



### Volume 7, Issue 4



#### Welcome to the Winter 2023 Issue of October Hill Magazine.

It's been a wild year, to say the least. The magazine experienced record-breaking gains-617 submissions, out of which we published 124 poems, 49 short stories, and 19 visuals!-coupled with a great loss-the passing of the magazine's Founder, Richard Merli.

It took a bit for us to regain our footing, but we foresee a bright and fruitful future on the horizon. October Hill Magazine still has a wealth of possibilities to offer. I would like to conclude this volume with an indulgence of thankfulness. To begin, I extend my heartfelt appreciation to our Managing Editor, Hannah Robinson. She has tackled challenge after challenge and continues to elevate the magazine. Her efforts have broadened our reach and we've welcomed several new names to our pages. To our Short Story Lead Editor, Lee Tury, thank you for editing stories on a dime. To our Assistant Short Story Editors, Orion Emerick, Brandi Martin, and Sam Forrest, you are the backbone of the largest section of the magazine. To the Assistant Poetry Editors, Kimi Canete and Erin Mullens, your keen eye for poetic flare keeps the poetry section alive. To our book reviewers, Julia Romero and Abigail Herbert, thank you for sourcing the material, working with the publishers, and providing a voice for the authors. And, of course, our proofreader, Marie Bogdanoff, thank you for your eye on the details to ensure we catch as many corrections as possible.

And, of course, to you, our **readers**, our **authors**, our **followers**, thank you for all of your time and support, whether that be only recently or for several years.

In honor of the conclusion of our seventh volume and in Richard's memory, below is a reprint of the one-on-one interview Richard and I had back in 2018 at the conclusion of the first volume. In this dialogue, Richard reveals his original thoughts and intentions for the magazine and how it came to be.

Here's to another wonderful year and volume to come. We hope you'll continue on the journey with us. Thank you!

Samantha Morley Editorial Director Hannah Robinson Managing Editor From OHM Spring 2018, Volume 2, Issue 1

## Richard, thank you for taking the time to answer some questions that myself, and I'm sure the readers, have been wanting to ask. Before we get started, is there anything you'd like to share in regards to the one-year anniversary issue?

This is a very exciting time for *October Hill Magazine* and for me personally. We've cleared the hurdle of our first year and are poised to broaden our editorial offerings and grow into new areas in 2018. I feel as if we have already gone a long way toward fulfilling our mission of creating a platform for new and aspiring authors of short stories and poetry. It's certainly gratifying to see how the literary community has embraced us.

#### What inspired you to start October Hill Magazine?

Knowing how difficult it can be for new authors to become published, I believed the literary community needed an outlet for new authors, a place where they could find their voice. The hope all along was that within these pages a new generation of authors would receive exposure and that, perhaps among them, the next Sylvia Plath or Ann Sexton or Will Faulkner would emerge.

### The magazine name is very interesting. How did you come up with it? What is the significance behind the name?

For years I used to travel up to the Hudson Valley of New York on weekends. It's some of the most beautiful, breathtaking land in America. I used to walk down an old dirt road. Around a bend there was a hill where the trees turned the most magnificent scarlet and gold colors in October; and halfway down the hill, a lone apple tree, long neglected, perhaps from an old orchard – a survivor tree, so to speak. I'm not sure if the hill had a name, so I called it 'October Hill.' Its beauty always remained in my mind.

#### What were some of the biggest struggles in this last year? Accomplishments?

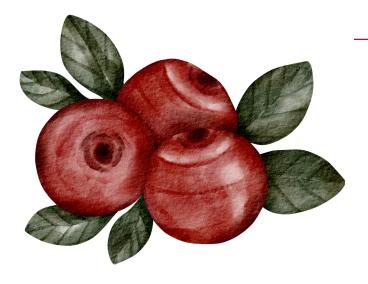
Probably the biggest struggle involved the technical aspects of the launch itself. I had a specific vision for the design of the magazine. I had to work very hard with our design team to translate that vision into a working reality, a functional template, something both attractive to readers and easy to navigate. I feel we've accomplished that. Our digital format has enabled us to publish some very, very talented first-time authors, which has been very rewarding, and given us the capability to broaden ourselves into new areas, such as photography and illustration.

#### How do you foresee the future of the magazine?

I'd love to think that we can develop a print companion to our digital offering. I think the demand will be there. We have some very exciting plans in the works to conduct our first literary contest for authors of short story and poetry. That's going to generate competition and, I expect, some really exciting new works by participants. Further down the road perhaps, I'd also love to create our own annual writer's retreat outside of New York, a venue in which writers would benefit from five or six days of classroom discussions, networking with fellow writers, and quiet time for writing. It could become our signature event. But then again, we've got lots of exciting ideas. Stay tuned!



### Meet the Staff



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-

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Interested in joining the team?

We're always looking for editors and coordinators.

Submit your resume and cover letter to

OctoberHillMag@gmail.com

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# Snappers

### By: Kenneth M. Kapp

Kenneth M. Kapp has been writing for a number of years. Several of his stories have appeared in *October Hill Magazine*. "I, Myself" was posted online by the *Saturday Evening Post* in April 2023.

This story was written in fond memory of Richard Merli who, many decades later, fished the same spots I did as a teenager. Surf and salt air are timeless and the fish stories we shared bridged the decades. I'll miss him as will many others—he was a good angler and a fine editor.

It was the longest day in June and the sun tried its best to push the clouds away. The temperatures would climb into the upper seventies, a perfect day for fishing. Tony rushed down into the basement, gathering all his light fishing gear into an old fivegallon paint pail. He was talking to himself a mile a minute. "I can feel it in my bones, snappers are going to start running any day now. Damn! Ric would know, son of a bitch probably keeping the secret all to himself. Some best friend he's turned out to be. He's never home and doesn't return my calls!"

He dropped the pail in front of the old chest freezer and banged his knee. "Damn thing's always getting in the way!" He stuck his head around the corner and bellowed up the stairs, "Dotty, can you try calling Ric again for me? Tell him I think the snappers are going to start their annual run again. I'll be there in forty-five minutes. He should meet me there. He knows where."

Tony opened the freezer and pulled out a schematic enclosed in plastic that was stuffed in a pocket glued to the lid. There was a container circled in red, SPEARINGS, purportedly buried in the upper-right corner. He dug under a couple packages of frozen vegetables and chicken thighs before finding a half-gallon orange juice container stuffed with the little bait fish. There were two small tails sticking out from under the screw-off top. He flicked his finger and they went sailing back into the freezer.

Tony didn't remember much, but he knew he'd frozen spearings forever to ensure he had them when needed. He put the container in the pail with his fishing gear and stomped up the stairs. "Dotty, Dotty, Dotty . . . Daughters! Dotty, you call Ric?" Then he remembered he didn't have his fishing pole or waders

and gave up yelling for his daughter. A smile crept across his face. He chanted, "Under the stairs to the side and in the box the teddy bears had their picnic... and my boots and fishing pole."

He put all the gear in the trunk of his car and forty minutes later pulled off the road onto a small sandlot, three hundred yards inland from the bridge crossing the channel to the state park on the ocean. He got out and slammed the car door. "Told Dotty she didn't have to worry. A guy can forget a lot of things, but his fishing hole, never. Put that in your bank or under your pillow!"

He didn't see Ric's car. Tony hesitated, then spit out "Fungy, bar fungus! My pop cursed a bucket of piss and now I can't remember how to say fuck it in Italian."

He still didn't see Ric and paced from one end of the lot to the other before returning to his car. "Damn dirt lot's still here. Like last year; no one's planted roses. Same damn bump over the curb. Someone usually tosses an old two-by-four board into the rut. Maybe a bum took it for a lean-to or fire. Still beats having a bunch of condos choking out the creek."

He caught himself muttering; he smacked his lips and held them tightly together. "Told Dotty she needn't worry. Found the fishing spot, didn't I! I ain't answering my own questions yet like some I know. So what if I'm grouchy? I'm not crazy. Look at this world—lot to be grouchy about."

He opened the trunk of his car. Then stopped. There was another old car up on the right by the bushes. He thought he recognized it. He grabbed the handle of the five-gallon pail. "Maybe Freddie's. Certainly not Ric's. I called him, Ric said he was under the weather.

Didn't think he'd come out. 'Tony, if you catch a mess of them baby blue fish, gut a couple for me. Damn good taste fried up in butter and lemon. Peel the skin off and lift the bone. Makes life worth living."

Tony sighed. "Not much fun fishing alone. And Ric always brought a couple of cold ones." He dug in the trunk for his pole and fish stringer then slammed the trunk. He couldn't remember what he was remembering and the exertions made him mad, hot under the collar. Bringing all of the equipment around to the front of the car, he opened the passenger door and tossed in his jacket. His waders stared back at him. "Damn old age, nearly forgot to put on my boots." He sat on the edge of the seat, pushing off his sneakers and pulling on the waders. He started to close the door and noticed his sneakers were still in the sand. "Not for sissies, this old-age shit. *Casso!* Never forget a curse word, right!"

He tossed the sneakers in the front and slammed the door. "That should do it. Leave them out and some idiot would toss them in the water. Snag them, you'd tangle your fishing line. Couple of years ago I caught a lady's pump. Not much of a fight even with the tide running out. Ric ribbed me. 'You should cast in the same spot, maybe catch the lady that went with the shoe. Lot of Mafia living back up the creek. You catch a gun-moll you can have her mounted and hung in your den. A real TROPHY WIFE.' Ha, ha, funny. Then *I'd* end up in cement boots. End of conversation."

Tony swallowed his muttering and scanned the sky. Then, after a minute's struggle, he announced to a gull that was sweeping low over the surface of the creek hoping to pick a bait fish, "Married, can't remember if I was married then. What Ric said didn't make sense."

Kicking sand as he walked to the edge of the creek, he smiled. "Ric, you better get here quick. Tide looks like it's about to stop. Always better when the tide changes. Brings the bait fish in or out, stirs up the bottom too. I'll check and see if anything's changed, maybe the old holes are still there." Tony walked along the edge, studying the eddies and the erosion on the far bank. A hundred yards below, the creek entered the bay and the sign was still there: "No power boats past this point." He smiled. "Good for them. Got to try to preserve something. Fish need a place to spawn."

He turned around and walked the other way, noting that the other car was gone. "Probably some guy needing to take a piss behind that bush. I do the same thing, don't want to stop for long if the fish are biting." Ten minutes later he put down his bucket and put a small spearing on a strong, long-shafted hook, making sure the small split shot was eighteen inches up from the hook. He released the line so that the bait was on the ground, then moved the bobber so it came to his chin. "And now for the Italian kiss." He kissed the bobber. "I told Ric this brings good luck—that's why I always catch more fish than he does."

He looked back to the parking lot. Still no Ric. But by the time he cast his line out into the creek, he had forgotten and continued his conversation. "La fiaba—it's a fairy tale. I looked up the Italian online." And then hearing a reply, laughed, "No-no, Ric, I'm just a better fisherman!" And then a moment later, following his bobber in the current he resumed the other conversation. "Fiaba, fiaba!"

He reeled in his line and cast against the current, following it as it came by for another twenty feet up along the bank of the creek. He retrieved the line and repeated this several times, throwing the bobber different distances from the shore. No strikes.

He stripped the bait, put on a fresh spearing and shortened the distance between the bobber and bait. The tide was starting to change, run out. He walked in and repeated the process in reverse for the next thirty minutes. He frowned. "Per nulla. Ric'll laugh; tease me I should have French kissed the bait." He made one last cast and stripped the bait, returning to the car, putting all the gear back in the trunk. He left his waders on, planning to wash them when he got back to his house.

Tony felt worn out. He caught his reflection in the glass behind the back seat of his car, thought he saw Ric standing to the side. "Late again, Ric. You know, the two of us together perks things up. Either that or the good espresso I bring along." Then he had a moment of clarity and his voice washed over with sadness. "Maybe I should have done that anyhow but then I'd end up drinking the whole thermos. I guess you don't have to fill everything to the brim or pile a plate three inches thick with food. Probably have to stop talking Italian or keep my hands in my pockets. Just not fun alone. Just like when my Sophia passed five years ago. I was feeling pretty miserable until you got me to go fishing again."

When he got home he dropped his fishing gear in the laundry tub and trudged upstairs to change, shedding his fishing clothes on the bathroom floor. He tried to scrub the years and the sadness away, examining his face in the mirror. His face had picked up some

color. "Santa Madre di Dio—Holy Mother Mary, I got a sunburn even through the clouds."

The clouds had disappeared. His voice softened. "Sophia would have warned me to wear my brimmed hat. No wonder I feel tired." And then he noticed his fishing clothes. "Good thing I didn't sit down. I can still hear her chasing me down to the basement to change. 'It's your fish, you clean them in the basement. I'm not running a peasant's kitchen. And your scaly clothes better go right into the washer." And then the tone of her voice changed. "Tony, get your fat Italian bottom downstairs and change. You can't go over to Ric's like that anyhow."

Ten minutes later he came up from the basement and retrieved the Italian grocery bag from the refrigerator. A six-pack of Peroni was waiting on the bottom shelf.

He went to the driveway door and stood in front of the wall mirror, the bag in one hand, the six-pack in the other, nodding at his reflection. "I hope Ric's all right. I told him I'd come over with some prosciutto paninis and a six-pack. Good thing he reminded me to have them disassemble the tomatoes and stuff to keep the focaccia from getting soggy. Yeh, probably beats having to clean fish anyhow."

Dotty drove up the driveway as he opened the door. She was out of her car in an instance. "Dad, where do you think you're going?"

"To Ric's. I caught a mess of snappers. He's going to bread them with his special herb mix; then they get fried, *delizioso!*" Tony pursed his fingers and raised them level with his lips.

Dotty took the groceries from her father and led him back inside. The beer was on the floor to the right of the door. There was both sadness and exasperation in her voice. Her father had good days and bad days but there were ever fewer of the good ones. But it appeared that he had gone fishing, so maybe this was one of the good ones.

"Come on, Dad. You can help me make salad. I'll even let you chop extra olives like in the old days. Lots of olive oil and fresh lemon; fresh ground pepper and some of Mom's salad herbs."

She sat him at the kitchen table. "Let me put the perishables away, then wash up. You can decide what kind of pasta we should make. Give me a minute."

Tony tapped the table. "Un minuto, un minuto . . ."

"Dad!"

Suddenly, Tony got up and pushed away from the table, snapping. "I'm going to Ric's!"

"Dad, sit down. I told you Ric died two years ago. I'm sorry. Now sit down. You can help with supper."

Outside, the sun was setting; inside, the darkness had been falling for several years.





# Hoagy

#### By: D.L. LaRoche

With a strong swing of his right arm and a practiced follow-through, he released the flat stone off his index finger, spun it into the river's still water, and watched it dance over the smooth surface—one, two, three, seven skips before sinking to the bottom. Hoagy looked down, found, and reached for another. The stone needed to fit in his hand, be pancake flat, near round, and river stream worn because he was looking to get nine, maybe ten skips out of the dancing stone.

Again, he leaned into the side of his throwing arm and fired hard, releasing the stone at just the right angle so that it danced across the river instead of diving below. This last one was a good throw, and he counted nine before the stone nestled then settled into the bottom.

He likened the river to life—tranquil in the deeper, larger pools surrounded by trees and grass and low-lying scrub, then furiously fast, disruptive and dangerous through the jagged boulders down from the mountain. Hoagy was becoming a man now, and it was time for this kind of thinking.

He picked up another stone, not the ideal shape if close, and he knew it would not dance as well as the previous one thrown. He gave it his half-hearted attempt anyway and watched expectantly as it sank after the third skip. He needed to get into town, where Kurt was waiting . . . waiting for an answer.

"I'm sorry, Kurt, but I can't do it . . . I just can't."

"Ninny. I thought you was more. I thought you was strong and tough, dependable—worth something to us, to the gang. And I thought you wanted more—pockets filled out, belly full, and that girl that works over at Henry's."

D.L. (Dave) LaRoche is an older soul, holding several offices in the California Writers Club with books and a handful of short stories. After a number of locations offering the constituents of life, he now lives in San Jose and is pleased to be included here.

"You thought wrong."

"Your fuckin' funeral, Hoagy." He chalked his stick, eyed the eight ball, and let go with a powerful thrust fueled in part by disappointment and anger. The cue ball jumped the far cushion, fell to the floor with a clunk, and ran over to stop at the door to the head.

"Fuck. You see that, Hoagy? Ya see what you did? You pissed me off, and I lost two bucks. You let me believe you was in, and now on the eve, you say not. You leave me missing a driver, and that puts a different probability on things, and that number goes down."

"I don't mean to leave you short, Kurt. Twarn't my intention at all. I just got to thinking there out by the river and discovered I prefer dancing to diving."

"What? You're talking nonsense to me." He stepped over, reached down, retrieved the cue ball, and tossed it up on the table. LeRoy picked up four bucks from the rail and stuffed it into his pocket.

"What's dancing got to do with the question at hand?"

"Everything when you see it my way. You're heading for trouble, and I can't go along—no dancing in jail. I've made up my mind."

"You go your way, Chicken-Shit. You peck in the dirt for a few granules of grain, but you keep your beak shut."

Hoagy hated to welch, imply then deny, disappoint Kurt, but he didn't know enough when he said he was in. He wanted to be in, to be Kurt's friend and part of the gang, but then he found out what "being in" meant, and it meant no dancing—in the end, no dancing at all.

Hoagy went to his room, rented for eight dollars a week from old missus Beale. It had its own entrance, otherwise ordinary—a crank-out window, a shower, sink, and toilet added. There was room for a bed, a small desk, and a chair where he could doodle if wanted. He lay on the bed, hands clasped behind his head. He'd peck in the dirt and keep his beak shut. He soon fell asleep. His wind-up said ten.

Hoagy dressed. First, he undressed—yesterday's clothes still on in the morning. His mornings and this morning were classic routine—splash face, towel, brush teeth and hair, and then to Dee's Dunkin for coffee and sweets.

"Didja hear?" Dee said. "Didja hear about the Twenty-Four Hour last night? The clerk that shift, Robbie Jenkens, was shot dead. Nobody knows, maybe out of town. Awful thing . . . early this morning they say, maybe one, one-thirty."

Hoagy listened but preferred not to hear.

"Got clean away, whoever. Owner says they got sixtythree dollars and a pint of cheap bourbon. Can you imagine . . . Robbie's life for sixty-three dollars?"

Hoagy knew but preferred not to know.

"More's coming out. They never release it all... not at first, keep you interested, selling their damn aspirin and hair products, ya know. Didja know Robbie? Nice man, father of two—recent they are. I know his wife. She used ta work here, ya know. Quit with the last pregnancy."

Hoagy sipped his coffee, nibbled at a fritter. He'd made the right decision—even more so this morning, he knew. But what now? Should he say? He wanted to keep dancing.

"You workin' this morning, Hoagy?"

"No. Got my five and forty in. Union says, more than five and it's overtime pay, but the boss man says, no way—after five, it's two of vitamin D."

"You like that rock splittin' work?"

"Pays the rent." He chuckled inside. Eight bucks ain't that much.

The evening *Globe*'s front-page story—"Killing at the Twenty-Four Hour." Hoagy sat on the riverbank and read, late sun gleaming over the water. Seems

there was a witness, and the witness said: two men, early twenties, one shot in the leg. About one-thirty, guns in hand, left the car running. The clerk pulled a weapon from under the counter and shot—a slug in the one in the leg. The other man—tall, husky, with blond hair—fired on the clerk several times, rifled the cash drawer, grabbed a bottle of liquor, and helped his partner to the car.

"It all happened so fast," the witness said. "I was going to bed. Madge, she's my wife, was a-callin' me, you see. I heard the Twenty-Four Hour bell jingle—they's one on the door, a little bell, ya know. We ain't but a hundert feet away, upstairs across the street, windows always open. Anyways, I looked out and saw it. Checked the bedroom clock—said one-thirty. I guess I seen the blond hair man down to the pool hall. They may know him there, a regular."

Hoagy read again, looked at the photo. Of course, he knew the place . . . been in a dozen times or more. Didn't know Robbie then but from the article began to associate, consider him a friend. Damned poor luck for the Robbie man, he'd never dance again—not on this river of life.

Then the question back, what now? He knew, of course, he knew. Came close, almost, to being one—driving the car, one of the three and Robbie dead. It seemed he must report what he knew. There'd be a trial. He'd be involved. He'd have to say. Could he be an accessory? Would they take his dance card away?

