October Hill
MAGAZINE

FALL 2022
VOLUME 6, ISSUE 3

October Hill
MAGAZINE

Volume 6, Issue 3

The End of An Era in Publishing

The recent death of Sterling Lord, the founder of Sterling Lord Literistic, marks the end of an era in publishing. Lord, who died on his 102nd birthday, was a literary agent for 70 years and was a throwback to an era when literary agents believed it was their duty to nurture, cultivate and promote the work of unknown but talented authors.

Lord's roster of authors included Jimmy Breslin, Willie Morris, Doris Kearns Goodwin, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Jack Kerouac, Gordon Parks, Edward M. Kennedy, Robert S. McNamara, and Nicholas Pileggi, the author of "Wise Guy," a book which Martin Scorsese adapted for the 1990 movie "Goodfellas."

The story is told that Lord was a struggling literary agent in 1952 when Kerouac visited his basement studio on East 36th Street in Manhattan. His success began with his representation of the then-unknown author. Kerouac was having a hard time selling his novel, "On the Road," which was written on a 120-foot-long scroll of architectural tracing paper. It took Lord four years to sell the book, for $1,000. At last count, the book had sold over five million copies.

Lord was known for going to great lengths to find promising young writers. He once traveled to a farm in Eugene, Oregon, to sign Ken Kesey, author of "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest," later adapted into a movie starring Jack Nicholson. Lord, who was from Burlington, Iowa, was reportedly demonstrating how to pitch hay when he fell off Kesey's hay wagon.

The son of an amateur bookbinder, Lord served a stint in W.W.II, then worked as an editor on Cosmopolitan and True. He came away from those experiences believing that literary agents were not serving authors well. But it was his willingness to take risks on many of the unknown authors of his time that led to the discovery of some of the literary giants of post-war America.

We hope that Lord's spirit remains very much alive among editors, publishers and literary agents in today's literary world.

Richard Merli *Editorial Director*

Samantha Morley *Managing Editor*

Meet the Staff

EDITORIAL DIRECTOR
Richard Merli

MANAGING EDITOR
Samantha Morley

SHORT STORY EDITOR
Selin Tekgurler

POETRY EDITOR
Leyna Bohning

ASSISTANT POETRY EDITORS
Clare Kernie

MANAGING EDITOR (INTERIM)
Hannah Robinson

BOOK REVIEWER
Julia Romero

SHORT STORY EDITOR (INTERIM)
Lee Tury

Interested in joining the team?

We're always looking for editors and coordinators.
Submit your resume and cover letter to
OctoberHillMag@gmail.com

Table of Contents

Fiction

Short Story Book Reviews

Poetry


Short
Stories

Hillside Living by E.L. Frost

E.L. Frost has been writing professionally for two years. "The Floating Garden" and "The Night Traveler" are two works published in *Adventuring Together: A Flash Fiction Anthology*. She is an artist by trade in both traditional and digital mediums, ranging from the whimsical to sci-fi and more.

Hit and Run

By: Ivanka Fear

Ivanka Fear is a Canadian writer. Her poems and stories appear in numerous publications, including *Understorey, The South Shore Review, Blank Spaces, Orchards Poetry, October Hill Magazine, Mystery Tribune*, and elsewhere. The debut novel of her *Blue Water* mystery series is scheduled for release by Level Best Books in January 2023.

Victor hit the snooze button as his six a.m. alarm jolted him into action for another day. He allowed his wife to enjoy 15 minutes more in the comfort of their bed while he hit the shower. As he washed, brushed, shaved, and dressed, he thought about the money to be made on today's deal.

Thirty minutes later, he ran down the stairs to the kitchen where the aroma of freshly brewed coffee greeted him. "Hey," he said to Cindy as she poured him a cup and placed it next to his breakfast of multigrain toast and fresh fruit. Although they both worked downtown, they drove to work separately. As Cindy didn't usually leave the house till 8:30, she had plenty of time to prepare for her job as a real estate agent, as well as get their eight-year-old son off to school.

"Hey, yourself. What's your schedule like today? I can be home a bit early if I work through lunch. I thought we could have a family night before you head off for the weekend. I could take a roast out of the freezer, and we can have a nice dinner, then go for a walk, maybe play a board game after?" Cindy was trying to convince Victor to come home at a decent hour, especially as it was Thursday and he had plans to be away from home this weekend. He often stayed at the office till seven p.m. or later.

"Sure, sounds good. I'll try to wrap up work as soon as I can," Victor promised, his mind already on the job. As an advertising exec, he was constantly running slogans and pitches through his mind. Today he was meeting with a new client—a high-tech company looking to change their image. If he could score this account, he'd be up for another promotion.

"Well, I've gotta run. Get a head start on the day," Victor said, giving Cindy a quick peck on the cheek and rushing out to his BMW.

As he turned onto the expressway, he hit the gas pedal, and his speedometer quickly surpassed the limit. Within minutes, he was tailing the bumper of a red SUV that seemed to be barely moving. Victor simultaneously hit the brake and the horn, then expertly swerved around the vehicle, giving the SUV driver the finger as he passed.

"Stay off the road if you can't drive," he muttered, cutting off another vehicle as he weaved in and out of traffic.

At 7:32, Victor hit the elevator button for his floor. Already running 2 minutes behind schedule, he was the first to arrive in his office, as usual, and quickly settled in behind his desk to go over his notes for the big pitch today. At 8:30, he hit the intercom button and barked out, "Get me a coffee," to his assistant, Ellen. Then he ran through his emails and voice messages, looked over his schedule, and checked his appearance before the board meeting.

The 10 a.m. meeting with the tech client went as expected. As Victor pitched the ideas for the new campaign, he had the approval of his bosses and the support of his co-workers. The clients were duly impressed, and the deal was signed. After they left the boardroom, one of the new interns, whose name he couldn't recall, commented, "You really got them on board quickly. How do you manage it so smoothly?"

"No sweat, kid. Once you've hit on a great idea, you just run with it. It's all about having confidence in yourself," Victor beamed.

The rest of the morning, Victor was on the phone, keeping clients up to date and happy. His mom called

around noon. "Hi, how are you?" she began.

"Busy, Mom, busy," he replied.

"Well, I don't want to be a bother, but I was wondering if you could bring the family over for a visit on the weekend. It's been a while," she said hopefully.

"Sorry, Mom. Maybe another time. I've already got plans for the weekend. Some of us are planning on heading up north and hitting the golf course."

"Cindy and Luke going?"

"No, just some work buddies. We need a break, you know how it is," he explained.

"Of course. Well, I'd like to see you and Cindy and Luke. Maybe I could come over tonight for just a bit?"

"Not a good time right now. Later. Gotta run now."

"Okay, I love you."

"Love you too, bye," he ended the call.

At 12:40, Victor left the office and set out for an informal lunch meeting with some clients whom he considered buddies. As he opened the door to his black BMW, he accidentally hit the adjacent red SUV. "Shit!" he exclaimed. After inspecting his car and finding no damage, he looked over at the vehicle next to him and noticed a slight indentation on its side. "Hope it doesn't belong to someone in my office. Oh, well. It's not that noticeable. They'll never know," he thought as he sped away to his appointment.

He hit the pub just before one p.m. After a leisurely lunch and discussion that vacillated between business and pleasure, Victor unexpectedly ran into his wife just outside the restaurant. "Hey, what's up?" he asked.

"Oh! I didn't expect to see you here."

"Lunch meeting with some clients. What about you?"

"Just heading to the bake shop to pick up some dessert for tonight. I'm kind of in a hurry. Still got stuff to do at work before I leave for the day. Could you pick up some wine on the way home? I thought maybe after we get Luke tucked in, we could have some time for ourselves. Just make sure you get home early."

"Sure, no problem. See you later."

"I love you."

"Love you too, bye," he said as he ran toward the parking lot.

The rest of Victor's afternoon was spent meeting with co-workers, going through ad copy, and running suggestions by each other. By 4:30, many of the workers were winding down and thinking about heading home.

When Victor started packing up his briefcase, the new intern asked, "Are you leaving? Isn't this kind of early for you?"

"Yeah, family duty calls. You know how it is, buddy. I'll be staying up late getting some of this paperwork done, though."

"Burning the candle at both ends, eh?"

"I guess you could say that. Gotta keep the missus happy, though," Victor laughed.

"Life's short. There's more to it than work." The intern put a hand on Victor's shoulder. "Slow down a bit before you burn out."

As he slipped behind the wheel of his car, Victor remembered he was supposed to get some wine for the evening ahead. "Maybe flowers, too, wouldn't be a bad idea," he thought as he considered a possible romantic night with his wife before his big getaway weekend. Victor drove to the grocery store. He figured he'd make a quick stop to pick up a bouquet of fresh flowers and a bottle of wine. As he made his way to the checkout, he noticed the long lineups. "That's just great," he said aloud. Then he proceeded to push his way past a couple with a ton of food and a toddler sitting in the front of the cart. "You don't mind, do you? I've just got a couple of items, and I'm running late," he said. He set down his flowers and wine on the counter as the couple looked at him, not knowing how to respond.

"Sure, no problem," said the man.

Okay, so this gives me just enough time to hit the gym for half an hour. I'll still be home before Cindy has dinner ready, Victor thought.

As he ran on the treadmill and lifted weights, Victor thought about his day. Another day, another success.

Who says you can't have it all?

On his way out the gym door, Victor ran into the intern from work. "Hey, I thought you'd be heading straight home," said the young man to Victor.

"On my way. See you tomorrow," answered Victor.

"Enjoy your family time while you can. You never know what's around the corner."

Seeing the intern reminded Victor he'd left his briefcase on his desk. He debated whether or not he should run back to the office to get it. "It'll just take a few minutes," he decided. "I can get in at least an hour's worth of work sometime tonight."

By the time Victor was on his way home, it was 6:30. Still time to get home for dinner with the family. He hit the gas and swerved around vehicles till he noticed a familiar-looking SUV right ahead of him, now with a dent in the side. "Seriously? Not again," he said under his breath. "Who drives the speed limit on an expressway of all places?" Once again, he passed and gave the driver the finger for being so inconsiderate.

When he exited off the expressway onto Allen Road, a skunk ran across the road. Hitting the brakes hard, Victor swerved but couldn't avoid running it over. He heard the crunch under his tires. "Shit! You've got to be kidding me," he swore. Not bothering to take the time to shove it off the road, Victor kept driving. The smell was overpowering. He decided he couldn't go home smelling like that. Victor headed to the closest car wash and emptied out the coins from his pocket. The hot soapy spray hit the car, and he ran it through three rounds of washing to de-skunk his vehicle. Then he topped it off with a wax. By the time he was done, he thought it smelled better, but then, it might be that he was getting used to the aroma of skunk.

Victor started up the car and set his sights on home again. He could have sworn he saw that same red SUV out of the side-view mirror as he exited the car wash. "Is he following me?" Victor wondered. He parked in his driveway, hoping it would air out overnight. The delicious aroma of roast beef hit him when he entered the house.

"Hey, I'm so sorry," he said, thrusting the red wine and red roses at Cindy. "I meant to be home early tonight. Ran over a damn skunk. Had to get the car washed."

"It's okay," Cindy sighed. "The roses smell lovely. Thank you. I fed Luke already. He was hungry. But I kept it warm for the two of us."

"Thanks, babe."

As they sat down at the table, Luke came bounding down the stairs. "Dad, dad, I got an A on my math test. Do you want to see it?" he asked.

"Maybe later, sport," Victor promised. "I've had a rough day. Just give me a few minutes to settle in and have my dinner."

Victor and Cindy ate while Victor explained the skunk incident that held him up.

"I'm just glad you didn't run into anyone," Cindy told him. "Someone could have been hurt."

"Yeah, but the car sure stinks."

After dinner, Cindy suggested they play a game with Luke before his bedtime. They played Scrabble for half an hour, then Luke reminded his dad about the math test.

"Good job," Victor told his son. "Keep it up and you'll get a decent-paying job someday."

"I don't think that's something he should be thinking about at his age," Cindy said. "He's just a kid. And kids need to have fun."

After Luke was settled into bed, Cindy suggested having some more wine and cuddling up with a movie together. As they settled down in front of the TV, the security lights came on outside. Victor jumped up and opened the front door to see who was out there. Not seeing anyone, he put on his shoes and took a walk around the vehicles in the driveway.

"Probably just the neighbor's cat walking by," he told Cindy when he came back in. Then they watched the movie and got ready for bed.

"I'll be there in just a bit. I want to have a look at some of the paperwork for the Richards' account. Wait up for me," Victor said.

An hour later, when Victor climbed the stairs and opened the door to their bedroom, Cindy was fast asleep. She had already set the alarm for six a.m.

The next morning started the same as every morning, with Victor ready to hit the shower and get started on his busy day. When he opened the door to his BMW, he was overcome by the smell. "This is worse than yesterday," he thought. He drove to work as usual, but today he couldn't shake the feeling that he was being watched. The feeling stayed with him at the office and on his way home, as did the overpowering smell of skunk.

That evening, Victor packed his bag, kissed his wife and son goodbye, and said, "Gotta run. See you in a couple of days."

"Have a good time. I love you," Cindy said as she hugged her husband goodbye.

"Bye, daddy. I love you so much. I miss you already. When will you be home?" asked his son.

"I won't be gone for long, sport. Gotta hit the road. Love you," Victor waved goodbye to his family and went out to his BMW.

As he hit the button on his car remote, the back hatch opened, and Victor got ready to swing his golf bag inside. The smell assaulted his nose and made him gag.

What he saw inside the back of his shiny BMW jolted the contents of his stomach onto the driveway. The dead body lay there, staring up at him. Pinned to the ear of the black-and-white carcass was a note. A reminder? Or a threat?

Slow down, buddy. Life in the fast lane will get you nowhere fast.

If I were you, I'd stop and smell those roses before it's too late. No one lives forever. Including you.

Still, like the Ocean, Return

By: Kevin Lê

Kevin Lê is a queer Vietnamese American writer based in Los Angeles and is currently working on completing their first novel. When they aren't obsessing over finishing their draft, they're usually playing with their cats or avoiding traffic in LA.

"Apartment 14," Má reminded me over the phone last night. Her Vietnamese was edged with irritation as if I could forget the small apartment I grew up in and was then cast out of ten years ago.

My scalp burned in the midday sun. The rush of steady traffic hummed along Trask Avenue and on the 22 Freeway, and the barren sidewalks glared and scorched in the harsh sunlight. I was back in Garden Grove—Garbage Grove, as some called it—a place I never thought I'd return to, the site of phantoms and dying dreams and suburban miasma, and there was no parade, no fanfare, no one to greet me at its door. I brought the cigarette to my lips and inhaled, letting the heat fill my chest, but I choked and broke into a fit of coughing, spitting myself out in wheezes in puffs of smoke.

Standing on the curb in front of Má's apartment building, I endured the early August inferno, making sure I kept my newest tattoo, a small bunch of chrysanthemums on my forearm, covered under Jessie's oversized denim jacket. Despite the cigarette smoke, I could still smell his cologne from the jacket—notes of bright citrus with a sweet floral finish—which he only wore in the summer. In another life, Má and Ba never would have kicked me out at 17. But *this* life wasn't like that at all, and no matter how much I used to wish that I could leap through time, through all the sand and the stardust, through all those years and the smoke, to reverse the wheel and undo what they did to me, I couldn't. So instead, I left and returned here, alone, from New York without seeing or speaking to them for all this time and hobbling together something of a life without them.

I took another inhale from my cigarette, a long one, held the smoke for a second or two or three, and exhaled it without a single cough. On my phone, I opened my messages with Jessie, and he had already sent me several photos during my flight. The most recent photo was of our cat Boba, an English tabby with golden eyes, who was asleep on my side of the unmade bed, bathing in the sunlight.

She already misses you :(, he captioned.

In another photo was Jessie in his white coat, in between rotations at the hospital. A stethoscope snaked around his neck, and he rolled his eyes to show their whites.

Only seven more hours of this :'(, he wrote.

My thumbs hovered above the keyboard. It had been a few hours, and I didn't respond yet. I wrote a few words, deleted them, wrote those same words again, paused to reconsider what to say, deleted them again, and then stared back at the impatient cursor line blinking at me over and over in the empty message box—581 times. I wanted to reply, to say anything at all, but I didn't know what to write, which words to use, and didn't know how to arrange them in the correct order to bend space and warp reality to close the distance between us. But nothing sounded right, and I gave up. I locked my phone and pocketed it.

All of this made me want to go home even more. I missed New York already, its electricity, its jolt, its sense of possibility. I missed Boba, and I even missed Jessie, as if he didn't drop me off at LaGuardia early this morning, as if I wouldn't return to him and resume my life after Ba's funeral was done and over with. My life there was so different, so unlike how it was in Garden Grove, but here I was after Má's unexpected voicemail two weeks ago.

The night I got Má's voicemail, Jessie and I were at a friend's house party in Astoria to celebrate her newest exhibit at a local art gallery and my 27th birthday—again. (Everyone kept their shoes on, which I thought was disgusting.) While we danced throughout the night, I got a call from a number with a 714 area code, which I immediately rejected without a second thought. I was too enchanted by the music, by the dizziness of the alcohol, by the high from the drugs, and by the celebration because that was what we always did: danced in this tiny apartment in Astoria, where everyone kept their shoes on, to enjoy living, that very moment, because no one knew when we could do it again, together.

The party ended late, but Jessie and I were still restless, still electrified, with drugs and alcohol running through our systems. Before going home, we wove in and out of the streets toward the river just to look at the Manhattan skyline, taking in the view and the cluster of light. I leaned forward on the fence with a cigarette in my mouth, a distance away from Jessie because he hated cigarettes and my smoking habit, always asking me to quit even though I always broke that promise. The black river babbled and wound past us, and lightly freckled its face while the moon stretched and scattered itself on the rippling surface. We stood two feet away from each other, with this skyline, this nebula, this silence between us.

The city at night felt like a forgotten dream, like earth and heaven switched places, and I couldn't believe that I was here, that I somehow replaced that boy who conjured in his hands so much fury, and so much fire, with stillness, with ashes, and with starlight. I learned to love this kind of solitude, learned to love being awake when everyone else was asleep, and the tenderness in that hour of the night when my body felt soft and shone blue, and my eyes saw fairies, and when my stomach didn't starve for fullness or for fantasies of another life. But then I checked my phone, inhaling the cigarette as I listened to the four-second voicemail with its 714 area code.

"Minh," the voice said. Má didn't have to announce herself because I recognized her voice immediately, this wave roaring the name of a person whom she left to drown, in a place I never wanted to see again.

No one in my life called me that, not even Jessie. They only used my American name, Henry, because Minh was a hex, an incantation, an ancient spell to raise the dead, a prayer, a curse. Minh was an unbreakable tether that reminded me I was bound to Garden Grove, to Apartment 14, to Má, and she tugged at it. Minh wasn't for them. Minh was for family.

"Dad died. Call me back," she finished, and the four-second voicemail ended, and her spell was cast.

The mirror shattered, the moonlight dimmed, the enchantment faded, and the illusion was revealed to be a trick of the light. Rose faded from my eyes, and I saw the reality of it all now, the truth at the center of the skyline, the sparkling water, and my life with Jessie. It was no cosmos, no picturesque scene, no perfect life, and it was all too good, and all coming to an end.

I wept in private for days afterward, sobbing all over the city on my lunch breaks and after work—in a coffee shop on the Upper East Side, a used bookstore in the Hell's Kitchen, on subway trains back home to Woodside—and drenching the bricks, sidewalks, and intersections in grief. Specters of Má and Ba were everywhere and in the small currents of daily living. I capped the toothpaste tube while brushing my teeth, scoured over receipts after paying for groceries to make sure I bought them on clearance, and carried $20 in cash—always three $5 bills and five $1 bills—just in case, because they did that, too.

Instead of sleeping, I lied awake into the dead of night and saw these ghosts, these monsters made of mist and vapor—Má gripping a cleaver with a bleeding hand, and Ba with cracked terracotta skin that spilled seawater—lurk around corners and at the end of long alleyways, shriek in the wind and rustle the trees and groan in the floorboards, standing over my bed with open mouths and empty eyes, and reaching out to grab me and take me back. New York now overflowed with them, and they haunted me, and I wept.

I imagined the kind of life Ba led since the last time I saw him, since he threw me out, and if it was the life he thought he would have—working himself down to dust just to get scraps, reaching for some sort of happiness high at the top of a shelf. Then, I thought of that ominous moment, the moment Má found him, how she found him, if she screamed and panicked when she saw his body, or if she expected it with a calm sadness when it finally happened in front of her eyes. I obsessed over the moment itself—what mundane thing was I doing at the precise moment he died, what tedious conversation did I have with a coworker, what did I want for dinner? I couldn't recall.

But the world didn't stop. The waves crashed. Ba died. The sun set and rose. I was given another day. We moved on, and I cried and cried. Jessie had no

idea that I carried on like this in secret, all in rooms without him until he found me cursing at myself for accidentally slicing my finger while preparing dinner and bleeding all over the kitchen. When he asked me what was wrong, wrapping the bandage around the wound, I finally told him everything that happened and collapsed into the space of his shoulder, into a black hole, pouring out this grief, this despair, coughing up this lungful of salt, flooding our apartment and our life together, sweeping him up and pulling him away to some colossal darkness, to see the eye of some great storm that gazed back. He had never seen me like this because I never let him, and I felt so ashamed that I still carried that ocean with me and everything it drowned.

When I finally called Má back the following week, she demanded that I attend the funeral and pay my respects. No matter what, I owed them both an endless debt for swallowing storms and drifting across the world to get to refugee camps in Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand, for being the little girl and the little boy who were born at the apocalypse, who breathed gun smoke, and survived the sea monsters—all for a life that they toiled and scraped and clawed to create, all to give birth to me years later, an entire world and lifetime away.

"I'll think about it," I told her in my flattened Vietnamese.

"Think about what?"

"My life. I can't just leave. I need to think."

"There is no thinking. You must come home because it's your obligation."

"I didn't say no."

"He's dead, and I'm alone," she said, cutting to the point. She didn't need to say anymore. I saw her, and I saw her meaning, and I understood.

"Okay," I said, and flew out a few days later, and left Jessie behind.

Sweat began beading along my forehead, and I inhaled the cigarette's final breath. Maybe coming back here was the wrong decision. Maybe coming back to the intersection of nowhere and dull, where there was nothing except that shortness of breath, that familiar, suffocating anesthetic strangling my throat, wasn't the best idea, but it was too late. I was already here, and I couldn't afford another ticket to leave anyway. I dropped the cigarette filter on the asphalt and stomped it out. I inhaled through my nose—one, two, three, four—and held it—one, two, three, four, five, six, seven. Then, exhaled—eight seconds—until my head was clear, like a deflated balloon. I could survive this week here. I had to.

I entered the building courtyard and made my way toward their apartment. The building was the same, as if the cracked stucco, succulents, birds of paradise, splintered window frames, and rusted railings were all in stasis, locked in time, in purgatory. Má and Ba stayed in Garden Grove, in this limbo, this time-proof cage, this *suburb*, all this time, in the same apartment building right across from the Toyota dealership on Trask Avenue. And there was Apartment 14, at the back of the building, in the corner.

Large tears ruptured the screen door, and the faded sea-foam paint was peeling off the front door in slivers and shards, flayed off, piece by piece, exposing the original wood underneath. The neighbor directly above Má's apartment left their front door open, and currents of a Vietnamese pop song poured through the screen door, splashing against the stillness of the complex. Against an electronic Eurodance beat and harsh synths, the woman's voice was light and sweet, and I found her words completely unintelligible.

I looked through the distorted glass window to see any shapes moving or shifting around inside, but there was nobody at all. I wondered if she would still recognize me, if she could see that teenage boy whom she threw out on the streets, buried inside an unmarked coffin underneath the years and rubble and dirt. I finally knocked on the screen door, and it rattled against the frame.

No answer.

I knocked again.

No answer.

I moved to knock a third time, but the knob shifted, the front door swung open, and Má appeared from behind the screen door. My stomach dropped and my breath, a lump of shock and globule of pain that tried to escape, caught in my throat, just briefly, but I swallowed that jagged glass, and from behind my sunglasses, I steeled myself against her.

She looked so much smaller than I remembered. She was still a powder keg of a woman, still carried herself with an air charged with electricity, and commanded

herself with titanic strength. The years sculpted lines on her face, and her hair was thinning and graying against her copper skin and was much shorter now, at chin length—it was no longer that ink that fell and draped itself along her back. (I wondered if I would eventually inherit her hair loss like I inherited her thick, jet hair.) There was now an ashiness to her skin tone, as if she lost her color and became a long, tired exhale of herself, which brought out the blueness of the varicose veins that bolted across her legs.

Her face still had that same sharpness in her glooming eyes, her high cheekbones, her jawline, and in the way she peered at me from behind the door, making dozens of incisions into me in an instant, cutting me down to the bone. She inspected me from behind the screen door, studying me cautiously. Her glare ripped away my piercings and carved off all the tattoos on my body, sliced me open—through the tendons and ligaments—and let all the glittering blood splatter on the hot cement floor. She searched for something familiar in this adult's body. But she still didn't recognize me.

"Who the hell are you?" she said in Vietnamese. Her voice cleaved through the music and rang throughout the complex.

"You know who I am," I said. I removed my sunglasses.

She looked me up and down once more, and her eyes went wide once she finally understood. "Minh?! You're not Minh!"

If she said my family name a third time, I might have come under her thrall.

"Má, it's me. It's hot. Can I come inside?"

She scoffed and huffed, but she opened the screen door just a sliver, wide enough for me to enter the dim, claustrophobic apartment. I walked past her with upright posture and my head held high. She smelled the fresh nicotine burning off me, and she scowled and crinkled her nose.

I kicked off my shoes before entering the apartment, and the ancestor altar for Ba Nôi and Ông Nôi—Ba's mother and father—made its presence obvious, always towering along the wall in front of the hallway that led to the bedrooms and bathroom. Their faded photos welcomed me back with a dour look, perhaps because I shamed them, somehow. A small plate of fresh fruit, a vase of cut flowers, and two chipped porcelain bowls of rice sat in front of their photos. Two incense sticks burned inside their own censer, almost completely down to the shaft, sending the food's essence to nourish Ba Nôi and Ông Nôi's spirits.

Ba's photo would be up there soon, too, but I wouldn't be around to burn incense or joss paper for him, to care for him in his afterlife and send him abundance with flame and flaps of smoke. This was my judgment for Ba, swift and final, exact like a dagger, and his penance in that eternity would be starvation and wanting and lack.

Inside, the stale air was a mixture of pungent fish sauce and burning incense smoke, caking itself onto my skin and dulling my sense of smell. So many of their belongings were boxed away and haphazardly stacked on top of each other, and some were covered with a dusty cloth and took up more than half of the living room. The grimy and yellowed vertical blinds in front of the patio door were kept shut to block the sun and keep the apartment cooler, but it still sweltered and broiled. Nothing breathed.

