on ninety and don't breathe too well, but I still have eleven of my own teeth and don't wear diapers, so I'm pretty content here. I don't miss the old neighborhood, never go out of my way to think about it and wouldn't now, except they put on a talent show this afternoon and some old geezer sang "Stagger Lee." Of course, I couldn't help myself then.

It makes me sad. Not the Stagger Lee-Billy Lyons deal. I don't give a shit about them. Fatboy, though, my old dog. Fatboy was dumb, but Fatboy was loyal. Fatboy loved me. I'd sing a song about Fatboy if the emphysema didn't take all my wind.

I was standing on the corner.

When I heard my bulldog bark.

I'd give anything to hear Fatboy bark again.

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

For Hunger or Glory

By Richard Lusskin

There were waffles on the counter, yogurts on the island, milk cartons sweating by the side of the stove. Fruit perched on stools and grapes dripped onto the floor where Buster, a short-haired, pug-faced, coonhound-bull terrier mix, swallowed them whole. He stood panting and drooling, waiting for more, his brown coat rippling, ears perked, and nose sniffing, a feral whimper coming from somewhere deep inside of him.

Raw meat covered the kitchen table: chicken breasts, London broil, rump roasts, pork chops. Still frozen but thawing fast, piles of gleaming flesh — destined to be marinated, grilled, baked, roasted, rubbed, stuffed, infused, and sautéed — mocked me, perhaps having the last laugh after all.

The ice cream was in the sink, already turning to soup.

“I know we’re supposed to eat dessert last,” said Katie, “but this time I think we should eat the ice cream first, before it melts.” She flicked her dark hair out of her eyes and sat up straight — righteous in the logic of her thought. Ten-year-olds see the world so clearly.

“I can cook all the meat,” I suggested. “The grill still works.”

I leaned against the granite counter, next to the sink, watching Maxine as she continued to pull bags and containers out of the fridge and pile them on the island. Then she got a roll of paper towels and a spray bottle and proceeded to clean the inside.

Why not leave it all there, I’d suggested in the past, where it might stay at least partially frozen? We could clean up when the power came back on. But she could never resist an opportunity to wipe, scrub, dust, sweep — anything to keep the house in order. No patience, I thought — something I had in spades, as I stood there watching her, knowing that I should go out to the garage and start the generator, as she had suggested in return, but not feeling ambitious enough to move.

She was bent over and working hard, her nightshirt hugging her back as she scrubbed, her body swaying suggestively as she dug deep into the shelves. I had always been attracted to her when she was cleaning — a feeling not generally reciprocated.

“Yes,” said Katie, “but can we eat all the meat?”

“And it’s morning anyway,” I realized. “Can I grill waffles?”

Maxine just looked at me and sighed. I knew that sigh.

“If I get the generator started, we can always refreeze it.”

“Yes,” said Maxine, “but how is the generator going to start if you are standing here watching me?”

I like to be here watching you, I thought, while opening a carton of ice cream and handing around three spoons. Fudge ripple.

“If you were the fastest man in the world,” said Katie, her mouth full, “would you eat faster than everyone else, as well?” She was wearing white pyjamas, with the winged feet of the Goddess Hermes on them.

“I believe that’s been asked and answered,” said Maxine, toying with her ice cream. “Many times.”

I watched a bead of sweat form at the base of her throat and slide down her chest, disappearing into the V of her nightshirt. After all these years, I was still absorbed by its journey.

“I know Mommy, but now?”

“I know, I know,” said Maxine. “Does Usain Bolt bolt his food? Not if he had a mother who was paying attention.”

“But he could,” said Katie. “And it would be helpful now,” she added, gesturing at the counters. “We have so much food.”

“Even he couldn’t eat all this,” I said. “And even if he tried, he certainly wouldn’t be able to run. He would bloat up like a hog.” I puffed out my cheeks for emphasis and waddled in place, like a penguin, for a few seconds — my usual clown routine, with the usual lack of reaction. “He would no longer be the fastest man in the world.” *Ipsa Facto*.

I watched more beads of sweat follow the first one down Maxine’s chest. I pictured them sliding down between her breasts to pool in her belly button. I knew the route well.

“Did you hear the storm last night?” Maxine asked Katie. “It was so loud. I thought the sky would break open.”

“How does a sky break open?” asked Katie. “It’s just air.”

“Perhaps a bolt of lightning hit a tree, which fell onto a power line,” I suggested helpfully.

Buster looked up at me, anxious to agree with anything I said (he was the only one), a thin line of drool stretching to the floor, as he watched me spoon up the last of my ice cream. Between that and the smell of the meat, it must have been torture for him.

“I bet it hit the transformer directly,” said Katie. “Nothing is faster than a bolt of lightning,” she added, with the smug confidence of a child who knows what she’s talking about.

“Ok, well, here’s a question,” I said. “Could Buster run faster than Usain Bolt?”

“Well,” thought Katie, “maybe if there was a big steak at the finish line and he could smell it. And it’s four legs to two, so that would give him an advantage.”

Buster seemed to know that we were talking about him and let out a sound somewhere between a wheeze and a whinny.

“Yes, he’d certainly have a leg up,” I added.

“How would you keep him on the line until the starting gun?” asked Maxine, putting her bowl in the sink next to the melting cartons, ignoring my comment. Her brown hair was pulled back into a loose bun, her neck exposed and glistening softly, invitingly. Her nightshirt hung around her

lightly, down to her knees, but I could sense her shape shifting below it; smooth curves brushing gently against the fabric.

Katie was scooping out more ice cream – chocolate marshmallow this time. I held out my bowl, and she filled that too.

“He would be in one of those cages,” said Katie. “You know, like they have at horse races. They would fire the gun; and somebody would throw the bolt; the door would open; and he would run.”

I winked at him, and he moaned and drooled back at me.

“Couldn’t you just see him on the podium? A steak in his mouth? A medal around his neck? Smiling?” said Katie.

“Dogs don’t smile,” said Maxine. “And he would have eaten the steak already. All he’d have left in his mouth would be some gristle stuck in his teeth. Like usual.”

I tried to catch her eye, but she wouldn’t look at me. They were warm and liquid, like pools of melting chocolate.

“I would floss him,” said Katie. “I could be a dog flosser. I will go to college for that.” As if her future were now set and sealed in stone. *Dictum Factum*.

“How is the generator coming along?” asked Maxine, finally looking at me.

I thought about the automatic generator I’d wanted to buy last year when the power went out. It would have come on by now, all the food would still be in the refrigerator; and I wouldn’t have had to do a thing. But that was ridiculous, she’d said. Too much money, too wasteful, too unnecessary.

“I don’t think it will be out long,” I said. “Maybe we should wait. I can grill up some pancakes.”

“There’s hundreds of dollars’ worth of meat melting onto the floor,” she said, “and you want to grill pancakes.” Sigh.

It wouldn’t be melting, I thought, if you’d left it in the refrigerator, as I’d suggested — a thought I kept to myself.

“When I race,” said Katie, “I like to eat pasta the night before.”

“I know, sweetie,” said Maxine. “I cook it for you every time.”

Did pasta really make you run faster, or was that a myth, cooked up by the pasta industry? Carbohydrates? Really? *Ipsa ridiculoso*.

Maxine went back to cleaning, and I spent another fruitless minute watching her, trying to think of something witty to say and coming up with nothing. I looked at Buster, who was sitting up and staring at the kitchen table, quietly ignoring me, eager to be forgotten. He was slowly and stealthily sliding closer until his muzzle was inches away and a little below the table edge. Run for glory or run for hunger, I thought. I’d take hunger every time...

I got up and went out to the garage. The generator was in the far corner, behind the tractor, snowblower, leaf blower, and bicycles. There were sleds piled on top of it and skis suspended from the ceiling above it, not to mention a pogo stick and some horseshoes piled by the side. Snow shovels were hanging on the wall behind it, along with hoses, rakes, and even an axe I’d bought when I’d thought that chopping wood would get me into shape.

I pressed the button to open the garage door, forgetting that it didn’t work, so I found a ladder and climbed up to the opener, reaching above the minivan to pull the cord and disconnect it. Then I lifted up the door. I went back inside to fetch the keys, so I could pull the car out, and then I started to dig out the generator.

I got it out into the driveway and filled it with gas. I could never remember which way the switch on the gas line went — up or down? Which end of the switch was supposed to point at “open?”

I guessed down. And the choke? In or out? I stretched my shoulders, took a breath, and grabbed the cord, pulling as hard as I could. The cord unwound and the motor spun. I pulled back, putting my legs into it, and it kept spinning. I leaned into it more, hoping to get it on the first try, which would have been a first in itself. There was no resistance, and I kept going back until I was standing there with the cord in my hand, the motor rewinding itself and snapping back into place. The cord end dangled down, and I looked at the generator, below which sat the washer, nut, and bolt, which should have been holding it onto the winder.

I was thinking about how long it would take me to put it all back together — if I could put it all back together — just as Buster raced out of the garage door with a leg of lamb in his mouth. The end was dragging on the ground as he ran past me and into the backyard to a spot behind the swing set, beneath a pine tree, where he lay down and attacked it. He ripped off chunks and swallowed them whole, growling and moaning — emitting a keening wail which sounded like the mating song of some lost and ancient tribe.

I looked from him to the bolt lying on the ground, and then over to the kitchen window, where I could see Maxine moving around, just a shadow really, but knowing that she was in there, organizing things. I stood there with the sun rising higher and beating on the back of my neck. Sweat pooled in my armpits as I listened to Buster masticate loudly. I heard a noise behind me and turned around to see the front grill of the minivan laughing at me. I turned back away from it, looking past the silent generator to the ladder standing by the opener, the debris and sleds scattered about the floor of the garage, and then back up to the kitchen window, just in time to see the light come on over the kitchen table.

Richard Lusskin lives in New Jersey with his wife and four kids. He owns a custom wood shop and builds cabinetry, millwork, furniture, and kitchens, among other things. While he enjoys writing, his children do like to eat (a lot), so he is not thinking of quitting his day job just yet.