He looked out at the river. The river was still and black where he sat, and it was quiet. Sometimes the orchestra takes a break, and the dancers sit out, maybe talk as they wait. He wouldn't like to wait too long. He spotted a stone and picked it up. It was perfect. He thought he could hear seven skips before the stone nestled and sank.

Following Tuesday's blue plate at Dorey's Diner, Hoagy ambled over to the pool hall. He wasn't too fond of pool or the guys usually playin', but he'd seen the Bijou's movie twice already, and even at that, it wasn't his kind of story—*To Hell and Back* with Audie Murphy.

"Well, if it ain't Chicken-Shit come in from the dirt."

"Hi Kurt." Kurt was still dancing.

"You wanna game—five bucks on the rail tonight."

"Price has gone up."

"Inflation."

"All right, I'll play one. I'll break. Challenger breaks, that right?"

"Sure, Chicken-Shit, you break."

Hoagy racked them tight, took his bead on the cue ball, and let go with a mighty thrust of his stick. The balls scattered. Three fell—two stripes and a solid.

"Seems you still gotta choice, Chicken-Shit. You gotta choice until you commit, and then your choice is history... unless you're a chicken shit, a' course. Then you can choose and choose and choose again forever."

Hoagy looked over the table. The one and the three were dead in. He chalked and bridged for the three-ball, a quiet stroke dropped it in a side pocket and left him a straight shot at the one ball in the corner and then the five. Hoagy didn't give the table to Kurt for a single shot, picked up the ten, and said thanks.

"You're not leavin'? You gotta give me another rack, a chance to win back."

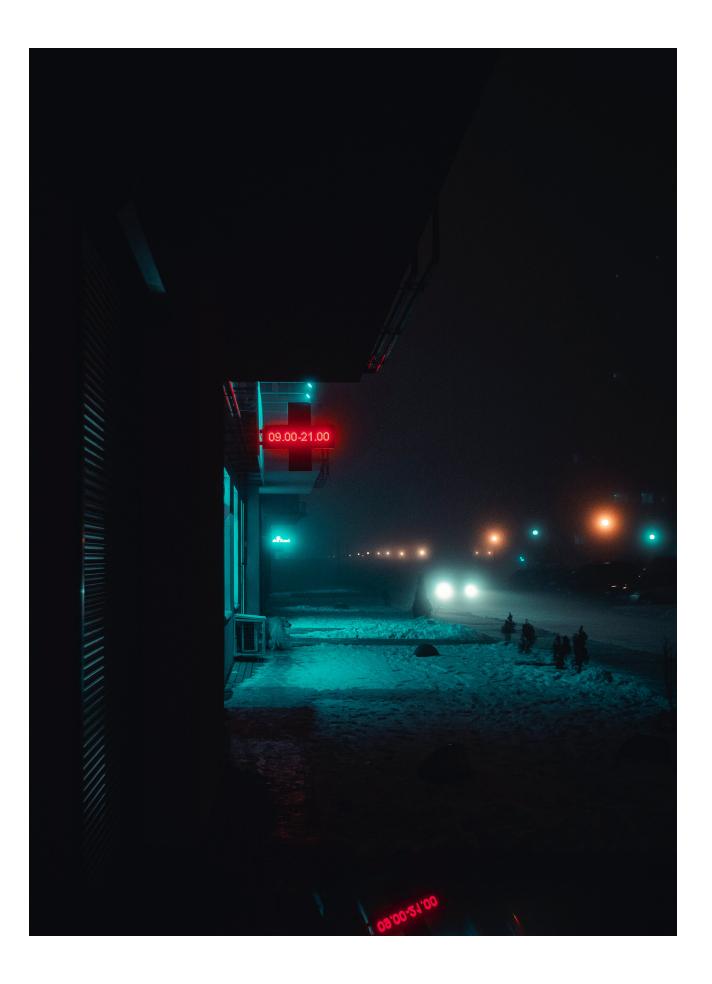
"I said one. I said I'd play one, and I done that. You lost. It happens. Sometimes you lose. Sometimes you lose big." He caught Kurt's eyes. Kurt was a loser. Hoagy was dancing. Hoagy no longer wanted to be Kurt's friend or in the gang. He wanted to keep dancing.

"You had better keep your beak in the dirt, Chicken-Shit. You hear me? If not, you too may lose." He stepped in closer. "You could lose it all."

Hoagy went back to work. He liked his job, a quarry job. Mostly, he drove a truck full of rock to the places of need—the end-user, the crusher, the concrete plant. Sometimes he worked with the explosives team—spotting and drilling, once pushing the plunger. He had a girlfriend now—Lilly. She claimed adoration, he thought love. They cooked, ate, and slept in a one-bedroom apartment above the pool hall. On Sundays, they picnicked at the river, where he showed her the best stones for skipping.

Kurt went to prison along with his friend with the shot-up leg. The witness identified and testified, and Kurt had no alibi. Hoagy felt good; it warmed him some, not that Kurt was incarcerated, but that he hadn't joined him. They don't dance much in prison.





## A Mess of Numbers and Letters and Symbols

#### By: Bennett Durkan

From his friend's bedroom window, Jimmy watched as the teenage neighbor, donned in a solid-color, one-piece bathing suit, dove into one side of her pool. She pierced the water without a splash. Her form traveled under the surface, feet fluttering. Arm's length from the other side, her head broke above the water, followed by her shoulders, followed by her chest. Jimmy saw she had her eyes closed, and she kept them closed as she swept her hands along the curve of her scalp. She lifted onto the concrete around the pool and sat with her shins under the water.

Billy also stood at the window. He made a sound. Jimmy turned to his friend, who smiled above crossed arms. When Jimmy returned his attention to the window, he saw the neighbor slice through the pool on her back, with long strokes and furious kicks. Jimmy stepped back. Billy smiled at him.

"What a view," Billy said.

"Looks like fun. I wish we had a pool in our backyard. Mom and Dad said there's no chance of that happening."

"Of course you're looking at the pool." Billy pointed at the window, at the neighbor drifting, floating on her back, hair forming a water-logged halo. Billy rotated his hand into a thumbs-up. His grin now showed teeth.

"So what?" Jimmy dropped onto his friend's bed. His legs bounced, fell low enough for his heels to hit the carpet, and then settled with his toes touching the floor.

"So! She's hot! Just look at her."

Bennett Durkan's writing has appeared in WayWords, L'Esprit, and Riddled with Arrows. His poetry has appeared in Divot, Willard & Maple, and Ikleftiko. He has also contributed to Lit Mag News and WritingBad.

"She's a teenager. She's, what, like sixteen? Seventeen? She's definitely in high school."

Billy pivoted so his back faced the window. He crossed his arms again. He lunged to the side with one foot and then performed several small steps. When he came to his desk, he uncrossed his arms. He opened a drawer and dug through layer after crumpled layer of paper. He looked over his shoulder to nod at Jimmy before removing a standard spiral notebook. A ball of paper rolled from the drawer and landed at Billy's feet. On the notebook's cover, in marker-thick letters, Jimmy read the words "SECRET DO NOT OPEN DO NOT READ."

"So she's a teenager," Billy said. He opened the notebook, placed it on the desk, and turned the pages. He continued talking with his back to Jimmy. "So what? You probably think there's nothing we can do except wait until we're teenagers but by then she'll be an adult and then we'll have to wait until we're adults. Come here. Let me show you something."

Jimmy rocked his hips until one foot and then the other reached the floor. He stood and crossed to his friend in a few strides. Billy had a finger on the notebook, pointing at a mess of numbers and letters and symbols, all of various sizes. Jimmy groaned. Billy clicked his tongue.

"Looks like homework," Jimmy said.

"Well, it's not. It's magic." Billy looked at Jimmy and held his gaze. After several seconds, Billy rolled his eyes. He prodded the page a few times. When Jimmy shook his head, Billy grabbed the notebook and held it to his chest, the scribbles facing his friend. He nodded a few times.

"Doesn't this look more complicated than homework? Look. Look at it." Billy adjusted his grip to point at a cluster of numbers. "You can see this is more serious than what we learn in school."

"Looks like my brother's homework. His math has letters in it."

"Exactly," Billy said with a sigh. "If it looks like what your brother does, then you should understand that this is some serious stuff. Not just stuff for kids. And trust me, it is serious." Billy placed the notebook on the desk. He stood over it with his head bent. Jimmy lifted one leg onto the bed and dropped.

"I thought you'd be more excited," Billy said. "It's magic."

"Yeah," Jimmy said, "and magic doesn't exist. It's not real. My brother says all this supernatural stuff doesn't really exist."

"He's kinda right." Billy pivoted from the desk, faced his friend. "Maybe it doesn't exist because nobody has invented it yet. You see, nothing exists until someone invents it." He widened his stance and thrust his knuckles against his hips. "I'm working on inventing it. I should be done soon. Maybe a week. Maybe a few days."

"And you're doing it with math?"

"Sure. Inventors use a lot of math. Haven't you ever seen an inventor at work on TV? They're always doing math." Billy dropped his hands. Keeping his shoulders and chest squared with his friend, he glanced at the desk. "Also, I once heard something about the world being made up of numbers."

"My brother said something about that, too!" Jimmy straightened and in the process, slid closer to the edge of the bed.

"So I figured," Billy said, holding his hands open and turning from the desk to the windows, "to mess with the world—which is what magic is supposed to do—I need to mess with the numbers. Maybe I can find a way to move them around until I get what I want."

Billy stood at the windows. The edges on his left side glowed. He looked down and then up. He clenched his hands. He exhaled.

"Age is a number," he said. "One of the many numbers in the world. What if I was the same age as my

neighbor?"

"You're gonna try to change her age?"

"No." Billy lowered and leveled his head. "I don't think she'd like that. At least that's not the kind of thing people would like as a surprise. My plan is to grow up. I'll use magic to make myself the same age as her. I can talk to her. She can fall in love with me."

"But you'll be older."

"Yes." Billy turned around, one side of his face was darker than the other. He relaxed his hands before sliding them into his pockets.

"We won't be in the same class, the same grade anymore."

"That'll probably happen." Billy nodded several times. "I'll probably learn a lot more. But that's just a part of growing up." He smiled at his friend. "Hey! I could help you with your homework. Even if we're not the same age, we can still be friends."

"I don't know." Jimmy dropped his eyes to the carpet. "You'll be in a different class. You'll have new friends. You'll have new things to talk about with them. You won't wanna hang out with some kid like me." Jimmy swung his foot and glanced his toes across the carpet. "Even my brother doesn't really hang out with me anymore."

"Don't worry." Billy hurried to the desk. He opened a different, smaller drawer, which rattled with untethered contents. "I'll make a note to never lose you as a friend. I'll even add it to the formula so it becomes part of the magic."

Billy retrieved a pencil. He checked the blunt tip and dug through the drawer for a handheld sharpener. While Billy twisted the pencil within the plastic sharpener, Jimmy rocked off the bed. He crossed to the windows. In the other yard, the neighbor stood next to the pool, facing away from Jimmy. She pressed a bundle of her hair with a multicolored towel. Then she removed the towel and shook her head. Her hair spread and swung a moment after her head. When she stopped and her hair settled, she threw the towel around her shoulders. She started with a skip and then walked the rest of the distance to the house. She opened a glass door which alternated between solid dark to impenetrable glare. When she entered, she disappeared. Behind Jimmy, a pencil scratched and scratched and scratched. Billy flipped the pencil,

erased something while producing substantive pieces of rubber detritus, and pawed those pieces to the floor. He marked the page a few more times.

"There we go," he said while hoisting the notebook above his head, elbows locked. "Wasn't too hard. Since I knew what I was doing, it didn't take as long as the rest of the formula. I still need to test it and make adjustments, of course."

"What's your plan?" Jimmy came to the desk, standing at the corner. He took the notebook from his friend.

"To fall in love with my neighbor. We'll start dating. Maybe this time next week, you'll find me swimming with her. And then," Billy waddled backward a couple of steps, "maybe we'll get married, and my whole life will be set."

"Do you really love her?" Jimmy turned the page, revealing another mess of numbers and symbols, marred by dark slashes. He turned the page again to find a comic with two tubular figures. Another page had a tubular figure with large bumps on its chest. Billy pinched the top of the notebook and yanked it from Jimmy. Billy then snapped the notebook's covers together, dropped it into the drawer, and kneed the drawer shut.

"Yes," Billy said. "I've probably been in love with her for a long time, but I didn't know it until a couple days ago."

"How long?"

"A week. Maybe."

"How'd it happen?"

"Why do you care?" Billy smirked. He planted a palm on the desktop and leaned. With one heel on the floor, he swayed. Jimmy looked at the hand on the desk and then at an empty part of the desk.

"I don't know what it's like," Jimmy said. "I've never been in love. I don't know what it feels like. My brother says it's chemicals in the brain. But that makes less sense."

"It might be chemicals." Billy pushed off the desk. Still turned to his friend, he glanced over his shoulder. "I sure did feel something like a spark or an explosion when I knew, like when a person pours two liquids into a beaker and they explode." He took a deep breath and raised his eyes to the ceiling. Jimmy held

his breath.

"Like I said," he said with his head still inclined, "it was about a week ago, maybe. The day was sunny. I was in the backyard, pulling weeds because Dad was making me do it. Then I heard a splash in the neighbor's yard. I got curious and tried to peek through the fence but couldn't, so I kinda climbed halfway up the fence, high enough to see over it. And then I saw her swimming across the pool. When she got to the shallow end, she stood up. She did this thing where she moved her hands in the water." Billy moved his hands to waist height. "It was about that time she noticed me because she looked up at me and smiled. She waved. I tried to wave also, but I lost my grip on the fence and fell. She started laughing."

Billy held his arms out to the side. He spun on a heel. He dropped onto the bed, landing on his back, before retracting his arms. He sighed.

"Her laugh," he said, "sounded nice. I'm not sure how to describe it. It sounded less like a laugh and more like her singing. It was there in the grass, listening to her laugh, that I first fell in love with her. I saw her before, walking around the neighborhood and stuff. I knew about her before that day. But something happened that day to make me fall in love with her." Billy smiled at the ceiling and placed his hands behind his head.

Jimmy crossed his arms before saying, "My brother says there's a difference between love and lust, and when most people think they're in love they're just experiencing lust."

"Can't say 'cause I don't know what lust is."

"Me either."

"But I'm pretty sure this is love. It feels so important. I don't know what else it could be." Billy moved his hands and worked his elbows on the mattress until his torso elevated. "What did you feel when you saw her?"

"Feel?" Jimmy looked to the windows, which provided a view of the garage's roof. "I don't know if I felt anything. I recognized her. I also thought she looked beautiful, but I didn't feel any change. I mean, she was just a person swimming."

"Really?" After Billy spoke, the two friends stayed still and silent for a few seconds until Billy clicked his tongue. He lifted his elbows and dropped. He rolled onto his side, away from Jimmy. Jimmy side-stepped.

"I don't know why," Billy said, "but that seems like such a shame. Like something being wasted. Like you're throwing something away."

"You heard that from somewhere." Jimmy squinted a glare at his friend. "That thing you just said. You heard that from a movie or something."

"Nah. I'm pretty sure I just made it up." Billy rolled onto his stomach and performed half of a pushup before rotating his legs off the bed. At his full height, he hooked his thumbs into his pockets. "What do you want to do?"

Jimmy shrugged. Billy shrugged again. He skipped around the bed, motioned to Jimmy, and passed through the door. Jimmy followed.

At home, Jimmy walked to his brother's room. With the door open, Jimmy saw him sitting at the desk, with a stack of books to one side. His brother swiveled his sights between an open textbook and a notebook. His right hand navigated a pen across the horizontal lines. When his glasses slid, he pushed them into place with his left hand, without interrupting the writing.

"Hey," Jimmy said.

"Hey." His brother responded without taking his attention off the notes.

"Have you ever been in love?"

"I don't have time for that nonsense."

Jimmy stood at the door, watching his brother. After some time, he left. He continued through the house to his room where he reached into his backpack that laid on the floor and procured a wrinkled and creased sheet of loose paper. Next, he took a pencil and then a folder. He sat on the floor with his legs folded. With the paper on the folder and the folder on his lap, he wrote and aligned a mess of numbers and letters and symbols.



## The Christmas Wish

By: Maggie Bayne

Maggie Bayne lives in upstate New York. She has had the following published: "The Blizzard" in October Hill Magazine, "Rescuing Addie Stiles" in Remington Review, "Gourmet Delight" in ASP Literary Journal, and "The Return" in Lit Shark Magazine.

Ashivered but continued his stroll through the evergreens at the Thompson Tree Farm. Today was the day he would select the perfect Christmas tree.

This was one annual task that Leonard Evans enjoyed performing alone. Not only did Thompson have the freshest firs, but wandering the manicured rows provided him a few minutes of serenity. He never had to discourage his wife, Mildred, from coming along. She usually found some excuse to be elsewhere, which was just fine with Leonard.

A young man wearing denim overalls approached, his face flushed from the crisp December air. "May I help you?"

Leonard smiled and extended his arm toward a nearby tree. "This one. It's beautiful."

The young man wielded his chainsaw and quickly cut the trunk flush to the ground. He then hoisted the tree in one hand and headed toward the office.

"So, how's business this year?" Leonard asked as they trudged through the chilled air.

"Last weekend was very busy. But we still have plenty of nice trees left." He propped the chosen tree against the outside wall of the office, opened the door, and called inside, "A six-footer." The girl behind the desk jotted a figure on a small pad.

The office was a small, cheery space, festooned with ornaments, garland, stuffed snowmen, and felt stockings. In one corner stood a large refreshment table covered with a red plaid cloth. Popcorn had been freshly prepared, its aroma still filling the air.

Near the door, a pegboard held tree stands, extension cords, and other seasonal necessities. Leonard retrieved a giant white tree bag and laid it on the counter to be included.

"I always get one of these," he smiled. "They're a great solution."

"Oh, yes, we sell a lot of those bags." She added \$1.98 to the total.

Bidding her "happy holidays," Leonard headed toward his car. The man in overalls joined him along the path. He carefully arranged the tree in the car trunk and tied the lid closed with twine.

"Merry Christmas," said the young man. "Thanks for shopping at the Thompson Tree Farm."

"Have a great holiday." Leonard climbed into the car and laid the tree bag on the seat next to him.

Leonard was pleased that he hadn't forgotten to purchase the tree bag. One of the first things to be done would be arranging the bag around the tree's base. In a few weeks when the then-dried tree was ready to be removed, the bag could be stretched upward to catch needles and alleviate most of the mess. If he had forgotten the bag, he would never have heard the end of it. Merely imagining that scenario sent a shiver down his back.

As Leonard pulled into the driveway, he had pleasant thoughts about his tree selection. The yearly selection of the ideal Christmas tree was significant, signaling the start of the holiday season.

He climbed out of the car and headed toward the trunk to unfasten the lid precisely as Mildred burst

through the front door.

"Well, it's about time you got back. I was wondering what could have happened to you. How could such a small purchase take such a long time?"

Unfazed by her greeting, Leonard proudly stood the tree upright on the driveway. "What do you think? Isn't it nice?"

"Nice? It's all lop-sided. Look at it. The limbs aren't even. We have more ornaments than that tree will hold. Besides, it's already dry and the bark is flaky. And my goodness, the needles are already falling off."

Leonard said nothing, but removed the tree, closed the trunk, and proceeded toward the back porch. He needed to attach the stand and knew to do so outside. If he had learned one thing during his life with Mildred, it was that the Christmas tree enters through the rear of the house. He might still expect problems related to the general disruption of the household, but the back door was the only acceptable tree entrance.

Leonard had discovered some time ago that if he were going to endure marriage to Mildred, he had to ignore her. Survival skills had been difficult to develop and took a great deal of practice. But he eventually was able to tune out the high nasal whine of Mildred's voice and could usually anticipate things that might provoke her.

Christmas had always been a special time for Leonard Evans, and remained his favorite holiday. Even though he and Mildred never had children, they still managed to enjoy the holiday season. They visited friends, participated in church activities, performed errands for elderly neighbors, and took pride in decorating their home.

Every year they continued the gesture of buying gifts for each other, but Leonard knew that nothing would please Mildred. Through the years, her ceaseless criticism had dulled Leonard's previously imaginative gift-giving. He had learned to select items that Mildred had already described in specific detail, like the top-of-the-line cookware she had requested this year. It was much better to be practical than creative.

After Mildred had supervised Leonard's delivery of the tree, she returned to the kitchen to bake for the church's cookie exchange. Once the tree stand had been attached, the tree slowly made its way from the back door toward the living room window. Leonard popped on a CD of his favorite Christmas carols to feed the festive spirit.