I calculated each step and made my way through and around the hoard to get to the back door and pushed the blinds to the side, brightening the room and discovering a patio that was filled with thriving, well-tended plants, which they never had before. There was a chili pepper bush, aloe vera, several types of herbs, succulents, orchids, and a tall, braided money tree with a thick canopy and an even thicker trunk. It was like my own collection of houseplants back in Woodside, except Má's patio felt more like a refuge, a place where she rubbed her calloused hands together, laid them on the pot, and transmuted the dirt, pebbles, and clay into a lush garden, into blooming flowers.

With more light, I saw the rest of the apartment more clearly, and I was stunned by the mess, the filth, and the ruin. Eight paces from the living room was the galley kitchen that was always too small to stomach Vietnamese cooking. Towers of dirty dishes soaked in the sink, a few mysterious spots of dried liquid stained the linoleum floor, an open drawer held a smattering of utensils thrown in carelessly, and an open plastic store bag for trash hung on a kitchen drawer's knob. A group of flies buzzed around the festering garbage.

Browning pots and pans and cooking pails hung on a pegboard wall, and foil lined the entire stovetop, except the burners, of course. They still had the same folding table from Costco that had grown discolored throughout the years and two metal folding chairs, one of which had a noticeable dip on the seat. Ba sat in that one, for sure.

I opened the sliding glass door to let in some air and to let out the stench. In a dead space between the couch and the altar, I tucked away my duffle bag—the least intrusive place I could find—and sat in the one open spot on the couch, which was otherwise crowded with garbage bags full of Má's clothes from the '80s and '90s.

The living room's layout was the same as I remembered, except the piles of stuff were a new addition. The TV, now a flat screen instead of that massive tank of a thing, was in the same spot opposite the same emerald-green couch with a plastic protective cover, with hills of junk filling the space between them. The same lacquer painting still hung above the corner fireplace; in iridescent pearl inlay were trees, flowers, a temple, and two young women in áo dài rowing a boat against a burning skyline on dark mahogany wood. Despite the dust and grime, the pearl inlay glinted and refracted in the sunlight.

Má dragged and scraped her metal folding chair against the floor and sat in it across from me. She crossed her legs at the knee, wove her hands together, and rested them on her lap, a position she assumed when she was around strangers or when the social worker evaluated us every year for Section Eight because she had to appear *presentable* and *respectable*. I crossed my arms. She examined me again, still unsure whether this strange adult who flew across the country and showed up at her door was, truthfully, her son.

I felt a wetness in my armpits. The dusty vertical blinds swayed in the light breeze. The crows' caws echoed in the complex. The music from upstairs thumped through the floor. Squeaking pierced through the ceiling. I removed my jacket and placed it in my lap. Má's eyes flitted between each tattoo. The pipes groaned in the wall. Water lashed the shower and filled the air with static white noise. The upstairs neighbor sang along to the song loudly, badly.

"When is the funeral?" I finally asked.

"I don't know yet. I haven't done anything."

"So why am I here then?"

"You're here to pay your respects."

"But there isn't a funeral *to go to*," I spat out from my clenched jaw and through my gritted teeth.

"Then you'll have to make sure that there is one."

I sighed and rolled my eyes, feeling my jacket pocket for the box of cigarettes. I was going to need a lot more than I thought.

"Oh, it's such a hassle," she mocked. "You're not the one who's *dead*."

I ignored her jab. "Do you have the money to pay for the funeral?"

"Of course we do. We prepared for this day."

"Okay."

Má's jaw clenched.

I settled back into my pins, and she into her needles. The music from upstairs changed from dance pop to the beginning of a cải lương track. I forgot how much I hated these back-and-forths with her, this way of circumventing the meaning of things and their centers, these serpentine paths that winded here and there, coiling around themselves and constricting me. Conversation with her was too exhausting, and every word was too serrated. The song started with quick, bouncing melodies from the zither before the fiddle glided in. We sat staring at each other, and I could feel her make more and more cuts into me, my life, and my decisions.

"What?" I asked, splintering the quiet.

She scoffed and shook her head incredulously. "What's everyone going to think when they see you at the funeral?"

"They're going to think, 'Wow, what a dutiful child, coming home to pay his respects to his father, who left his only child out on the street. And he's so handsome now!'"

"You bring too much attention to yourself. Look at all of those tattoos. You leave us for ten years, and you come back looking like *this*. Like you were in prison."

"I didn't leave you."

"But you didn't come home."

"So?"

"So you left us."

Yet here I was.

The Second Defenestration of Grosse Pointe

By: Douglas Steward

Douglas Steward has been published in the Zizzle short stories book series (Volume 1), *Atherton Review, Blackworks, Brief Wilderness, and Louisiana Literature*. Semi-retired from a career in the automotive industry, Douglas now devotes his time to writing and taking care of his two collie dogs.

Content Warning: The following story contains elements of self-harm.

When my Meghan hit 11 years old, it was as if an imposter had arrived in our house.

Just days before, I could count on finding her watching a Netflix documentary with her dad, Steven, or playing tag with Lizzie Weisbrodt in our backyard. She would occasionally come in from outside with a scraped knee or a minor cut. That's normal for an active little girl. Then, suddenly, it was as if the old Meghan ceased to exist. Her book bag and school shoes with the black straps were still strewn about the front foyer. But she was nowhere to be seen.

Now on the cusp of tweendom, she sheltered in her room with her phone, texting her friends and posting on social media apps.

I remember drifting off to my room as puberty took over, perhaps to read a book or dream about what life would be like with a boyfriend.

Meghan was hitting her teen years in full force, and I was pretty sure she wasn't reading *Little House on the Prairie*. More likely, she was spending time in front of the mirror, getting her hair just right, applying moisturizer to those smooth arms of hers, and then snapping a provocative photo of herself to share with friends.

At Grosse Pointe Academy, where Meghan attended middle school, there was a dearth of male teachers. So, naturally, we were excited when Jake Peden arrived by way of Philadelphia to teach social studies. Mr. Korenchuk, the school principal, sent out an email asking all us parents to do what we could to welcome Jake to the school. I was more than happy to do so. Steven was less enthusiastic.

"Let's not have a repeat of the last time," he said.

He was referring to the Luke Theisen incident of a few years ago. Steven always exaggerates that situation. It was an unfortunate misunderstanding, plain and simple.

Meghan was just beginning the long journey of adolescence. It was interesting to watch her push against the edges of her boundaries.

We began playing this little game where she would attempt to hide a tight top under her school sweater, the kind with the shoulders cut out. Every morning, I made her go change it before we left for school.

She'd protest, saying, "You can't dictate how I express myself."

That was usually followed by her stomping off to her bedroom and loudly slamming the door so violently I worried she might hurt herself.

I couldn't do anything right when it came to Meghan. The fact that I even existed mortified her. I had to refrain from saying "I love you" or "Have a good day!" when I dropped her off at school in the morning. She explained that I was committing an actual crime when I said these things.

She began passing judgment on my words and actions. In her eyes, whatever I was doing was too much.

She'd say, "Mom, that's too much."

Too much what? I'd ask. My outfit was too much. My manner of speaking, too much. I was spending too

much time chatting with Jake Peden in the parking lot at school. Everything I did was just too much.

She didn't complain when I invited Jake to our house for Sunday dinner. I thought he might appreciate a home-cooked meal.

Steven made a crack that preparing a roast was going too far. Perhaps he was right about that. I set the oven temperature too high, and the meat came out overcooked and tough as leather. I was so disappointed that I cried in the bathroom for ten minutes. Steven ordered turkey sandwiches from the deli, which Jake ate with gusto.

Jake turned out to be very popular with the students at school. He was great with the boys; he refereed impromptu wrestling matches and spent time throwing a football around with them. The teen girls paraded behind Jake in single file as if he were the Pied Piper. Meghan took up her place in the back of the pack.

I did my best to make him feel welcome.

"Are you dating anyone?" I asked. "Who looks promising? What kind of girl are you looking for?"

He'd stumble over his answers. It was kind of cute. Men his age don't know what they want. Meghan was aghast that I would bother him with such questions.

"You're pestering him too much," she said.

Meanwhile, Meghan surprised me by suddenly adopting more modest fashion choices around the house. I should have been happy about this new development, but I became suspicious. Steven was oblivious, as usual. But as a mother, I notice things. I caught a glimpse of her heading down the hall to the bathroom with a towel wrapped around her. I saw the crimson welts on her arms.

"Hold it right there, young lady," I said.

I inspected her head to foot. There were small cuts on her arms extending from her wrists to her elbows. She was bruised on her backside.

"Did you get in a fight?"

"It's from playing dodgeball in PE."

"Are they throwing knives at you instead of red gym balls?"

"Don't be so melodramatic, Mom."

"I'll call the school. They shouldn't be putting you in that kind of danger."

"If you call the school, I won't go anymore!" She ran into her bedroom, choosing to slam the door shut. I heard her loudly complaining in there, something about how all I do is embarrass her.

I asked Steven for some support.

"What would you have me do?" he said. Then he returned to watching television.

I'm often frustrated with Steven. That man has a talent for tuning me out. He prefers watching documentaries on television to having a simple adult conversation. I agreed to watch a Ken Burns documentary with him once. Steven was very excited about this. But I quickly lost interest in the exploits of Lewis and Clark. I assumed the film was about the college in Oregon. For the record, it is not.

I wasn't done investigating the origin of the marks on Meghan's body. I walked up and down the line of cars in the school drop-off line and knocked on drivers' side windows.

"It's a thing now," a mother in a Cadillac Escalade said. "I see the bruises on my own daughter."

"High school boys are throwing them out of second-floor windows." This came from a woman still in her pajamas.

"The kids call it defenestration," said a lady in a Range Rover. "They film themselves flinging each other into the bushes and then post it on social media."

That evening, I resorted to espionage. I filched Meghan's phone while she was distracted. She ordinarily brought her phone with her to the bathroom, but this time she forgot and left it on the desk in her room.

I found the video right away. A rather large teenage boy hoisted Lizzie Weisbrodt into his arms and then proceeded to pitch her out of a second-story window. Lizzie plunged past red brick and black trim into the bushes below. There was screaming and laughing and a close-up of the teenage boy flexing his muscles. Lizzie extricated herself from the viburnum, looking a little worse for wear. Still, she managed to glance up and give the boy a big smile.

The video was posted under the caption, "DEFENESTRATE."

I surreptitiously returned Meghan's phone to her desk and skulked out of her room.

Defenestration—I wasn't sure what to think about it. I was horrified that it might be something dirty; it sounded so much like a synonym for masturbation.

I looked it up. Defenestrate—to throw someone or something out of a window. Dangerous but not salacious. I wasn't sure whether that was a relief or not.

I called Jake on his cell phone. Perhaps he would have some words of wisdom for a situation like this.

"Mrs. Hendrick, how did you get my number?"

"I told you, Jake, you don't have to call me that. Karen will do."

"Is this school related?"

"In a way, yes. It involves Meghan," I said. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Meghan standing just outside my bedroom. Her ears had perked up at the sound of her name.

"Mrs. Hendrick, I'm not really an authority on teenage girls. I just teach them social studies. That's about it."

"I'd prefer you not to call me Mrs. Hendrick," I repeated. He had already hung up. I removed the phone from my ear. I saw Meghan step back from my bedroom door and disappear down the hall.

Strange as it sounds, this wasn't our community's first episode of people tossing each other out of windows. Theresa Schluederberg, Grosse Pointe's self-appointed historian, informed me of this. In 1893, the Village of Grosse Pointe Farms split off from the City of Grosse Pointe over a dispute regarding the location of a tavern. Things got heated during the discussion. Several bar patrons found themselves ejected through the second-story window.

"I'll certainly do some more study on the matter," Theresa said, "but I believe this will be referred to by future generations as the Second Defenestration of Grosse Pointe."

Try as I might, I couldn't get Meghan to talk about the window tossing. She refused to let me inspect her arms again. I was forced to fess up about surveilling her phone just to get the discussion started.

"Did you see any video of *me* being thrown through a window?"

She had me there. I admitted I had not seen proof of her participating.

"But you were there, weren't you?"

"I'm not saying I was there, or I wasn't there," she said. "That's not the point."

"What *is* the point, Meghan?"

"The point is that you invaded my privacy, guaranteed by the United States Bill of Rights. You shouldn't have looked at my phone without my permission."

She tried to distract me by asking if she could attend a football spirit rally at Grosse Pointe South High School.

"With your father?"

"With my friends."

Turns out the "friends" in question were the high school boys who had been tossing middle schoolers out of windows.

"Absolutely not. You're not even 12 years old yet."

"Stop trying to control me," she said. "I have my individual rights, you know."

Her bedroom door slammed again.

I tried to look on the bright side of this. She had obviously been paying attention in Jake's social studies class and perhaps was on her way to a career in politics.

On Tuesday, while I was marking time in the school pickup line, I saw Jake walking across the parking lot. I left my car idling and ran after him. It wasn't easy, in high heels and all. I ditched my shoes on the asphalt and caught up with him.

"Hello, Mrs. Hendrick," Jake said.

I bent over at the waist to catch my breath. "Why are you calling me Mrs. Hendrick?" I wheezed. "Please

call me Karen."

"I'd rather not." He turned toward his sporty black-and-red Jeep. He looked so cute in that little runabout.

"Do you have time to drop by? I can make pork chops."

"I think I'll get dinner on my own." He ducked his head and slid into the driver's seat. He put the key in the ignition, started it up, and pulled out of the school parking lot. I was left standing there alone, and, as I looked down, I realized I was overdue for a pedicure.

The debate over the high school spirit rally wouldn't go away. Meghan pressured me on the subject all the way home. Apparently, there was a dance associated with it on Friday night. And now Lizzie had been allowed to attend. My answer was still a firm "no."

"And that's final," I said.

Meghan glared at me with the white-hot passion of 1,000 burning suns.

I was determined not to leave things that way with Jake. I thought that perhaps he would appreciate an encouraging text. Except I'm not adept with emojis. Meghan noticed me fidget with my phone and offered to help. This sort of surprised me since she had resolutely stated that she was done speaking with me.

"First off, drop the peaches," she said.

"It's kind of cute."

"It means your butt."

I realized I was attempting to use a language that only the natives understood.

I erased all the emojis.

Jake

You're a great teacher and an asset to GP Academy

Let me know if there is anything I can do for you

Contact me when you are ready

I looked up at Meghan. I knew she had invented secretive ways of giving people the middle finger, which I wholly disapproved of. I just couldn't figure out exactly when or how she was doing it.

But in that moment, she made a heart gesture with her hands and smiled at me. It was simple enough for me to understand. I lived for those kinds of moments, as rare as they were.

Mr. Korenchuk waved me down when I dropped off Meghan the next day at school.

"I heard you chased Mr. Peden across the parking lot yesterday. Sans shoes, no less," he said.

"I retrieved my shoes; everything's good."

"Mrs. Hendrick, let's not have a repeat of last time," he said.

I wished he'd stop saying that. There are just some things you never stop paying for.

Jake and I were different. We were friends. Good friends.

But once they start, you can't stop the jungle drums of gossip from beating.

The effects were subtle at first. Normally, several of the mothers chitchat after dropping off their progeny at school.

I couldn't get a conversation going to save my life. I even tried to chime in when a few of the other mothers started discussing a juicy rumor regarding Fay Bunting.

"I've heard she is low on funds and has taken on a job as a realtor," I said. The other mothers blinked at each other and excused themselves. They didn't even manage a goodbye.

Teachers were just as standoffish. Even the school nurse, Ms. Brenton, normally a chatterbox, only mustered a minute to chat with me.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Hendrick," she said. "I have two kids who might be coming down with diphtheria. It could be the start of an epidemic. I've got to go." With that, she scampered away.

That all seemed reasonable to me until I remembered something.

"Isn't there a vaccine for that?" I called out after her.

Meghan asked if I could give Lizzie Weisbrodt a ride home from school. I was happy to oblige. Besides, I wanted to interrogate these two about this defenestration business.

"You actually jump out of a second-story window?"

"More like you're thrown," Meghan said.

"The bushes usually cushion the fall," Lizzie said.

"That has to hurt."

Lizzie shrugged. "Some bushes are softer than others."

"Lizzie, I want you to be honest with me," I said. "Was Meghan involved in any of this?"

"Mom!" Meghan protested.

Lizzie looked over at Meghan and then back at me. Then a wry smile surfaced on her face.

"Mrs. Hendrick," she said, "are you having an affair with Mr. Peden?"

That's when I drove across the centerline of the road, right into oncoming traffic. I managed to right myself with a sharp yank on the steering wheel and pulled over to compose myself. I turned around and faced my 11-year-old accuser.

"Where on earth would you hear such a thing?"

Her wry smile turned into a large, toothy grin. "From Meghan."

The drive back home after dropping off Lizzie was excruciating.

"What gave you such an idea?" I said.

Meghan covered her face with her hand. "I don't know. I hear people saying things."

"What kinds of things?"

"Terrible things. I see you calling him all the time and sending him texts."

"We composed that text together."

"You're the only one who doesn't call him Mr. Peden." She threw up her hands in exasperation. The scrapes up and down her arms were now deeper, more defined. This was clearly something more than scratches from falling into bushes. I was tempted to ask but still was distracted by what Lizzie had said.

"Honey, I want Jake to feel like he's part of our family."

"I don't have to start calling him Dad, do I?"

Word was out, and it spread like wildfire through the hallways of Grosse Pointe Academy.

Steven and I were summoned into Mr. Korenchuk's office. Jake was there, too, sitting with his head hanging and not acknowledging me at all.

"Do you know why I called you all in here?" Mr. Korenchuk said.

"People think that Jake and Karen are having an affair," Steven said. I rolled my eyes at him.

"Are you?" Mr. Korenchuk said.

"Of course not," I said. "But people run with whatever the latest gossip is."

"Jake?"

"No way." He lifted his head momentarily to say this.

"Didn't I warn you about this, Mrs. Hendrick?"

"It's all a giant miscommunication, Mr. Korenchuk."

"There does seem to be a pattern here," he said. "We had the same problem with Luke Theisen. And now this."

"Jake and I have done nothing wrong. It's just a baseless rumor, like I said."

"I've tried to avoid her, Mr. Hendrick," Jake said. "She's remarkably persistent."

"I believe you," Steven said.

Jake gave Steven an appreciative smile, then returned to looking at his loafers.

"I suppose I'm culpable in some way as well," Steven said.

I don't think I could lift my jaw off the floor at that point. That came out of nowhere.

Mr. Korenchuk sat back in his chair and exhaled, long and hard.

"You know," he continued, "I started out as a teacher just like you, Mr. Peden. I taught seventh-grade math."

Jake kept his head in the "brace for impact" position.

"Times like these make me wish I could get my old job back."

I was a little angry with Mr. Korenchuk and Steven for constantly bringing up that old chestnut about Luke Theisen.

Luke taught grammar at Grosse Pointe Academy. He was recently divorced and didn't know anyone. So, I decided to befriend him. You know, lend a little support. There were a few phone calls here and there. I invited him to lunch at the Village Grille.

All of it was perfectly innocent.

Well, the school administration thought otherwise. They said something about the appearance of impropriety. Tongues began wagging. People were sure that Luke and I were an item. Meghan was just eight years old. I suppose she knew nothing of it. Not long after that, Luke vanished without leaving a forwarding address with the school. But within weeks, I heard that he had nabbed a position as an English teacher at Grosse Pointe North High School. And I can attest to that. I've driven past the parking lot and spied his car parked there.

After our little meeting with Mr. Korenchuk, the school board decided to give Jake severance and send him packing. I was asked not to interact with the teachers unless it specifically pertained to Meghan.

"I'm not sure when they'll ever hire another male teacher," Steven muttered. "At least not while Meghan's still there." He could be so gloomy sometimes.

As for Jake, he never contacted me again. I still haven't figured out where he ended up; perhaps out of the district? At least he could have stopped by and given me a hug before leaving.

We dined on spaghetti with meat sauce and microwaved garlic bread on the night of the big high school spirit rally. Meghan, for her part, appeared to be silently accepting of her fate. I thought perhaps I had gotten through to her.

She borrowed my nail file after barely touching her food and headed into the bathroom.

Steven cleared the table of dishes, as he does every night before landing on the couch and losing himself in a Korean War documentary. On impulse, I placed my hand on his arm to intercept him.

I took his raised eyebrows as a sign to leave him alone.

I was wrong.

"I'm not sure exactly how to do this," he said. "It's been so long."

"Do what?"

Steven circled behind me and put his arms around my waist. Just like when we were dating, back before Meghan was in the picture. I laid my head back against his shoulder, and he kissed my neck. He was still holding a plate in his hand.

That's when Meghan came out of the bathroom. Silently she held up both arms. They were bleeding profusely from long, sinewy cuts that I could only imagine came from my nail file. I saw for the first time that these were not arbitrary scratches but intentionally deep scrapes running down her arms.

Steven, oblivious, kept holding me tight from behind, speaking softly in my ear.

Cherry Roots

By: Agata Antonow

Agata Antonow is a writer living in Canada. Most recently, her work has appeared in *Our Times, Defenestration*, and the FOLD (Festival of Literary Diversity) program. Her short story "Nightcrawlers" won first prize in the Writers' Federation of New Brunswick 2021 Douglas Kyle Memorial Prize.

In 1988, when I was eight, my father brought home a shiny plastic tub of sour cherries. Cherries so tart they would curl your face inward when you chewed them, lips already puckered to spit the pit out. I thought he had gotten them at the farmer's stand and pick-your-own farm in rural Ontario, where we'd sometimes go in the summer, bent among the strawberries, the green sounds of grasshoppers buzzing in our ears and the thumb of the sun pressing down on our scalps.

"What do you expect us to do with three kilograms of sour cherries?" my mother asked, her bathrobe askew, her eyes bleary.

"Make pierogies," my father told her, washing the motor oil from his hands. "Guy at work paid for his muffler in cash and this bucket."

Food at our house always had that edge of hours put in. I knew how many fractions of an hour my dad worked for my grocery-store birthday cake in December. You couldn't waste food, either—my father had been a child during World War II.

"We ate crows because there was nothing else," he said. "Eat your soup."

The hours were measured out by dough. Bedtime was when the bread dough went on; and, in the mornings, my wait for the yellow bus was spent sprinkling flour on and punching it down while mom slept in.

The sour cherries were rare, their outsides a marbling of orange and red. I put in a movie's worth of pitting, sticking my fingernail in the soft flesh and slipping the cherry off the pit, one eye on two characters on the screen dancing and sliding through revolving doors. Pits plinked into a blue enamel bowl, and the flesh squished into the clear glass bowl my mom and I picked up at the Salvation Army last year.

After school again, I started to mix the dough—a white flour volcano, and into it the sliding yellow sun of an egg and some cold water. In cooking shows I've watched since, cooks whip the flour so fast into the center you can't see the fork for its flurry of mixing. But at eight, I took a bulldozer approach, caving in the floury walls toward the center. I beat the lumps out with the back of the fork, looking over math problems for a test. For the rest of the school semester, I would shake showers of flour from my textbook.

I wrapped the dough into a plastic bag and stuck it in the fridge, next to cheese sandwiches I'd set aside and a carton of sour cream. The next day was a Saturday, and I got up early. This time, mother rose with me. I kept an eye on her, her moods swinging from helpful and present to wandering and absent. I gauged it was a good day; one where she'd get dressed, maybe clean.

We rolled out the dough on a large sheet of plastic my father had fashioned into a cutting board. We rolled the dough as thin as paper and then pressed a drinking glass right in, again and again, to make little circles. Into each circle went the cherries with a sprinkling of sugar.

The recipe I used was not written down anywhere. It was one passed down to me from a great-grandmother, who lived in a manor house, to a grandmother whose husband was sent into a camp for laborers—a camp he never emerged from—to my mother. My mother, who I didn't understand and

who often drifted away to where I could not follow her, disappearing into stories on the television and in books.

Yet, for all that she drifted through our house, she taught me the basics and would sometimes show up when it was time to cook. Perhaps this, too, is a way of expressing love.

Pierogis mean pinching. When you fold over the circle, you need to pinch the edges again and again to make a crescent that can withstand anything—scalding water, the waves of a boiling pot, the stir of a wooden spoon.

On the cutting board, we lined the folded dumplings toe to toe. They looked the way babies look in the maternity ward, though I hated to think of that. I hated going to the hospital when my arm broke or my chest closed up so tight I could not breathe through a straw or my wide-open mouth.

I hated to look at babies. I already knew where they came from. My mother had told me when we went to the market to pick up eggs—the ones that came from a chicken had something to do with baby chickens. My mother explained about the rooster and the hens and then about people. I learned what people do and where each of us emerged from. I wish she had never told me in her flat, thin voice. It was information I didn't want in my head.

It took four hours to make all the dumplings on Saturday. We folded and folded and pinched in silence. I looked at my homework notes without really seeing them, so mother would know I was doing something important. Hard work. She didn't like me being idle, though I rarely was. She didn't like it when I was not working.

We put the big pot on to boil, the one with the dent matching the dent in the living room wall. When the water boiled, you could tell because it sounded like very fast and angry talking. Then we dropped in the pierogis, one by one, careful to move back because even a small droplet of hot water hurt.

We stirred and stirred with the wooden spoon carefully, so a slowly moving cyclone appeared inside the pot. When the pierogis floated to the top, we scooped them out and put them in the blue enamel bowl, putting in curls of butter until everything swam in a yellow soup.

In our English reader back in grade three, we had read about the chicken who baked bread. She asked the pig for help, and the kittens, and the cow. But no one had time to help her. And at the end, they wanted some of the bread, but she said no and ate it up all by herself. She didn't share a crumb.

Even then, I knew that's not how the world works. The cafeteria ladies made the sandwiches with the damp bread and sour-smelling lettuce, but we ate them. And the farmer on the TV commercials milked the cows, and we drank the milk. We never keep our own crumbs. My father brought home the pierogi cherries, but it was me and my mother who made the pierogies. We are always eating the work of other people.

At six in the evening, father came home from the garage, smelling of sweet gasoline and oil. He washed his hands and sat at the table with the plastic tablecloth. It had orange flowers on it, wide as your palm. His palm curled upward by one of the daisies.

We ate without speaking: The bite of dough and the sour-sweet of the cherries. The fruit had lost its marbling in the cooking and was red and fleshy, soft and warm. The cherries slid past my tongue and into the darkness of my stomach.

Three kilograms of cherries made enough pierogis for three days. I made them with my hands and ate them with my mouth. Someday soon, I will return to the ground where they grew. Now, when I think of that fall, I think of all the generations gone before, bent and wrinkled as the cherry tree, buried deep within it. Somewhere, we share common roots, a common knowledge of how to make a crescent dumpling, how to fill it with what you're given, and how to eat in silence.

We Are the Others

By: Kerry Edwards

After leaving the Royal Collage Art in 1989, Kerry Edwards lived and worked in New York. She traveled widely in her career and found great inspiration for her passion for writing. Upon returning to the UK, she took an MA in creative writing and now writes and teaches English.