Welcome to Paradise

By Scott Laudati

In my junior year of high school, I saw thirty-five fistfights. The violence arrived one day like a mass psychogenic illness no one had ever seen, and no one knew what to do.

One fight the first day.

Five the next.

Just before Christmas break, we had two assemblies. In the first, the principal said it was our responsibility to break up the fights. “These are your peers,” he said, “your friends ... aren’t they?”

Obviously, he knew we weren't going to do anything, so between each period, teachers were stationed in the hallways.

Another fight broke out during lunch.

A second assembly was called. The principal didn’t even bother this time. The football coach stood up and blew a whistle until everyone in the gym had their hands over their ears. “Since none of you degenerates have any loyalty to your classmates, we’re going to do this a different way,” he said to us. “I’m ashamed to be in this room with every single one of you.”

His plan ignored the students and went right to the teachers. They were supposed to join hands and form a chain across the hallway. He said it would split the crowd as they moved toward the fight.

“If a student tries to break through, lift your arms to their throat.” He put his back to a female teacher in the front row. “And if they try and go under,” he continued, “use your combined force to sock them in the gut.” He swung his fist down and stopped an inch from her stomach. She gasped and jumped back as if he’d actually hit her. “These are legal tactics, folks,” he said, while somehow making eye contact with every student. “If you want to act like animals, I promise you will be treated as such.”

His name was Coach C; and even though he'd just taken our football team to State, his plan ignored a cardinal rule in sports: defense cannot stop momentum.

After lunch, I walked to the bathroom. My science teacher, Mr. Tarpinsky, was sitting at a desk between the girls' and boys' rooms. We were supposed to show him a hall pass, but I was skipping that period and didn't have one. He nodded at me and closed his eyes. We watched pro-wrestling highlights in his classroom every Friday. He was twenty-three. He didn't care if I had a hall pass.

Jake and Jimmie Jones were crouching Chinese-style in the open part of the bathroom, past the two stalls. One-dollar bills were scattered around the floor. This kid Todd had just moved over from a trailer-park town across the highway and taught everyone how to play Ceelo. The dice game was passing more dollar bills through the school than a strip club saw on a Friday night.

"Yo," I said.

Jimmie pointed at three dice on the floor.

"Look at this."

I bent down. Two of the dice were resting against the wall. The third had gotten caught mid-roll in a tile groove.

Jimmie asked me about the third.

"What number does that say?"

Jake slapped the back of his hand into his palm and said, "It's obviously a six."

"A six?" Jimmie said. "Fuck you, a six. That's a one."

"I can't tell," I said. I looked at the other two dice. A four and a five. "I'm calling a re-roll."

They stood up and lit cigarettes, while I faced the urinal. Jake tried propping open the window, but the glass kept sliding down.

Jimmie handed Jake his cigarette and said, “Let me go see if Mr. Tarpinsky has something to hold it up.”

Jake blew his smoke up at the ceiling and started laughing.

“Did you see Joe’s face yesterday?” he asked me.

“No,” I said. “But I heard it was so bad his mother wouldn’t even look at him when he got home.”

Jimmie Jones came back into the bathroom with a dictionary. He pushed the window up and let it slide down onto the book.

“Are you guys talking about Joe?” he asked.

“Yeah, man,” Jake said. “Tell him what you told me.”

Jimmie took his cigarette back.

“I saw the whole thing,” he said. “Craig broke Joe’s nose in one punch. Principal Sherman and Coach C grabbed Joe by his back and ankles before he could hit back. He used his free hand to try and blow bloody snot rockets at Craig.”

I left the bathroom, and my science teacher was asleep at his desk. It was mid-period now, but the hallway was jammed with students, as if the fire alarm had been pulled. I put my hands on someone’s shoulders and lifted myself up to see what was going on.

A girl was on the ground, trying to cover her face. Another girl was kicking her repeatedly, but with a prolonged setup, as if each one was a last-ditch field goal. I could make out some familiar faces in the crowd, but something was happening. Nobody looked exactly like themselves. Their faces were contorting before this nightmarish requiem, like hungry lions circling a carcass. Eyes red with feral delight, mouths smiling as if they’d paid admission for the slaughter.

I smacked Mr. Tarpinsky. He climbed out of the desk just as the classroom door in front of us swung open. Frankie danced out into the hallway with both fists up, waiting for whatever was

coming next. A gold *cornicello* charm hung from a chain around his neck. He picked up the horn and kissed it, and then he banged both his fists off his head like a boxer.

Two varsity football players came out after him. One wore an extra-large FUBU shirt (this was the kind of white town we were). The other one I'd often seen jogging around the track after school. They'd each won Homecoming King at least once. And a rumor was traveling around the school that Frankie's new girlfriend had been accepting rides home from them after cheerleading practice.

A circle of students chanting "Fight!" surrounded us immediately.

My teacher looked at me and sat back down.

"Frankie's gonna kill them," he said. "But he's twice my size. There's nothing I can do about it."

Before this month, our school had only suspended one person for fighting, and it was Frankie. He hadn't started the last fight, but he had ended it so brutally that the school was forced to send him home anyway. When it came down to a matter of meat, Frankie *was* the weight class, and nobody had been dumb enough to fight him since.

Until now.

I cheered with everyone else while Frankie banged the Homecoming King's head off lockers. When they were both lying on the ground, Frankie took his shirt off and held it against their faces. It turned red from all the blood, and he held it up like a heavyweight belt, so everyone could see. Then he put it back on.

We roared.

Frankie beat his chest like a gorilla.

Rachel was standing next to me. She watched me clap and laugh with the rest of the idiots. I really liked Rachel. She was popular, one of the girls who went to Catholic school for a while before she transferred over. She was done with rehab before I smoked my first cigarette.

And now she was looking at me, and I was smiling.

“I thought you were better than this,” she said.

Our high school, in the course of three weeks, had gone from the second safest school in the district to the most dangerous. The pressing question in the teachers’ lounge was “Why is this happening?” But, like schools with pregnancy or suicide epidemics, the “why” was pretty simple: the taboo had been broken. Whatever that thin line of morality is which keeps everyone in check had been crossed. And now they wanted to fix a couple hundred kids, all angry for different reasons, but manifesting that anger in the same way. How could they put a pin back in a grenade they hadn’t known was going to explode?

By the time last period came, students were being called down to the principal’s office. When the intercom went off in class, a collective “Whew” could be heard from the hallways from those who weren’t summoned. Everyone was a potential delinquent now. And the principal started suspending *everyone*. Unless, of course, you could give up the names of people who were thinking about fighting. But that plan backfired, too. If you came back to class, everyone knew you were a rat, and there was a target on your back until the score was settled.

Some girls in my class were talking about Adam. Adam was my partner on the basketball team. I was the “three” (the power forward). I dribbled. Shot. Rebounded. Adam was the “five.” The tallest guy on the team. He rebounded and hooked up my jump shot. And I was pretty good at throwing him an alley-oop when things looked hopeless.

The girls were saying that Adam was a “fag.” They said they were glad Jimmie Jones was going to “kick his ass tomorrow.” I didn’t know what to do. Adam was my partner, sure, but I was

still a virgin. I hated myself already. And I didn't want to look any lamer in front of the girls. Did I even owe him anything? After all, we weren't the football team. We didn't shower together after practice.

I didn't say anything.

We had an away game that day. I never took the team bus to away games. My dad always drove me so he could give me a thirty-minute monologue about discipline and foul shots.

I saw Jake on the way out to my dad's car.

"Yo," I said.

"Yo."

"Is Jimmie Jones fighting Adam tomorrow?"

"It's going to be a bloodbath. They're boxing at The Hill after school."

The Hill was short for Agony Hill — a little patch of woods between the high school and the middle school. The name came from an old town legend: once upon a time, two kids fell off their sleds and broke their necks in the woods. They were dead out there all night before someone found them. Now, on full moons, or Friday the 13ths, or first snows, you can hear two children crying softly for their mothers. I don't know if any of that ever happened. For the class of 2003, it was the place everyone got high before school. Or went to cut class. Or made out with a nice girl from a broken home everyone still called a "slam hog" at our ten-year reunion.

To combat the suspensions, someone had the idea to set up boxing matches at The Hill after school. If there was a person you wanted to fight (they egged your car, they slept with your girlfriend, etc.), you just had to call him or her to The Hill. And no matter the height or size disadvantage, the shame of being called a "pussy" by an entire town ensured no one skipped a duel. A beating was much more forgiving than tomorrow's lunchroom.

I got into my father's car. He launched right into his pre-game speech: "Remember, K-I-S-S. Keep It Simple Stupid. When they're running down the clock, remember: K-I-S-S. It's basketball. You dribble up. You defend back. K-I-S-S."

This routine all spawned from a Warped Tour he had taken me to a few years earlier. Those were the days when Nazi punks still openly gathered at shows. My parents would only let me go if my dad chaperoned. Green Day played that year, and during their set, Billie Joe Armstrong said, "Look at this. We're idiots. This song is stupid. It's three chords. Any idiot can do it. Keep it simple, stupids." I remember seeing some kind of glow spark in my father's eyes. It all suddenly made sense to him. Green Day was the band which made me a punk; and now, through some insane irony, I had to listen to my dad use Billie Joe's words, reworked into an un-motivating monologue before every game.

I watched the highway from my window while my dad repeated "K-I-S-S" over and over. He was old school, and things like "emotions" and "self-doubt" didn't make any sense to him. But I was starting to feel nauseous from all the guilt I was feeling, so I told him what had been going on at school. And then I told him about Adam.

"You're not going to stand up for him?" he asked. "He's your teammate."

"I know. But they're not even really fighting."

"He's your teammate. What if he hits his head on the floor?"

"They're not fighting. Everyone is going to The Hill tomorrow to watch them box."

"What if he falls and hits his head on a rock? Then he's paralyzed. I've seen it. How are you going to look at his mom knowing you could've kept her son from being a vegetable? Are you going to tell her you wanted to look cool? You know what's not cool?"

"What?"

"Your friend being paralyzed. You'll see."