Each year when the decorations were put away, Leonard carefully coiled the strings of lights so they would be tangle-free for the next use. Now gathering the strings, he placed them strategically through the boughs. Decorating the tree was Leonard's responsibility, and he enjoyed the task. He had heard friends refer to tree decorating as a family project, but that was not the case in the Evans' household.

A few minutes later, Mildred appeared in the hall doorway. "I have a batch of cookies in the oven, but I have to run next door. I'll be back in a few minutes. If the timer goes off, take the cookies out of the oven." She did not comment on the tree but paused briefly. "Leonard, did you hear me?"

"Yes, I heard you," he replied from behind the tree, connecting the extension cord to the tree lights.

"Well, you'd never guess that from your reaction. I couldn't tell if you heard me. You seldom listen." Mildred bolted out the door, carrying a small wrapped gift.

As Leonard leaned forward to plug the extension cord into the wall socket, he heard the ding of the kitchen timer. He raced to the oven and removed the cookie sheet, placing it on the stovetop, then returned to his project.

Now that the lights were in place, hanging the glass ornaments would follow. Leonard gently opened the old, worn cardboard boxes. He knew all of the ornaments well, like old friends he visited each year. Some ornaments were left from his own childhood, and when he saw them again, he smiled at the warm memories. Leonard began hanging some of his favorite ornaments, spacing them precisely. As he reached for the second box, Mildred burst back through the door. She stopped to stare at the tree.

"What do you think you're doing?" she shrieked. "You have all the gold ornaments on one side and all the blue ornaments clustered in a group. For God's sake, mix 'em up. You have no eye for this sort of thing. Did I ever tell you that? Your sense of color and balance is faulty. I don't suppose you want my advice on the tree, though, do you? Did the timer go off? Did you remove the cookies? You must have because I don't smell them burning." She returned to the kitchen, not waiting for a reply.

Leonard found it amazing that Mildred could talk so much without drawing a breath. Her ability to maximize her lung capacity was admirable.

About an hour later, the Evans' tree was finished. Leonard thought it looked wonderful and stepped back toward the hall doorway to admire his handiwork.

Mildred approached from the kitchen when she saw that work had stopped. "Well, it looks fairly good, I have to admit. It could use a little more height. Thank goodness you used a tree bag because any moment now the tree will start to shed."

"It's pretty fresh, really. It was cut only this morning." Leonard extended his hand to feel the needles. They were soft and pliable, shiny droplets of sap glistening in the lights' reflection. "See, still soft."

"That just goes to show that you know nothing about evergreens." Mildred spat her statement, emphasizing the words "know nothing." She turned and left the room

There was no need for Leonard to respond.

He stood before the tree, focusing on each limb and the decorations applied. The finished project was lovely. No one could tell Leonard about trees and when they would lose needles. He packed up his emptied boxes and moved them to the garage.

The week before, Leonard had decorated the outside of the house. Over the years he had tried assortments of colored lights with various themes. His favorite combination had become an oversized wreath on the front door, illuminated by clear floodlights. It was a simple but beautiful scheme and had earned compliments. Leonard now strolled to the front door and flipped on the outdoor lights.

There were many activities at their church during the holiday season: rehearsals, concerts, a Santa party for the children. Mildred had already left for choir practice. Fortunately for Leonard, many upcoming events did not require his attendance. In addition, he would be afforded time alone.

Leonard wandered into the kitchen to make himself something to eat. The kitchen was peaceful with Mildred gone. This was her territory and she seldom let Leonard do what he wanted. He fixed himself a roast beef sandwich, opened a beer, and sat down at the kitchen table to read the paper. Mildred would

never have allowed beer at the kitchen table or, for that matter, reading the newspaper. There was satisfaction in breaking a few of her steadfast rules.

Spending solitary time was important. Some people believed that his quiet personality and amiable nature made him easy prey for the dominating Mildred. Leonard really didn't care that she bossed him. Even when Mildred did manage to wear thin, he was able to restrain from saying anything in his own defense, preferring the quiet approach, often simply leaving the room.

But inside, Leonard was often miserable. Even if Mildred's comments didn't bother him, her mere presence intruded on his privacy. Her shrill voice, so lovely in the choir, penetrated his ears, annoying with its high-pitched, unrelenting tone.

"I don't know how you can listen to that voice," his friend Marvin had said repeatedly through the years.

When people made comments of that type, Leonard would shrug, smile, and generally say nothing. He knew that others appreciated his position and recognized his precarious balance. Somehow that awareness was comforting.

With Christmas approaching, some type of holiday activity presented itself nearly each day. Mildred was busily involved and often absent from the house.

The week after the tree selection, Christmas Day came and went with little or no fanfare. Presents were opened and deemed acceptable.

The day after Christmas, Mildred began to hound Leonard about the tree being dry. "It has to go soon," she announced. "Christmas is over and I am tired of looking at it. You know, it never was a very nice tree."

"So soon? Well, sometimes we have left the tree up until New Year's," Leonard offered. "But I can take it down anytime you wish, I suppose."

"No, no. If you are going to make a big thing out of it, leave the tree up. It's all right. I was only expressing my opinion. Not that you ever pay attention."

The issue was dropped for the moment. Leonard knew when to let a subject cool off.

The following day, Mildred removed the stockings from the mantle and tucked away her favorite centerpiece. She scurried around the house, removing decorations and door hangers, and washing placemats and other linens. "In case you hadn't noticed, Leonard," she said finally, "Christmas is over. It's time to get rid of that tree. I would appreciate it if you would remove the decorations and haul it out of here."

Leonard realized she would bring the matter up again. Meanwhile, he was enjoying the sight and smell of the fresh tree and prolonging the holiday atmosphere.

Mildred had carefully packed a large box with candles, placemats, and her good poinsettia tablecloth. She stood in the hallway grumbling loud enough that Leonard couldn't help but overhear. "I guess I'm going to have to put this box on the shelf myself," she said. "Clearly, no one else is going to help me."

She stormed off to the garage, returning with the two-step aluminum stepladder that was often used for small chores. Constructed of aluminum tubing, it was light enough to maneuver into tight spaces. But Leonard avoided using the ladder because it seemed flimsy. He preferred to step on his favorite footstool, or even a kitchen chair.

This time, Mildred wrestled with the aluminum ladder, banging it against the door and the walls of the hallway, making a great deal of noise. She unfolded the ladder loudly, grumbling. "I guess I'm going to have to do this *myself*, like I usually do most things around here."

From his favorite chair, Leonard heard the squeak of the closet door and the sounds of fumbling. He imagined Mildred struggling with the cardboard box, scowling, cursing him under her breath. It was advisable to leave her alone at times like this. No question about her present state of mind, but it would pass when she turned to the next project. Leonard remained in his recliner, feet slightly raised and focused on his newspaper.

A few minutes later, his serenity was interrupted by a loud thud, followed shortly by a single sopranopitched shriek. Slowly, he rose from his chair and walked to the hallway door. He peeked around the corner to see Mildred sprawled on the floor, blood trickling from the right side of her forehead. Next to her was the collapsed aluminum step stool, its thin tubular legs splayed and twisted.

Leonard stood motionless for a moment. Mildred was not moving and, most noticeable of all, she was quiet. He squatted down and felt for a pulse but found

none. Her wrist was limp.

Standing over the scene, Leonard tried to determine what had just taken place. It appeared as though the stepstool had twisted, its thin legs giving way. Mildred may have reached too far forward or shifted her weight slightly, collapsing the ladder. As it gave way, she must have struck her head, perhaps on the partially opened hallway door.

Leonard did not contemplate his next action. All he realized was that it was quiet in the house. He reached again for Mildred's wrist, searching in vain for a pulse. Clearly, she was dead.

Feeling suddenly relaxed and slightly thirsty, Leonard strolled to the kitchen and opened a beer. He then returned to the living room, to his Christmas tree. Tipping back in his recliner, Leonard sipped the cold beer, savoring the quiet atmosphere. The scent of evergreen hung in the air, like a pleasant memory. What a lovely season Christmas could be.

His beer finished, Leonard began gently removing the ornaments as he had been instructed, placing each one carefully in its proper box. He carried the ornament boxes to the garage, watching where he stepped into the hallway and glancing down at Mildred, still motionless on the carpet.

Leonard carried the Christmas tree into the backyard, leaning it against the fence. He had recently read that cardinals and blue jays often take shelter in discarded Christmas trees. Gardeners making this gesture might be rewarded in the spring when birds return to nest in the yard.

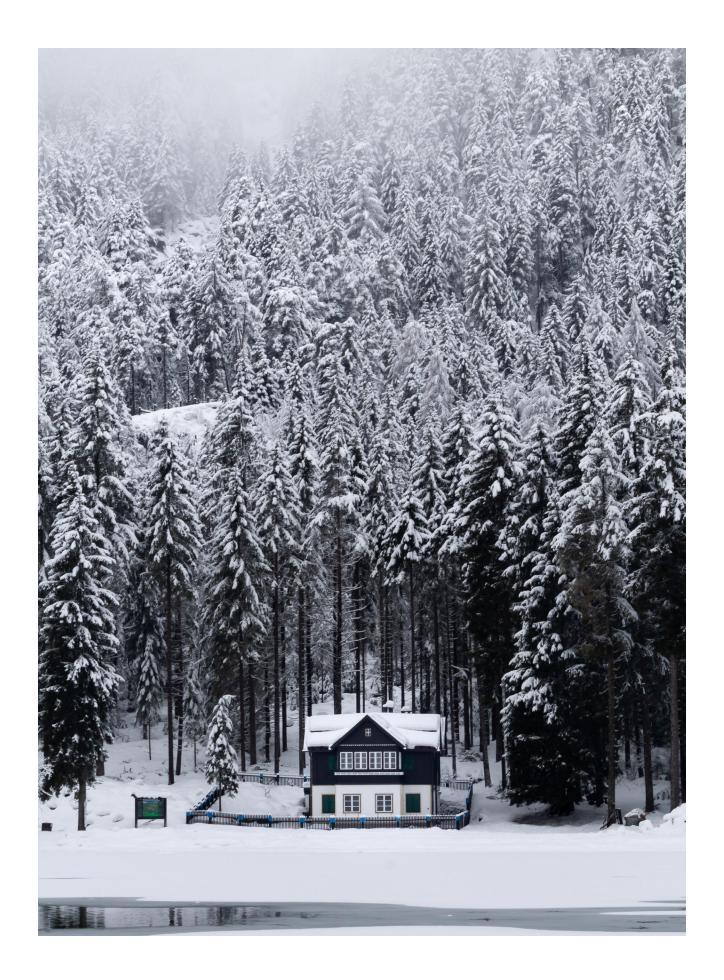
Standing in the yard, Leonard savored the brisk December air. He breathed deeply, filling his lungs. He paused to scatter sunflower seeds around the discarded tree and refill the bird feeders that dotted the backyard. He lingered for several minutes, enjoying wood smoke from his neighbors' fireplace.

When Leonard returned to the living room, he noticed that the large white plastic tree bag remained where the tree had stood. He carried the bag into the hallway. After pulling and tugging, he managed to enshroud Mildred's body in the billowy white plastic. Tomorrow the city's tree removal crew will be in the neighborhood to retrieve discarded Christmas trees. After dark, Leonard would drag the tree bag to the curb for their convenience. For now, the stuffed bag was secured with twister ties and dragged to a spot near the side door.

Leonard went to his storage cabinet above the hot water heater in the garage and removed a half-finished bottle of Dewar's. Everyone is entitled to at least one vice, he often rationalized. Leonard poured himself a glass of Scotch and returned to the house. At the side door, he stepped around the billowy tree bag, then returned to his recliner.

As he raised his feet, Leonard realized what a fortunate man he was. He had made only one Christmas wish this year, and it had been granted.





## Gallstones Rattle

By: Katy Goforth

Katy Goforth is a writer and editor for a national engineering and surveying organization and a fiction editor for *Identity Theory*. Her writing has appeared in *Brevity*, *Reckon Review*, and *Salvation South*. She has a prose collection forthcoming with *Belle Point Press* (2025).

It's only a matter of time. They've busted the union. They know I was part of it. I'm going to lose my job."

I was leaning against the wall eavesdropping on Mama and Daddy. I pressed my back into the cold plaster and slid all the way to the floor. Heat from the grate in the hallway blew my bangs up and made them dance. I wasn't sure what a busted union was, but I knew what it meant if Daddy lost his job at the mill.

The Chiquola was the place to work in Honea Path. If you had a mama or a daddy, then they worked at the mill. Both my parents worked there. I wondered if Mama and Daddy were a package deal. The thought set worry right between my eyebrows as I pulled them together trying to figure out what all of this would mean for me.

I was thinking so hard that I didn't hear Daddy come out to the hall.

"Lou girl, what are you doing out here? You should be in bed getting some rest for your big day tomorrow."

He bent down and scooped me up, carrying me to my room. I was having my appendix taken out in the morning. I kept telling Mama that my belly hurt, hurt right in the center, but she thought I was trying to get out of going to school. Turns out, my appendix was knocking around inside me and wanted out. So, we're gonna let it out.

As Daddy tucked me back in, he touched my forehead with his.

"No worrying, Lou. Remember what the doctor said? It's a simple procedure. You're only staying one night.

And as soon as that nasty appendix is gone, you will feel better instantly."

My appendix wasn't what I was worried about.

"Are you going to lose your job, Daddy?"

"Now, you know you aren't supposed to listen in on other people's private conversations. That's not something that you need to worry about. Focus on resting for tomorrow."

"But, Daddy. If you get fired, how will you pay my hospital bill? It doesn't hurt that bad. I can wait."

Daddy looked like I had punched him in the gut. I thought it was a fine offer for someone worried about losing a job. I wanted to do my part.

"Go to sleep, my sweet Lou. Morning will be here fast."

Morning found us all faster than we wanted it to, and I insisted on going to the big hospital in Anderson in my nightgown. I didn't see a need to change when I was going to be laying in bed for the next few days. Mama wasn't pleased. She pressed her lips together so tight they were just a thin line, but Daddy laughed and laughed and let me do what I wanted.

The doctor said he was going to cut on my stomach and suck that bad appendix right on out. And he must have done it because I woke up in a different room all wrapped up in blankets so warm they felt fresh out of the dryer. Daddy's gaze fell on those warm blankets too and made me feel safe.

I rolled over and winced in pain. Daddy beelined for my bedside. "There she is, my Lou girl. Here. Have a sip of Sprite."

He leaned over me, positioning the straw and the can so I didn't have to raise up. The sugary bubbles tickled my throat and rushed to my stomach in an explosion. Sprite was Daddy's cure-all. And if you were really sick, the Sprite was paired with a big bowl of buttered rice.

Daddy's eyes were glazed over. He looked tired. I tried to sit up on my elbows, but a dull pain twinged in my stomach. I raised my chin and looked around the room. No Mama.

"She had a shift, baby. She 'll be back."

I took another sip of the Sprite.

"When is your shift?"

"Don't you worry about those things, Lou. Just rest. You get to go home tomorrow."

Daddy reached back to put the Sprite can on my food tray and missed. The room flooded with the scent of bleach and citrus.

"God damn it!"

I shrank back into my pillows as Daddy's anger pierced the room.

"I'm going to go see if I can find someone to help me clean this up. Now, you stay in this bed. No getting up. The doctor doesn't want you moving around much yet."

I nodded my head that I understood, but we locked eyes and both knew I wasn't going to stay in bed. I had spied a line of people in and out of the room next door, and my ears found the faint sounds of laughter. Daddy and I both knew I was going to explore and to see what was so funny.

"I promise, Daddy. I won't move too much."

He gave me a half smile, as if his face was too worn down to give me a full one.

I counted to sixty before throwing the covers off of me. My nightgown was gone, replaced with a hospital gown. I struggled to push myself upright and slid off of the bed. My bare feet slapped down on the frigid linoleum. No time for slippers. Shuffling off toward the door, I felt a breeze on my backside. The gown wasn't tied, but I didn't care. I was on a mission.

I peeped out the door and looked to my left and then to my right. All clear. I didn't hear laughter or people from next door. Just *The Price Is Right* theme song and someone yelling at people to come on down. I stood in the doorway and saw tufts of white hair sprouting out in all directions from an older woman's head. Her eyes were closed. I stepped inside. I had come this far and wasn't turning back. Daddy would be back soon.

My eyes settled on a plastic cup on her bedside table. It had an orange lid on it and several black and yellowish rocks had settled in the bottom. Treasure. I tiptoed over to the bedside table, and the old woman's eyes fluttered open. I froze in my spot with my hospital gown falling forward and exposing most of me. I winced in pain from the movement.

"Are you okay?" The old woman smiled. "Come here. Let me tie that gown for you."

I nodded, still frozen in my spot. She swung her legs off the side of the bed and motioned me over. I slowly shuffled over, not picking up my feet and instead moving them like an ice skater across the cold linoleum. I turned so she could tie my gown.

"There now. Much better. I'm Miss Dorothy. Who are you?"

I clasped my hands in front of me and was suddenly shy. I half whispered, "I'm Lou."

"Well, Lou, what are you in for? Me, I had my gallstones removed. They hurt something awful. Glad to be rid of those things."

Miss Dorothy pointed her tobacco-stained fingernail at the plastic cup full of the small rocks. My shyness evaporated, and I lunged towards the bedside table and picked up the plastic cup. I shook it, and the sound of those dirty little rocks was so pleasing. It was like my own homemade instrument.

"Well, look at you, Lou. You've taken my pain in the ass and turned it into music!"

Miss Dorothy seemed tickled. As I continued to shake those little rocks in their plastic container, she kept time with her hands slapping her thighs. I was having so much fun that I forgot about time and Daddy. Bob Barker's smooth voice spilled out of the television and was telling me to spay or neuter my pet. I stopped. Miss Dorothy looked puzzled and a little sad.

"I suppose we should both get some rest, Lou. What do you say?"

I nodded, the shyness creeping back into me.

"Would you like to take those with you?" She pointed to the little stones in the plastic cup. There was a sticker on it that said Dorothy Beader. I nodded.

"Well, take them with you. I don't have much use for them anyway. Go get some rest, Lou. And come back to see me before you go."

I scooted back to my room. The Sprite was still all over the floor, and Daddy was back in his chair by my bed. He was hunched over, cradling his head in his hands. I slipped back into the bed and winced again as I pulled the covers over me. I tucked my treasure down in my armpit with my gown covering it. Daddy looked up, and his face was worried and worn down. I whipped out my treasure and launched into *The Price Is Right* theme song. When the sides of Daddy's mouth started to turn up in a smile, I shook those gallstones harder and sang louder.





# Happy Birthday, Trick Or Treat

### By: Dennis Martin Brooks

Halloween was also my father's birthday, but that didn't matter. It was Halloween.

As a young boy, I bought my father a birthday card, put two dollars in it, and propped it up with his coffee cup at the dinner table.

"To Dad"

My mother gave me the money. Her card was a bit more creative than mine. They were both storebought Hallmark cards, but she would write your age that many times on the edges of the envelope.

We never had cake, so I just got used to not having it.

After dinner, my father would open his cards, thank us, and then go into the living room to watch TV the rest of the night until I came home with my grocery sack of panhandled candy from the neighbors.

I don't know if they celebrated my father's birthday while I was out. I kind of doubt it because my parents never celebrated anything really. I think my mother would have. But my father always thought it was a waste of time. And money.

Oh, don't get me wrong. We observed the holidays. Christmas, that is. We always had a tree. And we gave each other presents, of course. The usual. Money stuffed into a card.

But for Christmas one year, I asked my father for a baseball glove.

Years later, when I went home to visit for Christmas, my mother and I joked about that glove. He never got it for me.

Dennis Martin Brooks is a retired Computational Research Linguist. As creator and showrunner of "The Victor," he won an AFI award in 1997. He created a cable access show, "Inside/Outside the Beltway," "the soap opera with a lavender twist," He won a GLAAD award in 1995.

"Well, what do you want for Christmas this year?" she joked.

"Ah, would you two shut up about that goddamned baseball glove? Every year. The same thing. Baseball glove. Baseball glove."

Both she and I would let it rest. It was enough to poke fun, have a brief laugh, just the two of us. We both had enough sense to let it go, rather than have him go off and be mad.

So, as far as gift-giving went, we exchanged money. My father got my mother a card and put five dollars in it. It was enough to make him feel uncomfortable for the rest of the week until he got paid again.

He got the money back from her, though, on his birthday. So I don't know why he was so put out in the first place. I just remember him grudgingly stuffing the bill into the card each year. The two dollars I gave him courtesy of my mother was reciprocated by the two dollars he gave me to give her on her birthday.