I was destined to be tall and strong, and beautiful.

Everyone said so. My mother was young and startled when I was born but proud of me. She told me that whenever things didn't go my way as I got older, something that wasn't meant to happen could surprise you with the blessings it brings into your life.

I am tall, and sometimes I feel beautiful, even though I know that isn't always how the world sees me.

I go by the name of Lydia. I was born Simon.

I write. I got a first in my journalism bachelor's degree. I nailed it, as my friends told me, as they congratulated me on results day!

"Who would have thought it?" my tutors joked.

My uncle only said, "So what will you do now?"

"I'm going to get a job and save money so that I can do a master's degree in women's studies at SOAS."

"But you aren't either oriental, African, or a woman," he barked.

"I'm made up of many of those parts," I reminded him. Thankfully, it didn't matter anymore. I was finally free of his guardianship. My mom died when I was still in junior school, and I never knew my dad. He reluctantly respected mom's wishes and allowed me to live with him, his wife, and their three kids. It wasn't a happy home, and I was not made to feel welcome within it. Going to university was the start of any life that really mattered to me. I was lucky I found my tribe easily. We are the others! Yet, we are the strongest of friends, and our bonds of friendship have outlasted all those around us.

We share a flat together now; there are five of us. A place in West London that was cheap and big enough.

Today was one of those days that has nothing to recommend it, and I just wanted to be home. The key was so temperamental; some days, it turned like a well-oiled cog in a priceless Ottoman clock, while other days, like today, I shook it from side to side, and I spoke to it gently as if it were a child who had been hurt, and it just didn't want to give in. Some days, I just gave up and willed someone to be in.

I took it out of the lock and blew on it, then I held it between my palms and said a prayer. Slowly, I inserted it back into the lock with the concentration of a master thief.

Ha! It worked—no one can tell me that prayers don't work! The mechanism released, and I pushed open the door. There was a scent that permeated the air. It was part curry from last night's dinner, part bleach and something else, something metallic and yet oily, cloying, and nauseating all at the same time. I left the door open to let in some fresh air, held my breath, and went through the flat opening windows. The floorboards creaked and moaned defiantly as I stepped on the threadbare carpet made bare by neglect and years of traffic.

Leila's room was last. Her door was shut, and I turned the chipped, crystal doorknob. It rattled loosely in my hands; I tried again. It was locked. Damn! *Was it me, or were doors just my inhibitors today?*

I shut the front door and went into the kitchen to make tea; I would think about Leila's door later.

I drank my tea with my feet up on the table, luxuriating in my slobbish ways before anyone came home and objected. I could hear Leila's rebuke as I read the creased copy of this morning's *Guardian*.

"Couldn't you empty the dishwasher and clean the table before you make tea? And don't put your feet on the table."

"Yes!" I always agreed with her entirely. She always said I'm like her teenage child, even though we are the same age.

After a while, the strange smell that hung at the edges of the room began to bother me again.

I looked around the kitchen—a bit messy, yes, I should clean it, yes—but nothing was unusual. The cat's dinner—gross!—but not unusual. Maybe it had made a mess somewhere. I got up to check for excrement. Nothing: the litter tray concealed a dried dose, but the smell wasn't coming from there.

I checked the other bedrooms. Next to Leila's room was Johnny's; his room was littered with poems, empty dreams, song lyrics, and ashtrays with stubs of tobacco and weed. There was the faint smell of depression, but that went with him wherever he was. He kind of reveled in it: his obsession with Leonard Cohen and the Grateful Dead meant that there was a world of grunge around him, which I found hard to share, but he was all heart and emotion, and it took all his energy, leaving him faint and semi-exhausted all the time.

So, his room felt like it usually did.

Ali's room was so like him, too. It was full of smuggled and stolen grandeur, beautiful objects that had stories attached to them of a different life in Iran before the revolution when his prosperous family lived in elegance and luxury. Ali was exuberant, funny, and outrageously camp, so much so that we spent a lot of time running for our lives from bars and clubs when he had behaved in his usual provocative ways and irritated some narrow-minded White boys, hell-bent on sorting him out.

The room smelt of precious amber and incense and dreams of a life far away from this one. Nothing was amiss here.

Lastly, Kat's room. Kat's mixed-race—very mixed, as she always said—heritage was represented in her room. She spoke in capital letters, just in case you missed her point.

The cacophony of Caribbean and South American colors and cultural symbols meant that your eyes couldn't focus on any one place. It was noisy, just like her. Whatever help you needed, she would be there for you. Braids, music, weed, literature—gay, lesbian, trans, or just weird—she had it. Even when you didn't need advice or educating on matters that felt compelling, you got it. She is a force. As for scents: think Rasta chic mixed with ylang-ylang, frangipani, and coconut. They won't do her justice, but they are the top notes. Somewhere below them are goat curry, old books, and rage. No, nothing unusual.

Kat and I studied together in the English and Journalism department at university. She spoke to me on the first day.

She said, "You are queer, I'm guessing?"

It takes one to know, but that's still a pretty ballsy statement, and I felt very othered. Not much gets by her, and she collected us like a curator collects exhibits. She introduced Leila as someone she met in a bar. No one cared where she met her; we love Leila. She is beautiful and raw. There is vulnerability written all over her, which makes her choice of work particularly hard to stomach. A songbird who has hurt her voice.

Everyone meets Ali, but he chose us to be most at home with.

Johnny is like a foundling; he attached himself to us probably because we sympathized with him, and he told us we inspire his music.

I like to think of us as an outlying post of the United Nations—all the world's nations with all their problems. We are the future—the combined message of our unconventional personalities defines the future in this fucked up world. Gay, lesbian, non-binary, asexual, mixed-race fusion.

I was perplexed. Leila's room shouldn't be locked; it was never locked. Fear began to circle me, tightening my stomach and clawing at my conscience. When was she last home? She wasn't around last night for supper; in fact, I don't think anyone had seen her since the night before.

I rattled the door handle again, and then I shoved it with my shoulder.

Wait! What was I doing?

I called her name.

Nothing.

Should I wait until later? Maybe the others would tell me that they had heard from her and laugh at my fear?

I stared at the door handle, willing it to turn and open.

The smell was curiously stronger here by the door, or was it my imagination?

I bent down and put my face onto the bottom edge of the door, where it meets the floorboards of her room, and I coughed as the smell filled my senses. I sat up nauseated and riddled with fear.

I stood up decisively and took two steps back, and booted the latch.

The door swung open, splinters flying angrily out of the moldy doorframe.

Nothing could have prepared me….

I don't remember much about what I saw, but I will never forget her face, shrouded and exquisitely pale, beautiful, and serene.

Ali came home first. He was singing, his arms covered in shopping bags. He had a lightness of being that I loved. His eyes always smiled as though he had learned to laugh in the face of adversity. My face must have told him everything. He dropped the bags he was carrying. Color drained from his face as he took in the scene. He covered his mouth, a reflex reaction to horror or maybe to avoid any utterance. The crime-scene tape over the doorway was enough.

He grasped my arm. "What happened?" he whispered.

I couldn't speak, afraid to give voice to the awful truth.

There was an officer present who came to speak with him. She told him that the ambulance men had taken her body away, and the police were investigating the incident.

Words choked as they scrambled around my thoughts, throwing their barbs into my throat. My nose stung with the stench of collective fear. My heart hurt. Still, I couldn't speak. The tears wouldn't come. A great tsunami of rage was boiling inside me. Ali put his arm around me, letting his heart rage through his tears. I felt suspended in my grief.

It wasn't too long before Kat came into the flat. The door left open told her that something was different.

Her eyes, wide open, roamed the scene, and her words came out in angry colors; her tongue lashed at the very air we breathed, and tears shot out of her eyes like bullets. Still, I held on.

No words could express the horror or the pain.

Johnny couldn't express his pain. Instead, he balanced himself against the door lintel just outside Leila's room and slid down until he sat crumpled on the floor. His eyes darted like fish in a bowl as he scrolled through his poetry and song lyrics to find some way to understand.

I cannot sleep without seeing her beautiful face, the face of an angel, wreathed in broken glass and covered in blood. It was a sacrilegious act that the killer had gone to the trouble to arrange the macabre, blood-painted shards of glass artfully around her dying face as the life ebbed out of her.

A deep pool of black, red blood had seeped onto her white sateen sheets. The killer had taken the red plastic roses from the vase she kept on her dressing table and made an outer halo with them around her head.

Her deep brown eyes were still open, unseeing, and, strangely, convincingly peaceful. But what horror did they witness? What hatred and deception and, finally, brutality?

The police decided that the killer was known to her, one of her clients, the overweight, over-White, male officer told me with a smirk. "She put herself in harm's way for a living," he told me smugly.

What did she expect?

What did we expect?

She was a woman, an immigrant woman, who worked illegally in the sex trade. The police found

little evidence on anything they picked up from her room. There were no witnesses, no CCTV, no leads for them to investigate, and very soon the case was closed.

Nothing would bring her back, and nothing would ever be the same again. This image will haunt my consciousness. Why didn't I protect her? She died alone in trauma. Now I will carry this trauma for her. Not letting go of it helps me feel connected to her. I know that it will weigh me down and keep me from a better way of living, but, for now, for Johnny and me, it is what we want. Johnny will expunge it in his music, and I will write her story.

What did we expect?

Here, Take This, It's a Token of Beauty

By: Alice Kinerk

Alice holds an MFA in English from The University of Washington. Her middle grade-novel, *The Octopus Under the Bridge*, was published in 2020. She lives and teaches in the woods of Washington State with her husband, 12-year-old daughter, and their lovable but lazy black lab.

With just ten minutes left of lunch, Melinda tries the door to the school stage. It opens. She turns to Bonnie, makes a *told-you-so* face. They dart inside. Melinda opens a drawer, begins rifling through lighting gels. She selects a dozen pinks, purples, blues, and greens and sticks them inside her bag. Bonnie does the same. Then they swing by the art room supply closet and make off with X-Acto knives, brightly colored permanent markers, rubber cement, and cardstock.

Bonnie and Melinda read in a book called *Inspiration Sandwich* that in order to become creatively free, one should make tokens of beauty and hand them out to strangers. So they dump their lunch trash, grab their backpacks, and set out to do so immediately.

Bonnie and Melinda are students at the Melville School. Melville's a laid-back K-12 day school where the teachers go by their first names, the school mascot is a dove, no shoes are allowed inside, and mornings begin with meditation. Also, pretty much nothing is locked.

During fifth period, which they both have free, they meet up on the frayed couch under the big window in the reading room and make see-through paperboard ornaments. The ornaments say things like *U R A Star*, and *B-E-A-You-tiful!*, and *B-Free.* Melinda is slicing up stars, hearts, and peace signs just as fast as Bonnie can color them.

"This is going to make people *sooooo* happy, don't you think? This is a true random act of kindness."

Bonnie nods. She holds a finished ornament up to the window, then turns to look for the place where the wall turns pink. It's February in the woods of New Hampshire. From the window, the world is nothing but blue sky, black trees, white snow. The sun is very bright.

There isn't time to finish the ornaments during their free period, but Bonnie's sixth-period English teacher, Arabelle, lets her color during class because Bonnie tells her it's a service-learning project. It isn't, but all the teachers at Melville go batshit for service-learning; plus, she's the teacher's pet because the first day of school, it came out that she'd read *The Bridge Over the River Kwai* over the summer. Bonnie had only read *The Bridge Over the River Kwai* because she'd been on a weeklong fishing trip with her dad in Quebec, and there had been absolutely nothing else to read in the camper except a two-year-old issue of *TV Guide*, which she'd also read, and enjoyed about as much. She had not told Arabelle about the *TV Guide.*

Bonnie finishes the ornaments before class is over, asks to use the restroom, walks instead to the locker bay, opens Melinda's locker, and sets the finished ornaments inside.

Then she remembers about the Bert note.

Melinda has a boyfriend named Bert. Bert does not go to the Melville School. Bert goes to Sunapee Prep, a high-pressure, high-tuition, high-pretension school just this side of the Massachusetts border. Obviously, he hates it. Melinda is always telling Bonnie about how much Bert hates it and how sad that makes her, to think of him at his school, hating it. A few days earlier, on Tuesday, Melinda had wasted her entire fifth period drafting some mysterious handwritten communication to Bert. Face down, arm crooked, creating a private room only big enough for her own head, hand, pen, and notebook. Every few minutes,

she'd sat up, flipped a page in her notebook, and started again.

Bonnie, splayed out on the couch watching, had seethed. Bonnie did not care to feel left out. Bonnie herself had never had a boyfriend, which, at the age of 17, was beginning to feel like an affliction, especially considering that Melinda was already on boyfriend number three.

"Writing a love letter?"

"No. I'm planning what to say on the phone tonight. Bert said—we just—" Bonnie shook her head. "You wouldn't understand."

So Bonnie had put her headphones back on and reopened *Ms.* magazine and pointed her nose at an article, but it was just for show. She wanted to know what Bert had said. She wanted to help Melinda form the perfect response. Isn't that what friends do, get all inappropriately up in each other's business and advise? Otherwise, who was she? Just a dummy, sitting there for Melinda's convenience. She had felt too upset to speak of it.

Now, though, Bonnie was determined to read what Melinda had been writing. She thinks she remembers that it had been in Melinda's pink notebook. But no, just biology notes. Maybe the yellow? Also no. Bonnie is alone in the high school locker room. It is cooler there than the stuffy warm classroom. Cool and quiet. Bonnie feels relaxed. Perhaps she should consider a career as a private detective. She's independent, driven, and has always enjoyed figuring things out for herself. Except for the stink of five dozen teenagers' sneakers discarded across the tile floor, Bonnie might stay in the locker room forever.

Then Bonnie opens Melinda's black notebook. Bingo.

When you said, "I love you," I did not know what to say! That is the reason I didn't say anything. ~~What I wanted to say was~~

Bonnie flips to the next page.

When you said, "I love you," my heart skipped a beat. ~~No boyfriend I've ever had has ever said that to me, and I~~

Next page.

I'm so sorry I didn't say anything the other night when you said, "I love you," on the phone. I didn't know what to say, so…

There is a page missing, with nothing but the ragged strip of paper around the spiral wire. Bonnie steals a pencil from Melinda's pencil pouch. She kicks away someone's soggy Nikes and plops down cross-legged on the floor, shading over the back of the next page.

I should have told you that I love you, too. Because I do. You are the best boyfriend I've ever had, and I love spending time with you, and I love you. If you do get into RISD, then next year, I will apply to go there too, because I want

There's more. But Melinda stops reading. She tears the page out, jams it into her sweatshirt pocket, sets the notebook back on the shelf, slams Bonnie's locker door shut, and speed-walks back to English.

Arabelle's blathering about gerunds, so it's fine.

Then it's time for Clubs. Every Friday, Melville has a recurring field trip known as Clubs. In the winter, students choose from downhill skiing (most popular *by far*), ice skating (distant second), cross-country skiing (third), or craft time at school. (Almost nobody. A few littles.)

Bonnie and Melinda are die-hard ice skaters. Always have been, since elementary. There are multiple reasons. For one, it is a very long bus ride to The John Fitzgerald Kennedy Memorial Coliseum in Manchester, and that means more time to talk, swap headphones, talk, etc. Two, there's a concession stand with candy. Three, ice skating is fun. They love to swoop frictionless in figure eights and ovals, propelled by nothing more than a gentle kick. Melinda can skate backward (Bonnie also can, but fell last winter doing so, and now refuses). They both speed skate. Bonnie knows how to spin. But, the last time she did it, she got very dizzy and nearly fell, so she doesn't like to do that anymore, either.

Bonnie and Melinda plan to hand their "tokens of beauty" out to strangers at the coliseum. Melinda rides the whole way with the stack on her lap to avoid damaging the corners. Finally, the bus rumbles into the parking lot, and everyone stands up.

From outside, the place looks like a single sleepy eye half buried in the pavement. The front of the John Fitzgerald Kennedy Memorial Coliseum is decorated with a row of orange and blue glass panels in haphazard layout. Four blue, nine orange, seven blue, one orange, and finally one blue. The complete lack of pattern or symmetry in the panels has been a frequent topic of conversation over the years between Bonnie

and Melinda. They have reached consensus. It makes them want to throw up.

It smells like sweat, exhaust, and stale popcorn inside the John Fitzgerald Kennedy Memorial Coliseum. It is simultaneously warm and breezy. A dry heat. Voices ricochet.

The crowd of Melville kids bear left toward the lockers, but Bonnie and Melinda turn right. Candy time. Bonnie pulls a crumpled five from her jeans pocket and runs it back and forth against the metal edge of the concession counter. Thank God the Whitelys divorced; now she's flush from babysitting. She selects Peanut M&M's, Nerds, and a Cherry Coke. The man drops her change into Bonnie's hand. Then Melinda orders.

Bonnie eyes the man. His back is to them, stirring Melinda's cocoa. She takes in his over-the-pants stomach, dingy work boots, thin hair. He has stubby fingers and a curved back. A life of manual labor. Bonnie looks at her own hands. They are soft and pale.

Melinda wonders whether Bonnie is thinking the same thing she is. "Should we give him a token of beauty?" she whispers in Melinda's ear.

Melinda shakes her head. "You don't mix random acts of kindness with a business transaction. It gets confusing."

When he's done with the cocoa, Bonnie and Melinda climb up to the very back row of the bleachers and spread their loot out on the bench. They eat. Melinda is convinced that she can taste the difference between the colors of M&M's, so she closes her eyes, pops a candy into her mouth, then sticks out her tongue for Bonnie to confirm.

"Blue," Melinda says.

"Nope. Yellow."

"Brown," Melinda says a minute later.

"Nope," Bonnie says again.

A second grader with a drippy nose and ice skates on is slowly sidestepping all the way up to where they are. He's got his eyes on Bonnie's Nerds.

"No," Bonnie says before he can open his mouth.

"What are those?" he says, pointing to their stack of ornaments instead.

"None of your beeswax." Melinda sets the tokens of beauty out of his sight.

"You heard the lady. Scram." Bonnie speaks out one side of her mouth like an old-timey gangster.

He goes. Bonnie and Melinda finish their candy, poke the wrappers between the slats of the bench, and watch them flutter to the ground. Then they do a half-dozen requisite swoops around the ice. (They got in trouble last Friday for spending the whole time in the women's room of the John Fitzgerald Kennedy Memorial Coliseum, attempting to dye Bonnie's hair pink. However, because Bonnie's hair is naturally dark, it didn't take. All it did was give her pinkish skin around the hairline as if she was blushing from the top of her head.) Now they smile and wave at the teacher-supervisor, Richard, who waves back cheerfully.

Bonnie and Melinda exit the ice, remove their skates, put on their matching Chuck Taylors (black, low-rise, with the star on the side), and begin searching the Coliseum for strangers. There aren't many, as Melville has the place for another half hour. They spot the Zamboni driver smoking a cigarette behind his machine. Melinda dances forth in the bouncy, effortless way that shows off her 13 years of ballet. "This is for you," she says with a little curtsy, holding up a heart-shaped ornament with *B-E-A-You-tiful* on it.

The guy drops his cigarette on the concrete and stomps on it. Then he takes the ornament from Melinda. He turns it over in his hands. "Thank you," he says. He locks eyes with Melinda, who smiles and curtsies again like the show's over, and she's accepting applause. Then his eyes go slitty, and one corner of his mouth curls up.

"You're welcome." Melinda dances quickly away, and Bonnie follows.

Bonnie feels a pluck of jealousy every time Melinda does something like that—something brave and beautiful. She herself is neither. Not brave, not beautiful. The one thing Bonnie has going for her is she's a hard worker, a dog-with-a-bone type of worker. All A's, always, except math and science. Her work ethic provides her with happy parents and zero romance. Melinda, on the other hand, has had two full years of boyfriends, although Bert's the only one she's slept with. And she's *still* on the honor roll. Bert tutors

her.

"Gimme an ornament," Bonnie says to Melinda. On the far side of the Coliseum, at the opposite doors, there's a mom with twin boys. Early arrivals for hockey practice at four. Bonnie walks toward the woman. By the time Bonnie arrives, the woman is seated on the edge of the bottom bleacher, her purse in her hands. She doesn't notice Bonnie until she's right beside her, and even then, Bonnie stands there for a second and finally has to clear her throat before the woman looks up. When she sees Bonnie, the woman jumps.

"Sorry," Bonnie says. There is no sound except for the shriek of her twins playing under the bleachers. Bonnie hands the woman the ornament.

"That's not mine," the woman says.

"It's a gift," Bonnie says.

"Oh." The woman takes the ornament. It's a peace sign that says *B Free*. "Very nice. Did you make this?"

"My friend and I did."

"Very nice," the woman says again. She puts her hand inside her purse. "Is two dollars enough?"

"They aren't for sale! It's just a gift." Bonnie shakes her head and begins stepping backward. She trips onto the other bleachers, falls hard onto her butt. Then she stands again and rushes off toward Melinda, who is beside the penalty box, laughing at something Richard must have said.

Melinda looks at Bonnie. "How'd it go?"

Bonnie's butt feels sore where she fell. "Okay."

They hand the last ornaments out together. The man at the concession stand gets a heart; another mom gets a star; and the bus driver (not really a stranger, but, as Melinda says, stranger-adjacent) gets the final star.

On the bus ride home, it starts to snow. At first, it's nothing, just a few feathery flakes. But then it gets dark, and the snow comes faster. The traffic on 93 creeps for a while, then comes to a complete stop. Everyone groans. The bus driver turns on the radio and starts scrolling through stations, probably looking for traffic reports. The melancholy opening chords of "California Dreamin'" by the Mamas and the Papas rise up through the static.

"Leave it here!" Melinda hollers. "Turn it up!"

The driver turns it up, and the whole bus of Melville kids begin singing the song together:

"Ironic, right?" Melinda shouts in Bonnie's ear.

"What is?"

"Safe in L.A.? Not if you're Rodney King."

"True," Bonnie nods. "Sad."

They keep singing. The melancholy melody is the perfect soundtrack to the blue-black sky, the falling snow. It's the perfect melody for Bonnie's mood, too. Under her winter coat, fuzzy scarf, hoodie, thermal shirt, and tank top, Belinda feels quite warm. The heaters on the bus are turned up full blast, and the windows are opaque with everyone's frosted breath.

But does she feel safe? Hard to say.

Outside, the light is fading. Traffic begins moving again, albeit slowly. It is a very long ride back to the Melville School. What should take one hour slips into an hour and a half, hour and three-quarters, nearly two. The driver keeps the radio on the whole time.

"You want to sleep over tonight?" Bonnie asks Melinda when the bus finally exits 93 and begins bouncing over the frost heaves of the school road.

"I can't. I've got plans with Bert, remember?"

"You do?" Bonnie does not remember.

"We're going to his school for Battle of the Bands. He's picking me up from the bus."

"But haven't you missed that? I mean, we were supposed to be back at school an hour ago. And all this snow. He must've gone on without you."

Melinda turns to the window and wipes the fog off with her fist. "I don't think so."

"Well, if he did leave, do you want to sleep over?"

"He'll be there," Melinda says cooly. They don't say anything else until the bus pulls into the school.

"He's here!" Melinda spouts as the bus driver begins a

wide turn into the lot. "See, Bonnie! Bert's here! I told you! He did wait for me!"

Bonnie sees. There, under the shaky yellow streetlights, under the windless snow, alongside a dozen other cars, alongside the minivan belonging to Bonnie's mother, there is Bert's black Saab. It's impossible to miss—each horizontal slat on the back window has accumulated its own outline of snow. It's too dark to read Bert's bumper stickers, but Bonnie knows them anyway by heart. *Question Authority. Coexist.* Also, *Phish.*

Melinda is off the bus the moment the door squeals open. She and Bert stand in the falling snow, hugging as if the war just ended. It isn't until Bonnie stands that she notices a torn, muddy piece of notebook paper on the floor below their seat. It's the notebook paper she'd shaded during sixth period. It must have fallen out of her pocket.

Had Melinda seen it? Why had she been so desperate to know what Melinda wrote in the first place? Was Melinda *really* that good of a friend? Or was their friendship just something that started a long time ago and just continued, like a lightbulb left on in an empty room?

Bonnie watches Melinda and Bert hug. Then she gets off the bus, gets into her mother's minivan, and her mother drives her home.

Into the Forest by Kathrine Snow

Kathrine Snow is a storyteller, author, editor, and illustrator from Petoskey, MI.
Her work has appeared in the *Washtenaw Voice Newspaper, The Huron River Review*, and the *Prolonging the Prologue* newsletter.

Back Bay Basement Apartment

By: Danis Banks

Danis Banks has an MFA in creative writing from the University of Montana, and teaches writing at New York University. She has published two stories in *October Hill Magazine* previously. She lives in Brooklyn, NY.

Content Warning: The following story contains elements of sexual assault on a minor.

I used to visit my sister often, when she was a college student in Boston, and I attended boarding school in western Massachusetts. I would take a bus to the Back Bay station, and either she'd meet me in its seedy, ill-lit lobby, or I'd walk by myself to her small apartment on a street hedged by designer boutiques and over-priced cafés whose fussy white tablecloths generated unrealistic hopes for the quality of the food. Nestled among the expensive eyeglass shops and pesto-pizza emporiums stood a brownstone in whose basement my sister dwelled. A pair of elderly Armenian sisters, both of whom dyed their hair an unnatural black and wore it in a tight, shellacked-looking bun, owned the building and ran the rug store in its parlor level. The two women lived above the shop, each to a floor, in apartments that I liked to imagine as darkly cluttered by old-world furnishings: Tiffany lamps on dense wood tables, thin-with-age rugs randomly layered, dusty lace curtains shrouding never-opened windows, the air redolent of fetid face powder and overcooked vegetables. I pictured Japanese room screens, antimacassars, an empty birdcage. My sister's place always smelled vaguely of a gas leak and seemed more of a former storage area for rugs than a legitimate habitation. It had wall-to-wall polyester carpeting in that bruise-like shade of brown-pink-gray that was often seen in small-town DMVs and elementary-school libraries, the non-color suitable to way stations and interludes. Now that I think about it, the makeshift, impersonal feel of Lisa's apartment probably contributed to my comfort in visiting: it was my infirmary, of sorts, in which to recuperate from boarding school (and its rigid hierarchy of looks, athletic ability, and intelligence, in that order). The Armenian women had given my sister a parking spot in the alleyway outside her back door, and there Lisa kept the antique blue Volvo that our grandmother had passed down to her. It had never been an option for me to get the car, as I didn't yet have my driver's license, and students weren't allowed a car at school—unless they were in AA or something and needed to get to meetings. But it would be some time before I'd learn about AA.