Adam and I ran the show that day. We were up by eight points in the last thirty seconds. I gave my dad a thumbs-up. But suddenly, we lost control. The other team hit a three-pointer. Then they hit another three.

My dad was in the bleachers screaming, “K-I-S-S. SLOW THE GAME DOWN!”

I took the ball and stepped out of bounds to pass it in.

My dad screamed again, “STOP THE MOMENTUM. K-I-S-S. Slow the game down! K-I-S-S.”

I called a timeout. I didn’t even leave the court. My dad was right. We needed to stop time for a second. Momentum was moving for them.

I passed the ball inbound to Adam. At half-court, they stole it. I already had four fouls on me, but they were about to break away for a layup. I intentionally smacked the guy with the ball. The referee blew his whistle, and I got thrown out of the game. The guy I’d hit missed both of his foul shots, and we won by two points.

My dad didn’t say he was proud of me on the way home, but I thought he should have.

There were no fights the next day during school. Three boxing matches were scheduled for The Hill that afternoon. Everyone was wondering how an operation this organized had started. Some people said it was Henry, the kid who’d been suspended for putting a pipe-bomb down the toilet the year before. A few whispered that it was Principal Sherman’s idea. But, in a world still ruptured by 9/11, no one paid much attention to conspiracies.

When the bell rang after last period, most of the school headed for The Hill. I knew I wasn’t going to stop the fight, but I walked to the woods anyway.

Each guy was given a set of boxing gloves. The first two matches went quickly. A few punches landed. A lot of dancing. No blood. I kept praying for an earthquake, but we were a Godless lot, and we received no divine intervention.

I stood at the back of the crowd and learned a lesson most wouldn't until much later: The idiots have the numbers, and the numbers prove you right, even when you're wrong.

Morality is no match for entertainment.

I watched Jake and some other guys walk around with wads of money. Jake had a clipboard in his hand. He was taking bets, calculating odds.

Adam never really faced us, and that made me feel better. A friend of each boxer pulled the gloves down over their wrists. When Jimmie Jones's gloves were on, he just started swinging. No countdown. No bell.

His first punch landed. Adam's nose looked like a plum exploded.

He hit back a few times, but I knew where it was going. Anyone can fight like prey on its back when pushed enough. But Adam, like me, didn't have whatever that instinct is to finish it. And no one in school was ever going to let him forget it.

I didn't wait for the end. I walked down The Hill by myself and thought about what a complete loser I was. A few times, the crowd got so loud I braced for a stampede of fleeing students. But death would've been too easy. No one followed me out.

Rachel was pulling out of a parking spot in her white VW Jetta. I asked her for a ride.

"You're leaving the animals on The Hill?" she asked.

"Just so you know," I said, "I don't think fighting is cool anymore."

But Rachel didn't care about my new perspective. She was dating a guy in college. Everything was boring to her.

On the way home, she told me about her dad. How he had left her mom for the secretary at his dentist's office when she was ten. How he was never proud of her. Not for grades. Not for cheerleading.

"What about you?" she asked. "Is your dad ever proud of you?"

“No,” I said. “But at least today, I gave him a reason not to be.”

Scott Laudati lives in Bushwick with his shnoodle, Dolly. His work has recently appeared in *The Bitter Oleander*, *The Columbia Journal*, and others.

The Rotten Fate of Finn King

By Chris Marchesano

After Charlie Carver's kid went missing, it was the gray silhouette of my father who rowed through the sleet to the rusted log bronc, caught in the seething gaze of every sawyer and logger and sander, to pull Finn King out of the tributary.

Distance and snow delayed state troopers. For several days, Finn sat with his hands chained to the metal loop bolted in an interrogation desk. This is the only fact I know — every other detail I have created and tore apart and fleshed out again with the deranged determination of a doomed sculptor, forever attempting to cast formless mysteries — the anguish of one man, the soul of another — into some imperfect permanence.

I am older now than Finn was when he was arrested, and I've forced myself back here, hiding behind my own shield, just as my father once did, and still clinging to some vague idea of justice and truth.

What I find is a memory of a town. A small pocket of dead history, once run by hard men, which eventually lost its name and industry and existence to a tiny spotted owl on a faraway endangered list. And it's here where my rambling father drowns in the glare of mindless television and waters dead plants and struggles to crush the pills which keep him alive. Despite a lifetime of cheap prayers and Eastern mantras, I take a bitter pleasure in his situation. I couldn't have stomached anything else.

For years, I imagined him asking questions with a certain kindness. It's true that my father possessed the quiet stoicism of an unremarkable man, a dullness occasionally mistaken as peace or wisdom. I saw him lighting the chained man's cigarette, sliding him food, meditatively plunging a cleaning rod through his service revolver, squinting through, and plunging again. Later, in moments

of desperation, I would cast him as the only distinct face in a violent tornado of flesh-colored putty and puce smears.

Near the tracks by Finn's trailer, a sweater belonging to the Carver kid had been found twisted up in the brush. His school books were abandoned in a neat pile outside the diner. Charlie Carver, who owned the mill and every living thing surrounding it, closed down the lumberyard. Even without tragedy, he was a small and vicious terrier of a man, and we silently understood the mill would remain shuttered until some hazy ideal of justice was reached — nobody knew if that meant a confession, a safe return, or the stumbling upon a body. The schoolhouse followed, then the local businesses, all dominoes which continued to fall until, finally, the lifelong routines of the men and women in this town were toppled, their familiar habits and meager certainties about life crashing down with them.

I remember townsfolk trampling through fresh snow to gather near the drone of the police station generator. There were the usual prayers and gossip. Rumors passed of unspeakable and unknowable violations inflicted upon the presumed dead boy. At night, snarls were launched through the building's shaded windows at Finn and my father, his perceived protector. This lasted for days, a strange purgatory with nothing to fill the stupor but uncertainty and disgust. Alibis were recited; everyone vouched for everybody else, and a wide tapestry of innocence was weaved with nothing other than emotional repetition. With him chained inside, people felt free to cry out about Finn King and his disease. We all stopped looking for the nearing headlights of state police. And eventually, like all mobs, a collective drill was driven straight through the veneer of civilized society into the great wellspring of primitive anger.

Fearing the worst, I broke into Finn's paint-chipped trailer to salvage what I could. A few paperback American frontier classics I had lent him during our tutoring. A rifle. A yellowing promotional handbill I always admired during each clandestine visit. It showed a handsome young

man with knotted muscles, no scarred webbing in the flesh below his eyes, his nose not yet pushed across his face.

He'd once been a fighter, a hulking and unspectacular light heavyweight who bounced around unglamorous regional circuits, secretly chasing down an insatiable penance in the sanctioned and cheered-on cruelty of his fellow boxers. When it was over, he came here to hide — from a disgraced wife he barely knew, from a career which fell short, from criminal records and outstanding warrants, and from his own name, etched into indecency ledgers in nowhere towns just like this one.

Having fled as far west as humanly possible, he took seasonal work on a logging crew; and with nothing left but the sprawling silver Pacific, he felt little choice but to stay here. He was my first experience with pity, hopelessly fumbling over a church pamphlet in the cobwebbed diner, a pocket dictionary missing entire swatches of the alphabet splayed out before him.

I was twelve; and despite the typical caution customary with cagey strangers, I soon understood that we shared, if nothing else, the same eyes: we both looked upon an ill-fitting world with an alien gaze. I was already vulnerable to forces and fears I couldn't identify; and somehow sensing this, Finn was oddly genteel with me. He had no reason to be. He was a man who'd lost his teeth on another man's knuckles. I knew this without his telling me, but only after his gloves had been unlaced for the final time, and his fists unwrapped, and the short-burning promise of his career was left to collect dust on the canvases from which he stopped picking himself up.

I met him long after his identity and face and dignity were taken from him — in dark bars and backrooms much later on — by guileless men with nasty intentions, and for no paltry purse at all.

And many days, after ambling through a forest already marked for logging and smeared with iridescent paint, I would appear on Finn's doorstep wearing my own embarrassing bruising, a peacock-colored puffy eye or a red bib staining my shirt. Each time, Finn would take silent inventory.

He never asked me the names of the kids who painted their own rage and fears and insecurities on my body. He never prodded me to relive the trauma of each drubbing. He didn't even need to know what my father always did — how precisely, I was weak and awkward and pitiful compared to others. Instead, he taught me how to simply tip my head and pinch my nose to staunch the bleeding. In his dim-lit kitchen, he'd gut the fresh lingcod and salmon he caught that morning and assure me that it would speed the healing of my split lips and swollen cheeks. Later, when I wanted to die from a hatred anchored squarely within me, he would teach me how a simple and straight right hand naturally follows a jab. We'd practice until my frustration seeped into exhaustion, my clumsy fists hitting away at his open palms. And days later, when I would inevitably return with fresh cuts or bumps or cigarette burns, I was never humiliated for having lacked the courage to fight back.

In innocent camaraderie, I spent hours with him, dissecting each syllable of one adventure novel or another, and it was in this small crucible of time that he allowed himself the only luxury I ever saw him take — an occasional excerpt from his own depressing gospel. Understandably, I was eager for stories. Being marooned in a lonely outpost of civilization, I grew up isolated in the most meaningful ways. I yearned to be impressed and hoped for tales of adventure to store away, believing that I could use another man's exploits as currency in my own life later on if I ended up worthless or a failure, or without any real scars of my own.

I'm still unsure if he intended these moments to be warnings or consolations or confessions — his lonely blueprint of a life gussied up with bare-boned nostalgia: His pitiful memories of a handsome and once-loved face, a rare evening spent undiluted by shame, a reference to an old (and often routine) act of kindness. In every other way, he lived the head-down existence of a man waiting for his executioner, already at peace with the illusion of salvation.

After Finn's arrest, my father and I ran parallel in our own unraveling. Our sparse conversations sputtered into grunts and then silence. My frequent hysterics weren't even met with a

beating I came to pray for — I was simply removed, sent off to various shriveled aunts whose religious fanaticism became a near fetish in my youthful presence.