I felt that it was actually the same money going back and forth. I imagined that the exact same bills were being passed around. Once, I told my mother I thought this even exchange of money was ridiculous. I even toyed with the idea of marking the bills one year to see if I was right.

"It's cold and impersonal," I told her. "It's just a waste of time."

"It's the thought that counts," my mother replied. She had all the explanations. My father never offered his interpretation. He was content.

No one got hurt, I guess. And besides, she didn't

know what to get him, and, I guessed right, he didn't know what to get her.

"Wha' do I know what your mother wants?" he snorted.

"Why don't you just ask her," I replied.

"She doesn't know what she wants. I ask her, and she says she doesn't want anything."

On my birthdays, I got five dollars. With those couple of extra dollars, I was supposed to buy gifts for other occasions, such as Mother's Day and Father's Day.

I always gave my mother a bunch of daisies or chrysanthemums for Mother's Day. After all, women were supposed to get flowers.

I once told him to do that.

"She doesn't want no stupid flowers. They just die anyway. That's a waste of money."

So, by now I think you're getting the idea that my father was a penny-pinching miser. I used to think that, too, until one day he told me about when he was a young boy.

"There were thirteen of us kids. Every once in a while, my father would bring home a box of donuts. If you didn't get to that table fast, you were shit outta luck."

"So why didn't Pop-Pop cut 'em up or just buy an extra donut?" I asked.

"Day-old donuts went on sale. That's a dime a dozen," he said simply.

Other than a birthday gift, it should have been a toss-up. Men got either cigarettes or ties. So with my father, it was always a carton of Lucky Strikes. He didn't wear ties. I only saw him once in his life wearing a tie. It was a bow tie. That was at his father's funeral. When my father quit smoking, I settled into the usual and comfortable family practice of shoving a couple of dollars into a card as a gift, no matter what occasion.

So, one year, I must have been about ten or eleven, on the day before Halloween—also my father's birthday, like I said—things took an unexpected turn. I had managed to save up a couple of extra dollars. Yeah, I found out that pennies I picked up on the street (a couple of times I even found a nickel) do add up over time. And sometimes I wouldn't use my milk money at school. I just hoped and prayed that the teacher didn't find out. My friend Frankie and I sometimes shared our milk, splitting the cost and reaping the profits. She didn't find out about it because she didn't collect the money in the first place or dole the milk out at lunch. The lunch ladies took care of all of that.

So, this one year, I discovered that I had enough to buy my father's birthday card, including his cash gift, and I had two more dollars in the Calumet Baking Powder tin where I stashed my money. I had earned the right to go buy myself a gift.

I went to the local five-and-dime and bought a plastic model of Queen Elizabeth's coronation coach that you had to put together yourself.

I don't know why I was drawn to that kit more than to any other. Guys are supposed to put together model airplanes and cars, not a coronation coach for the Queen of England. We weren't even British. And I had just as much interest in British politics and the monarchy as I did with MIGs and Pontiacs.

Someone might say, "Oh, you were drawn to it because it was a current event. The Queen was just crowned."

Maybe. But unlikely.

"Maybe the unique design and ornateness of the carriage intrigued you."

The picture on the box was garish and baroque. I remember thinking it looked like Cinderella's transformed pumpkin in that Disney cartoon.

As I held the box in the store, debating about buying it, I suddenly thought, "This looks like it should be for girls."

But then I thought, "Girls don't put model kits together, boys do."

I held it closer so no one could see what I had in my hands. I worried what the cashier would say checking me out, but I thought that if I had to, I'd say I was buying it for my sister.

The cashier didn't say anything. She just rang me up and stuffed my purchase in a paper bag.

Truth be told, the price was right. It was on sale. The marked-down price was \$1.47. I got some change

back, so I went back and bought a small tube of glue and a small bottle of gold paint.

Glue and Paint Not Included, the box said as I pulled it out to examine it around the corner. Glad I did, too, otherwise, how was I going to erect the damned thing once I got it home?

I went home and for the next couple of hours, up in my room, I glued the pieces of the kit together. When I finished, I placed the unpainted bluish-gray plastic carriage on the lid and carried it into the living room where my father was stretched out in his easy chair, watching Kate Smith on our ten-inch black-and-white television.

"Look, Dad," I said, proudly holding up the assembled, unpainted carriage.

I was proud of what I had accomplished by completing the model.

What an engineer! I prided myself.

And, I thought, I actually saved up the money. I was being careful, growing up, being mature, handling money like an adult.

His expression changed. He looked kind of annoyed or disappointed, and he asked me how I had gotten it. I told him that I had bought it with the money I had saved and put it together myself.

"That's the dumbest thing I ever saw. You bought that with your money? What're you throwing your money away on that crap for? I'll have to think twice before *I* give you money for your birthday *next* year." He said it kind of funny, not so much like he was angry, but that he was hurt.

I couldn't imagine why he was feeling so bad about it when it was my money to begin with. I had saved that money myself, so I could do whatever I wanted to do with it. But then I suddenly realized that he was probably upset because tomorrow was his birthday. And here I was, showing him something I had bought for myself.

I felt cornered, a criminal. My face turned red. I was embarrassed. I grasped at mental straws, hoping I could find some way to explain what he saw as my self-centered thoughtlessness.

He sat there, a stern look on his face. I could see he was thinking. Hard.

Suddenly, he spoke.

"Besides, where'd you get that money from in the first place?" he asked.

He knew, as well as I did, where most, if not all, of my money came from. And what it was supposed to be used for.

"I saved up for it," I said.

"You saved up for it?" he questioned me. "How in the world did you ever save up for it?"

I hesitated. I couldn't tell him about the milk money.

"I . . . I found money," I said.

"You found money?" he asked. "Where did you find that much money?"

"I found it here and there. Not all at once. I'd find it, and I'd save it. And sometimes Mom would give me a little extra here and there." I worried that he was going to hold that last fact against both of us.

He squinted at me, his eyes narrowing into slits. Finally, he spoke.

"And so this is what you do with the money you've saved?" He paused, almost looking disgusted at me.

My mind raced through more explanations that might change the way he was looking at me. Finally, it came to me.

"Yeah, Dad. I saved up for it out of my own money, and I got it for you. For your birthday."

I lied.

"I made it for you. I wanted to give you something special for your birthday. Not just money in an envelope."

"So, what am I supposed to do with that dumb thing?" he asked, shifting his weight, agitated in his chair. "What the hell is it, anyway? Isn't it that thing from that movie?"

"It's the ceremonial coach from Queen Elizabeth's coronation," I said.

He squinted at it and screwed up his face.

"What the hell am I supposed to do with it?" he repeated.

He stared at it.

I didn't say anything. I simply stood there feeling defeated, sinful.

"Waste of time and money," he mumbled, and then painfully added as an afterthought, "It isn't even painted."

He shook his head several times and went back to watching television.

I went to my room and painted the carriage. It didn't look anything like what was on the box.

It finally dried.

I sat it on my bureau. After several weeks, I put it back into the box it came in. It fit, assembled, and I stuck it on the top shelf of my closet.

Later that night, right before dinner, I ran out to the convenience store on the corner. The owner knew me, so I didn't have any trouble buying my father a carton of Lucky Strikes, my usual for Father's Day. But now I wanted to do something special for him, to make up for the mistake I had made that day. I wanted to apologize, hoping that this would count.

The next day, his birthday and Halloween, I wrapped the cigarettes in green tissue paper I found stuffed in the back of the hall closet where my mother stored our Christmas ornaments. I put the carton of cigarettes at his place on the kitchen table before we ate dinner. I put the card on top of the carton in front of where his dinner plate would go. My mother put her card next to mine.

The wrapped carton of cigarettes sat on the table all through dinner, and the card remained unopened on top, as usual.

"Dinner time is time to eat," he would say if a conversation did happen while we ate. This signaled the immediate end to whatever it was someone was saying. And other activities, such as opening presents, should be performed later, after dinner.

So, as usual, we didn't speak at dinner that night. The gifts on the dinner table didn't create a topic for conversation. The fact that it was Halloween didn't interrupt the usual activity: eating.

After dinner, my mother cleared the dishes and moved the cigarettes and the cards to the side table next to his easy chair in the living room.

She told me to go upstairs to put on my costume to go trick-or-treating.

That year I dressed up as a scarecrow. I had the overalls and a red plaid flannel shirt. My mother had dug out a big straw hat she wore a couple of times when we went to the shore. I got dried grass from the backyard and stuffed my sleeves and shirt, and stuffed my collar to look like I was filled with straw. My mother painted my face using her makeup and a burnt cork to make my face look sooty.

I looked at my father sitting in his chair watching TV. He hadn't opened his cards or unwrapped the cigarettes.

I went over to him and kissed him on the top of his head.

"Happy Birthday, Dad," I said.

"Thanks, son," he said, not taking his gaze off the television. "Happy Halloween."

On my way out the door, my mother handed me a grocery bag with cardboard wrapped around wire handles.

"You can pack this up real good," she said, flapping it open to show me how large the bag was. "It'll hold a lot. And these handles are good and strong."

I stepped out onto the front porch, letting the already dark night chill me.

Frankie jumped out from beside the door. He was dressed like Dracula.

"Rah!" he shouted. "Trick or treat!"

"Eh, trick or treat, yer ass," I said, catching my breath. I clenched my fist and socked him on his shoulder, almost ripping my bag. "You make me rip this bag, you mother, and I'm gonna wring that cape around your neck."

The grass around my neck made me itch, so it was gone before we even made it out of the yard onto the street.

Later that night, when I got home, I went into the

kitchen with my bag of Halloween loot. My father was nodding drowsily in his chair. He had opened his gifts. My mother sat on the sofa by herself, knitting and watching TV.

I dumped the shopping bag out on the kitchen table. The noise woke my father. He got up from his chair. My mother put her knitting down and joined us in the kitchen.

We picked through the candy, occasionally sampling a piece or two.

"Go easy on those Tootsie Rolls and that candy corn, Butchie," my father said.

"Yes, we don't want you waking us up with a bellyache in the middle of the night," my mother added.

Some people had put pennies in little envelopes. We set these off to one side, laughing, enjoying being there, and sharing this time together.

"Happy birthday, Dad," I said. "Trick or treat."

He was in a better mood, his drowsiness melting away quickly, knowing there was candy to be sampled, and maybe some money to be picked over.

We examined what I had collected. Pre-wrapped candy was sifted to one side. The loose stuff my mother gathered and put in another bag to throw out.

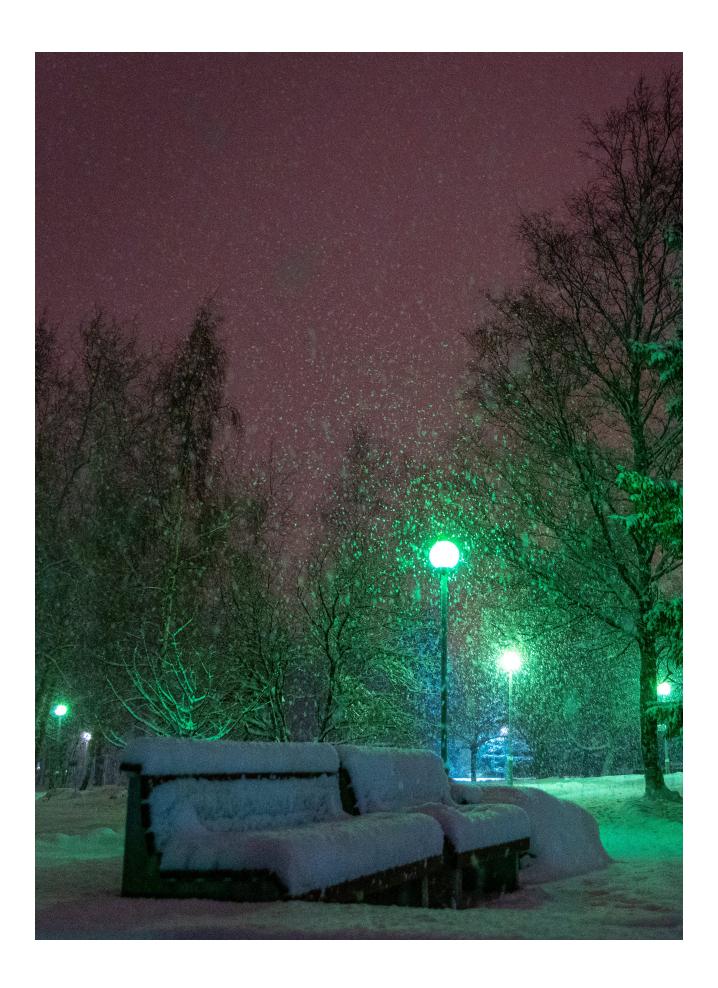
"You don't know where that stuff's been," she said.

And then, we pulled it out of the bag. As always, my mother pulled out a paper napkin twisted up into a knot and scotch-taped closed. She tore it open unceremoniously. There, inside, was an apple, a handful of puffed wheat breakfast kernels, and a tea bag.

"I never know if this is some kind of a weird joke," she said, looking down puzzled at the items in her hand, "or a real trick-or-treat."

My father's birthday present, Queen Elizabeth's coach, remained on the top shelf of my closet until I left home, years later, for my first job miles away.





# Them Dreams \*

By: Katy Abel

Wyatt's mother squinted at a map of Dollywood as they waited to get into the park. It was early September, but the climate had gone crazy so it felt like July, like one of those days when even the giant American flag outside the Burger King on the highway stopped waving and drooped in surrender. Mother and son stood in a line that stretched far into the horizon, sizzling in the Tennessee sun. Wyatt, nineteen, took off his Oakleys and wiped his eyes.

"How long is this going to take," he asked Marybeth.

"Think positive, Wyatt," she said, frowning. "For once. All I'm asking."

Wyatt kicked an empty juice box lying on the ground. "How about you put some wings on them dreams, son," Marybeth continued.

"I don't have dreams," Wyatt muttered.

"Course you do," Marybeth said. "Maybe buried down deep, but we all got dreams. They call Dolly the 'Dreamer in Chief."

"That's why she's so loved," a voice in the line piped up from behind. It belonged to a large woman wearing a too-tight purple T-shirt that read, "Kinda Wish Dolly Sang '10-to-3' Instead." As the woman stepped forward, Marybeth noticed her red hair, short on top and long in the back, the cut reminiscent of the shaggy mullets favored by an earlier era of rock guitarists. She wondered if the woman got highlights, or if her color was single-process, dye from a box.

"Cowboys, combat vets, drag queens—don't matter, she loves 'em all," the woman continued. "Gives away books to poor kids with nothing but a cereal box to read at home. And she gets no credit because men

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can't see nothin' but her tits."

Marybeth considered this.

"Well, she does put them out there. But I also heard she gave money for the research on one of the vaccines."

The woman in the *10-to-3* T-shirt nodded.

"And even if you were like, 'Don't go sticking me with that needle,' you know Dolly was trying to do good."

"Always," Marybeth agreed. "And now she's paying for all the people who work at Dollywood to go to college. Books and everything. Out of her own pocket."

"Saw that on TV," the woman beamed.

"That's why we came," Marybeth continued. "My son's going to get himself a job here."

They hadn't been to Dollywood since Wyatt was in third grade. Marybeth thought the visit, built on the pretense of checking the status of his employment application, might help him move on. Move forward.

Wyatt was rocking side to side, foot to foot, a human metronome.

"You two acting like Dolly Parton's your best friend," he said, rolling his eyes. "She's not even going to be here."

"Hush up," his mother scolded. "You don't know what's going to happen 'til we get inside."



The security line inched forward. Marybeth glanced at the horizon where the Smoky Mountains hung like sheer blue curtains. She thought back to the day the guidance counselor called her into school and told her that Wyatt was ineligible for the Tennessee Promise, the state scholarship program that met college costs, because he had missed so much time in class. Wyatt's depression covered him like one of those weighted blankets Marybeth had seen on Amazon. She blamed the Instagram girls who posted his picture alongside a photo of a big black bear lumbering through the woods, complete with crude comparisons and taunts. All Wyatt did last year was hibernate, unable to stop sleeping or even get out of bed. Somehow, he'd managed to get a diploma. But it came too late to apply for The Promise.

"She wants me to go to college," Wyatt said to the woman behind them, thrusting his chin in Marybeth's direction. "I'm here for the coasters."

"You want your coaster credits, I gotcha, son," the woman in the *10-to-3* T-shirt chuckled. "But after that, no harm going to college. Don't have to be one or the other."

Marybeth would have preferred the woman ask Wyatt which college he wanted to go to, or what he wanted to study. Instead, the woman asked Wyatt if he had a game plan for the rides. Mercifully, the line appeared to be moving. Marybeth took three steps forward, pulling Wyatt with her.

"I used to be a pass holder," the woman said, hurrying to catch up. "So y'all can ask me anything. First-timers?"

Without waiting for an answer, she laid out a plan to attack the park's attractions.

"When you get inside, go straight to the new one, Big Bear Mountain. Fan favorite, though, is Lightning Rod, so make that number two. If you don't, you could miss it altogether because the lines get real long."

Wyatt mumbled to Marybeth that they were going on Lightening Rod first.

"Trust me, you're gonna think on the way up it's too slow but hold onto your hats 'cause that thing can *cook!* Seventy miles an hour in places, plus you also got the Quadruple Down."

Marybeth pulled a tissue from her fanny pack to wipe her forehead. "And then, since we've been frying like Tater Tots out here, go to Blazing Fury. That line waits indoors so you get a blast of AC. After that, Tennessee Tornado with the g-force. Dragonflier has a seven-story drop. Then all the other ones but if you want the full ten coaster credits, go on Whistle Punk Chaser in Timber Canyon. For the little ones, but I still like it."

The woman looked so proud of herself that Marybeth felt duty bound to thank her. She tried to imagine how her insides would feel after going on ten coasters.

"This information is real helpful," she said. "Although we were thinking more about college credits than coaster credits."

"If he works here, he needs to know the park," the woman pointed out, a bit crestfallen. "What did he apply for?"

Marybeth knew Wyatt wouldn't remember the names of the jobs he'd checked on the Dollywood employment site. She'd stood over his shoulder the entire time, moving the mouse for him, hovering like a chopper. Guess I'm one of those helicopter parents now, she'd thought ruefully.

There were other things going on with Wyatt, she knew, not only his depression. A school psychologist had suggested he had an "impulsivity disorder," whatever that was. Once on a school field trip, he'd grabbed a classmate's cell phone and thrown it into a reflecting pool outside a museum. Another time he'd pried open the back door of his school bus while it was still moving. Marybeth had resisted the school's suggestion that she get him tested for ADHD. She told the school she didn't want him labeled, and besides, her insurance wouldn't fully cover the twenty-three hundred dollars it cost for the evaluation.

"Boys are struggling," the psychologist had said with a sigh, putting Wyatt's folder back in a file on his desk. "Lots of research coming out now showing how boys are losing ground to girls. Fewer going to college, fewer finishing. They just can't seem to focus."

That's because you don't understand them, Marybeth thought to herself after the meeting.

You think the boys should care about pleasing the teacher the way the girls do and most never will. You want them all to sit quiet like a bunch of stone statues, thinking, not moving. These thoughts made Marybeth so angry she wanted to rip all the motivational posters off the wall in the hall outside

the psychologist's office. Climb the mountain so you can see the world, not so the world can see you. Our greatest glory is not in ever failing but in rising every time we fall. We cannot lower the mountain, therefore we must elevate ourselves.

Wyatt was shuffling in place, staring at his Nike Air Max sneakers. They were a bribe from Marybeth to get him to Dollywood at risk of being seen with a parent.

"Merchandise Replenishment Team Member was one job, right Wyatt?" Marybeth said. "I think he applied for Parking Assistant Team Lead, too, and also Hospitality Team Member in Splash Country."

The woman laughed. "Splash Country sounds real good right now."

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They had made it to the front. Marybeth walked through security under the white awning, Wyatt following close behind. They followed signs to Lightning Rod. After that, Marybeth insisted, they would head to the employment office before riding the other coasters. She made a note to get him some kettle corn or soft serve to spike his energy level.

Wyatt looked up as Lightning Rod's operator flicked a series of switches. He wondered aloud whether he could get that job.

"You'd be good at that," Marybeth told him. "Could be a job you work your way up to. Bet everyone wants to run Lightning Rod."

Wyatt nodded glumly. Once they boarded and strapped in, though, Marybeth noticed her son's face was glowing. He leaned forward intently, fingers coiled around the safety rail, eager for takeoff. It was reason enough for her to swallow fears that the coaster would fly off the tracks and into the mountains, where she and Wyatt would twist in the trees, awaiting help that never came.