My sister was tall and slim, with doll-like features: huge brown far-apart eyes, an upturned nose, full mouth, large straight white teeth. People often described her as "glamorous" and mentioned her looks not so much with admiration as pride, as if in remarking on her beauty, they revealed something positive in themselves—discerning taste, perhaps, or a refined sensibility. Lisa's appearance perfectly expressed the late-1980s maximal aesthetic of jarringly red lipstick, chunky shoulder pads, clothing that had extraneous zippers and cutouts, and an oversize coiffure that it seemed she was continually brushing, blow-drying, or stroking, as though it were a pet or fur stole. At night, she might coat it in a hot oil "treatment," the little packets parboiled and squeezed onto her head, or apply a raw egg, beer, and avocado mixture, which she'd learned about from one of the several fashion magazines that she subscribed to (and gave to me after she'd finished with them).

Lisa's major was communications, chosen because there were so few requirements, which she acknowledged with rueful irony. Her attitude toward school had always been one of bemused detachment, as if teachers were overly earnest eccentrics whom she ought to humor by showing up to their classes. Yet she had a sharp intelligence, as evinced by her ability to manipulate people, particularly her boyfriends and me, into meeting her desires. In my case, that meant buying pastries and ice cream so she could have a bite or, in restaurants, ordering highly caloric meals that she wanted to watch somebody eat.

I always returned to school a few pounds heavier but lost the weight within a day or two after resuming my rather frenetic schedule of classes, sports, and study hall.

Whenever Lisa and I walked down a street together, it was likely that someone would whistle, and her mild smile belied the obliviousness she feigned on such occasions. From the open windows of passing cars, men shouted that she was gorgeous, foxy, a heartbreaker, a babe. Strangers in bars approached to proclaim her stunning, pretty, beautiful, or hot, the choice of adjective determined by some blend of drunkenness and class, plus age and New England hometown. The especially gregarious might ask for her number, but she never gave it, as Lisa always had a boyfriend, with several options besides waiting, as it were.

I first grasped the intensity of the male attention that my sister so consistently elicited when I was 15 and Lisa 21. She had whittled herself a size or two smaller, found a bra that created the illusion of larger breasts (she'd already discovered what brand of jeans looked best from behind), and started getting coppery highlights that stood out against the natural brown in alluring artificial streaks. I suspected that the praise had also to do with attitude: Lisa could suggest, merely from the tilt of her head or the slow crossing of her legs, that her beauty affected everyone—or that it should.

It may be worth clarifying that I was not the "plain" sister who served as a foil for the "fair" one, as in a Victorian novel. My role was probably closer to "lady-in-waiting." I had a teenager's sporadically flawed complexion, and the growth of my nose had outpaced my face, which later caught up. Worse, I was witheringly jealous of my boarding-school roommate, an overly confident person whom several boys desired, many girls felt threatened by, and some teachers and coaches took an inappropriate interest in, which, were anyone to question it, though no one ever did, would surely get described as "mentoring." A group of older male students had recently circulated a list they'd titled Hottest New Sophomores, on which my roommate's name crowned those of the similarly designated girls, ranked according to perceived attractiveness. My exclusion from this roster felt humiliating, but mostly I welcomed the lack of attention. She and I considered the other our closest friend, notwithstanding her obvious pleasure at my sense of inferiority, which I made apparent by, for example, frequently borrowing her clothes. Lisa, vain, too, was kind to me. I often felt alienated during my first year at boarding school, and those visits to my sister's basement apartment, with its three sooty windows that had vertical wrought-iron bars, faced the alley, and let in a sickly gray winter light, provided temporary relief.

Lisa's boyfriend at the time—Budd—owned a college bar where she and her friends liked to dance on weekend nights in its back room that was solely lit by a bare red bulb. Whenever I stayed at Lisa's, Budd usually did as well, in the windowed, drafty alcove off the kitchen, which my sister had made into her bedroom. That tiny space, just wide enough for a twin mattress, had no door, so Lisa had tacked a filmy scarf to the opening. It came about halfway down. Previous tenants probably used the area as a walk-in closet, as the many hooks and shelves suggested, or (judging from the blackish tire smudges on the walls) had kept bikes in there. I was given the pullout couch in the living room, and the scent of Lisa's perfume on the pillows was so comfortingly familiar that it helped me sleep, even with the metal bar of the bed frame pressing into my lower back.

Budd's primary mode of interacting with me was to flirt, which he did with persistence and sometimes aggression. He grew fixated on the subject of my virginity, and his standard greeting for me became a "lose it yet?" that was said with a disarming grin that showed his dimple—he was aware of being handsome. "When're you going to get poked?" he'd often ask. Such questions offended me at first, but soon I saw them as harmless—rhetorical, unserious—and began to enjoy what seemed to be his interest, even as I knew that the weighty stares and flattery were not fully sincere. He probably meant to compensate for what he assumed was my debilitating envy of Lisa, but she was more mother than rival; I decided that he was sensitive and had a profound understanding of women.

One night, Lisa did my makeup and selected clothes, shoes, and jewelry of hers for me to wear to a party; on our way to which, we stopped to see some girls she knew. As we approached their stoop, Lisa's large dangly earrings felt weighty in my earlobes and made the holes itch, while her pointy-toed white pumps—a size too small for me, which I hadn't told her when trying them on—cut my feet until they bled onto the leather (for which I'd later get castigated). We entered a sagging-floored, carpeted hallway that smelled of exterminator's poison, cat urine, and dust, a sweetish-stale olfactory mix that I'd come to expect in all old urban residential buildings, along with dry heat in winter and mildew every other season. In the

apartment, silver radiators hissed and steamed in front of the open windows, past which college students shuffled on the snowy sidewalk, clumped like buffalo huddling for warmth. The kitchen felt humid, and the air was heavy with rum and ripe fruit swirling among crushed ice in a blender. People shouted over until the noise abruptly stopped, at which point they thrust their mugs, glasses, and plastic cups forward to receive the foamy drink, their expressions a weird combination of grateful and entitled. Lisa lifted two wine glasses from the dishwasher, gave them a rinse, and filled both with strawberry daiquiri. Into mine, she inserted a straw that was a series of plastic loops. Even though the coiling shape meant that extra effort was required to extract the thick fluid, I drank it quickly because of the dark little seeds, sugary taste, pink color, and milkshake-like consistency, which made this gathering seem innocent, as if I were at a child's birthday party instead of among women who, though only in their early twenties, already had hard faces due to cigarettes and excessive dieting. I then felt a physical contentment that was more pleasurable than any I could remember, yet maybe as an infant, when held by a parent, I'd experienced a similarly reassured succumbing.

We migrated to the living room, and the mood transitioned with us from manic and celebratory to guiltily surreptitious. People sat around the coffee table as if for a particular purpose, which the exchange of knowing smiles and meaningful looks said that everyone but me had learned in advance. One girl emptied a small packet of white powder onto a Fleetwood Mac album cover, and another used a credit card to divide the mound into jagged, stubby lines. They all had a turn snorting the stuff through a rolled 20-dollar bill, then winced and sniffled as though from intense sinus pain—odd, then, the concern that each showed for her share: several stared at the rows as if guarding their allotment, while others dipped a finger in whatever hadn't gone up their nose and rubbed the remaining particles onto their gums. Voices grew loud, and faces euphoric, eyes darting a bit madly. Nostril-fondling was constant, and a few girls pivoted their jaw in bovine, cud-chewing rotations, like addicts who'd lost all concern for appearances, which made them look vulnerable and almost, but not quite, endearing.

I was passed the ersatz straw, and it no longer seemed related to money, as if an object's unintended use could render it something else entirely. Holding it at my nose, I bent toward Stevie Nicks' swirling gauzy black skirts and immediately became a part of these women—not just like them, but the same, identical. One girl asked how I felt, but I had none of their teeth-gnashing grandiosity nor energetic impulse toward chatter and confessed to being unaffected. This was met by frowns of disapproval. Lisa said that most people had no reaction the first time—"It can take a few tries"—as if my brain needed to be trained, my nervous system broken in. I wondered where she'd acquired such esoteric knowledge. Surely the girls thought I'd squandered the drug and, worse, wasted some of what could have been their portion. But I felt too young to have been offered any and was glad to have done it in vain. I would need to try another weekend, they said, and skipped me on the album sleeve's next rounds.

The larger party was hosted by an off-campus co-ed fraternity, a description whose multiple oxymorons seemed ominously self-negating: if something is all things, is it anything? In a crowded, sweaty room, I tried to dance, but my usual sense of rhythm eluded me, and, jostled and uncoordinated, I spilled most of my drink. Lisa brought me to the littered dystopia of the kitchen where, at a dripping table strewn with cans, bottles, and plastic cups, she made me another. Her swift expertise reminded me of Budd at her kitchen counter as he invented some novel concoction for us to try before he served it to customers. She handed me a gin and tonic that I wasn't sure I wanted, sat on a milk crate near the keg, pulled me onto her lap, wrapped her arms around me, and said, "Isn't my baby sister adorable?" Men, standing in shallow beer puddles in which bottle caps and tumescent cigarette ends floated with a lily-pad existential sadness, stared and sipped their drinks. I wasn't bothered by her using me this way: it had been happening for years; she seemed to deserve the attention, and the audience was so much older than me, they could've been a different species.

We left a few minutes before midnight because Lisa believed that exiting a party at its peak guaranteed her future invitations to (increasingly interesting) events. Also, she suspected that her looks were unusually dependent on sleep, more so than other people's, and a late night was never worth the sacrifice. She gave that particular excuse when extracting me from the conversation I'd started with a rower in the kitchen, which I ended with regret, knowing I wouldn't see him again.

At Lisa's, Budd sat at her glass-topped dining table, not listening to music or watching TV, but instead, he said, waiting for us. He looked depressed and older than his age, which may have been around 30; the brownish-gray rings circling his eyes created skeletal

hollows, while his face seemed to have doubled in size, with drooping cheeks that formed creases on either side of his mouth like single quotation marks punctuating whatever he said. This combination of drawn and puffy made me think of an inflatable object—an inner tube or life vest—that, having lost some air, sagged unevenly to be a bit flat here while still inflated there. Alcohol and cigarette smells, from his having worked at the bar earlier, formed a not-unpleasant pungent halo. Lisa and I removed the couch cushions and unfolded the mattress, which protruded as if it were an enormous rectangular tongue. Then she told me good night, and Budd followed her past the gauzy curtain that served as a door to her bedroom.

I lay recollecting the party and the gathering before it, with those pink sugary drinks and metallic-tasting powder, when Budd emerged from the alcove off the kitchen, wearing loose boxer shorts and a T-shirt that had a Harpoon Ale logo on the front. Alcohol distributors often gave him clothing and promotional objects, such as the three-foot-high green plastic Rolling Rock bottle that he'd bequeathed to me, which I'd brought to boarding school to display on a dresser in my dorm room like a taxidermied animal until the faculty member on my hall said to get rid of it, amazed that I'd thought it appropriate décor. "Plus, aren't you only a sophomore?" she'd said. Budd wore such clothes as regularly and unthinkingly as nurses used the logo-laden notepads and pens that pharmaceutical companies often left in medical offices to advertise their products. Sometimes he'd have on multiple liquor-branded items at once—a Heineken T-shirt paired with a Samuel Adams baseball hat—as if he didn't know (or care) what wearing so much free merchandise suggested about his habits.

He slid a beer from the refrigerator and said that he wanted to watch the end of *Saturday Night Live*, which I assumed it was too late to see, the night having felt dense with activity. Then I remembered Lisa's rule about leaving a party at what was, in her estimation, its high point. Budd turned on the TV with the volume low and said that even though my sister was "passed out," we shouldn't risk waking her. He climbed up the pullout mattress from the bottom and lay alongside me, him above the comforter and I beneath it, which seemed an important distinction if we were to lie this closely in a room whose only light was the TV's flickering glow. With his head propped by pillows and his ankles crossed, he drank his beer as if pouring it directly into him, mouth barely meeting the bottle. "You want a back rub?" he said. I knew that most people readily accepted massages when offered, but I'd never enjoyed having a stranger touch me in a windowless room where ambient music and scented candles induced a pressure to be calm. Now, full of drinks, I was reluctant to lie on my stomach. I also felt drunk enough that sitting up so that he could reach my shoulders seemed to require an insurmountable effort.

He instructed me to come out from the covers, which meant confronting my decision to sleep in a lace-trimmed top and bottom set that I suspected qualified as "lingerie" or, worse, a "teddy." I usually stopped myself from thinking of either word, as both called to mind a music video in which women whose teased permed hair, heavy makeup, and corsets, garters, and stilettos—unable to compensate for limited vocal skills and musicianship—justified their being a "band." No, these were merely the light-blue silk pajamas that my aunt gave me after she rejected them for whatever reason. Until this weekend, they'd been crammed, wrinkled, in the back of a drawer at boarding school, where if I dared to wear them rather than the sanctioned L.L. Bean plaid flannel or long johns, responses would range from dubious glances to mockery. I brought my legs from under the comforter, and Budd said, "Look at you."

He smelled of Old Spice or Speed Stick or some other masculine deodorant, and I shuddered as if from a convulsion, which I hoped he interpreted as shivering, yet this end of Lisa's apartment, far from the windows, was always too warm. The cologne-like scent couldn't conceal the whiff of the many ashtrays he'd emptied earlier, nor the drinks poured and beers drawn, which together became smoky, sugary, and fermented, like spilled sauce on a grill. The smell of risky overindulgence mixed with the antiperspirant into something artificial, like a mask or costume, as if he were an actor, the thought of which induced another spasm.

These contractions originated in my abdomen, so it was a relief to lie prone, even on my full stomach, with my arms out and head toward the TV. Budd sat on my lower back but kept most of his weight on his knees and shins, which I found considerate of him. He stroked me over the silk top for a few minutes, then slid his hands beneath the thin straps. I stiffened, afraid to breathe. What if his hands ventured to my sides? Or grazed my pajama bottoms, which were essentially underwear? His fingers swept over me distractedly, the effort minimal. His lackluster touching soon stopped, and he began to move his pelvis. I felt something solid, which seemed to be

a metal pipe. But why rub a pipe against me unless that was part of the massage? Perhaps the hard thing was a dildo. I'd seen one under a friend's parents' bed when I was younger, pink and dusty beside a stack of *Playboy* magazines.

His breathing became rapid as he went forward and back on my behind. I kept perfectly still, lest the slightest motion get interpreted as encouragement, and thought of the boyfriend I'd had in ninth grade, the year before I left for boarding school. We used to go to his house after school when his mother was still at work and lie on the living-room rug by the dusty base of the coffee table, fully clothed, kissing with our arms and legs entwined. This, with Budd, seemed related to those afternoons—distantly. I tried but was unable to make them feel similar. "I don't want a massage anymore," I said.

He swung off me as if from a horse, swallowed the rest of his beer, set the bottle on the kitchen table, and entered the small cold room in which Lisa lightly snored.

The next morning, Lisa toasted bagels in the leaky oven, and Budd puttered around with false cheer. I was downcast and silent. "What's with *her*?" said Budd, gesturing at me with a butter knife. I said that I had more homework than I'd remembered and should take an earlier bus than planned.

I stopped going to Boston on weekends, and my time at boarding school improved, which may have been why I didn't leave or was the result of staying on campus—I never could tell. Lisa eventually moved to New York, as did I after college, but a few neighborhoods (gay, tourist-filled) spanned the blocks between us, and we rarely saw each other.

We did have a final dinner before she would move to a different city to be with her fiancé. The restaurant was in a western part of SoHo whose defining characteristic was its proximity to the Holland Tunnel. The place was supposed to be fashionable—I'd heard people at my job discuss it—but that night, we were the only customers, and the damp, dirty smell of mop water tinged the air. I tasted ammonia, and my nostrils stung from bleach fumes.

I hadn't told anyone about the incident with Budd, partly because his and Lisa's relationship ended soon after that night. Also, I'd thought such behavior was normal, or common, at least: my mother had said that no girl reached adulthood without having similar experiences. She'd told me about a stranger in a hayloft who'd come up from behind, his face never seen by her: "His hands just knew where to go." There had been a man squeezing past her in a train corridor, her parents a few feet away.

Now, my words emerged like a deeply embedded splinter that, without prodding, eventually gets expelled on its own. "Why ruin my memories?" Lisa said, and I laughed, assuming she was joking. "Budd was one of my better boyfriends."

I'd expected apologies and appeals for forgiveness, with Budd's drinking offered as the excuse. "You should move past something that you say happened so long ago," she said. "Unless you like holding grudges."

"I just think it's best to know these things."

"What if I don't *want* to know?" she said. "Budd was a major part of my life, a good part. You've been single for a while—maybe this is about my engagement."

I wondered whether she was right, and I envied her so much I enjoyed conveying news that would only upset her. But it seemed more likely that because she would be married soon, she felt especially determined to preserve her youth as she wished to remember it.

Through the restaurant's windows, a streetlamp shone onto her face, as if lighting her for a scene. Lisa raised her chin slightly, and anyone on the street who happened to glance over would see her at an optimal angle. The night was desolate, though. She outstretched her hand and used her thumb, tucked beneath the palm, to wiggle her engagement ring, which glittered. We attempted to discuss other topics, but the conversation foundered, and we resigned ourselves to strained silence. The waiter put the dessert menu face-down on the table between us. Neither of us turned it over.

The Mystic Dog

By: Therese Young Kim

Therese Young Kim has been published in *Rosebud*, *Poetry Pacific*, *Tuck Magazine*, *Journal of Baha'I Studies*, *October Hill Magazine*, and *Soundings East*. Her book in Korean, *A Thousand Magnolias*, was published in spring 2022. She writes in cafés and walks around as a poetic therapy for her silent depression.

Following my divorce, I moved into a modest studio apartment in uptown Manhattan. I was suffering from melancholy like a wounded cat, but grateful for the little place I found to live and for the occasional work I was getting as a freelance translator. A few weeks had passed when I ran into my neighbor living across the hallway, Miss Wade, in the elevator. Neither of us greeted each other then, which was not unusual in apartment living in a crowded city like New York.

She was a tall, lanky woman in her early sixties and rather handsome, despite a stern look in her brown eyes. Although I soon learned that Miss Wade had recently retired from a city university, she had a dog called Rudolph. The name was a mystery to me, for he was a complete antithesis of that genial, red-nosed reindeer with straight blondish fur, some with elegant horns. This Rudolph had tightly curled jet-black hair that shone with a metallic sheen, making me wonder if he was a black sheep impersonating a dog.

Sometimes I would see Rudolph walking through the lobby with Miss Wade, who moved slowly with her shoulders hunched forward as if weighed down by the mountain of thoughts. Rudolph walked like a rumba dancer in slow motion, obviously trying to keep the pace down for his mistress. He looked around 29 in human age and thin, perhaps a bit too thin, and fit like a long-distant runner. His spine was perfectly aligned to the back of his head, and he had luster in his eyes like the orient of black pearls that were fixed upon the invisible sphere before him, only visible to himself, thus exuding an air of canine mystique. In that mode, he seemed to be trying hard not to upstage his mistress in any manner or form without even lifting his eyes to assess her mood.

One afternoon I found myself standing face to face with Miss Wade in the elevator again. This time I decided to say *hello* with a decent smile, to which she responded by curling her lips like a sneer. As if embarrassed or in camaraderie with his mistress, Rudolph kept his tail pointed down between his legs. As an admirer of certain dogs without owning one, whenever I saw a dog dainty and lovely like the other Rudolph, I would gently approach it and say in my funny lilt, "G-o-o-d d-o-g," for which, to my utter delight, I would get a wag from the dog, sometimes a smile from the owner, until the melancholy killed my sunny spontaneity following the divorce.

One day as a goodwill gesture, I decided to bring Miss Wade a small bowl of potato soup made from scratch. When I rang the bell and announced myself, she barely poked her grim face out the door. I apologetically explained my impromptu visit, to which she simply said, "I'm not a potato person!" Dumbstruck, I was about to turn away with my potato soup, but she hurried to say that she was invited for tea by a friend and her actor husband, Mr. Clark, living in the building, who recently had returned from California. They were to be joined by another actress friend, Sylvia, who, besides acting, read fortunes. "In fact," she continued, "Sylvia promised to read our palms. Of course, that includes my Rudolph!"

Amused that she was seizing the moment to talk about the invitation and her enthusiasm for the palm reading, not only for herself but also for Rudolph, I was about to wish her a good time when she shut the door in my face. I turned round with my bowl of soup and wondered if her friend also read the paws of a dog. Or, knowing the mystic quality of Rudolph, I gathered he must have palms or the actress read paws as well.

About an hour later, I rode down the elevator to run

errands. As soon as the door opened, a red-haired lady, whom I quickly recognized was the fortune-telling actress, whirled in before I could get out, nearly hitting my face with her sweeping red cape. As I managed to hop out of the closing doors without being smashed, I saw a gray-haired gentleman strut out of the freight elevator in a hurry, nearly colliding with me.

Looking debonair in his gray slacks and a navy jacket over a turtleneck sweater, he wore a quiet glow of a gently aged man. I could not recall what movie he had appeared in, but there was no mistaking it was Mr. Clark. As I stood dazed from our near collision, he grinned as if he felt embarrassed by being caught for something.

"Sir," I hurried to say, "was I holding up the main elevator too long?"

He responded by stooping over me and said in his husky whisper, "My dear, I'm trying to get away from my wife's two WRETCHED guests, and, yes, that STRANGE dog, too!"

Speechless, I watched him hurry down the lobby and out the front door as if a malevolent spirit were chasing him down. At that very moment, a dog started to bark from one of the upper floors. I wasn't sure if it was Rudolph, for I had never heard him bark before. If it was him, perhaps he, with the fortune teller Sylvia, was sending a bad spell onto Mr. Clark.

As often is the case in apartment living, I did not see Miss Wade for several weeks until one day, we happened to be in the elevator again. As always, Rudolph was by her side. This time she surprised me not only with her "hello," but also with the news that she had put her apartment up for sale. I was alarmed.

"Why?" I asked "And where will you go?"

"For the quality of life," was the answer given with her usual smirk.

Although it was not the first time I heard a retiree moving to seek quality of life, I wondered what kind of quality Miss Wade was pursuing.

"Sorry that you are leaving, but all the best to your retirement!" I said softly.

"Nothing to feel sorry!" she said without looking at me.

Whether he was listening or not, I noticed Rudolph's ears moving slightly up, if not his tail. Then I didn't know what came over me, but I heard myself saying to Miss Wade, "May I pat Rudolph?" She looked at me, rounding her eyes like an owl as if shocked by my question, but said tepidly, "You may."

Surprised by her permission, I froze momentarily, wondering if Rudolph would lick my bare shin with his long slimy tongue, or jump at me, even throw a spell on me. So, I gingerly and reverentially bowed from my waist and extended my hand above his head, and circled it around like a floating halo, saying softly, ever softly, "Go-o-d d-o-g, go-o-d d-o-g," when the elevator door opened, at which Miss Wade pulled the leash hard and said, "Let's go!"

Rather relieved to be left alone without drama and feeling celebratory that I did perform my forgotten ritual again, I let them walk ahead of me when Rudolph seemed to stall behind Miss Wade, then, lo and behold, he turned and twirled his tail twice at me! Yes, he DID wag his tail for me, only for me, firmly and quickly, behind his mistress, and it was divine!

Watching him walk somberly again with Miss Wade, who did not have a clue what her dog just had done, I went my way, nearly flying, imagining Rudolph in the countryside where he would run, bark, and wag his tail for the pure joy of being a real dog. I also knew he would be missed for his elegant walk, black sheep's fur, and wide black pearl eyes peering into the universe only he knew, for he is the mystic dog that gave a good riddance to my melancholy with a wag, perhaps, only perhaps, for good!

Kneecapper

By: Blake Kilgore

Blake Kilgore is the author of *Leviathan* (2021), a collection of poetry. His writing has appeared in *Barely South Review*, *BULL*, *Lunch Ticket*, and other fine journals.

"I only had a couple beers; I was *not* drunk."

Marlena Jones sat at her parents' kitchen table, her head lying on an outstretched arm. Long brown hair fell over her bloodshot and swollen eyes so that she was hidden behind tangled curls. Her parents were silent, waiting on her signal, anxious to bring emotional support which might heal. Suddenly, she was up, pacing, wringing her hands. Her voice shook. She went to the sink, washed her hands and face, then filled a glass of water and sat back down, clanging the glass loudly on the table.

She raised the glass, put it down before drinking.

"But I might have been able to shove him off and run. Maybe. He was strong."

Marlena stood abruptly and tried to leave the room but then fell to her knees, sobbing.

"Please forgive me. I tried to do right. Oh, please-I'm sorry!"

Her mother rushed to where she'd fallen. But Marlena climbed up, bent like an elder, bowing up and down under the weight of what was taken. Her hands clenched tightly around her sides, trying to squeeze out the pain. Her mother just walked behind her, rubbing her back, soothing whispers.

"It's okay, sweetie. It's okay."

Marlena's father sat in the corner, his head in his hands. He hadn't said a word, hadn't looked up. Marlena felt his rage, his embarrassment. Was he angry with her?

A booster and season-ticket holder for over two decades, he'd been rooting for the Cherokees since before her birth. They were picked to win the national championship this year, ranked number one in most preseason polls. Barring injury, Quarterback Vin Liddle would likely win the Heisman Trophy unless some failure of character came to light.

Slowly, Marlena's father raised his eyes, and they were moist.

"Marly, you're my baby. Nothing can change that; nothing ever will. So don't you worry—I'm gonna make sure we get that son of a bitch."

"Order! Order!" the judge screamed as he pounded his gavel.

Guards surrounded Vin Liddle and his attorneys, ushering them through a side door. The bailiff and several policemen restrained the father of Marlena Jones, dragging him away from the Heisman Trophy winner. Liddle, wearing a 5,000 dollar three-piece pinstripe and a Cherokee purple-and-gold bowtie, winked at the old man and smiled as the door shut between them.

Marlena sat with her mother in the last row, still and pale as a corpse. Some whispered condolences as they walked by, and others-the teammates and family of her assailant-gloated. She never looked up.

Marlena ordered a beer, looked up at the bright

lights of the Monday Night Football pregame show on the television. She couldn't hear over the din of the tavern. The announcers were discussing the accomplishments of last year's league MVP, and then the camera cut to a pretty blond reporter standing with the veteran quarterback, who smiled magnanimously. It had been a decade, but Marlena remembered that smile.

Marlena's friend, Shiloh, hollered above the crowd.

"Hey, dude, can you change the channel—put on the hockey game!"

The bartender shrugged his shoulders, reached for the remote.

Marlena waved him off.

"It's okay. Leave it."

Shiloh put her hand around Marlena's shoulder.

"You sure, hon?"

"I forgot it's a big game tonight. People will be pissed if they can't watch. Let's just go sit in the corner."

Both women grabbed sweating beers and walked to the lonely end of the room, climbed into a creaking wooden booth, and sat beneath a dim red-and-yellow sign with a smiling buxom woman holding a tray full of drinks. She was blinking at intervals of three—her body, her face, the tray full of drinks. Her body, her face, the tray full of drinks. It was an old lamp, and the bulb under the lady's face flickered, and sometimes it missed the interval, remaining unseen. Shiloh reached two hands across the table, laid them across the small fingers of her friend, and waited.