It took my entire life to return here, and I've arrived strange and wilted. I do not possess my father's pride; I never inherited Finn's compassion. Instead, watching my father struggle stokes the same grotesque pleasure I've lost the ability to simply indulge in nearly every aspect of my life — a junkie's gratification riddled through with guilt.

He doesn't recognize me as his son; and finally, when he determines that I'm not an intruder, he raves, unable to move past the few anecdotes and bar stories on which he anchored his life — a necklace he once fished out of the river, of card games and women he both won and lost. He talks of his own father's experience as a ball-turret gunner, naked and shooting fire inside an embryo of steel.

Conspiratorial machinations have had their way with his failing mind. A strange nostalgic collage is arranged on his kitchen walls: Clippings from his career, old letters to my mother returned undelivered, business cards of long-dead salesmen. Finn's promotional poster is pinned behind overdue bills. There is also the flayed armadillo skin I squirreled away for safekeeping in my childhood bedroom, which is now nailed, like a scalp, to the wood paneling. It had been a consolation prize, a joke gift, from a promoter down in Texas who had never seen a human take such a thrashing without losing consciousness. Finn hated the thing. Armadillos are helpless, nearly blind creatures of dirt. Yet, he kept it. And from its place on a bookshelf, I remember Finn glowering at it. Occasionally, he'd snort at it like an old friend.

When pressed, my father can't remember how he came into possession of the hide, though he drags his finger across each of the nine bands segmenting the armadillo shell, and shares a disjointed sermon concerning the levels of Hell.

He doesn't ask why I am back here after so long.

His incoherence towards everything but me is bear-baiting. Of the many exorcised ghosts from his life, I am the last one with the ability to haunt him. And this purposeful silence, my acquiescent emasculation, is simply an extension of the twenty years it took me to walk into a police archive in Salem and, from a dusty cardboard box, pluck official answers to this mystery.

In my weakness, I have not read the case file. A copy is in my trunk, under my service revolver, with several banded manila folders containing the investigative report of the state police after they finally arrived. Two weary men who looked just like my father and I do now appeared to find a clueless town returned to their stupefied work routine. The Carver boy had already been returned by then, sneering but healthy, hauled back by a Southern Pacific representative who escorted the runaway all the way home from Palisade Canyon. Finn left with those men, burlap-wrapped and smashed and stiffened in death, having hung slumped from the interrogation desk by his dislocated shoulders for several nights.

I take the armadillo skin. I lift my father by his armpits and move him outside and guide his hand in buckling his safety belt. Confronted with his frailty, I am again ashamed, a shame born out of a tiny seed of revulsion — for is there anything more pathetic and outright vile than a child despising a parent?

I repeat the mantra: My father is an imperfect man, and I am his imperfect son.

I drive a route I've already spent thirty years navigating in the lonesome darkness before sleep. I leave behind the home where my father returned with splattered blood on his uniform and mortified creases in his exhausted face. I go down past the farm once owned by the Henderson's, a pious family who all vouched for the presence of every barfly and townie at the tavern to state troopers. Beyond the farm, to the left, sits the ramshackle house where Sarah Haynes stood at her kitchen table and made her own official statement to authorities, detailing the imprecise faces she saw smashing down the jailhouse door after leaving her midnight shift at the diner; she recounted a

group of raging bastards, grimy and hungry migrants, all indefinitely furloughed by Charlie Carver's mandate of justice. We crawl past an overgrown field once crowded with the tents of transient laborers, a community of men whose zigzag travel often overlapped with Finn's, and who brought whispers and rumors, having heard of an incident in Biloxi, or witnessed a lopsided beating in Dubuque, or remembered how a foreman in Cape Girardeau publicly dubbed him The G.I. King, not for any military service, but for the term Gross Indecency. My father stares vacantly at the empty lot where Finn, once misreading the opacity of tender drunks, was smashed unconscious with a glass bottle and left for dead on a winter night.

We turn, driving alongside fallow train tracks, now depressed back into the earth, and stop at an empty clearing, where the outline of Finn's trailer is still faintly marked in the dead grass. We sit for a long time.

"You're a detective," he says, somewhere between a question and statement.

He steps out on his own, his head on a curious swivel. In the slow orbit he makes in the grass, I can tell that he's reaching back for a memory. I am suddenly aware of the pollen dancing in the heat. My father's face is wrinkled with an emotion I can't decipher, despite my years of preparing for this moment.

At a duelers' distance, his back towards me, I become aware that we must be sharing the same current fogginess, the incompleteness of a disturbing dream, where an existence so seemingly certain and rich accelerates into oblivion upon waking, always faster than the mind's grasping reach.

"Do you remember the man who lived here?" I ask, though not with the tone I had long ago planned.

He's pitiful — his toothless confusion, his trembling hand working at the corners of his mouth. I ask again, and he opens his palms.

I follow my father into the field, straying further from the absolution in my trunk, which now seems laughably powerless, too absurd to even use as a bluff. Nothing will tell me whether financial desperation or rage or a perverse sense of protection killed Finn King. Or worse, whether his death was spurred by what I always fearfully assumed — an exterminator's cold desire for hygiene. Nothing today will scratch away the itch gnawing under my rib cage, a discomfort I've brought with me in my own journeys through back rooms and dark passageways and false existences which often glittered with promise before shimmering and dissipating, like a cruel mirage.

I stare at my father's vulnerability. From inside the space where Finn's kitchen once stood, he's staring with milky eyes at the tree-cleared emerald landscape.

I will him to speak. I want him to say that the old world used to be crueler and more savage; that people then were closer to beasts; that Finn's life made him more of a leper; that his career and physical prowess only made his malfunction as a man even more disgusting, even more of a vague betrayal to those like my father. I want an excuse from his mouth, however contemptible and incomplete.

I want to hear that Finn was a deranged bastard who was wrong to allow other men to beat his sickness out of him; that, in the hours spent together on those final nights, sitting across from him, my father understood that Finn was not simply innocent, but that he was something inherently more than a fighter with no nickname and no punch and no true identity — a creature only capable of showing in the moment how much punishment can be taken silently, without apprehension, before quietly disappearing.

I want my father to tell me that wholeness and peace are never the same things, so that I can say aloud that he was a man capable of dignity.

I ask him again about Finn King.

“These once were old-growth forests,” he said eventually, scratching his grey chin.

“Undisturbed. They should all be ashamed.”

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Just Two Stops to St. George Station

By Corinna Feierabend

The look on Klaus' face was as devious and grumpy as ever, as every day. I had been finding him unpleasant for quite some time, and his looks were unappealing, too. But today he was downright getting on my nerves. Why was he hanging around in my kitchen, looking so grim? I had yet to hear him come up with any good vibes. Siegfried was leaning against the wall, sitting caddy-corner from Klaus. His unassuming manner, friendly but reserved, made him look like Klaus' antagonist, which calmed my changing moods. He and I had always talked to each other at eye level. Klaus, on the other hand, was just a grumbler, always knitting his dark brows together. These two kitchen mates had been my only social contacts for some time now.

To be precise, for the last four years, ever since I moved to Rothenburgsort. Yes, I know, completely uncool, totally unhip and beyond all boundaries of Hamburg's gentrified neighborhoods. This part of the city was also called Totenburgsort, — The Dead Place — an ancient joke which was never funny. But I felt comfortable here and thought that finding my place was a great stroke of luck. It was affordable and had a direct view of the Elbe River. An old friend who unexpectedly moved abroad let me have the small apartment fully furnished. He even left pictures hanging on the walls. The only thing which felt wrong was that not a single book was in the place. But the location was great! All I had to do was cross the street in front of the building, and I was already on the dyke, directly at the river's edge. Imagine that!

Aside from looking at the river, I wasn't enjoying life much in those days. So, I went outdoors a lot, even several times a day. I liked feeling the wind in my hair and on my face, the smell of the stale waters of the Elbe, the screaming of those stupid seagulls, and the rumble of riverboat engines. When I wasn't outdoors, I could look out my kitchen window at the dark river.

“I won tickets online for the theater tonight,” I told Siegfried. He smiled back cautiously but showed interest. Of course, he would encourage me to go because he knew this wasn’t something I’d normally want to do. “Schauspielhaus, two tickets. Man, when was I there the last time...?” Outside it was already turning dark, but I still saw an encouraging twinkle in his bright gaze. “Of course, you’ll go there,” it meant. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Klaus smirk. He didn’t believe for a second that I could ever go out and mix with people again. “Leave me alone!” I screeched at him. I couldn’t control myself anymore. I grabbed a coffee mug from the table and threw it in his direction. Loud crashes were followed by a silence hard to take. It embarrassed me. I embarrassed myself.

I started to sweep broken pieces together. My mug had hit Klaus right in the face, and he and his frame were in pieces on the floor. Relieved, I threw his remains into the garbage and took a deep breath. Siegfried gave me a friendly look from his picture frame, and I read satisfaction in his eyes. Looking at that pirate Störtebecker in a constant bad mood for so long was probably too much for him as well.

Six o’clock. Now it was completely dark outside. I had to decide soon if I would claim my prize and go to the theater. For the fifth time, I looked at the evening program. Neither the play nor the woman playwright was familiar. I actually wanted to stay home. I liked it when everything stayed the same — had for years. Changes were stressful. But around seven o’clock, I put my coat on anyway and set off toward the city center, surprising myself and managing the two stops to Central Station. The theater was right across the street. At first, I stood there, letting the sight of the theater have its effect on me again after such an eternity; its façade had always cast a spell. But today I wondered what purpose its neo-baroque domed roof served. Was it used to store costumes or props? Or were there private rooms tucked away into secret spaces? Was ancient clutter stored up there which no one dared throw away, like in my basement storage room? And, to top it off, did the

architects want to have some fun screwing things up and let a little spire, looking like a toothpick in a cocktail tomato, stick up from this roof to serve no purpose?