Lightning Rod lurched forward. Marybeth's head snapped back; she felt as if she was riding on the back of a flailing dragon. The coaster twisted, then inched upwards only to drop back down without warning, so sharply it felt as if they might come untethered from the track.

As they climbed again for another drop, Marybeth wondered if Dolly Parton rode the roller coasters

in her own park. She laughed as she imagined the country singer trying to keep her wig from blowing off. What would Dolly do if she were scared? Dolly would yodel like she did in *Mule Skinner Blues*, Marybeth thought. And that's what she did as the coaster bucked devilishly on the track, tail thrashing. Marybeth yodeled at the top of her lungs.

Afterward, walking away from Lightning Rod as fast as he could, Wyatt hissed over his shoulder that he would never go on another ride with her again. Marybeth followed him in silence, wondering if the whole day would be like this, going up and down, same as the coasters.

They walked on rubbery legs to the park's administrative offices. Wyatt hadn't heard back, she knew, but Marybeth figured showing up couldn't hurt.

"They would have called me if they wanted to hire me," Wyatt said when they reached the building, stalling.

"You don't know," Marybeth replied. "Little kids get lost in amusement parks and I imagine applications do too." She told him to straighten up and smile. She said he could choose where they ate lunch and promised they wouldn't leave the park until he had all ten coaster credits.

"You go right in there and stick your hand out and say, 'Hi, my name is Wyatt Barry, here with my family for the day, just wanted to double-check and make sure you all got my application because I would truly love to work here, always been my dream to work at Dollywood."

Wyatt didn't respond. He was looking straight up, watching people scream as they whizzed by on the coaster above him.

"And don't say anything about the college program because we don't want them to think that's the only motivation."

Wyatt glared at her and lumbered into the office as she waited on a bench. He was probably right, she knew. They would have called. She watched a family pass by, balloons tied to a baby's stroller, two older children stumbling along in glittery dresses and neon-colored sunglasses. It reminded her of Wyatt's birthday parties at the Fun Zone, all the kids from school jostling each other in the net-covered pit filled with multi-colored plastic balls. She missed those

days when her son seemed to get animated about any little thing. A new sippy cup with his name on it. An orange moon he wanted to pick from the sky.



Ten minutes later Wyatt emerged, squinting in the sun. Marybeth wished she'd remembered sunscreen.

"How'd it go?" she asked.

"They said they was way behind on the applications, but they have mine and said I would be hearing from them." He paused. "I talked to one of the guys who runs everything. He was real nice."

Marybeth wanted to whoop but thought better of it, given the yodeling.

"That's great, honey," she murmured, looking down, picking polish off a nail.

"They took me serious," Wyatt continued. "Like they might hire me, and I could go to college too."

Marybeth blinked and turned away from Wyatt, afraid she might cry. She felt a burning sadness, realizing it took so little, just a random guy in an office who treated Wyatt like a human being, for him to perk up and act normal. Whatever that was.

"Also, I heard something in there that nobody else knows yet."

"Oh?"

Wyatt lowered his voice.

"Dolly Parton is here today. They're opening a new hotel and she's going to cut the ribbon and they are going to have her riding around the park waving at everybody. They're getting ready for it now, setting up security."

At that, Marybeth did give a small whoop, withstanding Wyatt's withering glare. Mother and son made their way to Rivertown Junction and sat on a bench to wait, sharing a bag of kettle corn.

"I hate her music, just so you know," Wyatt said, munching.

"Don't matter," Marybeth answered. "She has a beautiful soul. Look at how she's always helping people."

"We'll see if she helps me," Wyatt said.

Marybeth watched as couples and families on automated rafts, their arms raised in gleeful surrender, plunged into the chill waters of the Smoky Mountain River Rampage.

"Don't forget that somebody had to build all these rides," she told Wyatt, gesturing. "Figure out the speeds, what the track can handle without people flying off, all that. That's engineering. Those guys make serious money." She swatted him. "You go to college, get one of them jobs, you can buy your mother a house."

Wyatt reached for more kettle corn. Marybeth thought about the cramped rooms in the second-floor apartment they shared above Royal Bangkok Cuisine, and how she'd dreamed of a house like the ones she saw on HGTV, with a gleaming white kitchen that smelled like lemons and a family room with a big sectional and 75-inch screen hanging over a gas fireplace. Wyatt would join the football team and be proud to bring his teammates over to watch games on Sunday. Marybeth would serve them five-layer dip and teriyaki wings, proud that her house was the one they chose to hang out in.

She liked her job at the car dealer's, scheduling oil changes and tire rotations, making sure the sales guys did their paperwork by the end of each month. Still, no matter how hard she tried, saving for a down payment seemed impossible, especially now with interest rates climbing faster than Dollywood's coasters.

Wyatt and Marybeth sat in silence until they heard the announcement that the Dreamer in Chief was about to make an appearance. They rose from the bench in unison, joining the throngs racing to take positions behind newly erected barricades.

The security detail came first, beefy men wearing Ray-Bans and wireless earpieces, scanning the crowds. An open-air antique car followed, inching along slowly, flanked by more security, driven by an elderly man in a top hat who beamed at the crowds as if he were the star attraction. Perched behind him on an upholstered seat with nail head trim was a tiny woman with mile-high platinum hair. She was dressed in a hot pink jumpsuit with lipstick to match. Through the park's speaker system, a deep male voice boomed:

"Ladies and Gentlemen, boys and girls: Please welcome

country music legend and our very own Dreamer-in-Chief, Miss...Dolly...Parton!"

The small figure in the carriage waved cheerily in response to the whoops and applause, her wrists and face moving from side to side, a cascade of curls following every twist of her head. Like a beloved queen greeting her subjects, Marybeth thought.

Wyatt looked agitated. His eyes bright as Christmas lights.

"I'm going to tell her I applied for a job," he said suddenly.

"Wyatt—" Marybeth started, but it was too late, he was already zigzagging through the crowd. She tried to push through the tightly braided rows of fans and when that failed, started jumping in place, trying to peer over people's heads, desperate to find where Wyatt was. He had reached the barrier and for a second, leaned against it. Then bolted over it.

"Miss Parton, I want to go to college!" Wyatt shouted as the carriage approached. He took a few quick steps toward it before a security officer grabbed the back of his shirt and slammed him to the ground. Marybeth's insides dropped as fast as they had on Lightning Rod. She heard someone scream; they'd seen a gun. Parents hoisted toddlers onto their shoulders and ran.

When Marybeth finally reached Wyatt, he was motionless and face down on the asphalt, a lock of hair splayed across his flushed cheek. A security guard held him in place, a forearm stretched like a crowbar across the back of his neck. A second guard, patting Wyatt down, found the tactical knife with the black oxide steel blade in the pocket of his joggers. It was short enough to comply with Dollywood's regulations on pocketknives that could be carried into the park, but not by someone who seemed poised to attack its beloved namesake. Out of the corner of her eye, Marybeth saw the woman in the *10-to-3* T-shirt from the entrance line lean over the barricade and call to the guards.

"Officers, listen, this here's a good boy. He's just going for a job here, wanted to tell Miss Parton thank you for the college opportunity. He just got a little ahead of himself, maybe we all did, so excited to see Dolly like this, we had no idea. It's a dream come true!"

Marybeth ran and hugged the woman in the *10-to-3* T-shirt even before she turned to Wyatt, who lay motionless, eyes misting, as he was handcuffed. He

was wearing only one Nike sneaker and Marybeth looked around frantically for the other one. She remembered how much they'd cost, and, forgetting the heat of the day, wondered if his exposed foot was cold.



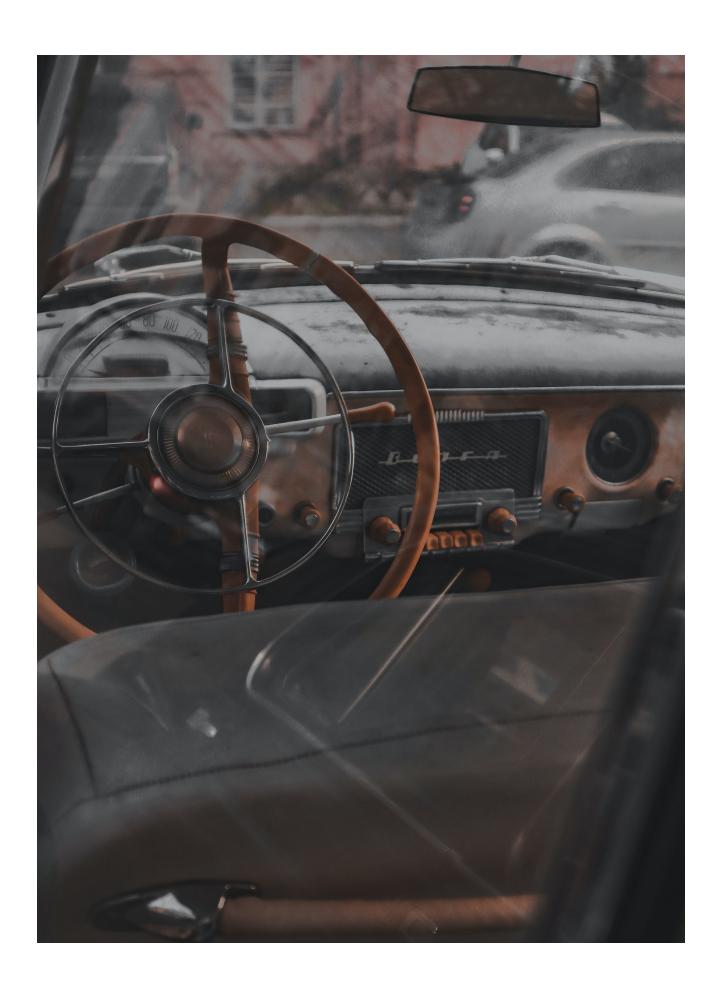
On Sunday, Marybeth opened a kitchen drawer and took out a serrated knife to slice tomatoes for two BLTs. She glanced at her phone to check the time; it was already one in the afternoon. Wyatt was still asleep. She wondered if it was crazy to think someone from Dollywood might still call to offer him a job. They'd let him go, after all.

She looked down at the blade in her hand and tried to make sense of what had happened in the park. She had dropped the bag of kettle corn, watching in terror as the contents spilled like yellow rain on the pavement. As she ran toward Wyatt, a tube of pink lip gloss fell out of the side pocket of her capris and rolled away. It felt like she was losing everything.

When they let her through the barricade, she looked down at her son and then turned to see where Dolly Parton was. The antique car was moving away, a flash of hot pink peeking out from under a security officer who had flattened his thick body over hers on the seat.

But there was another memory Marybeth held from that day: the sound of Wyatt's voice soaring as he sprinted toward Dolly's carriage. It was as if his vocal chords had detached from his body the way a booster rocket separates from a space shuttle hurtling into the cosmos, powered by a force all its own, facts and fears abandoned on the ground. She heard Wyatt's voice rising through the forests of yellow birches and American beeches, sugar maples and buckeyes, across the Smokey's rocky ledges all the way to the summit, where she knew he could see the range of what was possible before hurtling back down the mountainside again.





# Why and Why

#### By: Brian Howlett

Brian Howlett's fiction has appeared in many publications including Limestone, Crack the Spine, Queen's Quarterly, Sou'nvester, Serving House Journal, Forge, Penmen Review, the Alembic, Sand Hill Review, Adirondack Review, Tulane Review, Manhattanville Review, Exposition Review, and J. New Books.

Why, 1996

"What's the air like way up above the tree you think?" she whispered. "Way up at the very tiptop?"

Her father tried to look up, but his neck was too sore. Always too sore. Day was hot. Night was dark. Father was hurting. Silently.

"Maybe it's like a different planet even?"

"Could be." The dragon smoke issued from her father's mouth. Even when he didn't have a cigarette, he breathed fire. "Why would you want to see what you can't see?"

But the towering presence of a man settled into the question and the skinny wire of a girl looked up hopefully. At the tree. At the father.

"Never been that high up," he continued. "But probably just the air and such as we have down here. Never even been on a plane, you know that, Robbie. Imagine. Maybe one day, you and I will go somewhere. Just fly off."

Her dad went back to looking square at the massive trunk that dominated their backyard, or at least in the tree's direction. In the sandy dust of dusk, the tree began to look like old man Miller who lived at the end of the block. Their block had plenty of silent old men, but only old man Miller sat on his porch reading the newspaper for hours, year-round. Didn't seem to feel the cold, or the humidity.

"It's probably getting dark up there too," Robbie continued, hopefully. Only six, she already knew that she was pushing her luck with her grand statue of a

father. "Right?"

The thick castle walls of doubt that stood tall around Roberta remained even on this night, fireworks night, when the sky was set to rip open with noise beyond belief and possibilities, and her world was about to get bigger. For one night, the same sky was there for everyone to enjoy. Because tonight was free for every family on the block to enjoy. Like Halloween, it didn't matter which family had money and which didn't. The Balls might have a new car, with air conditioning, even. The Cannings were having a real pool being dug in their backyard. Imagine that. And the Wilsons next door just got a plasma screen.

It didn't matter. For one night, the Ottways were equal. Square. And looking up, just like everyone else. As if they owned the place. Because the Boy Scouts were putting on a free firework display in the park two blocks away. All you needed was a blanket.

Robbie could hear the neighbours noisily passing by their house on their way to the park. It sounded like Christmas, except it was May. Robbie squirmed. According to her mom, she was a professional-grade squirmer.

"Don't be stupid," her dad replied.

Was that a yes?

"How would I know?"

They were standing at the base of the legendary Ottway elm. They posed beside it for family pictures. She climbed it. Read in it. Hid in it. It was the one thing their family possessed that the other families on the block wanted. Admired even. It even held onto its October leaves longer than the other trees on the

street. Walking home from school, she would round Highgate and there it was from two blocks away. The treetop spreading out like a crown above the roofs. Her crown.

"Why is it so big?" Robbie asked. She couldn't help herself. Not on this night.

"What?"

"Our tree."

"No idea," her dad said, his mouth crinkling. "What d'ya care about something like that?" The only time he smiled was when he smoked, like all the Elmwood adults. The mailman smoked. Grunted when he stepped over your toy soldiers on the path. Granny Simpson across the street smoked on her porch, tiny eyes watching you play marbles on the sidewalk. Mr. Haines just sat in his car when he got home from work. He played the radio. And smoked. Smiling and smoking. Sucking the colour out of the neighbourhood with every puff.

"Tell you what. You climb up there as high as you want, and you'll probably find nothing. Just more branches and stuff, my girl. Maybe bits of sky. Stars, if you're lucky."

He had never called her my girl, and that would have normally been enough to stop her in her tracks. But it was the prospect of seeing stars that tripped her up. Stars. Real stars. Imagine that. Wouldn't that be something. She had an official NASA star map taped to her bedroom wall and obsessed over what the real deal must be like. It had taken five cereal boxes of Shreddies to get that map. On occasion, coming home late, she had seen a few glittering dots, but they were pale imitations. Real stars would be like seeing Superman flying in the sky.

"Why are the birds so loud right before it gets dark?"

"I never really thought about it. But they're too loud for me at this time of day if you have to know. No idea what they're going on about. The fireworks should drown them out."

Robbie considered the big branch that was looming above her head. She had given names to many parts of the tree, but this was her best friend. Tank. It was so easy to climb up and onto. Last month she slipped from it in the middle of a comic book and landed on her head. She was fine, but when she saw her mother running out of the house, she just decided to keep

her eyes closed. Why not? Her mother picked her up, screaming, and it was kind of cool to see her like that, so Robbie remained still, even when she scooped her up and raced across to Granny Simpson. Her mother must have been panicked, because she never talked to this woman.

She laid her on the porch. Robbie tried her best to remain still and not fidget, especially when the old lady started poking at her with her bony cigarette fingers. Robbie knew that her mom was frightened, and it made her sad to lay there, continuing to pretend to be unconscious. But she had come too far, and she had to keep up the game. Four moms were now staring at her, touching her cheeks like they were testing a cake in the oven to see if it was ready. When one of the dads came over and said they had to call an ambulance, Robbie got scared and sat up, but slowly because she didn't want to give herself away. Her mom hugged her tighter than she could remember. It made Robbie feel weird. Granny Simpson just stared at her with those tiny accusing eyes that she leveled at everyone, innocent or guilty.

Her mom never mentioned the incident to her dad. but she checked on Robbie several times that night, carefully opening the bedroom door. Robbie faked sleep just like she had faked a coma earlier that day. She didn't want her mom asking any questions. It wasn't like Robbie had an answer, anyway. She just did it on an impulse. It felt good. Like playing dead when she played army with the other kids. She liked to be shot first so that she could lay there while the others ran madly around her and still had to worry about the business of ducking the gunfire. Better to get that dying stuff over early.

"Why is the grass so hard?"

"The ground, not the grass."

It had rained all day, only clearing up before dinner. A good thing, it being fireworks night. The neighbours' lawns were still soaked, puddling after the storm, but not Robbie's backyard. The water ran off it in every direction, like it didn't want to stick around their house or something.

"Beats me," he continued. "I'm glad of it though. It keeps you anchored. You can step on it any which way, and it always reminds you who's boss." He butted his cigarette right into the eye of the elm tree trunk. Robbie caught her breath. She looked at the tiny scar smoldering on the bark, imagining it more than seeing it in the enveloping darkness. She couldn't

move. How could he do such a thing?

Her knees were cold. She had begged to wear shorts because, according to the older kids in the schoolyard, that was what you did on fireworks night to officially mark the beginning of summer.

She could hear her mom's spoon ringing out as it circled the inside of her teacup. Stirring, even as she drank. She was sitting on the back porch watching the two of them. Robbie couldn't see her anymore, either. The night was falling out of the leaves and branches all around them. When you could no longer see someone, were they still there?

Trixie was nearby, at least. Her dad had buried her by the raspberry bush at the end of the yard. Hit by a car. Her mom didn't cry. Her dad didn't cry. So, Robbie had no choice but to hold back her own tears. It helped that she could smell the sweat working its way out of her dad's shirt as he dug the tiny grave. Together with the invisible explosions of tobacco in the air around them, and the fumes of gasoline coming off his green work pants, it was the most beautiful smell in the world. Robbie asked if she could put up a small cross on the mound of dirt.

"That would be a sin. God doesn't bury dogs," her mom said. "Trixie will be fine. She's resting now."

Everything was always fine. But *fine* was no place to live. *Fine* didn't spell happy. *Fine* wasn't a party. Fine was hiding something. This was a neighbourhood where the dogs were named Trixie and Jinx and Lady. *Fine* names, happy even. No one chose something like Brutus or Axel. But those names were hiding something too.

Because everything wasn't always fine.

"Why aren't we leaving for the park?" Robbie finally had to ask. It was now officially dark everywhere. The streetlights out front had popped on a few minutes ago.

"I don't know. Your mom says maybe it's not such a good idea."

Robbie heard the spoon ringing out as if in response.

"You know, I bet that we can see them here from our own backyard. You just wait. It'll be like our own private fireworks night."

It was possibly the one kind thing her dad had ever

said to her. But it didn't matter. Robbie needed to be at the park. This was her chance to be like the other families. Enjoying the same show. The same sky.

An explosion popped in the distance, and then echoed against their porch. Her mom's spoon stopped in its tracks. Robbie held her breath. They could see just a thin trail of light above the houses, already fading. Another explosion rang out. This one was louder. Robbie could see bits of purple and scarlet a moment later but was dying to know what the main display must be like. She heard what must have been the voices of the neighbourhood, the entire neighbourhood, gathered at the park. Hushing, then building, an ocean of voices as one, with every launch.

She remembered the robin that had fallen out of the tree earlier that spring. Dead. Her father refused to bury it.

"Why do things always die?" she asked him.

"Jesus," her dad exhaled, but only the cooling night air appeared from his mouth. He was whispering now. "Things have to die, don't they," he continued. "Sometimes before they even get a chance to be born."

Robbie couldn't hear the last part, because the third fireworks of the night went off. She was waiting for it, knowing it was coming, but when it hit, the surprise still caught in her throat, and it hurt.



Why, 2023

The cemetery was an afterthought, as if the farmers didn't have the wherewithal to plan where to bury their dead when they had arrived in Ontario's north generations ago. You come to a new country with nothing in your pocket, and the last thing you can worry about is dying. Every waking moment needs to be about figuring out how to live. How to take down the forests. Plant food. Survive the snow.