"Well, how are things at the old office? I know everyone must miss me terribly."

Marlena shrugged, and then winked.

"One thing's for sure—Gordie the Great misses you."

Shiloh laughed with sudden ferocity and tried unsuccessfully to keep from spewing a stream of beer. She was giggling, and her eyes watered with glee while she wiped her face and the table.

"OMG, what a man; what a great, magnificent, huge specimen of masculinity. Ha!"

Marlena puffed up her chest, raised her arms to her side, and lowered her voice, mimicking the poor arrogant fellow.

"So, girlies, me climbing Mount Kilimanjaro all by my lonesome, days without end o' strain and desperation. Me hungry, tired. But the wild couldn't tame me. Too strong. See these muscles here, ladies?"

Marlena flexed her left bicep and pointed with her right index finger, and they both broke up, laughing and slapping the table. Marly reached over and squeezed Shiloh's hand.

"'Course we miss you, girl! I know I do. There's still all the same bullshit going on and a lot of the same weirdo characters. But I can't quite enjoy the show without your constant flow of sarcasm."

"Well, I try. Hey, speaking of creepers, did they ever get rid of that lurky Rufus for sneaking around, staring down everyone's shirt?"

"Naw, they ain't done nothin' about him. I'm on a totally different floor now, so I don't have to deal with him anymore. It's ironic that now I'm in a position to give him a load of extra work, but I don't because I'd have to go down there and look in those ravenous eyes."

Marlena flushed, looked away.

Shiloh squeezed her hand.

"Sorry I brought it up. Well, at least he can't bother you now."

"I guess."

Shiloh smiled, tapped hard on the table.

"Well, you gonna show me some pics, or what? Come on, come on, I know you are just dying to show me your baby doll and how much she has grown."

Marlena smiled and brought out her phone, pulled up photos of Sally, her black Labrador Retriever. The two ladies flipped through picture after picture, oohs and aahs, giggles and smiles, a happy moment.

There were cheers from the bar: the home team had scored. The ladies looked that way, noticed a couple of fellas in home-team jerseys smiling, seeming more interested in socializing than the game. Each gave a hearty wave. Shiloh thought: *Must we deal with these*

insatiable little creatures everywhere we go? Marlena looked past their hungry gaze toward the television, where Liddle was doing his ridiculous touchdown celebration, so Shiloh pushed on, trying to distract her.

"Who did your hair? Looks great!"

Marlena slowly pulled her eyes from Liddle and back to Shiloh. A worn look retreated, and suddenly she smirked, twirled fingers through her curls, cocked her head to the side, and winked.

"I must say, my lady works miracles, doesn't she?"

Both girls laughed heartily, and Marlena leaned forward and whispered.

"Hides my gray."

"Naw!"

"Yup. Don't tell nobody."

"You know I won't. You got too much dirt on me, hon, so I'm definitely gonna keep your secrets."

The ladies clinked their bottles, chuckled, and slowly settled back against their benches with a sigh.

"Oh well, what about your folks—how are they holding up?"

Marlena raised her brow, rolled her eyes.

"Well, Mama's still weepy all the time, always looking at me like I'm about to break in pieces or something. But really, she's the one. I know she went through stuff when she was young. But she won't talk. I think she's worried how Daddy would feel."

"Is he any better?"

"Worse. It's always fight, fight, fight! Like, I wonder if he's more worried about his injured pride than me. But maybe that's not fair."

Another roar went up from the bar: the home team had scored again, and the flirty jersey boys were smiling at them and clapping jovially.

"Does he still watch football?"

"Barely, and never the Cherokees. He loved that team a lot."

"It's not your fault, Marly."

"I know. It's just going on so long now, and he's bitter. I love him. But it's bullshit, really. I wish he could stop being embarrassed, could just start being proud of me for pulling myself back together and moving on."

"You're *not* still angry?"

Marlena put her head in her hands, then looked up, forced a chuckle.

"Okay—so sometimes I hope that jerk will throw like a million interceptions and get sacked on every play by the biggest, fattest defensive lineman in the league, and he'll suffer a punctured lung. And then I hope he'll get cut, and nobody will sign him, that he'll fail, and the talking heads will all say he's finished. But that's mainly 'cause I don't wanna have to hear him praised all the time like he's some kind of god. You know, every day I gotta drive by four billboards of his massive, grinning face selling useless crap. It's like an open wound."

There was a long silence between the two women while the bar crowd pulsated with good vibes—cheers, clinking bottles, muffled voices, and laughter. Both ladies looked toward the happy idlers and then back down at the table.

Marlena pulled a tangle behind an ear, grimaced.

"I guess what pisses me off most is that the burden doesn't get any lighter. Those dudes in the jerseys over there, for instance, might be real nice guys, two sweethearts looking to just laugh and have a good ol' time. I'd like that."

"But I don't know. Every time I meet somebody, I'm a little scared. When a boyfriend treats me well, I'm waiting for the other shoe to drop. Like, when is this bastard gonna try to force me to do some crazy shit he fantasized about? When is he gonna turn me into a prop?"

Marlena paused, looked back toward the bar. When she turned back, her eyes were shining, her voice a whisper.

"I wonder if he ever feels sorry?"

Shiloh sat silent a minute, trying to think how to lie and say he feels bad even though she knew Marlena was probably not his first, nor his last, and the whole

line of his suffering victims meant exactly zero to Liddle. Then suddenly, there was a clamor at the bar —a lot of shouting and groaning and cursing. When a server came to replenish the girls' drinks, they asked what happened.

"Looks like that superstar quarterback—Liddle—well, he just got destroyed."

Marlena stood and walked past the server, sat next to the jersey boys at the bar. Vin Liddle was laid out on a stretcher, his left leg wrapped heavily. Then she saw the replay. He'd scrambled up the sidelines and stepped out of bounds. A second or two after the whistle blew, a huge linebacker came in and smashed the side of his leg, just below the knee. It was sickening to watch, seeing that bone snap sideways out of his sock. Watching her assailant writhe in pain, Marlena felt a mixture of joy and pity. Moments later, Vin Liddle rode off on a cart, tears glistening on his cheeks, his thumb raised to the adoring crowd. The linebacker was ejected and walked into the tunnel, out of sight of booing fans.

"Some good that'll do," hollered the nearest jersey boy. "That bastard will be playing in two weeks. Liddle is out for the season, and where does that leave us? Hell—he'll probably never be the same."

Marlena looked up sharply.

"I bet you're right, but who knows?"

"Oh, you know football, do you?"

Marlena could see his ruddy smile, that he was trying to flirt. But his condescension was a little too thick, irritating.

"Sure, I know football, but that ain't his problem, is it? Vin Liddle is gonna have to climb back from the bottom, relearn how to walk again, then how to run. Will he ever be able to shake a tackler? How will this injury affect his throwing—will he be able to generate power on that leg? It's gonna take a lot of work behind the scenes, with no one watching, with no one remembering who the hell he is for a while, and with most people assuming the worst possible outcome. And *if* he can get back, he's gonna have to figure out how to believe in his leg, in himself. One thing's for sure—he's gonna ache for the rest of his life."

The other jersey boy leaned over to speak. But his drunken eyes latched onto something as if he'd seen a clue, found something lost. He sat back and stared at the TV, looked at the retreating cart and diminishing figure of Vin Liddle, as he disappeared beneath the rafters. His buddy was still smiling at Marlena, entranced by her acute awareness. She was glowing now, fervent.

"Something like that—rebuilding in the shadows—it takes a lot of humility, an iron sort of character. He'd be better for it if he had the guts. But sorry to say, bro, I don't think your swaggering quarterback has the stones to look hard in the mirror. We'll see."

Shiloh pulled at Marlena's arm, trying to drag her back to their booth. Too late.

The other jersey boy stepped toward Marlena and hollered, his smile gone.

"Hey! You're that gold-digging bitch who tried to smear Liddle, aren't you?"

"Come on, Marlena, let's go!"

Everybody nearby started looking toward Marlena and the jersey boys, wondering what was going on. Alarmed, the large doorman wearing a Liddle number 12 jersey hurried over to stifle the outburst. Marlena was enraged now, her voice quavering. She shook free of Shiloh's grasp and slapped the accuser, then pointed at the television.

"That motherfucker raped me!"

A murmur spread through the room. The bartender leaned over, stern, and told the girls he thought it might be best if they leave. The security guard wearing Liddle's jersey put his hand on Marlena's arm, and she flinched, started to cry, swatted at the man, and then he grabbed her hard, under both arms, his fingers digging into the sides of her breasts, and started dragging her toward the door. The barkeep looked at Shiloh.

"Get out now! I'm calling the cops!"

The jersey boys were up cheering, blood boiling red on their sweat-streaked faces, their fists pumping the air to the rhythm of an increasingly enraged tempo.

"Yeah, get that goddamned lying slut out to the gutter, where she belongs! Fucking whore!"

Shiloh shot the bartender the bird, chased down number 12, and stripped Marlena from his grip. Everyone in the room was staring. Some laughed

and pointed. Others joined the jersey boys in their furious taunts. A few of the men and most of the women in the bar looked nervous. But none of them said a word.

When the women got to their car, Marlena crumpled on the hood and began to writhe and moan. Shiloh put her arms around her and said she'd call the cops.

"No!" howled Marlena.

Shiloh understood, helped Marlena into the passenger seat, and then kneeled beside her, using a sleeve to wipe her tears. There was nothing to say, so she waited. After several minutes, Marlena looked up, her rigid cheeks glimmering in the dim creaminess of a streetlamp.

"I gotta get up in the morning and go to work. But if I drive past one of those damn billboards tonight, I'm liable to burn it to the ground. Can you please take me home? I feel like I've been murdered in broad daylight, and nobody cares."

The Mountain Hills by E.L. Frost

Sundown

By: Halina Duraj

Halina Duraj's prose has appeared in *The Sun*, *Ecotone*, *The Harvard Review*, and the 2014 O. Henry Prize anthology. Her short story collection, *The Family Cannon*, was published by Augury Books. She teaches literature and writing at the University of San Diego.

By the time my sister Nala arrives with donuts, my mother sits in the armchair in a clean t-shirt while I strip the bed. It's my mother's 73 birthday, and the third time this week she's wet her bed. The undergarment and absorbent square on top of her sheet don't catch it all, and it bleeds through to the waterproof mattress pad.

It's Nala's day off from caring for our mom, but she says she'll stay while I go for a run. She picks up a spray-cleaner bottle and starts wiping down the shelves in the fridge and the outside of the coffee maker. I go upstairs to change into running clothes but lie down on my bed instead.

I know caring for my mother is easier when I exercise, and yesterday I didn't exercise and also ate a lot of sugary things because it was hard to be in the same room with her. I felt a mystifying rage—not at her, but not *not* at her either. I crashed the clean dishes around as I put them back in the cupboard. Why was I so angry? Because she's getting old and frail and incontinent? Because sometimes she doesn't recognize me, and I know it's not her fault, but I'm still terrified I'll die in her mind before she dies in my life? Or because she should have left my father the first time he hit her, but she stayed with him instead because she didn't speak English very well and had no money and eventually four kids, no job, and he'd find her and probably kill her or at least beat her terribly if she tried to leave, let alone leave with the kids, plus he was a Holocaust survivor, and she was a saint, and she was raised to keep her vows because she was Catholic? Still, even as a saint, she felt such despair at her life, which included things like dragging groceries home from the store in a wire cart one-handed because her other arm carried me against her hip. Our brother Raf pulled Nala in the red metal wagon, everyone walking because my father, though he had a car, did not feel he owed my mother a trip to the grocery store and would not watch the kids because that was a woman's job. And, if he allowed her to learn to drive, wouldn't that just make it easier for her to leave him?

Once, she told me about hauling groceries past the park alone—we were all in school by then. She got so dizzy she had to sit down on the curb. When she looked up, the sun plunged out of the sky, dipped behind the trees, and then bounced back up. The world is ending, she thought.

But it wasn't ending in that four horsemen way. Just in the totally ordinary way of a woman eventually having to get up off the curb and go home to the man she'd made the mistake of marrying.

I don't have the energy to run this morning—this house I grew up in saps it from me—but I can walk. I do a loop—up my mother's street and through the tunnel under the train tracks and down the street past the park where my mother once saw the sun fall out of the sky, where this morning white-haired couples play tennis as vibrantly as if they were in a cholesterol drug commercial, where once long ago our father set up orange cones on Sunday evenings and made us do soccer drills until we got them right, and where, when I was little and not in school yet like the others, I walked with my mother and her cart to the grocery store and marveled at the great patches of tiny cheerful meadow-daisies dotting the park's green expanse in springtime. *What are those called?* I asked my mother. She knew only the Polish word: *stokrotki*. From *sto*, hundred. *Because they always bloom in hundreds,* she told me.

Today there are no *stokrotki*—it's midsummer, and

the grass shows great gaping dirt patches, a reminder of lingering drought. I hear crows and see one flying, then notice one sitting, hunched low, too low, on the grass. The crow's wings gather in a feathered half dome out of which its head rises, beak opening and closing. I wonder if it's injured. The other crow flies low past it and caws again and again. It's 8:30 a.m. and already hot, and I think about a black cloak in the sun and how hot that bird must be. A fledgling down? *Please-no-no-no,* I whisper. I became paralyzed by the impulse to help a suffering bird and the fear of being pecked by it in the process. I'm still haunted by an injured crow I failed to help on my porch a few years ago. It left blood smears on my door.

Back at my mother's house, guilt dogs me. I call the Wildlife Rescue number. The dispatcher tells me a volunteer will meet me at the park. I am relieved; I will not have to touch the bird. Which park? Willard Park, I say, though something about that feels wrong.

My mother and sister take a slow, slow walk on the sidewalk outside the house. Every step is an inch; it takes my mother a quarter of an hour to cross from our mailbox to the neighbor's.

I tell them where I'm going.

"How wonderful you're rescuing a bird!" Nala says.

"Well, I'm not really rescuing it," I say. "I'm just pointing it out."

"I will pray for it," my mother says.

I drive to the park. The bird is gone. Maybe it was just a fledgling taking a break as it learns to fly. I am relieved, just as I was relieved, in a guilty and complicated way, when that other crow disappeared from my porch.

I call the dispatcher to let her know the bird is gone. "That's okay," she says. "The volunteer has already arrived. He'll find you in a moment." I hang up. I look around. I don't see anyone looking for me, but I do see the park's sign, which says Snow Park, not Willard. I had confused the park with another park in town because my second-grade teacher's name was Mrs. Willard (no relation to the park, as far as I know), and both parks are associated with teachers. This park, Snow Park, abuts the house of my seventh-grade social studies teacher—Mrs. Pulley, who was once a city council member and has an abstract iron sculpture in her yard. Sometimes, when I jog this loop, I see her sitting in a wing chair by the window, reading in the glow of a tall lamp. Once I almost went up and knocked to tell her I think of her every time I hear the words *subsistence farming* and *hunter-gatherer*. The impulse passed.

I scan the edges of the park in case the bird has dragged itself into the shade. I'm about to call the dispatcher again to tell her I got the park name wrong. The volunteer calls me first.

"I'm at the park," he says, "but I don't see you."

"I got the name wrong, I'm sorry. I was about to call you."

"No problem," he says. "Where are you? I'll head right there." He's so nice about it, I can't believe it. I was expecting him to yell at me.

"Snow Park," I say. "But there's something else. The bird is gone."

"Yup," he says. "I had a feeling it was a sundown."

"A sundown?"

"From the description you gave the dispatcher, it sounded like a sundown. It's just a bird sitting and enjoying the sun, having a grand ol' time."

"I'm sorry," I say.

"No, no," he says. "Don't be sorry. I like to check those calls out, too. Sometimes a seizure can look a lot like a sundown, and you never know. It can be hard to tell."

"Well, thank you, I feel better."

"Thanks for calling it in," he says.

"Thank *you*," I say.

"Oh, no," he says, "this was a fun call." A fun call? Who *is* this guy, I think? And why is he so nice? Then I think about the calls that must not be fun.

My father tried to save a squirrel once. It fell out of the oak tree in our front yard and couldn't move. He put it in a shoebox beneath a lamp on his desk in the living room. He put a jar lid full of water and some almonds into the shoebox. He turned on the lamp. He thought the warmth might heal the squirrel. The next morning, we left for an overnight trip to buy carpeting at a discount warehouse on the other side of the state; my father had seen it in a newspaper ad. When we

returned, the house smelled gamey. The squirrel was dead. My father looked genuinely surprised, even sad. That was the first time I remember the confusion of feeling sorry for him. He wanted to save lives, even if it was just a squirrel's, maybe out of guilt for all who died while he survived. But he would always be trapped in history, a victim on one continent and a perpetrator on another.

I drive back to my mother's house. "Bird's okay," I yell across the yard to my mother and sister. My mother shuffles toward the bench under the picture window.

"Praise the Lord," my mother says. Then she asks Nala who I am and why I'm there.

My mother is so hunched over her walker that I can't see her face, just her silver-brown hair, the crown of her head pointed at me. Her hair isn't even all gray yet. She inches forward in fuzzy, rubber-soled booties with koala faces on them. She should have gotten more time after my father died—another lifetime. A hundred lifetimes.

Nala helps our mother onto the bench. My mother's hands remain on the walker. She leans forward, shuts her eyes, and turns her face to the sun.

Wasps by Kathrine Snow

Jabberwock

By: Daniel Lewis

Daniel Lewis lives in Philadelphia with his wife and daughter. *October Hill Magazine* will be his first publication.

There is a long, narrow road, lined thickly with trees, and a white stone bridge from which fishermen cast their lines at dawn. There is no sound yet on the road tonight. No voice. No stranger wayfares along the lonesome shoulder. Silent as a mirror, the shallow creek gathers in its stillness the leaden expanse of the lowering sky. There, at the edge of town, where no signs welcome the chosen few, nor warn others of their quiet wrath.

Sundown comes, as it must. A soft and expected darkness.

The procession begins in the empty streets. To the schoolyard, the post office, the parochial banquet hall, sundown comes to St Matthew's and the First Methodist, down the old king's road to the river beach and the creek mouth, the dredgewoods there still charred from summer fires, the city's cursed new skyline in the distance. It comes to Beach Hill and Snake Hill and the red light flashing on Columbia, to the AOH and the K of C and the VFW with its greatest generation cannon postured at the sky, to the porches and patios and little plastic pools and by cylinders of electric blue which light moths to dusty death. Little homes stand there on little hills with chain-link fences to protect them, the nuclear families tucked away, so safe and sound, playing in the dark.

This evening it is cool, hushed, nearly moonless. Summer has come and gone, and now autumn touches the edges of leaves, nearly ready to fall. It is a work night, a school night, an after-church night, and there is no gossip in the air. No small-town quarrels spill into the streets. Nobody spies on their neighbors from windows or screen doors. Even the constant river breeze does not whisper into the leafy ears of trees.

There, in the quiet, seething suburbs, the moon–white night comes to deliver babies into the snuggeries of sleep. There is no wailing now, no wild keening yet across the way. Mommies and daddies take their leave to find solace, a brief regeneration of the soul. But the sudden night comes, and their eyes, too, are covered with sleep. Tabby cats curl into soft places in armoires and sock drawers to idly purr in their private night. Family elders in gowns and flannel are sprawled on the couches, on ground-floor guest rooms, laps full of newspaper and cookie crumbs, the sandman's dust encrusting their eyes. Maybe an old dog lays at their feet. Maybe a crinkled page of memory hangs at the precipice of their tenuous grip.

Listen. There, at the far edge of town, somewhere out in the reedy dark, the dogs are barking. And a choir of crickets sing their ancient antiphonals. Listen to the foghorn as it bassoons upriver, downriver, ocean bound perhaps, its origin untellable, many miles away.

Clouds cover the sky tonight in thin, velated layers, low and on the move, ashen yet brightened by the fingernail moon and the numberless stars behind them. It is midnight now, and nothing moves. Everything is still. Everything is peaceful. Untold. Everything is certain. All the town is sleeping now.

Except for the night owls, blind drunk at Captain Cat's. They gather there to watch the game and reminisce of bygone times, knock back a couple of cold ones, and just shoot the shit all the livelong night. And the young mothers are still up with fussy newborns, their cabinets chock full of WIC, but never ever is a single one of them crowned a queen. And the young fathers, some more absent than others, they hit the town hard, ripping shots and chasing tail, pissing

on the floor and doing god knows what else, their restless firstborns in bed around the corner, tossing and turning with school or worse on their minds, not to mention all the other sleepless, twitchy persons who lay awake at all hours of the night, sick in bed with sorrow, or nostalgia, or the simple dread of the inevitable coming day.

Listen. There, outside in the silence, in the quiet small-town slumber, where the imperial robes of dusk have settled, there is a voice, something like a crow's caw. Or the snout of a snarling beast. A goat's head and whipping tail, the chanting cryptid comes leaping in from the far dark night. Its breath of fish rot, with coal-red eyes, if any at all, it calls to anyone within earshot, a sign, a signal, hear the yowl, its violent glee, a scream in the back of the throat.

Now, now, maybe it's just those good old boys at it again. Or a rush of wind by the window slit. Or perhaps, at the stark edge of town, where the creek meets the river, and everything is dressed in velveteen dark, a ceremony of teenagers let fly a single roman candle, an homage to those who came before, fierce and luminous against the night.

Maybe that band of teens is on the prowl. These days, the town is plagued by them, hordes of beady-eyed juveniles so stupid and contagious, jeans ripped and tight with accidental stiffies, always one-upping, horny, half drunk, and rowdy on a Sunday night, nipping at the heels of their potty-mouthed girlfriends, too young and too wise for their own good. And with a little grab-ass here, a little ruckus there, maybe one thing leads to another and uh-oh, their gangly arms go all flailing and ah, shit, there it goes, the joint they'd been smoking gets smacked sky-high into the air and the damn thing, rolled up so loosey goosey by god-knows-who, just drops down to the ground and splatters its little red cherry right there where they stand.

Perhaps, perhaps. A voice in the night, a town full of grungy kids, perhaps. After all, any happy and healthy all-American boy can, in a moment of excitement, talk himself into a tall tale or two, and there's nothing like a bump in the night to rile up a mouthful of careless storytelling.

And he's heard them before, of course, the stories. A thousand times in a thousand ways, every telling is a tale, so they say, and he knows each and every one by heart. Stories best told in the campfire light. Or while driving down a long narrow road lined thickly with trees. Or when sundown delivers again the shivering, moonless night, and the townsfolk scour the almanacs for the when of the first frost, and looming, too, is Halloween; and, as autumn's cruelty howls into the chimney's mouth, it comes. There. A sign. A visitor.

He speaks of strange marks in the Pine Barrens snow. Of wraiths shifting in the attic. Of when the town was not yet a town, before the war and before the television, before the sleeved heart of suburbia began to beat, when during summertime the revelrous scents of liquor and tobacco drifted across the unkempt lawns, how, when sundown came and for the love of old glory, they flash-banged the sky as wide bursting and colorful as a line of colonial infantrymen shot bloody full of holes. How there was once a time, amidst the bonfires and the I-remember-whens, that he walked alone to the white stone bridge at the edge of town and set his eyes upon it, a winged silhouette against the silver moon.

But that was then, son of the suburbs, that was then. Good times to be sure, but, gah, hot-damn, they don't make them like they used to. And no, no, none other than me bore witness to it. But have no fear, no fear, it doesn't matter now. The myths are old but never die. What's done is done. Dead to rights, by right and deed, by destiny, son, it's ours. Take the lot of it.

A voice comes at the edge of town. It rises over the riverside, high and mighty over the hillside, still higher over the trees, over the rooftops, over hearth and home, sweet home, by every window, every pillow side, every cubbyhole, every gap in the floor. No cellar, no attic was a refuge. Empty rockers rocked empty on porches. No deadness of night can clot its course, though few are awake to catch it. It echoes, and the echoes leap from house to house, from street to street, the lightless, childrenless streets by the riverside, curfewed by time, hearsay, and the green-lined myths of kith and kin.

The voice resounds and flees the town. Over the schoolyard, the post office, the boxy municipal hall, over little homes on little hills and over the empty streets, over the sanctuaries of home and church and drink, and over the white stone bridge at the edge of town. It slips beyond the borough limits, by the riptiding river and the jon boats which bob at the water's edge, little wakes kneading at the riverbank, to the cherished white wilderness of the barren pinelands in the east and the stoney remains of mapless ghost towns, the old bricks and brooks and brae, by packs of wild dogs and the vile southern crosses flaunted above the old Mason-Dixon, by tick-

bitten back roads and backwater boondocks and onward, seaward to the egg stink of the marshlands by the sea, by the silty, hideous crabs, the peekytoes, the blue claws, the hermits beached and vacant, and, at last, to the vast Atlantic, ocean of triangles, the ink-dark sea, where it shed its sibilant skin and scattered into the Milky Way sky, into the cold, intergalactic and beyond.

Maybe so, maybe so. Oh me, oh my, the possibilities. Or then again, well. Who could say?

Anyhoo, it's late. It doesn't matter. There is nothing to be done. Time passes. No sound. No voice. Nothing moves. Quiet again.

The Ram

By: Andy Plattner

Andy Plattner lives in Atlanta, Georgia. He has published stories in *Litbreak*, *The Spotlong Review*, *The Lincoln Review*, *Ponder Review,* and *Sortes Magazine*. His story collection, *Tower*, was published earlier this year by Mercer University Press.

For Jón Steinunn

After the war, a German officer named Studer moved to a town known as Kaldalindir, where he applied for work as the town policeman. This was a village in north central Iceland, and only one policeman was necessary. The people of Kaldalindir did not find Studer to be a disagreeable man. He'd been a Nazi officer. But the feeling amongst those in the town was that the move to Iceland and the new job meant Studer wanted a clean start, a different life. Studer died in the early 1960s when he was perhaps in his mid-fifties. The cause of his death was unknown.

Many years after his death, a few of the older men in the town were celebrating the life of Jon Aronson, who had recently passed. Aronson, a sheep farmer, had rarely been away from the town and had never set foot outside of Iceland. At the end, he had three teeth left in his head. What he enjoyed were hot dogs; they were soft enough for him to chew. After Aronson's death, some older men gathered at the tiny bar known as Sjávarfrostinn.

In the discussion of Aronson's life, the name of Studer was mentioned. They were about the same age, these two men, Aronson and Studer, with Studer perhaps a bit older. Aronson had been in the national navy, and Iceland's navy had not been part of the war. The name of Studer came up because of a mysterious incident which had happened at Aronson's sheep farm. The men who'd gathered to honor Aronson each had memories of Studer being a nice man. Studer hadn't married, hadn't pursued a wife, this even though Kaldalinder was somewhat renowned for its attractive women.