Theatergoers were already gathered in front of the building, some alone, some in groups. Some were standing under the marquee, smoking in the cold while they waited. First, I walked past them and turned right into the Lange Reihe, but turned around after a hundred meters and came back. What was I supposed to do with the second ticket? Sell it? Give it away? Throw it away? Walking more slowly, I heard some quiet music. An old accordion player was sitting near the entrance. I went closer and recognized him. Years earlier, in the days when I had gone to work in the morning, he had often played at the entrance to Hallerstrasse, an underground station. I liked his melancholy melodies and sad songs, which I could hear from downstairs on the station platform. I always had a coin ready, or something sweet, or a couple of cigarettes I'd put into his instrument case. He thanked me every time, a warm look emanating from gray-green eyes in a wrinkled face, and he would bow slightly. Sometimes I imagined he was playing just for me, which was nonsense, of course.

Without any introduction, I asked him if he wanted to see the play with me. He seemed to think about this while he kept on quietly playing, swaying a bit. Had he understood me? But he did answer, his cigarette stub in the corner of his mouth. "Thank you, madam! It would be great honor to see play with you. But I do not sit still, very hard to do." I remembered his raw voice and Slavic accent. Suddenly, I didn't care about the play and suggested we go for a drink. He nodded silently and packed his accordion away after gathering up coins and putting them in his pocket. I gave my theater tickets to a young woman asking passersby for tickets to what was apparently a sold-out performance. "They're a gift," I told her to make sure right away we wouldn't have a conversation about her giving me money.

The musician and I walked silently down Kirchenallee toward Steindamm. It began to rain. Water misted down and glistened coldly under the streetlights. "Where?" I asked. He pulled up his

eyebrows and nodded toward Bodega Nagel, a restaurant we were walking past. I knew the place from earlier — a nice old place with food and drink and no frills or hipster pretensions. *Some trendy types would likely discover it soon for that very reason*, I thought. Here, the waiters still wore the right suits and the lighting was dim. Until the musician and I sat down, I was anxious about curious questions he might ask or any silences, fearing we wouldn't reach common ground in a conversation. But it was the opposite, and I began to relax. He told me his name was Danilo; he was sixty-two; and he came from Boyarka, Ukraine.

“I think we already saw each other at Hallerstrasse?” he asked carefully.

Speechless that after years he would remember our brief encounters at the station's entrance, I forgot to introduce myself. He surprised me. He was an interesting conversationalist and good listener; I was grateful he talked about more than himself. He drew his own conclusions from our conversation. We talked about Hamburg and all about our favorite places around the city, about music — he had studied at the conservatory in Kyiv — about life as a foreigner in Hamburg, and a thousand other things.

Two hours and four glasses of red wine later, Danilo came straight to the point.

“You a little cuckoo,” he said. “Book sick, or I can say Bücherfick?” Bookfuck. He jostled me as if we were old buddies and grinned. But he was right. Inwardly, I saw the devilishly grinning face of Klaus, grotesque and distorted, and I shut my eyes for a moment. “You always worked with books,” Danilo continued more carefully, “always read, always write. But you forget people; books more real than family, friends. Then it was more bad; you start talking to people in books. They not there for real; only in story. Your man leaves; your children go away; your job go away. Your place full with books in boxes; you use them like table, chair, bookshelf. Then electricity stop; you burn books in fireplace, not so cold. In end, you go to crazy house.”

My life was sounding almost ready for the stage, I thought with still half-shut eyes.

“Even to me this sounds unbelievable. You really didn’t need to go to the theater!” I said to Danilo. And added, “Yes, but that’s how it was.”

He mumbled something while he put on two jackets rather awkwardly. He probably needed them because he sat and played music in the cold so much. Then he said, “Me hungry. We go eat?” I nodded and we left the pub. It was good to breathe fresh air again, but the rain had turned into a downpour, as so often happens in Hamburg. We walked a few meters around the corner, but our jackets were soaked right away. In Köz Asli, a Turkish place on Steindamm, we found an empty table in the corner and ordered tea and kebab with spicy sauce. While we ate, I thanked Danilo for listening so closely and giving our talk so much thought. No one had ever summarized my weirdness in three sentences. Not even the psychiatric staff at the clinic in Ochsenzoll.

He smiled. Instead of answering, he said, “If you want, I invite you to concert tomorrow. Here on Steindamm, in small, beautiful theater. Polittbüro. You know it? I play benefit concert with four musicians for people living near Chernobyl. My brother die from cancer two years after terrible accident. I was already in Hamburg when that happen. Now my turn to help. But we can’t help anymore. Anyway, music is medicine for everything. You come too?”

I said yes maybe, and then I said good-bye. I went back home. To Siegfried. I wanted to tell him about Danilo right away. Mr. Lenz was always a great listener. And I could hardly wait to hear his advice for tomorrow evening.

Corinna Feierabend, who lives in Hamburg, Germany, works as a freelance journalist and teaches German and German as a foreign language. She writes short stories, poetry and book reviews for a local bookstore. In 2017, a short story of hers was published in *Hamburger Ziegel*, a literary yearbook. Corinna holds an M.A. in French and German Literature.

Sugar

By Sarah Jane Weill

Her lips still inches from the wooden spoon, Annie went hot with shock. It was the smallest sip, but the taste was syrupy and sickening and wrong. All wrong. This was her mistake, Annie knew. Hers alone. The evidence had just slid down her throat.

Less than an hour until she expected her friends, and Annie was collected and dressed: clean in a black jumpsuit, a vine of black pearls clinging to her neck. For the first time in months, she felt strong. Air filled and left her lungs at a healthy pace. All day she had moved through the kitchen, stirring and plating and seasoning, as if she could trust her limbs again.

Now, blame hardened in her body. Heavy and solid, it threatened to bring her crashing to the floor. She needed to excise it from beneath her skin; it couldn't rest inside of her. Not with her guests in their cars, heeding the stilted commands of their GPS trackers.

Instead, she could blame the coarse granules themselves. Blame the coincidence of their size and texture. Their color.

The same color as the tiles on the kitchen floor where she stood. Barefoot. Her maroon toenails a stark contrast against the ceramic hexagons.

The same color as the gown she was supposed to wear last month, standing at a flowered altar. Annie had wanted her hair fastened high with a jeweled clip. A gilded thing with fat, fake emeralds. She had envisioned herself poised with bound lilies in her hand. Loving words positioned at the back of her tongue. Instead, the gown was boxed. Waiting.

The same color as the hallways she had paced and paced this past year. Dressed in a disposable robe, her hand fastened around a metal pole. A tube blooming from the soft of her arm.

Annie had prayed, silently and clumsily, as she teetered through those sterile tunnels: for shrunken tumors, for the pain to melt from her body. Somehow, her pleading convinced Fate to relinquish her scissors. The gloved hands, the scrutinizing lights, the smell of antiseptic, all were no longer constants in her life. She didn't have to answer her phone hoping it was or wasn't one of her doctors, depending on the day. Annie owned her hours again. She was ready to celebrate that slippery fact - tonight.

But now she needed to assess the damage simmering in the pot in front of her.

Color. Yes, the two confused ingredients were identical in this way. Salt and sugar; sugar and salt. White as the tiles and lace and linoleum of Annie's world.

Why she decided to organize everything in her kitchen in glass jars, how she neglected to label them more boldly, Annie couldn't question now. She didn't have the time. She didn't have the help. Her fiancé was somewhere upstairs with a towel secured tightly around his waist, shaving cream thick on his cheeks. Probably leaving puddles with each step he took.

Meanwhile, on the table, eight bowls sat empty and impatient.

Annie knew she couldn't serve this potato leek soup, now better suited as a dessert. Still, she needed a first course. There was an order to things, she understood. And she wanted to do this, to succeed in her performance. To devote herself to normalcy again.

But she had no lettuce, tomatoes, or vinegar. Only oil. No pâté. No shrimp waiting politely on ice. No ingredients to fling into a bowl, to mix, pour out and bake into a solution.

Annie brought her fingers to her temples, pressed hard, willing an idea to lodge in her brain. The rhythm of her heart was percussive, menacing in her ears.

Cans. A whole pantry full of them, their tin tops brushed with dust. Cans ready for fires, tornadoes, blizzards, blackouts, hurricanes, floods. Cans prepared to act as first responders. Annie

rushed to the pantry, swallowed back her unease as she scanned her options. One cream of broccoli. One mushroom and barley. Two chicken noodle. Four tomato.

Tomato it was.

Annie grabbed the cans, placed them on the counter. She couldn't bring herself to look at the clock. She was certain the minute hand was where she hoped it wasn't.

She tried and failed to find the can opener in two different drawers. As if this room wasn't her domain. As if she hadn't sliced open and unpacked countless cardboard boxes without any assistance: settling herself into this kitchen, this house, with a relentless, ravenous force.

There it was, finally, resting with the whisk, spatulas, ice cream scooper, and two pairs of scissors. Annie seized the can opener, fastened its jaws around the lip of the first lid. The sound of its bite was definite. Metal punched through metal. Quickly, she started winding the black knob round and round and round.

The can split open with each turn of her wrist. She felt a slight prick of relief, holding this can, feeling its weight, knowing its contents were mildly delicious.

Four cans of tomato soup, together they could be enough.

There was blood on her palm before Annie realized what she had done. She sucked in a rush of air, pulled back her hand from the can, nearly dropping her hard work on the floor. The soup label was smeared with red, a few letters obscured.

A gash revealed the meat of muscle beneath her thumb. A new heart line: cavernous, raw. As Annie studied the crimson mark, for a moment any sensation she felt seemed distant, as if it wasn't in her own body. She focused only on the direction of her injury, mesmerized by the straightness of the line of torn skin. As if she had sketched it using a plastic ruler.

Annie stood, red drops falling onto the counter. Suddenly, the pearls gripped her neck too tightly; the jumpsuit she wore felt as if it was meant for a different body. Her pain pulsed.

The throbbing sparked Annie into a new consciousness.

She had to clean the blood. Finish opening the cans. Heat the soup. Find a bandage. Find antiseptic cream. Wipe the tears from her cheeks. Touch up her mascara. Find her shoes. Step into them. Take a breath. Stir the soup. Test taste, again. Test its temperature. See if it needed a few more minutes on the stove. Grab some painkillers. Swallow the pills with tap water. Take a breath. Call for her fiancé. Make sure his outfit matched. Tell him to comb through his hair again. Take a breath.