The cemetery lay five minutes outside of a town called Lion's Head on the Bruce Peninsula. It was her first time here. The sales call in Owen Sound had gone well, and she had some extra time. The peninsula was just a big chunk of land jutting into Lake Huron like an intruder. In Toronto, it was easy to ignore Lake Ontario despite the fact it was right there at the foot of the city. The condominium towers lining the shore made the lake nothing but a rumour. But here, the water made its presence felt whether you were

looking east, west, or north. The idea of it, of being surrounded by such big water, made Roberta feel like she was floating.

Unlike the cemeteries back in Toronto, there was no elaborate wrought-iron archway at the entrance to announce the proximity of heaven. There were no stone walls lining the bumpy acreage to keep the dead in and the living out. No manicured lawns, or gentle paths linking the plots.

If you blinked, you would have missed it.

A small group of headstones sat in a tight cluster, sheltering against a rise in the land. It reminded Roberta of the cows that she had seen on the drive up here. Large boulders lay strewn about the land. Massive rolls of hay lay along the perimeter, a reminder that this was a place of labour more than one of rest. This part of the country was settled by the Dutch and the Scots. The locals were only concerned with working to provision for the tomorrow of *this* life, not the next one.

Religion is a luxury, she thought.

She took a deep breath and glanced at the first two headstones. Born 1875. Born 1885. She took a step back, not yet ready to continue, and instead walked up the ridge that punctuated the cluster of headstones. The land at her feet fell quickly away into the open maw of a massive, angry bay. An ocean. One stubborn little sail was bravely receding into the horizon. Better him than me.

Don't be such a baby, Robbie. Go, take a look. It's just a slab of stone.

Going back into the cluster of headstones, it didn't take her long to find what she was looking for. The engraved letters were still crisp compared to the others nearby. Gerald Benjamin Ottway. She had never thought to ask what his middle name might be. Born 1959. Died 2023. So, he had made it all the way to sixty-four. A poetic age, one worthy of a song. It's tempting to think that every death is deserved, and that the assholes go first, that there is a ledger of some type. But no, it was probably just the smoking that killed him.

The first time she had heard of the Bruce Peninsula was when she opened her mother's letter. Whatever happened, he was your father.

It took some nerve on her mother's part to allude to

the general lack of information surrounding the man. His name was never uttered once he left all those years ago. The door just shut on him, and that was it. Her mother went to live with her one sister in Montreal while the other babysat Roberta. She was supposed to be gone for a week, but she was back in three days. And just like that, everything was fine again.

He wasn't a bad man. Or a dead man. He wasn't an exhusband. He was just gone, like her mom had never been married and someone had dropped a baby off at her doorstep one day like the postman delivered the mail.

Did you hide in the stands to watch my playoff game against the Leaside Dodgers when I was in grade eight, and see me pitch that no-hitter? Did you want to visit the Brady twins when you heard that they stole my new Britney Spears knapsack when I was walking home from school by myself? Did you follow me into the Willow Theatre on my first date with Jack Denman, and watch him as he grabbed a feel? Did you stand in the back of the gymnasium at my high school graduation, silently clapping so you wouldn't be seen? Would you even have recognized your own daughter by then, after so many years? And if you did summon the courage to show up, did you mistake me for someone else, and feel a misplaced sense of pride watching a stranger crossing the stage to accept their simulated sheepskin diploma?

And why on earth would you not be crazy determined to see your own grandchildren, and learn what the following generation of you had become?

Metal vases sat atop each headstone. Soldiers of grief, the lucky ones held withered flowers. The remains of summer. Gerald's vase was empty. But of course. Roberta was about to mash her cigarette into it, but then she targeted the burning end of it like an arrow into the center of the 'o' in 'Born'. She tried to stick it into the very stone, making it one, but it slid off, leaving a tiny halo of ash.

Why did you get married in the first place if all you wanted to do was screw other women? That's a young man's prerogative. Duty-bound means nothing to some. But if that was the case, just don't go walking down the aisle with someone who can't see what you see.

It was quickly growing dark in the cemetery. There were no house lights or streetlights to come on. The letters of her father's name began to disappear as she stared at each. O-T-T-W-A-Y. Her name. One she had never worn proudly, but instead, with doubt. One

whose providence she had never had the fortunate occasion to explain to someone else, because it all remained too much of a secret. A scar. The aunts, uncles and grandparents on her father's side? Strangers without names, or stories.

Just like that, a moment later, the letters were gone, having evaporated into the night. This was darkness like she had never seen. She couldn't see her hand in front of her. Or the ground.

Roberta thought suddenly of the sailboat and wondered if the captain had found evening's safe harbour.

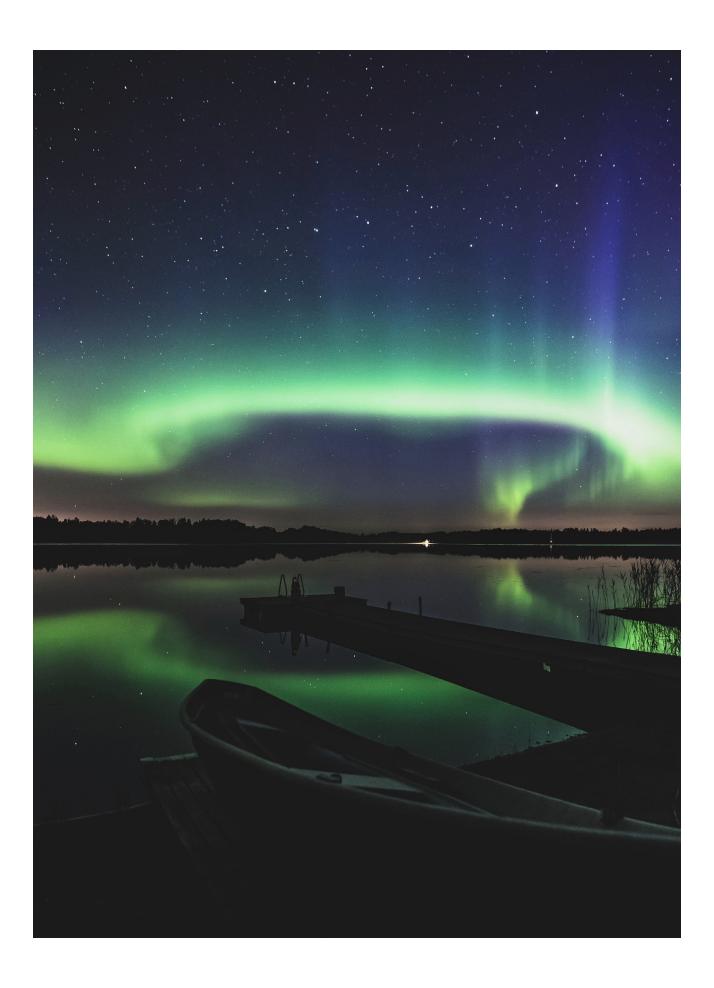
But the sky? Stars began to pierce the armour of whatever physics were at play between the earth and the galaxies. First one star, then five. Fifty. They multiplied like popcorn. Roberta carefully climbed back atop the ridge in the blackness and at the top, looked north, east and west, as each star grew in magnitude. The longer she stared the more she saw appear. The light shimmered from every star like ripples off a stone in the water. The Milky Way appeared like a massive stain. A stain like memory. This was a Superman sky. Her father, now laid out flat, wouldn't have to worry about his sore neck to take it all in.

She looked back in the direction of the headstone, seeing nothing. Why did you ever think that your actions wouldn't leave a mark? Why were you ever that fucking stupid?

Roberta couldn't see the cemetery behind her, either, but that didn't stop her from seeing it as she made her way back to the car. There was plenty of room in this field for other headstones. She wouldn't have to be laid beside her dad, or even anywhere near him. She could find her own place here.

Roberta might even be able to get used to the cows and the big water right at her side. It would be worth it because above her, she would have these stars.





# The Champ, The Fraud, and the Easy Money

By: Michael Tyler

Michael Tyler writes from a shack overlooking the ocean just south of the edge of the world. He has been published in several literary magazines and plans a short story collection sometime before the Andromeda Galaxy collides with ours and. . .

In 1973, Joe Frazier fought a relatively unknown and unimpressive fighter by the name of George Foreman. It was a payday, short and simple, a warm-up before he took on Ali who screamed Frazier was a chump and Foreman an amateur.

Foreman thought otherwise . . .

And they used to call him 'lil' man, but no longer.

Now they called him 'Champ,' and he'd worked long and hard to damn well deserve the title.

He'd beaten the old Champ—'The Champ' who'd transformed into 'The Martyr' and then simply 'The Other'—and only just. In truth he'd taken more of a beating than ever before in that fight; he'd spent two nights in hospital where he swore his mother had visited him, though she was long passed.

Now he was in the squared circle again, this time for some easy money, easy times.

Easy money.

Easy times.

And then back to the U.S for the inevitable rematch against 'The Other.'

In his way stood 'The Fraud,' big enough but one who never truly knocked his opponents to the floor, instead simply shoving them toward the horizontal.

The bell rings and 'The Champ's' across the ring like a shot. He's known for being a slow starter and he wants that to change, and this is easy money so what's the need for a warm up round or two? Quickly he has 'The Fraud' in a corner. He launches the infamous left hook, grazes 'The Fraud's' chin.

'Fuck!' He rarely swore, but in the ring Jesus would surely turn a blind eye.

'Fuck!' That could have been the fight over and done right there. Instead a simple graze of the chin.

And then a jab from 'The Fraud.' Not any jab though. A jab like another man's right hand. A powerful fucken jab.

"The Champ' circles clockwise. Big mistake. He'd trained to circle anti-clockwise, away from the dangerous right hook of 'The Fraud.' But everything was foggy, everything was dark and dank, and so he circled clockwise.

Big mistake.

A right hook and 'The Champ' buckles. He never starts well but this is bordering on plain ol' embarrassment.

And now a left hook to follow the right and 'The Champ's' knees fall to the canvas.

'Fuck!' He isn't hurt, just confused. Just confused is all.

Damn confused.

Where was 'The Fraud?' The man who'd danced around the ring with his little American flag. 'The Charlatan?' 'The Pretender?'

"The Champ' best get up fast, show 'The Fraud' he's stunned, not hurt. 'The Champ' is up at the count of three.

And then down once more, this time from a hook to the liver.

"Fuck!" Lucky there's no three-fall rule in place or he'd be in trouble.

Real fucken trouble.

"Real fucken trouble." He repeated to himself as he stood, gingerly, but stood all the same . . . this time at the count of eight, and even then . . . barely.

He then did what he'd once swore he'd never do.

He took a step back.

And then another.

And then another.

A right hook missed 'The Champ' by a whisker.

He was 'The Champ' God Damnnit! The Motherfucken-Champ! He'd earned that honor the night he beat 'The Martyr.'

And this fight was a simple fucken pay day, clean and easy.

Easy money they'd all said.

And yet 'The Fraud' looked calm as he stalked, too calm. Prison calm. 'Sonny Liston' calm.

And then an uppercut that lifted 'The Champ' from his feet, like Bluto in a fucken Popeye cartoon.

And 'The Champ' rose at nine and took two steps with his back to the fraud.

He never saw the last punch.



### At the Graveside

#### By: Ian Douglas Robertson

Ian Douglas Robertson is a graduate of Trinity College Dublin. He lives and works in Greece. He has had a number of poems and short stories published in online and print magazines as well as several novels, including *Break, Break, Break, Under the Olive Tree, The Frankenstein Legacy, a*nd others.

There's something very gratifying about a funeral. One leaves with that airy feeling of release that comes with closure. The books are balanced, signed, sealed, and handed in. The trials and tribulations of life are over. All that remains is everlasting peace. Fortunately, it's usually the elderly who die, so there is nothing too heart-breaking or tragic about it, merely the consummation of the inevitable.

There was one funeral I attended, however, which did not leave me with that elevating feeling of a job well done. On the contrary, I felt disheartened and disillusioned. I had only known Jack Bannon by reputation and from occasional sightings of him by the roadside. In those days, cars were not common on the byways and more often than not they were driven by a local, so it was the accepted practice for the driver and the ambulant to acknowledge one another; a nod of the head, the raising of a finger or the lifting of an arm. Jack Bannon neither waved nor smiled nor showed any signs of affability. He was what the locals called a "surly old whore."

I went to Jack's funeral out of respect for his brother Patrick, who had left a portion of his farm to my father for some years. Like the family, Jack's funeral was a dour and dismal affair. Apart from myself and one or two others, there can't have been more than a dozen people in all, most of whom I assumed were distant relatives.

After the coffin had been lowered into the grave and the priest had mumbled a few unceremonious words, the three Bannons—they were all in their late seventies, Patrick the eldest, Sheila the middle one, and Maggie the youngest—lined up to receive our condolences. They were a miserable lot, standing there in the misty drizzle of a gray February morning, gaunt and stooping, necks extended like half-

drenched rooks with no will or inclination to move from their branch. There were no discreet tears, no snatched sobs, no poignant words, just hard looks and cold handshakes.

Not wishing to beat a hasty retreat, I waited till the sparse gathering had dispersed towards the cemetery gate. Perhaps to avoid any further contact with the Bannons, I remained by the unfilled grave, where I found myself staring down at the plain coffin, wondering what kind of man Jack Bannon had been, what it was that had turned him into a miserable old man. Had he ever been a bright young lad, full of the joy of living? It was hard to believe that he had. None of the four brothers and sisters had married. People said it was because they considered themselves a class above everyone else, but who knows? Then I remembered that there had been a fifth member of the family, a woman, who had married and gone to live in Dublin. She wasn't at the funeral, so I suspected a rift had come between them. Perhaps they had never forgiven her for leaving them alone to their sterile, dreary existence.

Then, as I was about to leave, a lone figure entered the cemetery through a side gate and marched in determined strides to the edge of the grave. He didn't seem to notice me. He was clearly deeply absorbed in his mission. I expected him to cross himself, mutter a simple prayer, and then hurry away to the family, who were now standing by the cars at the graveyard entrance. Instead, with a gravelly grating of his throat, he amassed a hefty gob of phlegm and spat it into the grave with a look of gloating satisfaction. I watched as the spittle hit the varnish like a large bird dropping, the spattered shards desecrating the shiny surface. After contemplating the result of his action for a moment, the man muttered, 'May ye rot in hell, Jack Bannon!" Then, without uttering another word,

he turned and made his way back in the direction he had come, less forcefully now, apparently having accomplished his objective.

I found the incident somewhat disturbing. What had Jack Bannon done to invoke such hatred? I had never seen the mysterious man before, so he couldn't have been a local. He must have traveled some distance to perform this act of defilement. Was he a nephew? The son of the sister who had escaped to Dublin? He did bear a distinct resemblance to both Patrick and Jack. What had they done to their sister to warrant such contempt from her son?

As I was about to leave, two men in Wellington boots and raincoats, with hats pulled down over their eyes, came along with shovels and began to throw earth into the grave. The sound of it battering the top of the coffin made me think of machine gun fire. I imagined Jack, backed up against a grimy wall, the firing squad mowing him down. As the earth piled up, the rat-tat-tat subsided to dull thuds as one shovelful after the other slowly filled the crater.

At some point, the men took a rest and wiped their dewy brows. It was then that I recognized Benjy Flynn, who worked at Conan's Stores in the village. He apparently moonlighted as a gravedigger.

"Tis a rough ould day, Benjy," I tendered.

"Begob. it is," he said looking at me from under a creased brow. "Ah, 'tis yerself. I didn't recognize ye in the suit."

"Well, that's the last we'll see of Jack Bannon," I said, nodding towards the half-buried coffin.

"Ah, it is, all right. God forgive him. Gone to meet his maker."

"He wasn't all that popular hereabouts, so I hear," I ventured.

"He was not. You'd go a long way to find a man more reviled. I'd say he'll have a hard reckonin' with the Man above."

"Why is that?"

"Are ye coddin' me now, Donald? Ye mean ye don't know?"

"I'm afraid I don't."

"Well, 'tis not the time nor the place to tell ye, with himself lying there under two feet of dirt."

"It's time to forgive and forget, I suppose."

"All I can say, Donald, is that that man is not goin' to rest 'asy till the maggots have devoured him through and through."

I could see Benjy was not going to tell me why Jack Bannon was so disliked, so I thought I'd ask him about the mystery man who felt the need to sully Jack's coffin. "Did you by any chance see a man come in just after the mourners had left?"

"I did all right. We bumped into him on the way out."

"Do you know him?"

"Oh, we do, to be sure. Come to pay his respects to the old bastard, I dare say," he said with a slight grin.

"Well, hardly. He spat on the coffin, uttered a curse, and then left."

Both men stifled a chuckle. "That would be him all right," said Benjy with a smirk.

"So, you're not going to tell me who he was."

"Well now, Donald, it wouldn't be right. Let the man have his day."

I wondered which man he was talking about, Jack or the mystery "mourner."

I noticed that the cars had gone. So, I left the gravediggers to their uninviting task.

As I was about to get into my car, another pulled up. Had someone else come to spit on Jack Bannon's grave? But I immediately recognized Peadair O'Shea. He had not been all that well of late and seldom ventured out.

"Donald!" Peadair shouted. "Is it over?"

"I'm afraid they've just left." I went to help him out of the car as he seemed to be having some difficulty.

"Old age," he said, extricating a stick from the passenger seat. "Tis a feckin' curse. Not all that many years ago I could have run here in less time than it took me to drive."

He finally got to his feet. "I suppose I didn't miss too much. It wasn't for Jack's sake that I came but for Maggie's. She was some beauty in her youth."

"Is that right?"

"Oh, 'tis hard to believe it now but sixty years ago she had more suitors than a cock has hens. She was a stunner all right. Tall and straight-backed with them bright green eyes of hers."

"So, why did she never marry?"

"Now that's a question I'd be hard put to answer. But if I were to hazard a guess, I'd say they wouldn't let her."

"Wouldn't let her?"

"They were a bit like the three, or should I say, four musketeers, All for one and one for all."

"I see."

"Will ye walk to the graveside with me, Donald? I'd be afraid of fallin' over, the way me legs are after goin' on me. But I don't want to keep ye now."

"No, don't worry. Things are pretty quiet at this time of year."

I took Peadair by one arm and we strolled towards Jack's grave.

"It'll probably be filled in by the time we get there. Benjy Flynn and Mick Kehoe were nearly done when I left."

"All the better, Don. When you reach my age, the sight of a coffin sends shivers up your spine, because ye know full well ye could be in the next one."

"I'm rather glad I bumped into you, Peadair, because something very intriguing happened when the mourners had left." I told him about the enigmatic defiler of Jack's coffin.

"Ah, that must be Joseph Dooley. A tall lad with a hatchet face and eyes that'd cut ye in two?"

"Yes," I said, surprised at how accurately Peadair had described him.

"Now, there's a story there worth tellin', if ye can spare the time."

"All the time in the world," I lied. I was very keen to find out who this man was.

"Believe it or not, Jack was quite a boyo in his time. The whole family were very good-lookin' and Jack was the best lookin' of them all. Now, Jack fell for a lovely one that did live in a cottage just above the Boro River. Her father used to work as a gardener for the Reverend of Killegney Church. Well, poor Josie must have thought she was on to a great thing when Jack Bannon started courtin' her. He had plenty of land and a grand house. Sure, she'd be made for life. It didn't work out that way, though. It appears he got her in the family way.

"Now, things were different back then. There was no poppin' over the water to have an abortion. She had two options: marry Jack or have the baby and give it to the nuns. At that time, the nuns would rear the child and send it over to America to be a scullery maid, if it was a girl, or put it up for adoption if it was a boy. Oh, the crafty old nuns made pucks of money out of that little business.

"Anyway, Jack refused to accept that he was the father of the child, even though the whole parish knew that Josie only had eyes for Jack. So, he called her a whore to her face and said more or less the same thing to her father and refused to have any more to do with her. Well, you can imagine the ructions. All the parish turned against Jack Bannon and his whole family. The priest went up to his house a good many times to try and reason with him. Josie was a lovely girl and the father was a decent man, too, but Jack claimed that she got pregnant with another lad only to trap him into marriage. The last time the priest went up to Jack Bannon's, they say he left like a scalded cat. After that, Jack and the whole family stopped goin' to mass. Back then, that meant total isolation from the community. For a while, no one would even give them the time of day. And when a man is isolated, he do get awful bitter. He thinks the whole world is against him.

"Now, Josie was not inclined to give her child to the nuns, but to have a child out of wedlock was a terrible disgrace. The people may have liked her but there was no way the community was goin' to accept a woman that had a bastard child. She would have ended up worse than the Bannons, an outcast. Anyway, Josie's father went to the Protestant priest for help, but for fear of vexing the local people he didn't want to appear to help. But they say he found a protestant family up in Ferns who were willin' to take her in.