The barkeep, Agnetha, a middle-aged woman who'd moved away from the town two decades ago, but had returned last summer, poured their drinks. "A nice man, Studer, but not necessarily a good policeman," one of them said. Studer would only wear the uniform shirt, no star or badge. After he died, Studer's Nazi uniform was found in his closet, perfectly kept. Ready if called back to duty. Agnetha, who had been listening politely, nodded. "I heard that," she said, "when I was a little girl."

One of the men said that Studer let people drive drunk. If he heard someone got hurt, he phoned for an ambulance.

"He was a Nazi," one of the others said.

"They believed in things," another said.

"That is not what I meant."

"Anyway, old Aronson. You know the story of him and Studer?" he said, in the direction of Agnetha.

"Probably," she said, "if it's the one I'm thinking of."

The man who knew Aronson better than the others spoke up. He said, "Yes, Studer, if you'll remember, had one thing he loved, and that was the black Volkswagen he arrived in—a car for the people! He kept that car immaculate, like a shrine. If you put a foot on the fender, he looked like he'd draw a pistol on you. One time, he drove the car out toward the sea, and I think there was something about the seawater, the spray of it, bringing on rust, and so he parked far away, off the road, out in some pasture, and he walked the rest of the way. He was gone for hours. It was fall, too cold for swimming. I don't know—no one knows—what he was doing. Maybe he just found a place on the sand and stared out at the water. Dreamed of being back in the homeland, marching in parades. How he'd butchered people. He was a nice

man. When I say that, I mean he was not unpleasant. He might have been sinister at heart, you see. But a man is never all one thing.

"When he came back to his car, his little Volkswagen, the doors on both sides had been dented, and the paint scratched. He walked around the car 20 times at least, walked fast, this according to Aronson. Studer had parked in a pasture of a sheep farm. But he didn't know what he was looking for. He'd shake his finger whenever a person from the town wanted to tell him about the myths, the Hidden People. He'd say: 'Nein, nein, nein.' He was angry about the doors of his car and finally took out his pistol. Aronson was on a bluff, watching it all. He'd gone to fetch one of his flock, which had strayed. Studer did not notice him. In the distance, on a nearby hillside, stood a ram. But Studer did not see it. When he drove off Aronson's property, he did so in a hurry. He brought his car back to town, and nobody asked about the doors because they knew how he felt about the car. He never spoke about the incident. He had the Volkswagen sent away to be fixed. But something happened, and it wasn't returned. He was even quieter after that—this was the general impression—and resentful."

The man speaking said Aronson held that story for a long time. Following Studer's death, the uniform was discovered in the closet, and Aronson felt justified. "He said to me, 'You see, the Nazi in him would never rest. You cannot change a man, ever!' Aronson said that if Studer had found out what had happened, he would have come back here and killed all of his sheep, every last one."

After the uniform was discovered, Aronson could tell the story: while the shiny black Volkswagen was parked on his land, one of his rams crept out to investigate. And because the doors on the car were like mirrors, the ram could see its own image, and, of course, what does a ram do when it sees another ram? The ram charged at the image over and over. It trotted away, then circled the car and wound up on the other side. Its horns cracked. Aronson inspected them later; and, when he did, he cursed the German steel. That ram had a herd and always defeated its challengers. Studer didn't know enough about rams to puzzle it out. He went to his grave not knowing. Maybe he dreamed it was the hands of the souls he'd murdered, clawing at him, trying to get at him.

One of them said, "I want to feel bad for Studer when I hear that story. You know that he is a man in turmoil. This was why he went out to look at the sea. He was more than just a man in a uniform. He was doomed. He knew it."

The one who'd told the story said, "Here's to Aronson. And that old ram."

In another moment, another man twinkled in the direction of Agnetha. He said: "He should've gotten married…kept his mind on his business." They were all looking in her direction then. Of course, they were too old for her.

"How about some hot dogs, boys?" she said. "In honor of Aronson?"

The men said, "Yes, yes, yes. Mustard, ketchup, fried onions! Whatever you have!"

An Inch Either Way

By: Marco Etheridge

Marco Etheridge is a writer, occasional playwright, and part-time poet. He lives in Austria. His writing has been published around the globe. When not crafting stories, Marco is a contributing editor and layout grunt for a new magazine called *Hotch Potch*.

Instead of poking his flat key into the dead bolt, Eric Measures poked a small dent into the paint of his front door. A man of set habits, Eric Measures never missed the dead bolt. He would climb the stairs, raise his hand, and slip the key into the lock without a fumble. Turn the key, open the door, enter, and close the door. Another workday is done. Simple. Automatic.

Eric peered at his hand as if it might have somehow malfunctioned. He squinted at the divot gouged into his door. That would need a spot of paint. He moved his eyes from the scarred door to the dead bolt, consciously adjusted his aim, then stabbed at the lock three times before the key slipped into the keyway.

The key turned in the lock, and the door opened. Eric's guts felt jittery. Perhaps that curry at lunch had been a bit off. That might explain why he was feeling as if things might not be completely normal. He pushed the door closed behind himself and fought the urge to lean against it.

Inside the hallway, Bennie, his corgi, danced around his feet. Eric slipped the laptop case from his shoulder and reached for the dog's lead.

"Walkies, Bennie?"

The corgi ignored the lead and the door. Bennie was behaving as if Robert had stopped by on his way to work. Back in those happy days when Robert walked Bennie and still loved Eric. Dear handsome Robbie, now his ex-boyfriend, whom Eric had not seen in a month. Who had announced that they should start seeing other people, by which he meant he and Eric should stop seeing each other.

Eric gave up on the walkies and knelt for the routine "welcome home" doggie cuddle. Bennie propped his stubby legs on Eric's thighs, ready to have his head scratched. Then Eric saw Bennie's ears, and his hand froze in midair. A bad curry was not going to explain this.

Bennie had a droopy ear. The tip of his left ear flopped over while his right ear stood to attention. Eric adored Bennie's ears, and now they were backwards. Someone or something had switched his dog's ears. This was not right, not right at all. He did not like things that weren't right.

A drink, most definitely a drink. Eric hooked his coat over a peg. Passing down the hallway, he set his case atop the console table he'd salvaged from the bin. Had he been less distracted, he might have noticed the scarred faux-Danish birch tabletop had somehow been transformed into gleaming walnut.

Whisky poured, he flopped into his favorite armchair, and Bennie belly flopped in after him. Eric stared down at the dog's ears and took a long drink of scotch. Then he peered into the glass, sniffed the amber liquor, and blinked his eyes. Wonderful stuff, but not his normal brand. Three cuts above his league.

He looked to his shabby-chic bar table, which did not appear quite so shabby. His affordable yet quite passable whisky was nowhere in sight. Eric saw instead a top-flight bottle of single malt hobnobbing with several like companions. He closed his eyes, reopened them and, when that did not help, took a much larger sip from his glass.

Eric scratched Bennie's ears, flipping up the droopy one in the hope that it might revert to a proper upright position. The dog's ears refused to comply. His thoughts careened between those floppy ears and

the strange whisky, which seemed to be disappearing at a rather rapid pace. He emptied the glass and spoke to the dog.

"Things are a bit off in Camden, old pal. Only have you been down to the off-license buying whisky? No, probably not. You don't have the legs for it, do you, my stubby little friend?"

He eased the dog aside and pushed himself out of the chair. Strange or not, it was damn good whisky, and another seemed a bright idea. As he settled back with a full glass, Bennie squirmed onto his lap.

His phone chirped, and Eric fished it out from under his thigh. An email from his chief, Darla the Dragon Lady. He braced himself for the usual harangue, but this email must have been sent by an imposter. *Great job on the proposal. Sure to knock them dead on Monday. Good work, enjoy your weekend.* Praise from his fat cow of a boss? What in bloody hell was happening with the world?

Then Eric saw the icon alerting him to a new text. It must have been sent while he was on the tube. He thumbed the red dot. He read the text. The words on the tiny screen had the force of a physical blow. It required a superhuman effort not to drop the phone, the whisky, or both.

Hallo E. Walked Bennie on my way to work. Lovely romp in the park. Fancy a weekend away? We could do Brighton. XOXO Robbie.

Eric held a shaking hand to his forehead. Fever, that's what it was. A fever brought on by a bad curry. He'd read about episodes like this. He was imagining things. Like the posh booze. Well, it was damn fine scotch, imaginary or not. Pity to waste it. He'd miss the stuff when he woke up from this horrible nightmare.

His course of action set, a third stiff drink followed the other two. There might have been a fourth. Then there was the vague memory of a swerving walk while Bennie towed him around the darkened neighborhood. Somehow, they had made it home. At the last, there was an awful bit where the bed spun around while his stomach lurched into his throat, and he pleaded for it to please-dear-god stop. It didn't.

Sunlight slanted through the bedroom curtains. It was a weak London sun, but it pierced Eric's aching brain like a sodium flare. A groan broke from his parched throat. He threw a forearm over his face, but the weight of it sent shocks of pain stabbing through his skull. Another groan, much louder.

Well, would you look what the cat dragged in.

The voice only added to Eric's pain. Much, much too early for talking and much too hungover. Go away, please go away.

Perhaps an aspirin or two. Wash it down with the hair of the dog that bit you. Might help, you know.

Fucking hell, that voice was annoying. And what bastard was in his bloody bedroom? Eric let the dead forearm fall away from his eyes. He squinted into the blinding light, blinked, and tried to focus his bleary eyes. There was no one there. The room was empty except for Bennie, who sat atop the foot of the bed.

Eric raised himself on one elbow, regretted it instantly, but managed to prop himself up against the headboard. He gave the bedroom an angry once-over. There was still no one there.

He slumped back, and his skull conked the headboard. Pain exploded through his head and out his eyeballs. He cursed whisky, cursed the sunlight, and generally damned everything and everyone to hell and gone. Bits and pieces of the preceding night forced their way into his addled brain, each bit of disturbing shit worse for the remembering.

He would need painkillers. For fuck's sake, let there be a few aspirins left in the bottle. Or something stronger, something to silence the strange voice that had invaded his bedroom. He gave the entire room a solid cursing and then wished he would die.

Swearing like a right proper sailor boy, are we? If your mum could hear your talk.

Eric's wish to die was replaced by a very strong urge to kill. Whoever was torturing him wanted slaughtering, with as much violence as possible. Vengeance, that's what he needed, then perhaps a bit more sleep.

Oh, too, right. Kill a harmless doggie, would you?

A horrible premonition caused Eric to look down the length of the bed. Bennie looked back at him, his

goofy tongue hanging over the side of his jaw. The corgi then waggled its eyebrows at its master, who almost soiled the bed in response.

"Bennie… wait… what… are you talking to me?"

Not talking, no. Not possible. No larynx, you see. Communicating might be the better word.

Eric's heels scrabbled against the sheets as he tried to push himself through the wall and away from this waking nightmare. The wall held fast, and Eric succeeded only in knocking Bennie off the end of the bed. He saw the corgi's head bounce into view, vanish, then bounce again. It took Bennie three tries to launch himself back onto the mattress. The dog was not pleased.

Look, I know you're a poofter, but must you be a coward as well? Kicking a little corgi off the bed. I mean, really.

"So, you can talk. Sort of. In my head, I mean."

Yes, Eric. May I call you Eric?

"But when?"

When what?

"When did you learn to, um, stick that dreadful voice in my head?"

Is it dreadful?

Eric let go a huge sigh and sagged onto the headboard. He stared at his faithful dog, now a talking dog. Then he surrendered to the hangover, the weirdness, and everything else. It was only going to get worse, so why bother fighting it? His life was in the bin, and he was damned if he knew why. Searching his brain for a reasonable explanation only produced more throbbing. He gave it up and looked at the grinning dog.

"No, not dreadful. You sound quite chummy, matter of fact."

Good to know. Wouldn't want to come off like a cat or something.

"Cats can talk as well?"

If you could call what they do talking. When they aren't uttering beastly curses, they're busy whinging for food they won't eat. Horrible creatures on the whole.

"And dogs are better?"

Bennie raised himself on stubby legs and lumbered over the bedclothes. He gave Eric the sad puppy eyes until Eric began scratching his head. The dog closed its eyes and smiled. Eric slipped his hand under Bennie's jaw and gave the mutt a shake.

Right, sorry. Head scratches are like a drug for us. Well, now, truth be told, a dog's life is a fairly limited existence. Food, walkies, pee-mail, is that bitch in heat, barking at imaginary intruders, that sort of thing. Not like you humans. My, but what varied and interesting lives your sort lead. Take yourself, for example. Alternate realities, and you are stuck between the two. Fascinating.

"Stuck between alternating what?"

Alternating realities. Although, I suppose we shouldn't rule out the possibility that this is all a psychotic episode.

"My dog is speaking to me in my head. Of course, it's a psychotic episode. Or a bad curry. Or the worst hangover in history. All three."

Does any of that explain the sudden appearance of the stellar booze, the heady email from your evil chief, or the text from Robert? I like Robert, by the way. He always brings me treats. Of course, he's using the flat to have it off with other blokes. Three other blokes at last count.

Eric's chin fell to his chest, and another bolt of pain ricocheted around behind his eye sockets.

Is this what he'd wished for himself? If not him, then who else? His hunky boyfriend back in his life, even if Robbie was a cheat and a liar? What about the nicer furniture, the posh whisky? Or a talking dog, for fuck's sake. Had he somehow conjured all of this? And if the answer to that was yes, how in the hell could he put things back to rights?

The answer was there, a thread of thought his addled brain tried and failed to grasp. Something about desire and suffering. Maybe a book he'd read. He almost had it, but then the idea danced away into the painful corners of his head. He felt a paw pulling at the back of his hand and pried open his eyes.

"What now?"

I hate to interrupt and all, but my bladder is about to burst.

Eric groaned. Right, life goes on. Or rather, lives go

on, whether they're wanted or not, real or not.

Sorry, dog thing. Can't be helped.

"Half a tick, then."

Eric swung his legs off the bed. He pushed himself up, fell back, tried again. His clothes were heaped in a tangle on a chair.

He fought his way into them. Bending over was no good. He sank to the chair and managed to yank the socks over his bare feet. Bless the poor sod who invented slip-on loafers. Laces would have been beyond him.

Back on his feet, but just barely, he staggered to the bath. A long splash of cold water, a brush through the hair, and he looked a bit less like a corpse. When he stepped back into the bedroom, Bennie was off the bed and padding towards the hallway. Eric followed as best he could.

Remembering the disaster of trying to bend over, Eric sank to one knee to attach Bennie's lead. He pointed a shaking finger and gave the dog a stern look.

"And not a word, you hear me? Not one word."

Bennie gave a sharp yip that pierced Eric's skull. He pushed himself to his feet with a groan and opened the door of the flat.

When Eric arrived at the coffee bar, he saw a single vacant table. He pounced on it like a drowning man onto a life raft. He tied Bennie's lead to the wrought iron and lurched inside to order coffee.

Two caffè lattes and four aspirin later, Eric felt as if he might live. He tried to pretend this was a completely ordinary Saturday morning in Camden Town. Ordinary except for this massive hangover and a pet corgi who had acquired the ability to speak. Eric risked a peek at the pavement.

Bennie lay under the table, a half-gnawed complimentary dog bone between his paws. The corgi was up to his usual, throwing doggie smiles at cute passersby or growling and lunging at any pigeon that ventured too close. An ordinary dog doing ordinary things, and, most importantly, not speaking.

Eric ordered a double espresso for good measure. Able to think again, he was also able to worry. Did he want to go back to his flat? If he did, what would he find there?

He was dead certain on what he could live without, thank you very much. Alternating realities were right out, as were psychotic episodes. Cheating boyfriends and talking corgis were also not required. His life might be knackered and boring, but he wanted it back so very badly. Eric settled his sizable coffee bill and steeled himself for the return walk.

A slightly less hungover master and his eager dog walked back to their shared flat. Bennie read the pee-mail at his favorite tree trunks and added his own piddle to the messages. He dashed around at the end of his lead, pulling his human along as he chased fat pigeons.

Eric followed in Bennie's wake, feeling as if he might just survive, and afraid of what might happen if he did. Then they were inside the building and standing outside the door to the flat. Bennie gave a few short barks, waggling his tail stub and a good bit of his fat butt.

The key seemed heavy in Eric's hand. What waited beyond the door, the strange new or the comfortable and familiar old? Eric knew he was about to find out. He made one wish, one fervent and heartfelt wish. He realized his eyes were squeezed shut.

In the next moment, Eric lifted his hand. The key snicked into the lock on the first attempt. The key cuts danced over the tumblers, calling them to order. Fingers turned the key, the lock bolt slid aside, and Eric opened his eyes and the door. He hesitated at the threshold. Before he could peek inside, Bennie trotted through the gap. Eric shrugged and followed the dog.

Eric bent down to remove Bennie's lead. The dog looked at his master, head cocked, left ear flopped over, and right ear standing to attention. Eric scratched the dog's ears and looked again. Left ear down, right ear up.

Bennie gave a yip and wiggled his plump butt up the hallway. Eric followed but paused beside the console table. He ran his hand over the scarred birch tabletop and fingered the familiar cigarette burn at the near edge.

Once in the living room, Eric eased into his armchair.

He looked to the scruffy bar table. His first glance at the whisky bottles caused him to wince, but then he smiled. Good workingman's drink and not a posh bottle in sight.

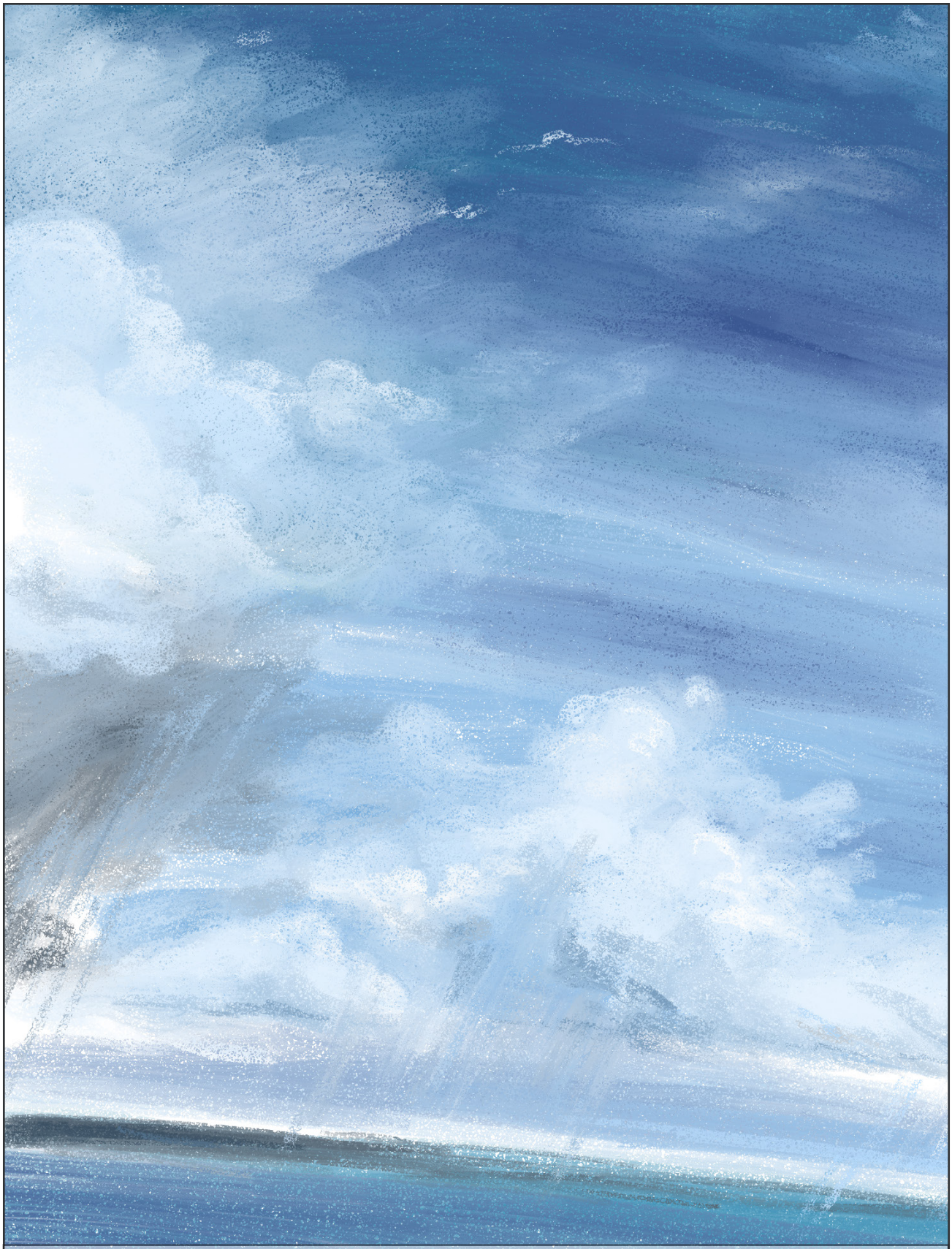
His phone vibrated, and Eric fished it from his pocket. Late Saturday morning and a scathing email from the Dragon Lady. Does she never give it a rest? He thumbed a reply full of apologies and promises to fix it on Monday. Muttered "cow" under his breath, made sure the cow didn't appear in his email, and hit send.

Another message, a text from Robert. Oh-so-handsome Robbie, the lying, cheating bastard, who wondered if they might not have a drink together. Just the two of them, a chance to talk things over. I'll give you all the talk I can spare, you pompous wanker. Eric typed two angry words, one exclamation point, and sent the final response on its way.

He dropped the phone and sank back into the armchair. Bennie waddled across the room, his favorite toy dangling from his jaws. He broke into a run and launched his fat body at the armchair, ending in a clumsy belly flop across Eric's thighs. The dog righted himself, fussed about until he was comfortable, then looked up at Eric.

"All right then, Bennie?"

The dog did not reply.



Rain Over the Gulf by E.L. Frost

Failings Real or Imagined

By: Mike McLaughlin

Mike McLaughlin is a writer for Vietnam Veterans of America and Wrath-Bearing Tree. His historical features have appeared in *American Heritage* and *American Veteran*. He has written three novels and dozens of short stories. Between adventures he lives in Boston.

By Japanese standards, the sailmaker wasn't simply a half-caste. To the *daimyo* of the south, he was *fujun*.

A half-breed.

A mongrel.

His muddied ancestry made him easy to mock and ignore. Those of purer breeds looked upon his kind with, at best, disinterest—and contempt at worst.

As a boy of five, he had left Korea with his uncle for Hokkaido, the northernmost part of Japan. He had no other living family, and so the two had gone together, yet alone, for reasons he never fully understood but was discouraged by the uncle from inquiring after.

Through diligence and no small amount of luck, they settled into a quiet—if not always comfortable—life in a fishing village on the coast of Haboro, far up the island's west coast. Yet it was an existence the boy came to enjoy. While his uncle remained as dour as ever, the boy thrived there. The damp sea air and storms of winter were invigorating to him. The milder seasons that followed gave him a sense of peace and well-being he had never known in Korea and probably never would have. It was in this frame of mind that he served as his uncle's apprentice, designing and stitching sails of all kinds and mending nets of all sizes. The quality of their work soon became known beyond their village. From this, the two began enjoying modest prosperity.

A year after their arrival, his uncle married a young Ainu woman. To the boy's delight, she took to him readily, giving him love and kindness in abundance.

As he recounted to Havilland years later, the Ainu people were as foreign to the overbred *daimyo* as the Inuit were to Texans. A backward people, at best. Ethnically inferior. Targets for derision and abuse in a sustained effort to weaken their culture and their language.

When he was nine, the sailmaker slipped in the rain, falling from a pier and striking a submerged rock, injuring his hip and breaking his right arm.

A local doctor set it with a crude splint that more or less kept it in place. The boy, healthy and resilient, mended quickly. His recovery, however, was incomplete. There was a slight curve to his arm between the wrist and elbow, and his fingers were stiff and painful to move.

Day and night, his aunt massaged his hand and arm with oil and warm compresses. Then she resolved to use music and insisted her husband purchase the boy a *shamisen* and hire an elderly man from up the road to give instruction.

Hesitantly the neighbor declared he had only been playing the three-stringed instrument for a few years. It was a pleasant distraction to help fill the long silent hours after his wife had died. His skills were fair, no more, and he was unsure he could properly convey them.

The aunt said this merely made him better qualified to teach. Furthermore, she demanded he teach the boy to play left-handed as well as right. And when the bewildered man protested he had never once played that way, the woman replied with her winning smile that now was his opportunity to learn.

And so the child and the old man set to their task. Doing so awkwardly at first, then with enthusiasm,

filling the air with the twanging of clumsily plucked strings. At the beginning the uncle would grind his teeth, swearing to his young wife that this enterprise was futile. In reply, she fashioned him earplugs from hemp and wax to ease his suffering.

The boy recovered almost fully, although his fourth and fifth fingers often felt numb. His limp was nearly gone, too, although his hip would reliably inform him when hard changes in the weather were approaching. But this troubled him little, and, to his family's surprise and satisfaction, his hands quickly developed an acuity that far exceeded his uncle's.

The measuring and the cutting, the stitching and re-stitching of heavy sailcloth, always slow and tedious tasks, became easy for the nephew. Work that once took days he now completed in hours.

Word of his abilities spread quickly to tradesmen of the region. Men who had plied their craft, doing precision work for decades, began to appear at the door inquiring whether the boy could complete delicate tasks that had too often frustrated them. Soon the boy was aiding clockmakers, locksmiths, photographers, and even the operators of the regional telegraph service.

The culmination of the boy's recovery came one day in the dead of winter when he was ten. A representative from a city orchestra 60 miles away had made the difficult journey under extraordinary circumstances. To his uncle's astonishment and his aunt's delight, the representative asked for the boy's services. A specialist was required to help tune a long neglected piano for a grand performance within a week's time.

When the boy humbly stated he had only seen pianos in photographs, the man shook his head. The point was irrelevant. They had engaged the services of a difficult yet supremely talented piano tuner. To even get the man to accept the task was a major achievement. Winter disagreed with him, and he did the majority of his work between April and October.

The problem lay, alas, in that the old man's arthritis and back pain had grown to the point where he could not continually sit at the piano's keys, play a note, then walk around the piano to adjust the strings within. He likened the task to carrying stones up Mount Fujiyama, six feet at a time, then turning and limping back four.

The assistant he normally used had died suddenly. The orchestra had provided another, then another still. After a few minutes with each, the old man declared them worthless, then threatened to leave if they didn't find him adequate help.

Hesitantly a junior member of the orchestra said he had heard of a boy up north who played the *shamisen*. The lad showed exceptional faculty, not merely with the instrument but in many other crafts. Perhaps he could assist.

This suggestion was loudly mocked by his peers. The idea of some *fujun* child providing the solution was absurd. But the theater's desperate manager ordered the boy summoned immediately, swearing he refused to be dishonored by poor performance as the result of a faulty instrument. It would be the vilest of insults to the legendary pianist scheduled to perform and to the audience as well. The shame, he pronounced surely, would fall not merely upon him for failing to take action but upon them all, no matter how skillfully they played.