The doorbell was ringing.

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Words Matter

By Morghan Brown

“You can’t ignore me forever,” he said, with what, she was certain, was his best attempt at menace. She’d heard him take that tone many times before — chastising students lingering in hallways, girls wearing short skirts, and the senior class being too rowdy during one of many mandatory assemblies. Principal Stevenson’s “angry voice” was one of the most recognizable sounds of Bayton High’s preppy hallways.

“We know it was you, Kylah. Just come clean and save me the paperwork.”

Kylah had to bite back a smile at that. She kept her eyes trained on the bookshelf behind him — Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Faulkner, Salinger. Another smile tugged at the edges of her lips.

“You don’t need to say anything. People saw you, Kylah.” She raised her eyes to him then, curious, and followed the slow line from where his too-skinny tie grazed the surface of his oversized mahogany desk to where his fat neck was held hostage by his too-tight collar. The beginnings of black stubble littered the edges of where Kylah suspected his jawline had once lived, and his green eyes bored into hers unapologetically. She didn’t take it personally. She imagined they hadn’t had much practice apologizing.

“You’re a smart girl, Kylah. Why would you do something so dumb? You graduate in less than a month and you’re out here acting like a kid. This is childish. This is beyond immature.”

Kylah weighed his words as her eyes returned to the misogynistic bookshelf. She felt there was a complex simplicity to childish actions, stemming from the nature of a tiny person who doesn’t fully understand why they’re doing what they’re doing but being blindly resolute on doing it. Like the time Kylah was in third grade and proudly came to school with her hair in tight, clean cornrows — the kind she’d always seen her older cousins wear. Young Kylah was mesmerized by the intricate

designs and yearned for anything that meant no longer being victim to her mom combing out her hair every morning. Just the thought of a caught tangle was enough to bring tears to her eyes.

Madison Davis was the first to say anything, her own hair in a messy blonde pile on top of her head, hidden behind a crooked pink bow. She'd lead the campaign in telling Kylah how ugly the braids were and how reprehensible it was that Kylah dare put her scalp on display. Madison's words were met with unyielding support by the other girls of the grade, and at recess, a flurry of tiny white hands examined the atrocities of Kylah's tender scalp, despite her protests. But the third-grade girls did not pause to consider Kylah's soreness, or even why they were so opposed to Kylah's new hairstyle. Kylah herself would not understand until much later, after several lengthy conversations with her teary-eyed mother and her older cousins, when young Kylah begged for release from the protective style. Still, she didn't blame the girls. They had no idea why they did what they did.

Unlike Kylah today. Today, she had acted with razor-sharp intention, planning carefully and keeping in mind childish things like security camera angles and early-morning times when only a select few would be in the school parking lot.

"Kylah!" Principal Stevenson slammed his fist against the mahogany desk, winning back her gaze momentarily. She wondered if he'd just learned her name today. He seemed oddly obsessed with it, but it made sense. In names, there lived power, and he was clearly losing the power play.

"You're on thin ice now. I'm sick of this. Explain yourself. You are wasting my time and testing my patience."

Kylah stared at his balled-up nubby fingers in sympathy. She knew it sucked, being tested. The way that people tried to press and flex the personal boundaries of other people's comfort zones disgusted her. But she'd learned her own way of dealing with it back in middle school when it was a beloved pastime of the boys in her grade.

The best at it was Cole Markmen, the unofficial leader of every middle school boy of her sixth-grade year. He'd taken a particular liking to the N-word and coincidentally always found a way to slip it into conversation whenever Kylah was around, whether he was candidly quoting his favorite rapper or simply recounting a time when a friend was acting less than favorably. On the rare occasion Kylah found the energy to voice her discomfort, the retort was always exactly the same.

"I say it around my black friends all the time, and they don't care."

And who was Kylah to question the ever-omnipotent judgment of Cole's hypothetical black friends who she'd never seen before?

Kylah understood what it meant to be tested. But she'd learned that sometimes, it was best to leave the questions blank. Sometimes, it was best to put up walls when lines weren't enough to keep people from crossing them. She wished she could explain that now to Principal Stevenson, and hopefully ease the tension in his tightly coiled, angry sausage fingers, as she was certain he was hurting himself with the force of his furious fist, but she knew it was something he'd have to learn in his own time, just as she had. Or maybe he'd never have to learn it at all.

Principal Stevenson wiped a hand over his face in exasperation and closed his eyes. Without opening them, he drew in a slow breath and exhaled loudly through his nose. He looked at her then, his eyes almost kind.

"Kylah," he cooed. "I'm sure there's a reason you did what you did. Help me help you. Make me understand. If you don't, I have to make a decision based on what everyone else has told me. You don't want that. If something happened, you have to say something. That's what we do at Bayton High. When something's wrong in our community, we don't lash out. We rise to the occasion. We come together and we speak up."

Kylah bit back another smile, this one tasting darker than the others, saltier. She loved the blind conviction that people who see something say something. She supposed that had been his

experience, but she couldn't help but wonder if they were talking about the same school. His eyes held such fierce sincerity that she could tell he believed his words, and she felt a sharp pang of jealousy. She wanted to live in his bystander-less reality.

Instead, Kylah had the memory of her AP English class, filled with the brightest young adult minds the senior class of Bayton High had to offer. College decisions were just starting to roll in, meaning the air was thick with stress, and an unspoken competition Kylah had no interest in. But apparently, some things were inevitable.

"Okay, but you know why you got in, right?" Trevor McDonald scoffed as he proudly intruded on the conversation Kylah was having with a classmate about her latest college acceptance. He continued as if he hadn't been ignored.

"It's because you're black," he continued. "And a girl. But mostly because you're black." Kylah didn't know what to say to that, and apparently, neither did the other students surrounding them. They surrendered in a chorus of silence, but Trevor was hungry for battle.

"A buddy of mine just got rejected from there. He's a real smart guy, top of his class, worked with me at the mayor's office. I know he's overqualified for that shit school. It was his safety. But I bet you anything his spot was handed to someone less impressive just because they're black. That's why that affirmative action crap is bullshit. Explain to me how that's not reverse racism."

Kylah rolled her eyes and ignored the order, wondering if Trevor's "buddy" was as pressed as Trevor was.

"Explain!" he demanded. "That's discrimination based on race. He deserved that spot. It's fucked up that you don't have to be smart to get into college anymore. You just can't be white."

Kylah's eyes scanned the room filled with white students who had gotten into a plethora of prestigious colleges, all of whom were a direct counterexample to Trevor's absurd proclamation.

She made eye contact with the eavesdroppers one by one, and one by one, their eyes darted away from hers, suddenly fascinated with the assignment they'd been ignoring.

Uncomfortable with the idea of roping in another unwilling participant, but even more uncomfortable with carrying the weight of the conversation alone, Kylah remained silent. She could tell that Trevor felt her silence was rooted in superiority, but she didn't have the energy to explain the subtle differences between the two of them. She didn't feel better than him, just older than him, aged by the weight of conversations like these.

She couldn't take another year.

Trevor scoffed again.

"That's the problem with you people," he kindly informed her. "You can't even defend yourself when asked an innocent question."

Kylah was darkly entertained by the workings of Trevor's mind. She was sure he thought himself original, as if she hadn't had the exact same interaction last week with Matthew Donnelly in AP US History, and the week before with the school guidance counselor. They were all clearly uninformed and had no interest in being educated, and Kylah couldn't blame them. She knew for them, this was just a mentally stimulating conversation, a fun debate. And when faced with the fact that her existence was a plaything in the minds of her peers and educators, she had no choice but to laugh. It was just so heartbreakingly funny. But when she heard soft laughter coming from the students surrounding her, Kylah was certain they weren't laughing at the same thing.

She'd gone to her teacher after class to express her discomfort. Ms. McDonald was an old and plump woman with kind eyes and a feather-light voice. She knew Ms. McDonald loved Trevor, as did every other person in the school, so her expectations weren't high — just a sympathetic word to restore her faith.

“You know what, Kylah?” Ms. McDonald drawled, not looking up from the stack of essays she was grading. “He’s got a point. Maybe you should try to learn something from moments like these instead of getting angry at a classmate who’s just trying to educate.” Had Kylah not turned her personal lines into walls long ago, perhaps the comment would’ve hurt. Perhaps it would’ve crept under her skin, and maybe she would’ve cried in a bathroom stall and blamed herself. But thankfully, Kylah had learned that there was no use in crying over what was to be expected.

“Maybe you should talk to Madison about this,” Ms. McDonald continued. “You’re always so quiet, but she’s very outspoken about social justice and women supporting women and all that stuff. She’s a very passionate girl with a big heart and a big voice. You could learn from her. Put that anger to good use.”

Ever grateful for her walls that day, Kylah smiled slightly, nodded, and went on to her next class.

“You know what, Kylah?” Principal Stevenson said now, with a new note of finality. “Enjoy your three-day suspension. Clean out your locker and go. You’ll get an email from the student conduct board by the end of the day. I’m done trying to help you. You have to learn not to be so damn angry all the time. Get the hell out of my office.”

Wordlessly, Kylah left his office, forcing herself to keep her head level and pace slow, showing no physical reaction to her newfound perpetual anger. She kept her head up as she walked down the hall, past whispering students and their indiscreet stares.

She emptied her locker with a manufactured calm and continued to the parking lot, where she sat in the driver’s seat of her 2008 Honda Accord, watching the minutes pass on the dashboard clock. As Kylah waited, her mom called three times.

At 3:07 p.m., the passenger door opened and closed quickly, and Kylah started the car. “How was your day?” she asked warmly, her voice croaking from underuse. She cleared it quietly.

“Good. Better than yesterday.”

“What happened yesterday? You were very quiet,” Kylah recounted, much too casually.

“Well...okay, don’t get mad, but yesterday at lunch, I overheard some senior girls saying some dumb stuff so I was upset.”

A calculated pause.

“What dumb stuff?”