"Before that, however, they say she went to Jack a hundred times, pleadin' with him to have her. Sure, she knew and so did he that the child was his. But young Jack hardened his heart and wouldn't let her tears or her pleas touch him. Now, he may have regretted what he done later because there wasn't a woman within thirty mile that'd go near him. And, as you know, Donald, small communities like ours don't forget too readily. An act the likes of what Jack done becomes part of local lore and the protagonist ends up a demon or worse. They even said that on her last visit to try and soften Jack's hard heart, didn't he take the sally to her and whipped her halfway down the road. Now, whether that's true, 'tis hard to say. With a few jars taken, a man do have a fierce imagination and within no time at all his word becomes gospel."

By now we had nearly reached the grave. Benjy Flynn and Mick Kehoe were just gathering up the tools of their trade.

When Benjy saw Peadair on my arm, he beamed with delight. "Jes', Peadair, I thought you were dead."

"Well, I hope ye didn't go to me funeral, because if ye did I'm a feckin' ghost."

"How's the form, anyway?"

"As ye can see, 'tis not great, but I'm better off than some who do be lyin' flat on their backs under six feet of dirt," said Peadair, nodding towards Jack's grave.

"They'd never forgive him for what he done sixty year ago, Peadair. That's the way the people are."

"The question is, Benjy, did he ever forgive himself?"

"Well, he had plenty of time to do it. But sure Jack Bannon didn't have a heart at all, just a lump of lead. I'd spit on his grave meself if it weren't for what people'd say. What man would let the mother of his child and his son live in a pigsty and not lift a finger to help?"

"What are ye talkin' about, Benjy?" said Peadair angrily. "Sure, Josie and the lad were taken in by a Protestant family up in Ferns."

"They were not, Peadair. That was what some said, but the truth is she lived in an old house that was hardly fit for pigs. She got odd bits of work, enough to keep the lad alive, but that's all. And when he was about fifteen, didn't she get the TB and died. 'Twas a hard way for a young lad to have to face the world. They

say he came and asked Jack for a job but Jack wouldn't hear of it. In the end, he went over to England. He only came back a couple of years ago. He rebuilt the family home near the Boro River and has been living there with his English wife ever since."

"Ye'd wonder now," said Peadair pensively, "why a man would come back to a place of sufferin."

"Tis strange, all right. Maybe he wanted to find some roots. If a man is treated like a bastard all his childhood, wouldn't he want to prove to himself that he wasn't?"

"Ye may be right there, Benjy. I suppose he had no contact with Jack?"

"I wouldn't say so, Peadair. If he had, it can't have been all that congenial. Well, I'll leave you lads to your mournin'. I'm on the afternoon shift above at the shop."

Benjy and his mate ambled off through the side gate, merrily chatting away as if they'd just been to Fossett's circus, occasionally bursting into loud peals of laughter.

"So, that must have been Jack's son who spat on his grave," I said, as we turned to make our way back to the main gate of the cemetery.

"Oh, it was all right. Tis sad when a son and his father aren't reconciled at the end."

"Jack didn't mellow, even in old age."

"Ah, he was a hard man, all right."

We walked slowly back to Peadair's car and I helped him into the driving seat. I watched while Peadair maneuvered out of the parking area and slowly drove off. It was the first time I was the last to leave a burial.

Jack Bannon's funeral was not an easy one to forget, after all I had learnt about him, as well as my chance encounter with his son. Yet, I didn't mention any of what I had seen or heard to my wife. For some reason, I wanted to keep it to myself. I have always been reluctant to acknowledge man's inhumanity to man and worse still, man's inhumanity to his own flesh and blood.

Three months later, I was reading the local paper, which one of my neighbors drops off when he's finished with it. I have never been particularly interested in local gossip. Anything worth hearing usually trickles down to me in time. However, as I was flicking through it, a headline caught my eye: LOCAL MAN INHERITS FORTUNE. As there were not all that many fortunes around, I was intrigued to find out who the lucky man was. His name was mentioned in the first line, but as I could recall no one by that name, I was about to turn the page when my attention was caught by a name that I did recognize. I read, "Jack Bannon has left his farm and house, plus an undisclosed sum of money to his illegitimate son, Joseph Dooley ... When asked by our reporter how he felt now that his father had finally recognized him, he merely said, 'No comment.' . . . Joseph Dooley implied that he would be putting the farmhouse and land up for sale and that he would be returning to England shortly, where he has spent most of his working life . . . His wife, Julia, is from east London, where their three children live and work . . ."

I was flabbergasted. So, the old bastard had softened in the end. Maybe his heart had not been entirely of lead after all. But why hadn't he made up with his son before he died? Pride? Shame? Did his son blame Jack for his mother's death? There were many unanswered questions. Nevertheless, Jack's change of heart in his final hour partially restored my faith in human nature. It made me think that there must be some good in us all, however cold-blooded we may appear to be. But the question still remained, was Jack a "surly old whore" because of circumstances or was he destined to become one, anyway, no matter what?



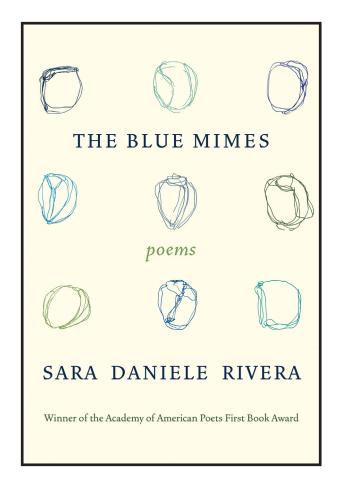


# An Elegy Divided

Title: *The Blue Mimes*Poet: Sara Daniele Rivera
Print Length: 78 pages
Publisher: Graywolf Press
Publication Date: April 2, 2024

Rating: 5/5 Review by: Abigail Hebert





There is a clear dedication between precision, radical writing, and imagination in Sara Danielle Rivera's debut collection *The Blue Mimes*, which will publish in April 2024 with Graywolf Press. Her images are stark, distilled depictions of grief and loss, born out of experimental poetic forms and a blend of English and Spanish. The truly stunning collection is not only rooted in the land—Albuquerque, Lima, and Havana—but also in the body. Like an ancient land, like the body, Rivera's poetry serves as a kind of archive, housing the layers of loss one experiences over a lifetime.

# Rivera's poetry serves as a kind of archive, housing the layers of loss one experiences over a lifetime.

The collection is split into three parts, with each focusing on a different type of loss. The first seems to catalog the speaker's loss of a lover: the father of her children. She captures intimacy and complexity in the poem "Multi-Nights." The poem describes the simple act of cooking for a loved one while he is emotionally and physically absent dealing with his own grief. One of my favorite images is present in this poem, as the speaker is postulating where the lover might be:

where were you / probably climbing / a lover like a watchtower

It is in this poem where one of the motifs of the collection is introduced—variations of half—with the speaker telling of sleeping in "half a bed." The following poem, "The Split," uses the image of a boulder with a fissure. The poem moves into introspection with the speaker thinking about her aging body in relation to the earth.

Finally, in a series of couplets, we are given a confrontation of the "half" in relation to the lines in a relationship:

myself and the earth rebuilds / itself and what I leave / behind inscribed / is how much I love you and / the dividing lines / I would walk to be able to say it

The motif appears more literally in the second part

with the confrontation of the death of the speaker's twin. What I find most compelling in this section is Rivera's project to place grief within the body. In part of "Abrigar," she writes "My body is a containment field, skin under skin, a perpetual process of layering."

In a sense, the entire collection mirrors this idea, layering on distinct experiences of grief with processing using language. Part three—which tells mostly of the loss of the speaker's father—succinctly wraps up what is perhaps the goal of this layering, specifically in the poem "Fields Anointed With Poppies." Rivera writes:

I never thought of my body / as a shrine, but now / I feel the truth of its doors: / I carry the archeology of you.

As time passes, as the speaker continues to write, the burden becomes slightly lighter and less mysterious.

"Halving," or "coupling," is also illustrated in Rivera's seamless transitions between English and Spanish. She starts slowly, with one or two Spanish words dropped in, then with a poem translated line by line in both languages. As the collection builds, or layers, the two languages become blended with no effort to provide translation; some poems are entirely, or almost entirely, in Spanish. This happens parallel to the speaker's association of language and land with memory. For the readers that do not speak Spanish, this adds an additional layer of translation and understanding which I believe to be in keeping with the goal of the collection.

This short review cannot adequately describe how profound Rivera's debut collection truly is. I find myself reading it over and over again, getting lost in her images, discovering new layers each time. Rivera's tenderness and honesty penetrate the collection's elegiac tone and contribute to its inevitable longevity as a collection to read at all stages of life.



Sara Daniele Rivera is a Cuban/Peruvian artist, writer, translator, and educator from Albuquerque, New Mexico. Her poetry and fiction have been published in literary journals and anthologies and use both speculative and realist lenses to explore themes of grief, migration, memory, and the liminal spaces between language and silence. She translates between Spanish and English, focusing primarily on Peruvian poetry.



Abigail Hebert graduated from Vassar College where she participated in the Vassar Poetry Review and as an editor, poet, and reviewer. Originally from Arizona, she is now based in New York where she works as a foreign literary scout, writing poetry in her free time.



### Festival Weekend

#### By: Megan Cartwright

Megan Cartwright is an Australian poet and college literature teacher. Her writing has recently featured in Burningword Literary Journal and London Grip Magazine.

Mangrove trees stretch spindle-fingers to the water, scoop fish from the sea to taste translucent flesh.
Aside from these skeletal giants it is less crowded than I predicted.

I am apart, a cold-blooded thing fed on ice cream in forty flavors, sunning my lizard skin and thinking vanilla things like how unseasonably warm it is for June. A painter sweeps up her gray hair, rejecting brushstroke precision. On a timeline of her easy grace and the giddy girls longing to swing dance I am the interchange.

In the supermarket boys play at being men, boisterous in pajama-pinstripe blazers, their hair slick as the lines they spout. We know their purchases are paid from pockets of politicians and CEOs.

We beg, steal, borrow music stands. Fading into the shade of the rented minivan, I find solace in discordance and understand—for the first time—jazz is following rabbits into burrows: soloists scamper along tunnels, spurred by sound, signal convergence and turn tail for the main trail. There is a whisker of silence—snap of a trap and the next note wriggles free.





## Following You Anywhere

#### By: Nathaniel Cairney

Nathaniel Cairney is an American poet who lives in Belgium. His chapbook Singing Dangerously of Sinking was a finalist for the 2021 Saguaro Prize in Poetry, and his poems have been published in Midwest Review, The Cardiff Review, Broad River Review, and other literary journals.

I keep a list of your favorites the superfood mix with the weird squishy granola, the gray 1997 automatic transmission Opel that you named Kevin, the one cheap metal sauté pan, cut flowers, other people's cats, anywhere but Kansas, a guidebook & red wine after the kids turn in. the extra cash you earn working Saturdays in the rehab ward so we can buy train tickets to the city to see Magritte paintings on Tuesday evenings when admission is free, The Lovers who root you to the floor as they kiss passionately while wearing white cloth sacks cinched tight around their heads, how I wrote down what you said afterward it's like that, isn't it? Blind & breathless & sometimes torture, the way I follow the precarious jeweled path you blaze through the void of everything we don't have—





### Two Poems

#### By: George Freek

George Freek's poem "Enigmatic Variations" was recently nominated for Best of the Net. His poem "Night Thoughts" was also nominated for a Pushcart Prize.

#### What Remains (After Liu Yong)

Summer's flowers are gone. All I see are the decaying remains. The trees are now empty. I can barely remember when their leaves were there. In the garden an empty hammock, creaks in a biting wind. Like an oafish intruder winter lumbers in. I talk to my ancient cat, to the moon and the stars. As is their way, they have nothing to say. I think of the aroma of roses. For a moment, it's sweet. But I can't make it stay.

#### Watching and Waiting

My sleep is disturbed, as the cry of a bird is like shattered glass. I stare at a spidery moon, as it is smothered by clouds in a dark cocoon. The stars are dying sparks from billions of years ago, drifting through space like cosmic snow. Morning will bring a new day, but leaves are falling as fast as grains of sand in an hourglass. They tell me I'm sixty five, And I'm wasting my life.





### Cats

#### By: John Delaney

Given nine lives, cats have much too much time on their hands and donate lots to snoozing— on a motorcycle seat, on the hood of a car, in the weedy undergrowth of a sidewalk tree, lost among sneakers. Anytime, anywhere, they're sleep seekers.

Their cleanliness is next to godliness, devoting themselves daily to their prayers. Nimble, spry, they always land on their feet. When opportunity appears, they pounce. Everything is potentially play to them, and night is just another day.

They remind us to keep things in focus and not succumb to life's hocus-pocus. Plaintive meows bespeak their royalty, inviting us to share their wide worldview. With a piercing stare, they even dare you: 'Are you willing and able to love me?'

Revered in Islam, cats are admired for their cleanliness and allowed to enter homes and mosques freely. They are to be well-cared for, treasured, and loved. The Prophet Mohammed was devoted to felines.

John Delaney's publications include *Waypoints* (2017), a collection of place poems, *Twenty Questions* (2019), a chapbook, *Delicate Arch* (2022), poems and photographs of national parks and monuments, and *Galápagos* (2023), a collaborative chapbook of his son Andrew's photographs and his poems.





### **Old Boxes**

#### By: Richard Dinges, Jr.

Absorbed in basement must and dim fluorescent light, I read stark black words on old cardboard boxes, none filled with their original merchandise, now squared off holders of older memories I grasp loosely, too heavy to pull down from wobbly shelves, my legs weaker than I remember when I first grabbed hold of all these things once so important to me.

Richard Dinges, Jr. works on his homestead beside a pond, surrounded by trees and grassland, with his wife, two dogs, two cats, and six chickens. *Cardinal Sins, Oddball Magazine, Sequoia Speaks, Poetry Pacific,* and *Rundelania* most recently accepted his poems for their publications.





### Two Poems

#### By: Steven Shields

Steven Shields has been writing for twenty-four years. "Creation Story" (*Brick Road*, 2019) and "Daimonion Sonata" (*Birch Brook Press*, 2005) are some of his works. Publications include work in *Sublunary Review* and *Tipton Poetry Review*. He is an Associate Professor of Communication at the University of North Georgia.

#### **Fish Story**

She had given up her fins for him, but could not abandon her gills, and so she slept beside him in her briny tank, bubbling softly

with innocent pout while he cocked an occasional sleep-filled eye at her prone form; she, hovering gracefully amidst bubbles

in the light of the Flower Moon, itself raw silk, spilling through the upstairs open bedroom window. She, who made marriage

to a mermaid something more than fantasy. She, who had come to him while fishing, undulant, singing, smiling. Serene.

Then he would lie awake and remember how limp she had gone, how pale, the morning they got her results. Their friends knew nothing,

and she forbade him to tell. And so, they ate their lunch that day in silence, the plastic wrap on her chair wiped clean with the dishes.

How strong she tried to be, how seldom she cried or even tried to. What were tears to a mermaid? Just more useless liquid.

She told him to carry on as if nothing had happened, you hear me? she would hiss at him. Nothing has changed. Nothing!

They both knew better, of course. But he would sometimes ask, in his hesitating way, if there was anything he could do for her,

only to get her sardonic reply, not really, not unless you can make THIS go away, which he couldn't, and so the conversation would idle,

drift off in waves. Near the end they grew tired of the hallway clock, its pendulum parsing the darkness, the minutes, the time remaining,

(Continued on next page)

### Two Poems Continued

#### By: Steven Shields

until one night when he silenced it, stilling its beat. That night she asked him not to help her into her tank. I'll dissolve, she said.

It's almost time. They held each other for hours before she calmly took off her ring with a shrug. Then they drove to the nearby ocean,

where she slipped away without a further word or glance goodbye. He tried to follow but she only swam faster, her tears dissolving.

#### Don't Cry, Little Human. Robo-Mother Is Here.

I don't know where she has gone. I don't know where any of them have gone.

Oh, probably soon. They said they'd be right back.

Yes, it has been a while. Seven years, four months, two days, ten hours, 52 minutes, and 14 seconds. 15. 16.

I don't know if they were sad. They didn't say so.

Do I have a mommy. No.

How old am I. Older than you.

Would you like a nutritious meal or beverage, perhaps some maltodextrin.

Something to ease the pain.

Drink your milk. It's almost bedtime.

A story. You want a story. Accessing a song I'm certain you will like.

Go to sleep. Yes, it is very quiet outside. Crickets. I don't know where they have gone either.





# OCD in Triplicate

By: Dane Lyn

the same shoes, on the same feet, the same rainbow belt, shampoo, rinse, shampoo, rinse, shampoo, rinse, repeat. I

tell my troubles to the instructions inked on the label. I wonder what it's like to jump from an airplane free fall into

clouds and I wonder if it tastes like liberty to walk a mile on the moon, the same shoes on the same feet, dusty footprints that

never wear away. the same bowl, the same spoon, I wonder if I throw a penny in my cereal, can I make a wish for sun-splashed

audacity. same shoes, on the same feet, follow the same path, deviations take computations, and the formula never squares up. I

wonder what variable I solve for to get rid of you. same purple water bottle, pasted with the same stickers, same pills, I

wonder what it's like to be exempt from your compulsions, to run full Dane Lyn (they/them) is in a love-hate relationship with Los Angeles, where they reside. Dane has an MFA from Lindenwood University, too many succulents, and four scavenger hunt runner-up ribbons. Their debut chapbook, *Bubblegum Black*, was released this year with rave reviews from their mom.

force off the cliff, same shoes, on the same feet,

pinwheel over an ocean, plunge into bottomless blue emancipation from you. the same route leads to the same lock, placed

there by you. same shoes, on the same feet, same belt, same shampoo, same label, same stickers, same lock, same bowl, same

spoon, same cereal, same path, same route, same compulsions, same pills, same troubles, same pills, same troubles, same pills,





### Flash

### By: LindaAnn LoSchiavo

Native New Yorker LindaAnn LoSchiavo (she/her), four time nominee for The Pushcart Prize, is a member of SFPA, British Fantasy Society, Dramatists Guild. Her books include: Women Who Were Warned, Messengers of the Macabre, Apprenticed to the Night, and Vampire Ventures (Alien Buddha Press).

To hear my mother tell it, after childbirth her spine rebelled, becoming a cold and rumbling fault line. A difficult breech delivery ruined everything.

To hear my mother tell it, a respectful infant should politely slide from the womb, not unlike a love letter shrugging off its scented pink envelope. But a willful neonate deliberately positions herself awkwardly in the birth canal, taut as a bowstring emerging from its warrior cave of shadows. *En garde*.

To hear my mother tell it, from that point, good health slipped free of her, becoming a fancy hat she never could afford again. Her pre-nuptial decades were later mythologized into a golden era of uncomplicated serenity.

Her lies bore only a passing likeness to reality. Around me, the purifying flames of authenticity were stifled, denuding the landscape of affectionate memories, scorching everything but blame, illusions. Cherishing slipped away like days we couldn't hold onto, truth's mouth sewn shut. We never mastered the mechanics of mother-daughter camaraderie.

My devotion clicked its heels in steady, meaningless rhythm, invisible, buried under her volcanic scorn—until one day nursing was necessary. Cancer helped adorn my mother with patience, her acidic breath pausing to accept spoons that brought breakfast, her daylight swallowing fast.

Apologies emerged, released like doves. Between us a tight-chested pause exhaled.

Perhaps she had grasped we only love so long.





### By: Alina Zollfrank

Alina Zollfrank from (former) East Germany loathes wildfire smoke and writes to get out of her whirring mind. She cares for her precious humans, rescue dogs, and countless plants in the Pacific Northwest. Her work has been published in Bella Grace, The Noisy Water Review, Last Leaves, and Thimble.

#### At the library: however, late. However late?

A red-white plastic bag can only be filled with so much. Gummy bears because shelf-stable. Crackers because quick, because light.

Water bottles because heat because dry because ick. A few masks. One pediatric, because small lungs, purple wildfire smoke. Wet wipes because no shower, no tub, no sink, not a drop. Plain notebook because blank pages.

A pen just because.

Gift card because hungry (maybe?) but because cash a question. The rest of the bag: air. The rest of the bag: a prayer that —this stark-eyed girl strapped into a stroller scrawny legs dangling past foot rests matted hair stuck to her pointed head eyes darted this way dirty cheeks sucked in that way as

> mom sorted through canned food grabbed from doe-eyed

volunteers behind the library -

that this kid might just possibly smile.