For the better part of two days, with his aunt beaming from the far corner of the stage, the young sailmaker stood behind the piano, his hands deep in the works. Awaiting his master's command. Wondering if the piano's massive black top would drop on him if he failed in his duty.

Slowly, painfully, the old man tapped each key and frowned. Critically grumbling, then calling out his instructions in colorful metaphors. Commanding the boy to tighten one wire by a breadth of a horse's hair. To loosen another by a hen's beak. Orders baffling to those of the orchestra were clear as day to the boy. Readily he grasped the intent behind the phrases and acted accordingly.

In the middle of the third day, the old man ceased. Grimacing, he pushed away from the piano. Wincing, he heaved to his feet and limped slowly from the stage. The boy waited, as was his custom, thinking the master would return—but he didn't.

Several minutes later, a clerk appeared and handed the aunt an envelope. He stated it contained a stipend for the family's assistance and for their travel expenses. Then he said they would no longer be needed, and they could leave.

Now.

The aunt and the boy hesitated. They asked if that was to be all. Asking if they would remain and hear the great instrument in the performance the following

evening. Perhaps receive acknowledgment from the pianist? An opportunity to meet the other musicians?

No, the clerk replied. They were no longer needed. A taxi would take them to the station for the train back north. The man shook his head, adding that, for an Ainu woman, the aunt had risen above her lowly station to provide the *fujun* child with such skills. Then he departed, leaving them alone with the perfectly tuned piano on the empty stage.

Upon their return, his uncle told him, with considerable reluctance, that the boy's mother and her younger brother—the uncle himself—were Japanese, although he did not say from where and refused to divulge this when the boy repeatedly asked. He did state that she had died when the boy was only a year old. Of his father, the boy learned nothing. The uncle never knew the man, not even his name – only that he had been Korean. His uncle and aunt were all he had.

The next day the boy began a lifelong study of a nation and a culture that refused to accept him. The people denying him his birthright for the sole reason that he wasn't Japanese *enough*.

From his happy life by the sea, his love of ships, his ideas of brave voyages to far places, he had hoped to enlist in the navy when he was 17. Yet he was rejected for national service due to his childhood injuries, regardless of the extraordinary recovery he had made. The conscription officer furthered the insult by saying he should be grateful for even being evaluated. The Imperial Japanese Navy required the very best from every man who served—so what could a crippled mongrel like himself hope to contribute?

His bitterness ebbed slowly but never completely left him, resigned as he was to continue the life he had always enjoyed in his world. A world now that felt smaller with each passing day. Yet even this seemed uncertain as Japan's nationalist fervor swelled to hysteria. On this, he and his family agreed.

Japan's invasion of Manchuria in 1931 came as a shock to them all, the uncle especially. A hammer blow from the dark. Never given to displays of emotion, the man surprised his family with tears of regret and loss. He had distant relations there, people he knew only from childhood. And now they were, at best, under a hard and indifferent rule. Dead at worst. What little word they would send in the past ceased entirely.

After long talks with his elders, the sailmaker resolved to leave Hokkaido. He had been made to feel like a foreigner by the *daimyo* for so long he could no longer see the island—nor himself—as a part of any empire, let alone a nation.

Having great fondness for him, the local fishermen recommended he travel far away, leave Japan, push south and west. Go to the Philippines, perhaps, or even Borneo. A few urged him not to stop until he reached the Indian Ocean. It would be worth the trouble, they assured him, and he came to agree.

The day of his departure was bittersweet. He embraced his uncle and his aunt, pledging to write and keep them informed of his progress, for good or ill. He pledged he would return one day, perhaps a wealthy man, with a wife and many fine children. A prodigal son returning in better fortunes than when he left. Returning with a much improved existence, a higher station in life, and an insult to be hurled at those who deemed him worthless.

He was defiant…and yet he was defeated, too. Leaving because he felt compelled to do so, even though he genuinely did want to see the world beyond. Going with disdain for a nation that would never judge him for what he could do or for what he aspired to be—only for what he was.

It was their indifference to his ideals that hurt the most. Their dismissiveness, even contempt of his commitment to the tenets of being Japanese.

Of learning how to live well.

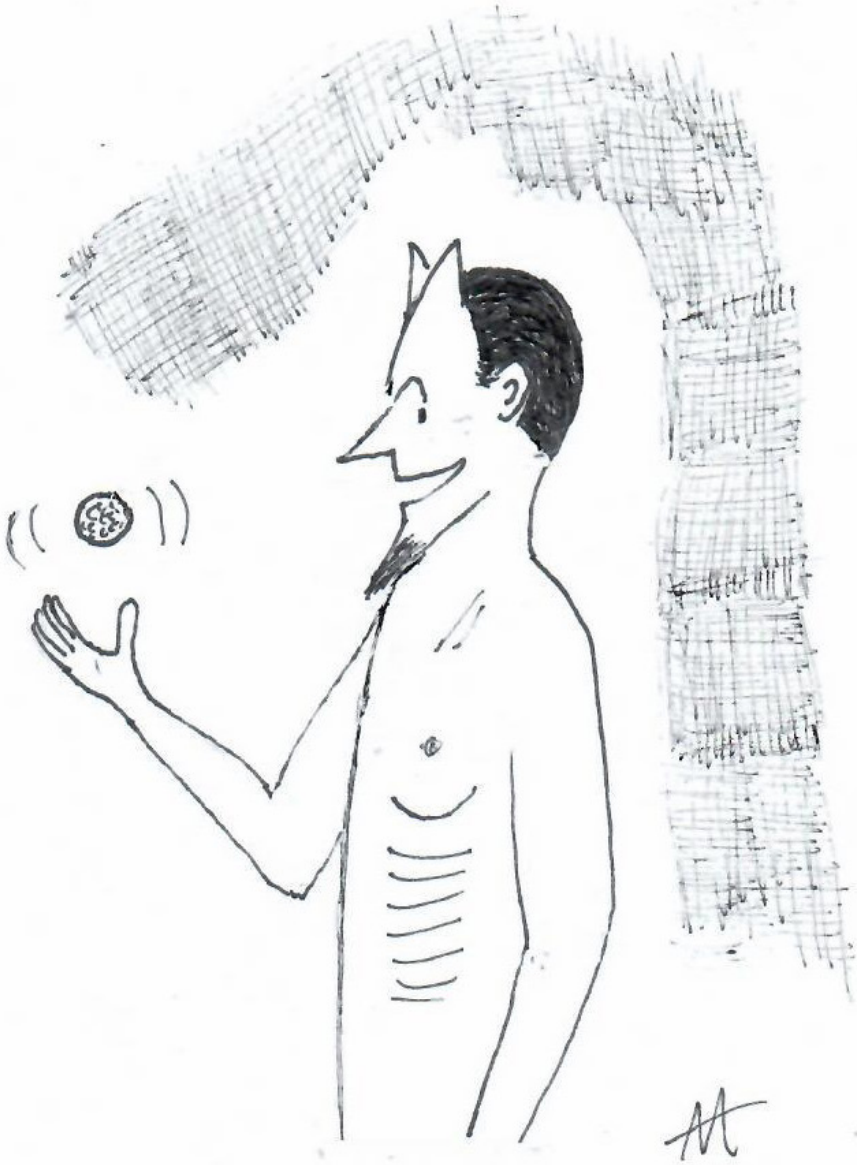
To serve well.

To age well, and above all, how to die—*well.*

As his nation disappeared behind him, he thought only of the *ronin*. Of the samurai who failed in his duty, allowing his master to suffer, to lose face, even his life.

The masterless samurai.

The skilled warrior—condemned now for his failings, real or imagined.



By Andrew Armstrong

A Sporting Chance

By: Andrew Armstrong

Andrew Armstrong won a regional poetry contest two years ago. His poems have gotten better since then. Andrew is also a cartoonist with over 100 sales.

"So this is what it's like to die," thought Dexter McGuinness as two EMTs worked feverishly to revive him. It was as if he were watching their efforts far above from where he lay victim of a heart attack. Suddenly, his point of view changed; his soul, or spirit, seemed to be soaring toward a bank of white clouds. "That must be heaven," he thought. But then his ascent slowed, and a long, downward drift began, which ended when he landed softly by the first tee of the most beautiful golf course he had ever seen.

There, waiting for him, were his golf clubs, leaning against the iron rail by the steps. He hadn't played in years—his health wouldn't permit it—but now he seemed to have shucked his age and physical ills; he felt younger, stronger, much as he had felt in his twenties, decades earlier. The sun was shining, and there was the slightest of breezes. But why was he alone on a perfect day to play? The course seemed deserted. Not only the course, but when he walked to the venerable fieldstone clubhouse, he found it locked, and the pro shop dark and empty.

Feeling a bit like a trespasser, he decided he would play and settle up when he had finished; surely, someone would be around by then. "On a day like this, I could birdie every hole," he said aloud, taking out his driver and reaching into his bag for a ball and tee.

"I don't think anyone's ever done that, birdie every hole," said a deep voice. A man—tall, thin, with a ruddy complexion—had emerged from behind the cedar hedge flanking the first tee. He was carrying an old-fashioned golf bag, which held what looked like ancient implements. "Mind if I join you?"

"Please do," said Dexter, although there was something about the stranger he did not like.

The newcomer put his clubs against the rail next to Dexter's. "Warm, isn't it?" he said. "Imagine me saying that." To Dexter's horror, his companion removed his hat to reveal small horns on either side of his forehead. "You're up," he said, and Dexter, shaking, teed his ball and swung.

The result was a weak slice, and the devil—for it was he—clucked his tongue in sympathy. He, too, climbed the few steps to the tee, and laced a towering drive which split the fairway. He shouldered his clubs, as Dexter had, and they began walking side by side.

"I always carry my bag," said the devil at last. "I feel I have energy to burn."

"Hilarious," said Dexter. He turned to his companion. "I assume we're playing for my—"

The devil waved a reproving hand, or claw. "Let's call it the privilege of keeping me company for eternity."

Dexter swallowed hard.

"Still, I never imagined Hell was like this," Dexter remarked, before playing his second shot, which fell far short of the green. "It's beautiful, and not a half acre at all."

"Don't believe everything you've heard about my domain," said his opponent. "I have far more than a half acre—I need a lot of room for my many guests." He smiled fiendishly.

Dexter understandably butchered the first hole, a par four, and conceded after the devil had chipped close in three. The second hole, a scenic par three over a small pond, went almost as badly; Dexter's ball plugged in a trap fronting the green, and his recovery was well

short of the pin. The devil missed the green to the right, but sank a winding ten footer to go two up. He grinned, pleased with himself, threw his putter in the air, and caught it by the grip. "Sometimes you're hot, sometimes you're not, although I usually am."

"Ha ha," Dexter said, miserably. It was then that he decided that, no matter what happened, he would play his own game and go down fighting, if need be. He wasn't beaten yet, he reflected, for the devil, for all his boasting and unearthly powers, had not been able to conquer the game of golf. Supernaturally long off the tee—he often outdrove Dexter by 40 yards or more—his chipping was poor, and his putting erratic. Dexter, who cautiously aimed at the center of every green, was able to even the match after six holes.

Still, he was at a considerable disadvantage, playing the layout for the first time; the yardage markers were questionable as well. "I don't suppose you have a scorecard, with a map of the holes," Dexter said as they walked toward the seventh tee.

"Alas, I do not. But if it's keeping score you're concerned about, I keep score very accurately," said the devil. "In fact, you might say I'm the great scorekeeper—unfortunately for some people." He smiled and showed a mouth filled with pointed teeth. "Besides, a golfer of your experience shouldn't need any outside aids—how long did you play, 52 years?"

"Fifty-three."

"With some success on the local level," the devil said.

"I twice was club champion," Dexter replied, modestly.

"Yes, and the second time you won, you said you had a four on the last hole, when you really had a five. That put you in a tie with young Wendell Hill, and you beat him in the playoff."

Dexter felt his face reddening, but observed, "I hardly deprived him of his only chance at the title. He won the next year, and later won again."

"That wasn't the only time you slipped—what about the lovely Miss Hale?" the devil said, referring to a long-ago coworker of Dexter's.

Dexter was annoyed. "What about Melody Hale?"

"You were attracted to her. Don't deny it."

"I was faithful to my wife, always," fumed Dexter. He backed away from his ball and looked the devil in the eye.

"But you committed adultery in your heart." The devil thoughtfully stroked his chin. "I think it was an American president who first used that expression. If not, it should have been."

Play your own game, don't listen to his nonsense, Dexter reminded himself, but was rattled enough to hit his second shot fat, and conceded the hole, going one down.

They halved the next four holes, and then the devil missed a short putt on 12, squaring the match.

"I was too hasty," he hissed. "I should have lined it up."

"They say the devil is in the details," Dexter couldn't resist saying.

The devil scowled. "You'll pay for that remark, McGuinness!"

Dexter didn't care.

"I'm still a little confused as to why I'm here at all," Dexter said, when they arrived at the 13th tee. "Yes, I cheated—once—at golf. But I was faithful to my marriage vows. I never took a dime which wasn't mine."

"But how can men judge as—well, outside agencies—judge?" argued the devil. "You, like the great mass of humanity, fell into that gray area between instant salvation and immediate damnation. A sort of limbo."

"So you give people a chance to save their souls by challenging them to a game of golf?"

The devil looked shocked. "Oh no, not just golf. That wouldn't be sporting. I select whatever major interest or hobby the individual had in life. A former boxer, once a heavyweight contender, tried to duke it out with me; he didn't know the devil is a great counter puncher." He chuckled mercilessly. "Then there was a chess grandmaster who requested to meet me over the board. Poor soul, he forgot I was making moves before he was born."

They halved the 13th; and, when they went to tee off on 14, a short par four, the devil said, "I'd watch out for that trap on the left if I were you; it's so deep we

call it The Pit."

Dexter acted as though The Pit didn't exist, and carded a regulation par. Alas, the devil failed to heed his own advice and pulled his second shot into the sand. Dexter heard more than a few "Damns!" as his opponent tried to extricate himself. Finally, the devil emerged from the trap, ball in hand, growling.

"Maybe a little less gamesmanship, and a little more game?" Dexter suggested.

The devil hissed.

Dexter McGuinness maintained that one-hole advantage coming to the 17th, a longish par four. He was safely on, and safely home, in four strokes, but the devil, finding his putting touch at a most inopportune moment, rammed home a 20-footer for a birdie.

"That was a hell of a putt!" the evil one cried as it fell. Silence. "I said, that was a—"

"I heard you."

It would come down to the last hole then, a par five, which curved like a banana around a meandering stream. Dexter played two safe shots, and found himself in light rough about 130 yards from the green. He needed the approach of his life —or his afterlife—and he got it: his ball landed ten feet behind the pin and backed up to within three feet of the hole. The devil was on in three, but far away, and two putted.

"This is for all the marbles," said the devil, as Dexter settled over his ball. "If you miss, you know what that means? Sudden death."

"If death has any meaning here," muttered Dexter. He kept his head still and the clubface met the ball squarely. It ran true, hit the back of the cup, and dropped in.

He expected his vanquished opponent to disappear with a puff of smoke, accompanied perhaps by a clap of thunder. But nothing happened. Nor did Dexter feel any closer to paradise.

"Your hole, your match," said the devil, picking up his bag. His gaze appeared fixed on some distant point beyond Dexter's left shoulder, and Dexter, turning, saw that lights had come on in the clubhouse, and that someone was standing by its open door.

"You'll find food and drink – the very best – awaiting you, as well as entertainment, if that's your wish," the devil said. "Also, a comfortable bed, and a fire—naturally—for warmth."

"But I thought—"

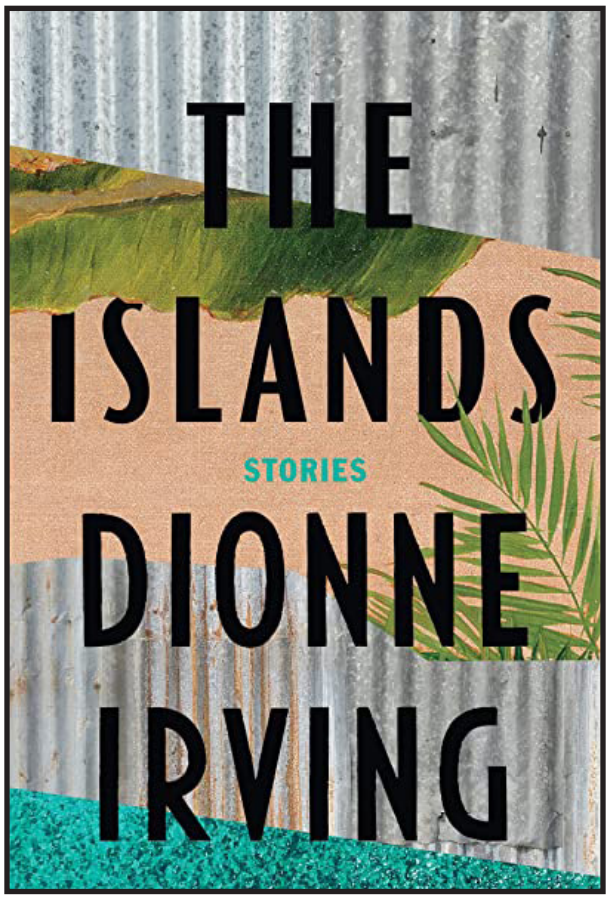
"This has been so enjoyable I really must insist that we do it again tomorrow. Same time, same place." The corners of his mouth turned up. "Same stakes."


Book
Reviews

The Islands Doesn't Shy Away From the Painful Realities of Immigration

Title: *The Islands*
Author: Dionne Irving
Print Length: 272 pages
Publisher: Catapult

Pub Date: November 1, 2022
Rating: 5/5 stars
Review by:
Julia Romero



Dionne Irving's debut collection and second work of fiction is a standout exposé into the lives of Jamaican women across the globe. From Jamaica to Europe to the United States, these daughters of immigrants struggle to make a home in unfamiliar and unsettling places. Irving's cast of characters are flawed and uncertain. They are restless mothers, distraught daughters, and passionate lovers, growing roots in contaminated soil.

Irving's cast of characters are flawed and uncertain. They are restless mothers, distraught daughters, and passionate lovers, growing roots in contaminated soil.

The opening story beings in Florida where a couple has relocated with dreams of prosperity and reinvention, only to watch their hastily built structure crumble around them. In another, a woman returns to Panama for the first time since she fled with her family after the 1964 anti-American riots that resulted in a terrible tragedy. And in my favorite of the collection, "An American Idea of Fun," a young woman reflects on the summer she spent in France when she was 15, and the destructive relationship she formed with an older man while there.

What makes Irving's collection a standout is two-fold; She doesn't underestimate the reader, and she doesn't underestimate her characters. Never shying away from the sticky realities of pain and loathing, Irving brings these raw emotions to the surface, embedding them in layers of tension and nuance. The result is an arresting storytelling experience, in which every word is cataclysmic and every action meaningful. Irving trusts the reader to grasp the subtle inflections in tone and off-putting character dynamics that makes her stories so rich—and we do, because Irving makes it impossible not to.

In her second story of the collection, "Weaving," Irving crafts a tight story that perfectly embodies the above-described writing style. The story follows Delroy, a distant father and professional boxer, who decides to gift his young daughter a piglet for her birthday. As we watch Delroy steal a piglet from a small farm and fantasize about how the animal will rekindle the fractured relationship with his daughter, we keenly feel the explosion festering beneath the surface. When the mission ends in disaster, Delroy returns to the fighting ring, unable to let go and move forward.

My only complaint is that Irving has a tendency to overextend and overexplain the final few paragraphs, leaving many of the otherwise strong stories with lackluster conclusions. It felt as if Irving forwent her earlier rule to not underestimate the reader, as if she was scared her earlier moments of brevity went unnoticed, which was not the case.

All in all, *The Islands* deftly highlights the grey areas of life, underlining the truth that no one experience is the same. Irving writes her stories with an emotional intelligence that doesn't shy away from sharing the gritty parts of assimilation and displacement, and I would highly recommend.

Photo Credit: Myriam Nicodemus

Dionne Irving is originally from Toronto, Ontario. She is the author of *Quint* (7.13 Books) and *The Islands* (Catapult Books) in 2022. Her work has appeared in *Story, Boulevard, LitHub, Missouri Review*, and *New Delta Review*, among other journals and magazines. Irving teaches in the Creative Writing Program and the Initiative on Race and Resilience at the University of Notre Dame and lives in Indiana with her husband and son.

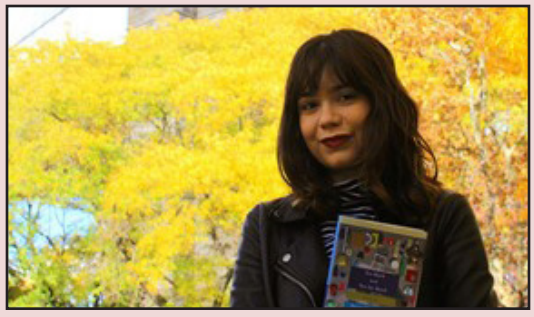


Photo credit: Ann Jeffers

Julia Romero recently graduated from New York University with a bachelor's in English. She has a keen interest in speculative fiction that tests the limits of reality and offers new insights. She was a prose editor for West 10th, the NYU creative writing program's undergraduate literary journal. She's written about art, theater, and music in *Encore Magazine* and currently works as a Publicist at Pegasus Books.


Poetry

Two Poems

By: Dominic Windram

Dominic Windram has been writing for 20 years. His poetry has previously been published in *October Hill Magazine* and recently in *The Red Fern Review*. He regularly contributes to *The Northern Cross*, a Catholic newspaper serving the diocese of Hexham and Newcastle in North Eastern England.

Only Ghosts Remain...

Only ghosts remain
from former days of deep green
and blue: when forests
abounded with sweet birdsong;
when rivers ran free
and summers, tinted with gold,
were memorable.
I can recall shafts of light
by the apple tree;
the scent of wild strawberries
and the warm glow of
anointed, smiling faces.
Now, in the autumn
of life, I ponder the truth
of all that I've lived
and suffered. Sometimes, I glimpse
a sign of redress,
which somehow has passed me by.
In the dream-garden,
the swing is old and rusted,
and the rose petals
withered and out of season.
Some say that it's not
too late to change direction.
Yet the wind isn't
blowing my way, and new storms
gather, like strange beasts,
waiting to crush fragile hopes.

Lamentations

If we were to have all the wisdom of ages
explained to us in detail, it would take too long.
All we know is the flash of lexicons in passing,
and the dying embers of autumn's plaintive song.
The great presences that emerge to expand our
collective consciousness, from generation to
generation, are so rare, we can only skim
the surface of their underlying significance.
If we could find warmest, holy sanctuary
in somebody else's arms, we would not fear
the deadly spears of night. Yet the kind of deep
communion we seek so long to embrace, seems
impossible. As creatures of habit we tend
to objectify the mysterious other,
whose ethereal essence cannot be captured.
Hence, the blue eyes of love are tainted with sorrow.

Two Poems

By: Anne Whitehouse

Anne Whitehouse's most recent poetry collection is *Outside From the Inside* (Dos Madres Press, 2020), and her most recent chapbook is *Escaping Lee Miller* (Ethel Zine and Micro Press, 2021).

Meditation at North Beach Park, Burlington

Thickly-wooded Juniper Island
rises from the lake
within swimming distance from shore.
The sloping peaks of the Adirondacks,
misty blue and far off in the distance,
belong to heaven and not to earth.

From the beach I watch a storm
gather from the mountains,
then sweep over the lake.
Whitecaps form on the surface.
It is like the sea,
and it is not like the sea.

Rain falls in large drops,
propelled by a breeze,
and a canopy on aluminum poles
topples on the beach,
somersaulting erratically.

Under a shelter,
students and faculty gather
at an impromptu party
celebrating recent graduates.
I eat strawberry-rhubarb pie,
tasting of summer.

I think of the mountains, eons old.
When they were formed,
fault lines pushed yellow dolostone
above the dark shale,
the older stone above the younger.

Now I am old.
I want to impart history.
Shivering children in wet bathing suits
wrap themselves in towels.
Sometimes the young listen politely
and sometimes impatiently,
propelled towards lives
that haven't happened yet.

I feel my hold on life growing tenuous,
like those islands farther off—
the Four Brothers—like stepping stones
appearing to float in the blue
without moving at all.

Two Poems (cont.)

By: Anne Whitehouse

Late Summer, Block Island

The air gray, still, and parched.
The rain, when it comes, is a sprinkle
dripping silently on the ground.
The mourning dove's call is backdrop

to the sea's suck and ripple
that speaks of longing
and sadness, buried hopes,
like lost wrecks off rocky shores.

From the marshes comes the trilling
of red-winged blackbirds, in the thicket
the cardinal's chirp, the meadow lark's whistle,
chatter of a hawk chased by crows.

In the afternoon, sunlight behind
banked clouds glints off a sea
as pale as isinglass, reflecting back
my memories as I write,

until the day when words will be
all that are left of me,
words and images
and other people's memories.

Bury my body deep in the earth,
but may my soul roam free
in the shadows under the trees,
in the dancing hearts of flowers,

the setting sun and the rising moon,
the barred clouds and winds that move them,
the waters where I love to swim,
beloved haunts of my essential solitude.

Migration

By: Cassandra-Helleh Delaney

Cassandra-Halleh Delaney has been writing for many years. "Sandpainting" and "Amphibious" are some of her works. Publications include *Gateway*, **82 Review*, *Sugar House*, and *Pear Noir*.

When the autumn foliage holds no more interest
than dead leaves on a houseplant
migrating birds call from overhead.

Go south with the old souls, wild berserkers
with the taste of life in their mouths, following it on the wind.
Somewhere there are green leaves growing
chlorophyll converting light waves to sweet sap.

Winter is not fixed in immutable time
it blusters like a paper bag dragon until you see
the dull grass the pale sky are only a matter of locality
undone by a few tanks of gasoline and a road map.

You can stay here and wait
bear witness to the ebb and flow of the seasons
or yield to that strange magnetism
dinging deep in your brain
the ancient lines of migration.

Two Poems

By: Linda McCullough Moore

Linda McCullough Moore is the author of two story collections, a novel, an essay collection, and more than 350 shorter published works. She is the winner of the Pushcart Prize, as well as winner and finalist for numerous national awards. She is currently completing a novel, *Time Out of Mind*, and a collection of her poetry.

Love Song in Ragged Rhyme

I had a boyfriend the whole day.
I found him early in a magazine
printed with a poem he had written
I like to think at night when everybody
in the world was fast asleep,
and he was feeling sherry-mellow tight.

Thirty years ago I used to have a glass of sherry
late at night and sit and write down poems life will rate.
His poem come I think from the same place
and made me know how good together we would be.

I Googled him. He lives not eighty miles away.
His town is mostly made of ferns and trees, now May;
the air is clearer there, the women wear less make-up,
men make sculptures in their scruffy doubt
out of rusted things the women solder into rings,
and then complain about.