“Something about how I was too dark to be on homecoming court and I would ruin the pictures or whatever. They’re dumb. It’s not a big deal.” But it was a big deal. Big enough for some of the senior girls to laugh about it from lunch to last period AP English because they had caught word that the “little freshman bitch” had overheard their performatively boisterous lunch conversation and ran crying to the girls’ bathroom. Kylah had heard their hopes to make “the little freshman bitch” drop out of homecoming court and had received a text from her mom later that day about her sister’s strange newfound hesitancy. Their mother was perplexed and worried since her sister had been so excited when they’d first heard the news and bought her dress. It was an expensive dress, a gorgeous dress, and a big fucking deal.

Kylah kept her expression even and her eyes trained on the car in front of her as they waited in line to exit the packed student parking lot. Her eyes slid to the left, where a security camera’s view was obscured by a low-hanging tree branch, making it impossible to see the first few cars in the senior section of the parking lot. Those were highly coveted spots, typically won by athletes who got to school early for morning practices.

“It was that one cheerleader, really,” her sister continued. “Maddie something? Do you know her? I think she’s the one who always goes on feminist rants.”

“I know of her,” Kylah muttered. “But a better question is why a whole-ass senior has nothing better to talk about than the freshmen court members.”

“Well, she wasn’t talking about it today. I heard she was freaking out because someone trashed her car. There’s pictures all over Instagram. Apparently, someone spray-painted the word ‘bitch’ across her Benz! Isn’t that hilarious? She thinks it was an attack on her ideologies or whatever, but I’m pretty sure it’s just because she’s the fucking worst. I’m glad someone did it, too. Otherwise, I would’ve cussed her out-”

“And what exactly would that have done?” Kylah snapped.

“I wasn’t just going to let her-”

“So you’d rather make a scene and get kicked out of school? Now you’re the angry black girl.”

“You’re so annoying with this. It’s not that deep.”

“It is that deep. People listen to you. People watch you.”

“So I’m just supposed to say nothing?! I’m just supposed to be powerless and let people walk all over me? I don’t think so.”

“I didn’t say that. But you have to be careful with how you react. Words matter. And you don’t owe anybody anything. You don’t owe them explanations; you don’t owe them education; and you don’t owe them your emotions. The more you give them, the more you let them get to you, the more they have to use against you. That’s another way for them to spin your story. And then guess what! You’re the angry black girl again.”

“Who cares? I am angry!” Her sister yelled.

“You’re more than anger.”

“Nah, I’m pretty sure I’m just angry.” Kylah’s eyes sliced into her sister’s. She remembered her own frustration, her tiny third-grade fists balled at her side as young Kylah told her mom that she hated her classmates and she hated her braids and she hated her mom for making her wear them.

“Are you angry?” her mother had asked. Young Kylah nodded silently, wiping away tears that betrayed her.

“It’s okay to be angry,” her mom whispered as she wiped away the remainder of the tears from her hot face. “What they did was wrong and you have every right to be angry. But you are more than anger, and that’s hard for some people to understand. So, you can be angry here. You can be furious and you can yell and scream and tell us why it’s not fair, because it’s not fair. But when you go to school tomorrow, you’re gonna have a good day, okay? I want you to be happy and have a good day. Can you do that for me?” Young Kylah looked between her mother and where her two older cousins sat on the couch in her living room, fawning over the baby. The eldest held Kylah’s gaze for a moment with eyes filled with pity at her loss of innocence, the first of her added years.

“I can do that,” young Kylah promised.

“I think Ky-Ky’s hair is bootiful!” her baby sister exclaimed. Their mother smiled.

“It is,” she agreed. “Absolutely beautiful.”

Now, Kylah cleared her throat again, knocking off the remainder of the lingering cobwebs.

“Never say that. Never say that to me or anyone else ever again. You are more than anger, but if that’s what you decide, angry is all you’ll ever be. Choose your battles. Choose your words. We don’t cuss people out in cafeterias. We’re smarter than that. End of story.”

“You can’t just-”

“End. Of. Story.”

The sisters sat in tense silence for a moment as Kylah merged onto the interstate.

“What was that?” her sister asked.

“What?”

“That noise. What was that noise?”

“You mean me trying to give you a bright future, or you being a little brat about it?” Kylah quipped. Her sister rolled her eyes and let out a sarcastic remark under her breath that Kylah pretended not to hear. She knew it wasn’t personal. It was just the anger that came with an added year, justified anger that Kylah had tried to protect her sister from. But apparently, some things were inevitable.

As Kylah watched out of the side of her vision, her sister pulled out headphones and crossed her arms in protest of Kylah’s reprimand. Kylah sighed and reached forward to turn the radio up, masking the violent metal clanking of aerosol cans coming from the trunk.

Morghan Brown is a musician based in New York City. She is a Dramatic Literature student at NYU. While she primarily focuses her efforts on songwriting, she has always had a deep love of fiction and poetry and its ability to aid social change.

Poetry



By Mara Szyg

Reincarnations

By Lucy Newlyn

“Such violence and I can see how women lie down for artists”

That first time, in Balliol JCR, he was exactly
as you’d expect: the one man in the room
powerful enough to move mountains.
Feral, morose, his voice possessed me.
He stole the poems of his I had by heart
and gave them back to me again
so fierce and new that I shook and trembled.

The second time, in the Sheldonian, he was
a long way off — thinner than I remembered,
and somehow frail. The Yorkshire gutturals
were still strong, but the voice had faded.
Plath’s words came back to me: ‘Oh to give myself
crashing, fighting to you.’ Was it aging that made
this difference in him, or had I changed?

The third time was in Blackwell’s, when I heard
he’d died. But death was not a word that fitted,
and *Birthday Letters* proved me right.
He had come back — not as he’d been known,
but as a voice confessing: naked, thrawn.
His words of reparation all the more strange
for being so clear — and spoken much too late.

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

Pondering Plasticity

By Yuan Changming

Sure, I would paint my skin
Into a colorless color, & I would dye my hair
Wear two blue contacts, & I would even
Go for plastic surgery, but if I really do
I assure you, I will not remove my native village
Accent while speaking this foreign tongue (I began
To imitate like a frog at age nineteen); nor will I
Completely internalize the English syntax &
Aristotelian logic. No, I assure you that I'll not give up
Watching movies or TV series, reading books
Listening to songs, each in Chinese though I hate them
For being too low & vulgar. I was born to eat dumplings
Doufu, & thus fated to always prefer to speak Mandarin
Though I write in English. I assure you that even if I am
Newly baptized in the currents of science, democracy &
Human rights, I will keep in line with my father's
Haplogroup just as my sons do. No matter how
We identify ourselves or are identified by others, this is
What I assure you: I will never convert my proto selfhood
Into white Dataism, no, not
In the yellowish muscle of my heart

Yuan Changming is the editor of *Poetry Pacific* in Vancouver Canada with ten Pushcart nominations. His work has appeared in Best of the Best Canadian Poetry (2008-2017) and Best New Poems Online.

Where Are You?

By Joe Cusack

I'm a whisper in the snowflakes.
All around the falling ether.
I'm here with you in-breaths and shivers
To take away the chase

What are you?

A painted flower, a faceless instance
A staked claim to know
Your honest brow a teardrop hastened
A silent searing page.

Can you be seen?

A single drop in a sea of rain
Deserted brimming need
A sparkle in a fragment smashed
Glistening flecks in smithereens

Which one are you?

I'm here on a winged floating ride
A tiered bend of highs
Softened touch, a wizened look
Made an ethereal line

When will you return?

Entered realms impassioned kind
A delicate touch and floated core
To hearts and minds and treasured lines
For yours and mine are all

How will you arrive?

I don't know.

Joe Cusack is a freelance journalist based in Salford, UK. He writes news features for national publications including *The Sunday Mirror*, *Take A Break*, *Vice UK* and many more. Joe has ghostwritten three memoirs.

Weightless

By Duncan Richardson

we have driven with the hills
towards the clouds
in their winter fall

they meet us
gray and gleaming
with a distant sun

clouds streak and layer
shade out the world
beyond now

though they can bleed
 from brushes
into inky permanence

to live in a cloud
would be the gift
of presence

Duncan Richardson writes fiction, poetry, radio drama, and educational texts. He has published five poetry/haiku collections, including “Ultrasoundings” in 2012. and “Mountains, Plains, Sea” in 2014. His verse play "The Grammar of Deception" was produced by the ABC in 2008. He is the author of several books for children.

The Cabin

By Charles Edwards

Sitting in a lonely, dark cabin
on a cold winter night
chilling my ego's delight...

Rains have finally arrived
much to the toad's refrain
always a joy to hear them, again...

Fragrant candles glare
lighting up the rustic setting
as of the power, I'm not betting...

Silence is golden
though in a distance, I do hear
winds of fear, very clear...

Clearing my mind, thoughts of tomorrow
clouds roam, as moonlight beams
as I sit pondering these broken dreams...

So, whose to rid me of silent nights?
which brings back terrible frights
only this lonely, dark cabin...

Charles Edwards (pen name) was born and raised in Chicago by a Southern family. He is a long-time Californian, retired, widowed, offset printer who has been writing poetry for several years.

After Fifty Years, An American Soldier Returns to My Lai

By Anne Whitehouse

When we came to Vietnam,
we were young and naïve.
Once here, we realized
we'd been fed a lie,
and it became a part of us.

I looked into the eyes
of the enemy and saw myself.
To kill him would be suicide,
to love him salvation.

Some horrors cannot be expiated.
To the spirits of the innocent dead—
the grandmother with the child
in her lap, the baby at its mother's breast—
I offer the music of my violin
while incense burns on the family altars
of their descendants.

Seeing this country at peace,
I feel a peace long-denied,
watching children at play,
with no burden of war.

Anne Whitehouse is the author of six poetry collections, most recently 'Meteor Shower' (Dos Madres Press, 2016) as well as a novel, *Fall Love*.