It will be easy to pop in on him so near,
to drive home after dark,
so long as I am careful of the deer.

We suit each other to precision. In poetry
he gives God pride of place in each decision.
Me, I like God very much.
The poet's hair is gray.
In the photographs online he turns away
as though he is remembering the time he climbed
the back wall, caught tall limbs, not to fall, stretching,
reaching near the sky, hearing other children cry.
In another photograph he's wondering – in mime -
why he did it only that one time.

I worried when I read his poetry that he might, he,
have a wife in residence as men I like so often do,
but, we,
I'll say we, dodged that bullet. She has gone away
- Nevada or to Paradise? He doesn't say.

I had thoughts of him inside my head for all the day,
to soften several hours into something made to stay,
be warm and kind. To make me warm and kind.
I am a nicer person when I am in love. I can be
quite splendid, when somebody is in love, with me.

Dementia Is One Name

No one words or catalogs the fog,
the pea-soup white obscuring;
though there be cupboards full
of little quiet poems
about the early days
when only nouns
and names go missing;
not when people do,
not when decades disappear
and time is truly out of mind,

and place a thing
you cannot recognize,
when fear grows up
and moves around inside your body
bumping up against your brain
and finally you have lost you.
No one writes about that alteration,
Uncertain what to say.

Prayers for St. Anthony

By: William Miller

William Miller's eighth collection of poetry, *LEE CIRCLE*, was published by Shanti Arts Press in 2019. His poems have appeared in *The American Poetry Review, The Southern Review, The Penn review, Shenadoah,* and *Prairie Schooner.* He lives and writes in the French Quarter of New Orleans.

For a dollar, I pray to find
lost things, as he did
eight centuries ago
for a lost key.

The punk is lit off a candle
still burning, left behind
by the faithful
or tourist charmed.

So much to pray for—
it seems the flame burns out
before the last things
are named:

a lost son, a lover
who vanished, two lost hearts
never heard again,
the dying beats.

The candle still burns,
and there is a final prayer
for something
more important than

a grandchild's laugh,
the long, brown hair
of an imagined wife—
the ladder to heaven.

That prayer turns
the key a saint recovered
in a Paduan cell
just after a winter dawn,

the key to the last lock
worth opening, light beneath
the ancient door,
faith in faith.

Ishmeal

By: Randy Blythe

Randy Blythe lives in north Alabama. His collection, *The Human Part*, was published in 2014 by FutureCycle Press. His poems have appeared in a number of journals, among them *Northwest Review, Aji, Pleiades, Tar River Poetry*, and *Black Warrior Review*.

Stillness from a sigh.
The look
of knowing and being known
that has just disappeared
from an eye.
A white film
in its place.

Below misted air still
alive enough to make daylight
rainbows,
the calm at the end of the chase
won't let me ignore
fellow-feeling: scenes
too crimson-soaked to slip
through the sieve of days
unheeded.

No other way
to make the sea
this kind of quiet,
and why I have to see
my own refusal to see
when the spout's huffing
dies away
and the silence
lays claim.

As an angel
to the Lord
no matter which way
earth turns,
so this great eye
sunward in death,
its end with God,
not His pretenders.

Two Poems

By: Elise Chadwick

Elise Chadwick has been writing for 10 years. Her poems have been recently published in *The Paterson Literary Review, Literary Mama, Inkwell,* and *Gyroscope.*

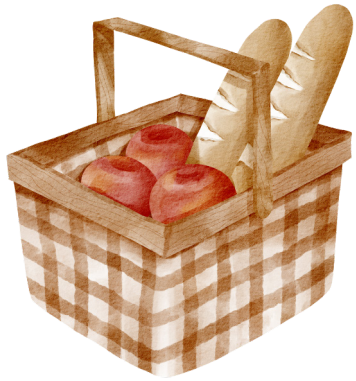
Points of Entry

I don't invite them
but they spirit their way in
through cracks in the foundation
and gaps in window jambs,
through yawning spaces no
amount of insulation or spray foam
can completely seal
in a 200-year-old house.
They come to die.
Or maybe they lack such mortal
knowledge when they arrive,
just looking for a place that's warm.

I recognize the gassy sweetness
escaping from the hall closet,
remembered from winters past
in radiator vents when the heat came on
or the dark beneath the gas stove.
That winter, I needed a flashlight
to confirm his unreachable presence
in his final resting place, cradled
between two floorboards.

This one found its way
among clutter of damp wool
and dysfunctional umbrellas
saved just in case
to the crate of winter boots,
treads caked with mud,
Cushioned insole a comfortable
bed for eternal hibernation.

It was early December,
a day of false thaw,
when we brought him home
from that place we feared
he would spend his last days.
Better to die here, we thought,
as he crawled up the front stairs
and came in through the front door.



Two Poems (cont.)

By: Elise Chadwick

After Pumpkin Picking

There were ten thousand thousand fruit to touch,
Cherish in hand, lift down, and not let fall.—Robert Frost

I head to the pumpkin patch
in search of perfection,
no two-pointed ladder needed
here, no reaching heavenward,
just an earthbound stumble
through a tangled maze of roots,
thick as an umbilical cord,
a ready trap to capture
an unwitting foot or ankle.

Camouflaged beneath green lobed
leaves veiny and serrated
hollow shells squish and ooze
underfoot. Others, still firm, roll
like landmines as far as their roots allow.

I step and pause, then stoop,
turn over a flash of orange ribbing,
lift it from the bed, where it has been
growing for 100 days and 100 nights,
a bed first firm and sunbaked
now cold and frosty,
to examine its soft spot.

Perfection is a misshapen
orange sphere sitting upright
on its own. I snap the hollow
stem from the root - a handle
too bristly to grasp - and
cradle my rotund treasure
in both arms.

Two Poems

By: Megan Cartwright

Megan Cartwright is an Australian writer and college teacher who attempts to make sense of the nonsensical via poetry. Her work has appeared in *October Hill Magazine, Quadrant Magazine, Authora Australis, Blue Bottle Journal,* and *oddball magazine*.

Magpie

Still warm, the body of the bird in my hands,
weighing heavy on my conscience,
like a premature newborn.

The heart beating out of its feathered chest.
Side eye -
A rebuke. Feline energy has no place here.

Cradling brittle bones in an old baby blanket
I will it to know my remorse.

Life Cycle

Thrumming cicada song heralded school holidays,
languorous hours unfurling plump bodies,
their tissue-paper wings turning translucent as they dried.

We dared one another to climb the wattle tree,
reaching pollen-blind into the leafy canopy.
The acacia's black branches bled globules of amber sap.

I returned to this place on my thirtieth birthday.
Autumn was too cold for cicadas.
It can take seventeen years for a nymph to reach maturity.

This place was no longer mine, belonged to the hatchlings of insects I had catalogued in my childhood,
dormant beneath my feet.

Let Bygones Be

By: Jack D. Harvey

Jack D. Harvey's poetry has appeared in *Scrivener, The Comstock Revien, Valparaiso Poetry Revien, October Hill Magazine Typishly Literary Magazine, The Antioch Revien, The Piedmont Poetry Journal*, and elsewhere. Jack has been writing poetry since he was sixteen. He lives in a small town near Albany, New York.

Well, strike me for a lark,
a tree fell over a tree,
we dreamt on a little while
and snow comes down a
little while and Mussolini
passes on.

Well, let's hold hands,
let's sit in the park on
a bench, feed each
other from a paper bag;
summer passes too, the
trees lose their leaves,
the flowers fall apart
and butterflies
pass into the never-never
nothing-nothing.

Sing in a cafe,
dance,
sit in a bus
with your friend.
The piano sounds once,
the dogged chords
resound between the
timbers and iron
of basement walls,
the wood of
country cottages,
of mansions,
the frames of skyscrapers,
ringing softly once and forever.

At night,
all of us,
safe as mice
in our rooms
but let the owl
fly up in madness
and strike the
eagle once.

The Glaciers are Melting

By: Joan Mazza

Joan Mazza worked as a microbiologist, psychotherapist, and taught workshops on understanding dreams and nightmares. Author of six self-help psychology books, including *Dreaming Your Real Self,* she has poetry published in *The Comstock Review, Prairie Schooner, Slant, Poet Lore, and The Nation.* She lives in rural central Virginia.

In a warming world, ice sheets
shrink and turn darker, absorb
more heat and light, then crack
and calve. Species migrate
toward the poles for cooler
weather. On Everest, bodies
are exposed after decades
entombed in ice. In the most
dangerous zones, corpses
are recovered, returned to heirs
as treasure, despite the risk
of more death along Khumbu
icefall. In water too warm,
the coral reefs bleach and die,
polar bears starve. Still,
candidates line up to speechify,
and make fantastic, tremendous
promises impossible to keep.
I'm doing what I've always done
to cope. I write, scribble, tap
words out on a keyboard, hope
for dear and thoughtful readers.

Particles

By: Josh Mahler

Josh Mahler lives and writes in Virginia. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *The Southern Poetry Anthology, Vol. IX: Virginia, from Texas Review Press, The Adirondack Review, The Comstock Review, The Nassau Review, The Carolina Quarterly, Puerto del Sol, Book of Matches*, and elsewhere.

Something about the dust that covers
my table, and then I start to wonder.
Would it exist in a million years
if no other were to sit in my chair?
Would the outline my eyes make,
when bodies pass by as one version
of the night, vanishing into a scent
familiar and known, particles
falling to the floor, the various feet
trampling anonymous sound,
and how we walk back and forth
with other things on our minds? We
often don't realize our bodies create
layer upon layer of skin. We die
with each breath, the turning clock
less a gesture than certainty. We
search for a bright light, a good meal,
safety of a locked door with no key.

Memory Care

By: Molly Walsh

Molly Walsh is a graduate of The Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington, where she studied visual and performing arts. Although a reporter and photographer by day, she is new to the world of poetry, and is excited to continue exploring art through the written word.

When she asks if she can go home,
Don't challenge or correct
Otherwise
She may become belligerent
Or confused

Let one of the chatty ladies from reception
Guide her to the shade of the court yard
Pour a paper cup with Tang
Add a bended straw
And set it on the side table
With three saltines stacked on a napkin

Cinnamon disks, windmill mints
Sour strawberry soft-centers

TAKE ONE

A consolation for the sour air
And dewdrops of bleach water
That moisten shirt sleeves

The park bench's foxhole
Upended
The garden's court stands to attention
Saluting to a battleground
On two frontal lobes

Her eyes fixed to the distance
Duct taped frames forced upward
Her nose wrinkles,

"Grandma?"

It could be tomorrow, or Sacramento,
Or her first Memorial Day

The thermostat reads '77
She's buckling under the stress
Two weekends out
From her daughter's wedding

I sit her down
Tell her that I can predict the future

I can see it now!

Of dogs and cats and pet goldfish
Brothers, sisters, cousins, grandchildren
Playing capture the flag under
Rainier cherry trees

Deep fried turkey
Slices of pecan pie
Double helping of dream whip
And football each Thanksgiving

Pour a drink for the occasion
The red can meets her lips
Brown syrupy drops flow down her chin

Memory Care (cont.)

By: Molly Wlash

We are celebrating Independence Day
Turn of the century lighter fluid flames
Scorched coal-grill hot dogs
Tabloid literature consumed from the porch swing
Roman Candles wail a red-glowing lullaby
Clasped tight by grownup fingers
My sister's hands over her ears

I point to her great-grandson
Beaming through pixels
She pauses, takes the phone from my hands
And kisses the screen

She asks for my name every Tuesday
And Wednesday and Thursday
But on Friday
I'm Mom or Esther or Grace
Seven days treaded
Yellow socks grip the linoleum
Doors lead to corridors, lead to doors
A padlocked summer camp

White paste and glitter and crayons
A game of Scrabble, tossed into a word salad
She pauses, and confides in me
Worried she will never find a boyfriend

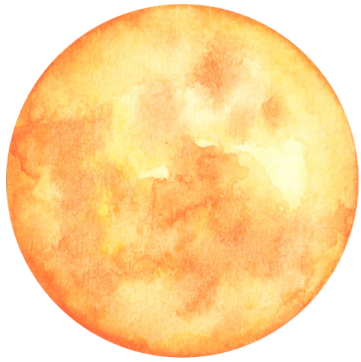
Six months can't forsake
That for today
We're not sisters or mothers
Or granddaughters

Raise a toast to chocolate milkshakes
Tilt an umbrella,
And settle in for a summer afternoon
On the inlet of 1950

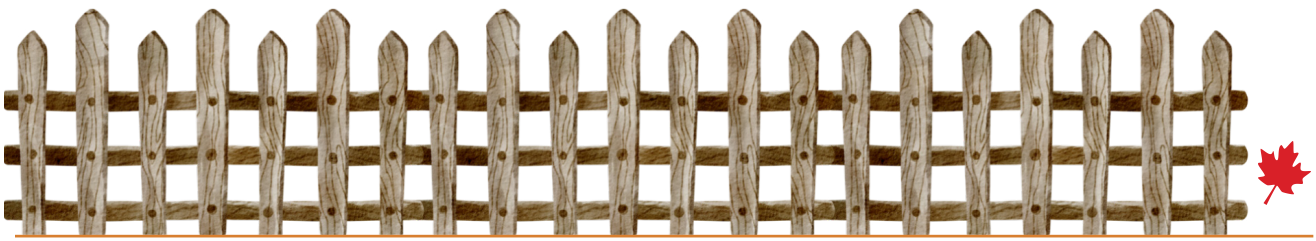
Under A Blue Moon

By: George Freek

George Freek's poetry has appeared in many journals and reviews. His poem "Written At Blue Lake" was recently nominated for a Pushcart Prize. His collection, *Melancholia*, was published by Red Wolf Editions.



The day disappears
the way music disappears,
yet echoes in the mind,
and I long for things,
I'll never find.
Our minds are blind.
As I look up, the stars
look secure in the night sky.
But scientists tell us
it's simply a graveyard
where they have died.
I once thought I was strong.
I expected to get
the things I was after.
But I was wrong.



Ineffable

By: David Banach

David Banach teaches philosophy in New Hampshire, where he tends chickens, keeps bees, and watches the sky. He has published poems most recently in *Lavender Lime Literary, Hare's Paw, Please See Me*, and the *Poets' Touchstone*. He also does the Poetrycast podcast for *Passengers Journal*.

And who will understand me when
I talk about the patch of sky above
my head in my yard and what I see there?

How can I say the intersecting patterns
of snowflakes flailed by wind in the
moonlight against a black sky?

And even if I sing of the smell of
apple blossoms as I kissed you amidst
the petals and filtered sunlight,

even if I shout aloud the hazy memory
half asleep of my sister's hair and warmth
and a home that never was, who,

who will understand, who will share
these half-formed thoughts that
run from my mind even as I have them.

And yet I keep talking, alone as I am
words bouncing off words in minds
not my own, and who understands?

Two Poems

By: Mike L. Nichols

Mike L. Nichols is a graduate of Idaho State University and a recipient of the Ford Swetnam Poetry Prize. He lives and writes in Eastern Idaho. Look for his poetry in *Rogue Agent, Tattoo Highway, Plainsongs Magazine*, and elsewhere.

My Mother is a Skeleton, part I

My mother is a skeleton.
She wears a white dress.

Not virginal, Celestial. But then, was her
costume ever clean, or was it sullied from the start

even as she pushed her head free
of the lace, jaded by the impending

disappointment of her callous child
turning his back on her expectations

while the Earth spun at one thousand
miles-per-hour. At such speed, who can stand

up to religion's indoctrinations?
She'd have been happier

spiked on an actual cross.
Forgive me mother

for I know not what to do
to make you happy.

My mother is a skeleton
concealed in white dress.

Calcium and collagen covered
with silk and crepe. The walnut lid shut up.

The brass rings rattle. Sealed in
concrete, unadorned. Enshrined

in saintliness. A Matryoshka doll,
inaccessible. The final layer March mud.

Her silken lips moldered away
exposing grinning teeth.

She deserves the last laugh,
after all her suffering.

Two Poems (cont.)

By: Mike Nichols

My Mother is a Skeleton, part II

Tonight I do not sleep, thinking,
beneath my feet my mother's
bones keep. I consider the
concrete capsuled skeleton
that had borne her flesh. Flesh that
drew up the corners of her lips,
crinkled her eyebrows up and in.
Flesh that pulled the covers
tight beneath my chin.

Her bones are solid as when
her animation was attached,
but they are now anonymous.
Not even I would recognize
them were they scattered
across the graveyard amongst
all the rest. The bulbous ends
of a femur wrapped by a spike
collared bulldog's slobbery lips.

If, bucket by bucket I backhoed
her free, unwrapped the rotted
fabric of the yellowed dress,
draped her radius, her ulna
over my flesh encased clavicles,
her phalanges dangling,
might I feel close to her again?
If I fashioned a flute
from her left fibula could I
Pied-Piper her back to tuck me in?
Might her spirit at least reply,
whistling a lullaby I'd recognize.

Dora Circa the War Years

By: A. Whittenburg

A. Whittenberg is a Philadelphia native who has a global perspective. If she wasn't an author, she'd be a private detective or a jazz singer. She loves reading about history and true crime. Her novels include *Sweet Thang, Hollywood and Maine, Life is Fine, Tutored, and The Sane Asylum.*

For remembrance, the picture of her girlish dark-haired freshness and a taut,
three-paragraph bio was posted on a flagpole

For a week, students passed her, too wrapped in their own bad days and stressors,
their own crosses to bear, to notice

Hiding, maneuvering,
Creating a bottomless sense of chaos
Dora had spent her wonder years as a partisan
Making, makeshift weapons out of lost parts
Sleeping in forests
Using her trusty machine gun as a pillow

Evading, plotting,
breathing almost to the date of liberation
She had escaped the ghettos,
the trains rides, the liquidations
Until, too many Germans surrounded,
demanding they produce a Jew
Disarmed, momentary solidarity melted to basic instinct
Someone pointed out Dora

They bound her hands
Tied a rock to her neck
Threw her in the river
Then shot her twice

An empty, gray ending to a would-have-been
full, green life
Under other circumstances…

That's Life

By: Duane Anderson

Duane Anderson currently lives in La Vista, NE. He has had poems published in *Fine Lines, Cholla Needles, Tipton Poetry Journal*, and several other publications. He is the author of *On the Corner of Walk and Don't Walk, The Blood Drives: One Pint Down, and Conquer the Mountains.*

I bumped into my chair
as I walked past it, and said 'Ouch,'
even though there was no pain.

I sounded like I was looking for sympathy,
but no one was around to hear me,
or feel the pain that was not there.

I may have to do something more senseless
before I feel the pain. That moment will surely come.
It is only a matter of time.

Roses Jutting from a Jetty

By: Rich Glinnen

Best of the Net nominee, Rich Glinnen, enjoys eating his daughter's cheeks at his home in Bayside, NY. His work can be read in various print and online journals, as well as on his Tumblr and Instagram pages.

They're likely left over from a moonlit walk,
Accompanied by champagne,
Two flutes tinkling a romantic tune,
Like clear, lovestruck bats,

White linen shirts, first used as attire,
Then flattened into beach blankets.
A half-bottle later, wielded like washrags,
Blindly searching for residue
Before becoming blankets once more.

The lovers are gone this morning,
But the roses are still here, forgotten,
For they've done their job.

We unfold our beach chairs nearby
And watch the seagull a few feet away,
Casting a little happy canoe of a shadow.
The ocean breaking on the sand sighs,
Remembering when the sky laid her down
And kissed her at the horizon.
Even the flabby middle-aged man's side
Can't help but crack a smile
When his owner turns around.

Two Poems

By: Sangita Kalarickal

Sangita Kalarickal, wordsmith, has been honing her craft in the forms of poetry and fiction. Publications include several journals and collections like the poetry zines *Open Door Magazine, Storizen, Drifting Sands, failed haiku*, and *Acorn*, to name a few.

Ceruleans and Stark Depths

rain since false dawn …
gloom spreads slow
in varying shades of crimson gray
the garden sleeps under the
now brown slush
of an autumn long gone
snow seems to have preserved fall
as i left it
and the thaw…
the thaw seems far
beneath the topsoil.
i am hunched
under a colossal weight -
collective guilt of humanity
not my own to bear

yet i chasten myself.
a lost rabbit
wanders, finds
fresh sprouts where
i saw mere brown
earth takes care of her own.
and i
wait my turn.

Tamas

Blow out the candles.
The flicker of flame
against the glow of darkness
burns my eyelids.
Shades of deep inks spread
familiar to my inner sight.
The soul now languishes in
a familiar ennui.
I will stay draped
In this deep *tamas*
For without it I am
stark naked.
For what I don't see
doesn't exist
And what doesn't exist
I don't need to fight against
So I will share
my darkness with you
And in so sharing, we remain
happily blind
Notes: tamas: darkness, ignorance

Psalm

By: Chase D. Spruiell

Chase D. Spruiell began writing poetry at the age of 24. His poems have appeared in publications such as *Ink Sweat & Tears, The Chiron Review, Leaf Press, NoD Magazine, Wavelength Magazine, The Big Windows Review, Zombie Logic Review, aji magazine, Oddball Magazine, KNOT Magazine*, and *Mad Swirl*.

time sits ephemeral
while I daydream of cigarette pulls
and an episcopalian church set on fire

cancer patients in hospice tick off
minutes and moments of longing
while I stand naked in the dark

a pilot perfects an emergency landing
mercy granted to the flight's passengers
instead of death while I clench the wheel
in rush hour on a Wednesday

ornaments hang from a hand-me-down Christmas tree
in dull, chipped red, green and silver
three gifts rest wrapped in grocery bags underneath
while the Holy Bible sits dog-eared on my shelf

like it has for ten years

death stands infinite:
wary and unwavering
waiting patiently with brother time

counting down eternity

while I sit in the corner booth of a diner
drinking black coffee
frustrated about today's
crossword puzzle

unable to smile

Panic

By: Carolina Worrell

A New York City native, Carolina Worrell has a journalism background and has been writing and editing for 15 years for a myriad of publications. Her work is featured in both technical and lifestyle magazines, and, in 2015, her story was featured in The New York Times' *Metropolitan Diary*.

I waited for the shampoo to work its way into my now-muted blonde strands. To brighten up the dullness. I think I was waiting for it to do that for my life, too. It's like every part of me had lost its vibrancy.

In shallow, hurried breaths, I told myself it would be ok. That the light would somehow come back again. After all, the bees in my head had been buzzing for a while now.

I waited for the hot water to strip off the exterior I had created. But it was a thick skin now. Hardened and impenetrable, resisting that fighting voice that held on for so long.

I've always been a bit difficult to handle. Guess I still am. Those tendencies stay with a person, like an old tightly woven tapestry, now faded and threadbare, still mounted on the wall. It's not the focal point anymore but you refuse to part with it all the same.

It's fuzzy vision and a belly full of lead. It's a tightly closed throat made better briefly by tiny white pills prescribed only 10 at a time.

My appetite for hunger and for life seemed to disappear at once. Now I wondered about getting through one day to the next.

"Don't panic," I said to myself. "You've been through this before."

And in that moment, when I knew the messages coming through my silenced phone were filled with worry and concern, I rinsed the soapy suds out, turned off the water and stepped into a time of healing.

Innocent Mother Genevieve

By: Bryce Johle

Bryce is from Williamsport, PA and earned a BA in Professional Writing from Kutztown University. His work has, or will soon, appear in *The Writing Disorder, Shoofly, Nebo: A Literary Journal, Litbreak Magazine*, and *Ghost City Review,* among others. He currently lives in Pittsburgh, PA with his wife and stepdaughter.

A few houses down the family keeps a
front yard of daisies, Black-eyed Susans,
small summer shrubs hand-grown below
a sun deck built on top of the porch.

When her first year of school lets out,
she plays teacher with us until its old,
then digs up dirt in the backyard. Peeling
rocks from soil, she hunts insects for herself,

and tufts of grass, oxalis, and creeping charlie
she harvests for our desks, which die in old
herb planters labeled *sage* and *cilantro*.
We can build her a flower garden to tend,

to make the slugs and ivy her own for catching
and pulling and marigold gifting. If she had
a garden, the soil would be rich like chocolate
and roots would bless her in fragrance and

color, and when I accidentally spill her earth
children, they will remain potted and secure
with full bellies, rather than dust and crumbed petals
which she helps vacuum beneath my computer keys.

Intended

By: Ryan E. Holman

Ryan E. Holman has been writing for most of her life and has recently had poems appearing in *Maryland Literary Review, Eternal Haunted Summer*, and *Enchanted Conversation*. She makes her home in the mid-Atlantic United States and enjoys writing about mundane and fantastic life through the lens of the elements.

Have you ever eaten
a fresh pomegranate?
Taken it apart
bit by bit
to eat the ruby drops inside?
There is no way
in Hell
that Persephone
ate these seeds
anything but intentionally.
Pomegranates
like relationships
take messy work
to peel back
the tough surface
that will never
go quite as planned
and will probably
stain your fingers.
But the end result is sweet
and sometimes bitter
and comes down
to hundreds
of
tiny
choice
drops.

A Thousand Ships

By: Robert L. Dean, Jr.

Robert L. Dean, Jr. is the author of *Pulp* (Finishing Line Press, 2022), *The Aerialist Will not be Performing* (Turning Plow Press, 2020), and *At the Lake with Heisenberg* (Spartan Press, 2018). A multiple Best of the Net nominee and pushcart nominee, his work has appeared in many literary journals.

The woman on the Walmart Eye-wear sign
is young and attractive, her long sun blond locks
fluttering out behind her in a breeze all her own,

her smile big, broad and white toothed,
and her azure eyes follow me from behind
stylish glasses as if to say Yes, come on in

and you too can be happy, carefree, the wind
in your hair, one of the beautiful people in
pastels and tailored suits and we'll go to that

cozy bistro down on the beach and live
happily ever after in between the wars
you fight over me which will make of you

the Hero you've always wanted to be,
until I notice the fat man hunched
behind the counter in tuna-fish salad-

stained white coat pushing
horn-rimmed bifocals
back up his beak of a nose

and the diorama dissolves
and I walk back out
into the heat and humidity

of the blacktop parking lot, only
slightly bedazzled,
not a trireme in sight.

1996-2001

By: Kaci Skiles Laws

Kaci Skiles Laws is a closet cat lady and creative writer who reads and writes voraciously in the quiet moments between motherhood and managing Crohn's Disease. Her debut book of poetry, *Strange Beauty*, is available on Amazon, as well as her most recent collection of poetry and prose, *Summer Storms*.

I want to go to the farmer's market
and find an orange watermelon,
watch you roll its pregnant belly around
and knock on it to see if it's sweetest.

We can take it home and divide it
over a table of newspaper,
spit seeds across a headline
announcing the next county fair,

read Calvin and Hobbes, even the obituaries
would seem like good news.

October Hill
MAGAZINE

Fall 2022
Volume 6, Issue 3