Love's Needle

By Anne Leigh Parrish

Watch them tug along
First her, then him
Walking like looped stitches
In the slanted evening light

Watch her thread him
On her spool
Cast perfectly on the bobbin
Of this orange sky

So long together, they have
Sewn, pulled apart, frayed
And dropped the needle's thread

But now they rest and
Gather up their loosened strands
Bound together, always

Anne Leigh Parrish's fifth novel, *A Winter Night*, releases in March 2021 from Unsolicited Press. Recent short fiction may be found in *The Nonconformist Magazine*, *The Mark Literary Review*, and *New Pop Lit*. New poems have been published in *Feminine Collective*, *34th Parallel Magazine*, and *Q/A Poetry*.

Someone Else's Lover

By L.W. Hawksby

Do I really care about the color of her hair? No.
Do I really care about her body or shape — Slim, athletic or Pear? No
Do I really care that she thinks I am hers-No? Hah! Of course not.
I'm the opposite of a hero in a cape & no apologies, I can't help but spread rot.

When I wear a mask, it is for these reasons.
To dupe, seduce and take for all seasons.

I am a Narc. A man-eating shark- no not a man, just whoever I can.

Sharp fins of drive. Wide smile of lust. Smooth brow of confidence, I leave others in my dust.

When we meet, I will want to eat. Your hope, mind & optimism to me are the most delicious
treats.

As you frown, and question, look at me with more testings, I know it's time to throw away the
mask.

Ruining your life- was always my task.

You slip a finger under the sides, tickle my jaw and slide the mask aside....
I tense, smile grimly, stare, and watch. You get more confident. I click open my pocket watch.

As you start to say "have you been cheating on me....?" I flip open the strap and drop to my
knee.

"Marry me, my baby. It's just you, I love". You smile and flap your arms, excited. A lost dove.
The mask remains. Loyal and just- you have no idea. It really is just lust.

Tomorrow my other mask comes out- the wife herself has plenty more clout.

The only thing I'm ever honest about...

L.W. Hawksby is a newly published memoir author from the Highlands of Scotland. Her first book, *Dangerous Normal People. Understanding Casanova Psychopaths & The Narcissistic Virus*, was released in September 2019. Her second book, *The Notch*, will be released in February 2020.

Barefoot

By Mary Szyp

"Barefoot... Screaming without a voice. Feeling my shattered heart falling in pieces inside an empty chest that makes an echo. Needing one of your long shirts to stain... To clean the waste of paint off of my life's brush. The unlucky colors that don't make it to touch my canvas...

Wishing the smooth waves were to whisper secrets to my feet... Loud music to quiet my nightmare's thoughts... Mute the voice. Nude the soul. Broken-hearted. I paint to not lose my mind. As I have always. As I will always."

Mara Szyp was born in 1976 in Buenos Aires, Argentina. At a very young age she showed aptitude and interest for the arts in general. Mara is a cancer survivor. She found art to be the only medium to be able to express what she was feeling. Today Mara is an independent, creative, self-taught accomplished artist.

Sonnet for That Pigeon

By Lisa Cooley

To try to describe what is so poetic about
This rat of the sky, this pest, this pathetic pantaloons of a bird
This greasy, gray and graceless goon, poised
perfectly in the light of some glorious midday sun

To try to describe what is so poignant about
This beaked beast, this slick-feathered beggar, this plain, pitiful pecker

Is to see him, in all his witless triumphance, at his platform post
as a passenger, a picnicker, a passive people watcher
of the commuting passerby's
Who could learn a thing or two from this pesky pilgrim

Maybe it is to see him as a poet — a purveyor of passing trains
Of thought, pausing, pondering in the October J train air
Before continuing his arrhythmic plod and peck
It's all perspective, really

Lisa Cooley is a Senior studying the intersections of Art Therapy and Social Justice at NYU Gallatin. She took her first class in creative writing and poetry in the Fall and is excited to share her work.

Round Wire-Rimmed Spectacles

By Alex LeGrys

He drinks out of tin camping
mugs,
speckled with white so even
when
he's inside he reaches for
something beyond the room —
still trudging through the
snow

he drives a gray car
that
crawls up mountains yet
may hell freeze with his
fingers if salt eases its
labor

he's well acquainted with
the sandpipers, and
he
too rushes in and retreats
and breaks the ocean's
heart with his gentle teasing

he never lent me his
round, wire-rimmed
spectacles
and still, they allowed me
to

see I would never be
good
enough for the ocean—
leave
alone him.

Alex LeGrys is 18 years old and attends Bard College.

Glass Heart Girl

By Elle Lee

Glass heart, anyone who really wanted could shatter it
Why am I the way I am?
Memories are healing behind me
Rushing into the next day, next week, next life
There was a girl
She felt broken but appeared just fine
Defiant as a child, wholly accepting of herself
Wore
 big brown shirts and little black heels,
 purple pants with a neon pink windbreaker
 Bermuda shorts and thick hairbands
Loved
 reading fiction, running through pages
 writing creative stories, jotting in class and pretending to be Harriet
Wanted nothing else but the world to love her
 the way she loved the world
She was outgoing and unafraid and unaffected
Reached out to lonely girls at the lunch table
Befriended those she thought had a good heart
Cruel father
He himself was lonely and lacked love
Physical pain was not the worst he inflicted upon his family
Ghosted pain in the youngest, never touched, but damaged
Alone and not understood
An abusive father, a working mother
And a sister who had to care for a little lost girl
With a glass heart, who started loving the world a little less, day by day
Wondering why it felt like the world stole and took away
The love she initially had for the world

Elle Lee, a 20-year-old creative, was born in Seoul and now lives in New York. She is a student and studies Media, Culture, and Communication.

lost
(In Memory of Peggy)
By Ernest Clemons

she still plays
piano knows every
note to every song
she's ever played

but doesn't
recognize her
own reflection

they say music is the last
thing that's taken long
after the self dies but the
music soon will cease

a husband
four
children a
life

and
then

nothing

Ernest Clemons has been writing poetry for over ten years. He cites Bukowski as his chief influence. Ernest lives in the Southwest and has two grown children.

The Relic of Your Love

By Mark Mayes

Your skull beneath a crown of flowers,
your blood staining some cracked vessel,
your bones scattered to the winds
to wind up in a score of churches;
so many claim your bones
you'd make a dozen men.

When to the daughter of your jailer
you gave the gift of sight,
and signed it *from your Valentine*,
it bought you but a temporary stay.

And smitten with your God,
you would keep marrying soldiers
to the supposed virgins of Rome,
so they could not fight;
and soldiers are gold to an empire.

Or else ministering to Christians
(those dafties with their crosses)
before the lions had them;
cutting hearts from parchment
to remind them what their love meant;
for the betrothed on earth, and to Him beyond.

All this made the Emperor chafe;
you weren't playing ball, my love.
To maintain respect, like some Scorsese hero,
he simply had to have you beaten with clubs;
and like Rasputin, you forstood unfathomable violence,

until they chose to remove your head
out on the Via Flaminia,
one night beneath a Hunter's Moon.
This did the trick.

Centuries bleed past like broken hearts,
and here you tarry, my grinning suitor;
I stand before your skull,
braided with white roses
that stink of faith,
and ask for the gift of vision
to find the one true heart
in a wilderness of stone.

Mark Mayes is an author, poet, and songwriter.

Migrants

By Mariangela Canzi

Migrants here have sailed
to reach a Promised Land.

Daring a new life
beyond a foreign sea.

Death suddenly
seized them all.

Their wounded bodies
a black sea

has welcomed.

Their lost eyes
look in wonder
at the bright sky.

In the weeping sky
screams and prayers
have flown up.

To the bottom
wishes and hopes
have sunk.

Mariangela Canzi is an Italian writer. She tries to express her deep feelings and thoughts about life and the world. Her work, including poems and haiku, has been published in *The Poetic Bond VII, VIII* and *Haiku Canada*.

A Rose Is but a Rose

By Russell Bittner

I question why my roses rush to bloom
 (unlike my grapes, now pressed for wine and fun);
perhaps because their petals presage gloom
 once autumn drops a dimmer on the sun,
and roses sense a turning of the earth
 away from what illumines summer skies.
A rose is but a rose upon her birth,
 yet regal to the root until she dies—
though we are not. Instead, and in the act
 of seeking to bedazzle with a blush,
we're forced to face one incidental fact:
 our dotage leaves us barely fit to flush.
My roses muse that such a pun impedes
 that rush of spring recumbent in her seeds.

Russell is, first and foremost, a father of two; secondly, a fiction writer; and thirdly, a poet. He has dozens of past publications both in digital form and on paper.

Thirty-Three and A Third

By Mike McNamara

Here is where they keep
the tools of death,
two candles on a moonless canal.
Who lives in a house like this?
A Holy Ghost?
God's thirty-three and a third,
lifting weights and giving butterfly kisses,
a stained glass shadow
far from chapel or cathedral.

Hiding a questionable truth from
the shriekers and seekers.
Deeper into the machine
as it burns the bread,
the toast of heaven.
The sustenance of falsehoods.
Some truths are melted snow
from which hymnal, Delphic oracles
prophesize for no man in an arid no man's land.

Mike McNamara's publishing credits include "Overhearing The Incoherent" (Crevatt and Crevatt, 1997), "This Transmission" (The Argotist Online, 2019), and a collection entitled "Dialling A Starless Past" (Arenig Press, November 2019).

A Series on Rogue Geographies – Poem #2

By Maxine Flasher-Duzgunes

Coyote carcass
sand-swept
at land's end

four miles
washes over
a silent Sunday walk

she picks up
the brittle pieces
holey white remnants
atop her blue veins
pulsating the wind

the creature
once prowled
a seal-pup scape
but drowns in the icy
inbound sky

a star's piqué
in a C-curve surf
plunges bubbles through
his hungry yips

the same missing
as the wandering Calico
whose stapled headshot bleeds
in the telephone pole rain

Maxine Flasher-Duzgunes has been published in *Literary Yard*, *Red Cedar Review*, and *The Thread Mag*. She is an editorial writer for *inbtwn* and an editor for NYU. Her novella, *through Eileen*, will be published in May 2020.

This concludes our third volume!



By Mara Szyg

**Thank you to all of the authors, readers, and followers
who have made this possible!**