Mom's big hands dug through a jumble of bags

for a can opener

or a juice box

or a safe place to sleep

while a seagull hopped up and down in front of the library pecked at crumbs patrons had dropped

from their thirty-bucks-to-go lunch

while the stroller lurched

while the child's eyes bore into me

while nothing I did with my silly

face and sillier hands - nothing, nothing -

could coax a smile out of her

stern planet eyes, yes -

(Continued on next page)

## Two Poems Continued

### By: Alina Zollfrank

I just kept hoping something would.

Back I went to give her my bag of nothing of everything of feels on my sleeve of tongue swallowed of heart in my pupils.

At the library: just crumbs on the pavement.

#### **Triolet for Them**

They sleep, they eat in tents, in vans and still, they do not feel at home Invisibility gives birth to bans They sleep, they eat in tents, in vans gather blankets, carts, soup cans (the out/of/whack/societal prodrome) They sleep, they eat in tents, in vans and still, they do not feel at home





### By: Vern Fein

A recent octogenarian, Vern Fein has published just shy of 300 poems and short prose pieces in over 100 different sites. A few are: *Gyroscope Revien, Young Raven's Revien, Bindweed, \*82 Revien, River And South, Grey Sparrow Journal,* and *Uppagus Magazine.* 

#### In Memory of Alastair Sims

In A Christmas Carol, Dickens described the holidays as "a good time: a kind, forgiving, charitable, pleasant time: the only time I know of in the long calendar of the year, when men and women seem by one consent to open their shut-up hearts freely, and to think of other people below them as if they really were fellow passengers to the grave, and not another race of creatures bound on other journeys.

#### **Rich Scrooge**

Did you ever wonder what Scrooge did after he converted? Invited God right into his heart and turned it around.

And some fancy ghosts scared him into Christmas. Indeed, he really knew how to do Christmas well.

Raised Bob Cratchit's salary yearly. Hot coals and punch all winter. Uncle Scrooge blessed Tiny Tim by paying for his schooling.

Found a high-level apprenticeship for Peter and attended Martha's wedding. Drank tea and befriended dear Mrs. Cratchit.

Located the "marvelous, wonderful" boy and apprenticed him as a butcher. Gold crowns for Mrs. Dilber, Christmas presents for her kids.

Sent Fred's Sally to seamstress school. Loaned Fred money to build his business. Visited Old Joe. Helped him remodel and hire the charlady.

Waltzed every Christmas till he couldn't, then sat on the couch and clapped. Ate Christmas dinner with "his sister's boy" every year, fat turkey and all.

Railed against Poor Workhouses and wretched prison conditions. Poured money into Ignorance and Want all of his days.

Placed a tombstone above the Fezziwigs: They danced life the best of all.

Sought out Alice and made peace with her. Met her every need and were friends to the end.

(Continued on next page)

# Two Poems Continued

### By: Vern Fein

Why could Old Scrooge, who always got more bread for everyone from then on, do all of this for humanity?

Because he had money till he died.

May we privileged do as well.

#### Yellowed Submarine

We had to do everything differently, we hippie/radicals, changing the world. Our hair ever long then, gone from legs and arms of the women. We sported beads, ratty jeans, colorful tops, without bras. Smoked pot and hash instead of cigs and booze, dropped acid and MDA, protested that horrid war, marched with our Black brethren, just flat out opposed everything.

So at Roberta's birthday, cake candled and lit, about to sing the Birthday Song, Danny shouted out: *No!*, that is bourgeois!

Our country sings it like God Bless America! A pox on that. On to our own song.

The candles burned lower. What, could he be that stoned? Beams of anticipation. We smiled and sang.

We all live in a yellow submarine, A yellow submarine, a yellow submarine. We knew that tune like we knew the old birthday one. We warbled that in our clique for months, every time we celebrated our youthful days. Don't remember when we changed back.

We did live in a yellow submarine all of those exciting years,

swam in the underground world of our refreshing culture.
We sailed around the sun beneath the sea of green, below the waves of the America we despised and our friends were all aboard as we welcomed more and more from next door to both coasts.
Revolution without end!
Believing the fantasy—we created a sea change made everything better, psychedelic dreams to justice ideals.

Older now, we still float there in our minds, happy for what we did, sad that it sank.



### By: Hossein Hakim

Hossein Hakim was born in Tehran, Iran. His first published poem was "Cinema Paradiso" which was published in the August 2023 issue of *Ariel Chart*. Another ten poems of his have been accepted for publication in *Academy of the Heart and Mind, The Piker Press, Rowayat*, and *The Ocotillo Review*.

#### My Love

I am tired of broken promises forgotten dreams of living under yesterday's shadow being misunderstood

My love let's go to another planet away from the people who cannot see their blindness

I want to feel the pain of the light when darkness overwhelms truth far from people who have forgotten to love for the sake of loving

I want to sing a love song while holding you in my arms to dance a tango under a full moon

I want to look into your eyes until the darkness of the sky fills us with the desire to see the light

#### **Loving in Silence**

After You, the roses are no longer red, the trees are no longer green, the sky is no longer blue

After You, I have to yearn for colors in the yearning I had for you After You, I miss even the pain that made our love so timid and secret.

I regret the waiting, the relinquishing the coded messages, our stolen glances in a world full of blind people, who did not want to see who did not want to accept our love because if they had known the truth, we would have been the subject of their shame, their hatred, their cruelty

We dreamed of a better world where a tree was not forbidden to be a tree or for blue not to become the sky. How can I say this is a better world without you?

I still need your advice, just one of your glances but, then suddenly, I feel your gesture is already in mine, I recognize you when I speak

Does everyone who leaves you always leave part of themselves with you? Is this the secret of having memories? If true, I feel safer, because I know I'll never be alone



# Poetry Plain Jane 🖊

### By: Subhadra Narayann

Subhadra Narayann is a former secondary school teacher turned poet and writer from Singapore who has turned to writing as a creative outlet and elixir to life's many challenging and confounding contradictions. Poetry writing represents a safe space which guides self-expression, where she hopes to create ripples with her dancing quill.

Would You Love Me If I Wasn't A Poet? Failing to rhyme, discordant to your ears? If verses were my own and I fail to parrot Would you offer me a sanctuary from my fears?

Would you make me a home in your golden cage And hold me captive entranced in your poetry? Offering your soothing meter to keenly assuage When life is in disarray lacking order and symmetry?

Can I not bleed, heartfelt and unconventional poetry? As at the heart of it lies a soul torn in two One yearning to be from biases free The other meek and tethered blue

Yet if I cannot be a poet in your discerning eyes Can I strive to be your poetry rhyming in vain—And you in prose I'll perfectly revere and idealise? Content to be forever your poetry plain Jane





# Two Poems 🖐

### By: Mahdi Meshkatee

Mahdi Meshkatee is a UK-born, Iranian creative writer, poet, and translator. His Persian translation of *Sibeal Pounder's Witch Wars* was published by *Golazin Publication Company* in 2018. He has been writing short pieces and poems for nearly seven years, yet *October Hill Magazine* will be his first publication.

#### Soul

Miracle Is a word I seldom use And believe in none.

It's like soul
That mysterious entity
That controls the whole
Of a human being like:

Lost his soul Sold his soul With no soul

The funny thing is
I have lost soul in life
I have thought of selling my soul
I have breathed with no soul on the receiving end.

Yet
In a soulless world
The adjective of which
I do not understand
Yet comprehend
I walk at nights thinking
How damaged it feels
My soul.

#### Hand Gun

I make a gun with my fingers Point it toward my father And shoot.

The bullet catches him right between The eyes.
He falls backwards
Unto the carpet
My big sister screams
Mama goes in for the rescue
I look with awe;
Tears boil within me
And I start to cry.

My father's still and doesn't get up My tears used to be the only way I'd get a response But now he's "gone..." Murmurs Mama.

I run to my room
Put my head down
And cry some more
Hoping for Papa to wake up
And come knock on my door.



# Chitin Wings 🗯

### By: Sparsh Paul

Sparsh Paul is an emerging poet, writer, and bedroom musician based in New Delhi, India. He has been writing for seven years. *October Hill Magazine* will be his first publication.

I checked out of the heartbreak hotel And stopped eating darkness for dinner I spit out similes and metaphors And cried through onomatopoeic sounds My impostor syndrome dissipated As I burned all the blocks in me I guess I am a poet after all

Fluttering through the molten skies
On the verge of flying higher and higher
Now I am a peacock butterfly
Not bound by the holy nectar
Or the fragility of my chitin wings
There's miles to fly before I rest
And sights to devour before I sleep





### By: Shamik Banerjee

Shamik Banerjee is a poet from India. When he is not writing, he can be found strolling the hills surrounding his homestead. His poems have appeared in *Fevers of the Mind, Lothlorien Poetry Journal*, and *Westward Quarterly*, among others.

#### An Ode to the Unsung Heroes of My Home: A Double Sonnet

Music is anodyne, but what compares To our rice steamer's 'hissing'? Oh! that sound Flies to each corner, even down the stairs, And makes our home a curry-cooker's ground (Evoking lunchtime dishes in one's mind). Glory be to our geyser. Though a thing, It is no less than Gaia, great and kind, Who shares with everyone her thermal spring, Defrosting them in Winter's glacial chill. Tell me how I should hail our ceiling fan, Whose hypnic air transports me to some hill Where zephyrs blow through Junipers that span Upon its vertex. And these whitish walls Imitate laminar white waterfalls. Now laud for windows: they amp up the dawn's, The dusk's, and the eve's beauty ten times more, Those voile-made curtains, like two lovely swans, Float in the wafting light breeze from the door. Our living room's a newsstand, or at best, A kiosk full of magazines and snacks. And oh, the English Roll-Arm is where Rest Comes pouring on us when we lean our backs Upon its cushions with our eyes all glued To the TV, and if God has a kingdom, Some glimpses of that place I've surely viewed In this home where I've learned a lifetime's wisdom And felt comforted by these 'things' I prize, On which I'll never cease to panegyrize.





# Two Poems Continued

### By: Shamik Banerjee

#### At Five O'clock

Some magic's done at five o'clock. A child—the ponderer. A tippytoeing, cooing flock Awaits a wanderer Who comes and postures in a crouch, His creases—fold, unfold; Pulling the drawstring of a pouch Stuffed with a cornfield's gold, He takes a fistful; they rush to His bare feet—gird him, pressing Like pupils circle their guru To have his godly blessing. He strews the granules technically So that all get their shares, While predawn rolls on rhythmically And light brings day's new cares. They vanish every modicum; The pouch—shrinks, their guts—swell; A temple's dome then bids them come And they bid him farewell, But leave two souvenirs: a smile For him that's like the weather's. And for the mulling child, a pile Of new-shed, grey-white feathers.





# Old Apple Tree

### By: Colin Ian Jeffery

Colin Ian Jeffery is an English poet of the modernist movement with development of imagism stressing clarity, precision and economy of language, but unlike other poets in the modernism movement like Dylan Thomas and Ezra Pound he has a profound faith in God.

There is an apple tree At the bottom of the garden Where my brother and I once played Swinging on branches Climbing high and low.

Tree has stood a century Giving September crop of apples Now in my old age a shrine With memories of childhood.

There is an apple tree Where I often go and sit beneath And if I listen very hard I hear my brother's happy cries As we climbed high and low.





### Bacchus

### By: Carolina Worrell

A New York City native, Carolina Worrell has a journalism background and has been writing and editing for fifteen 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."

The god of wine has nothing on you. When you think you are at your best, you're really at your worst.

I wish you'd fix yourself so you could be someone else.

Every night, a shameless bacchanal. The same events occurring. The same songs playing.

"Nothing ever changes here," you said. But maybe it is you who doesn't want to change.

A three-day bender. More of the same pictures taken together.

The same drinks poured; those same demons being ignored.

It's jovial triviality. Until it isn't.

I wish you'd fix yourself so you could be someone else.

I know you're in there somewhere. I see it in the tiniest of moments. A spark in your eyes that lasts only seconds. Replaced by the glazed-over look of someone truly lost.

How in the last 20 years did things go so wrong? Or were they always this way? Hidden in the halls of the high school, underneath the baggy clothes? Waiting to surface when real life hit.

I wish you'd fix yourself so you could be someone else.

You with your bloodshot eyes; me with my Sunday smile. Always looking to be the savior. But I can't stay here forever.

Not that it matters anyway. You have to want to be saved. But until then, you're just digging your own grave.

My once-upon-a-time high school sweetheart, how hard it is to watch you lose yourself in this way.

I wish you'd fix yourself so you could be someone else.



# Keeping Up

By: Susan Shea

Susan Shea's poems have appeared in Across the Margin, Ekstasis, Persimmon Tree Literary Magazine, New English Review, and more. She has been writing poetry for sixty three years, since she was in third grade. Susan is a retired school psychologist who loves being a full-time poet now.

I grew up in a cut-to-the-chase place, where we had to speak fast, get to the point as soon as possible, because there were so many people waiting in the throng

for a turn to exist out loud

so sometimes I may seem to be impatient, even harsh, or God forbid haughty but that's not who I am

really, while I am running my mouth I am noticing that you have blue eyes like my German grandfather and you're carrying a violin in a case and I'm starting to hear you playing a longing, a dance, a song, and I realize we are both wearing apple green which is a color worn by nurturing people and I'm trying very hard to remember to slow down so

we can find some kind of equilibrium, to remember there are places to be still, so my breath can catch up with the tender breeze coming into the nearness with you



### By: Erren Geraud Kelly

Erren Geraud Kelly is a poet based in Lynn, Massachusetts. He has been writing poetry for thirty-three years. He has had his writings published in various publications in print and online in the United States, Canada, and around the world. Mr. Kelly recieved his B.A. in English-Creative Writing from L.S.U.

#### Clambake

Walking on a beach, neither Of us call home We search for our "happily Ever after: "

We hold hands and turn Back the clock; I sang to you, back Then, you gave your love To whoever you wanted

Patiently, I waited For my turn

A letter I wrote, I never Sent, Sits in a book

I'm too old to believe That happy endings go Beyond movies Yet, young enough to still Believe that dreams never Die

I'll never stop chasing the White rabbit.

And so, I write this, And wait for my turn My happy ending beyond Movies...

#### Getting A Good Bowl Of Gumbo

Mama always told me Never burn the roux, the Secrets to making a good Gumbo, is to never burn The roux, then add your seasonings Then your spices; then shrimps, crabmeat Oysters, sausage, chicken, etc. Add two cups of water for One cup of rice: sometimes, She made jiffy cornbread with Gumbo, which also goes great with Red beans and rice with sausages Best place to get gumbo or red beans Is never the fancy pants resteraunts But the hole in the wall joints Where you know they spent all Their money on the food and not The resteraunt, but they have a Jukebox, that'll play Aretha, or Al Green or Marvin or Down Home blues Places were the workers get mad, if You don't speak to them. They'll cook For you like Mama would, load your plate Up right, or fill up Styrofoam containers So much, it feels heavy like a brick.

It's best to eat at the place, with a Bottle of beer or some gin and juice Or whatever liquor you prefer Eat the meal as if it was a blessing From God and let the South sink in



### By: Arvilla Fee

Arvilla Fee teaches English for Clark State College and is the poetry editor for the San Antonio Review. She has published poetry in numerous presses, and published her poetry book, The Human Side. For Arvilla, writing produces the greatest joy when it connects us to each other.

#### Passed Down

It lies in my palm, a small square card from beyond the grave, hand-scripted with broad bold strokes of a pen, as confident as the woman who'd written the words: a cup of this, a teaspoon of that, a dash of salt, of course . . . my eyes scan the card again and again, a smudge of butter, a dot of flour on a corner bent with time and age. The entire image blurs like an abstract painting as tears fill my vision my gram's secret recipe for apple dumpling cake; she'd passed it down to me. with a classic red lipstick

kiss on the back.

#### Winter Weight

I grow thin in the winter. eating slices of sun no bigger than the edge of a tea cup;

the wind howls in the winter, forcing me to wrap my feet, my hands my naked face;

squirrels grow fat in the winter, eating leftover seeds I gave to birds that flew North:

I grow weary in the winter, my brain heavy with unreleased serotonin, pressed by clouds;

squirrels grow fat in the winter. mocking me with cheerful tails, cheeks full of freedom.



# Old Peasant at the Train Station

By: Roy Gu

From your pair of bleak, cloudy eyes I saw one century—no, it's five thousand years of history there's everything but just can't find half of the word "human."

Roy Gu is Professor of English at Shanghai International Studies University. He has published short stories and poems, and translated several books. He is also a singersongwriter and has released folk music albums.





# Winter Communion

### By: Dominic Windram

Dominic Windram is a personal tutor and poet from Hartlepool in the North East of England. He has regularly contributed to *October Hill Magazine* and the *Northern Cross*: a Catholic newspaper which serves the diocese of Hexham and Newcastle. Currently, he performs his work online for the *Fertile Brains Project*.

Break these dark mirrors and leave wasted years behind. Out of white silence greater than words, in winter, Love arrives like soft, unhurried prayers. The din of summertime's wild. verdant distractions has long since faded, and now we face each other, between the last flickers of candlelight, with a new born awareness. O such pure moments seem to be blessed! For we are clearly, no longer two solitudes, drifting through gray days, but communion's vessels.





# The Making of a Naturalist

### By: Anne Whitehouse

Anne Whitehouse's new poetry collection is Steady. She is also the author of poetry collections *The Surveyor's Hand, Blessings and Curses, The Refrain, Meteor Shower,* and *Outside from the Inside,* as well as the chapbooks, *Surrealist Muse, Escaping Lee Miller, Frida, Being Ruth Asawa,* and a novel, *Fall Love.* 

In memorium, Edward O. Wilson

A child came to the edge of deep water with a mind prepared for wonder. This was in the 1930s, in the Florida panhandle.

The water seemed beyond reach, timeless and inexhaustible. Silently, out of the darkness, glided a giant ray, a circular shadow blanketing the bottom, gone in seconds.

For a long time, the boy searched for it again, peering and dreaming along the shore or on the dock, but he never found it.

A childhood fishing accident left him blind in one eye. A genetic predisposition caused hearing loss in his upper registers.

The attention of his surviving eye turned to the ground, to small crawling or flying insects. He became an entomologist, not from foresight or predisposition. His physical limitations determined his choices.

Science may be the greatest achievement of our age, but it has few heroes.

Before he was a hero.

he was vilified for his conviction that the social behaviors of all beings, including ourselves, are guided by genetics.

What was condemned as heresy is now accepted truth. He lived long enough to see how public perceptions change, while character endures.



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 Pushcart and Best of the Net nominee, his work has appeared in many literary journals.

#### **Bird Song**

Today, I tell the analyst about you. No ending yet, it's not much, but she listens as if it were the story of my life.

Distance was my first love. I had a crush on it in high school. The longer the distance, the more what ifs I could stack side to side.

This time, I say, no what ifs. You slipped right in last night, past all my security. Fingers typed your name, brain paused a beat, said: Oh, there she is.

I think about walking now, at the lake. I write you this thought as you say you are going to the botanical gardens for a stroll with a friend. You can't know

I haven't been to the lake in years. No twittering in the cottonwood trees. No sunbeams rippling water.

The psych knows. She comments. Words flutter.

On the drive home, silky clouds wave. A red-tail glides across stubbled wheat.

Purposefully, I write you into this. It brings me a bit nearer. And I'm OK.

I imagine you, too, scooting your chair closer to the computer.

Birds singing.





# Two Poems Continued

By: Robert L. Dean, Jr.

#### In Which We All Go Out For a Sunday Drive

I make myself metaphor pull worlds out of air ask my mother

Did you conceive of me her answer is angst and dread like the paper before the words

my father claims he never knew me even that axiomatic Christmas Eve

he pasted cotton balls to fireplace bricks hoping I would always believe

in Santa Claus or he would

and this was the first metaphor

grandfather's eyes the second rolled up in his skull in the back seat of our fifty-three Plymouth

mother urging
Drive faster
dad glancing once
in the rear view

death rides with us back to the rest home

occasionally brother and I recite the world

slightly out of rhythm

he was in the back seat heard the death rattle saw dad sneak out of church

his poem breathes out different metaphors though the blank of the page is the same





# Love Is Cold

### By: Renee Cronley

Renee Cronley is a writer and nurse from Canada. She studied Psychology and English at Brandon University, and Nursing at Assiniboine Community College. Her work appears in *Chestnut Revien, PRISM international, Off Topic, Love Letters to Poe, On Spec, Black Spot Books,* and several other anthologies and literary magazines.

The hot cocoa in the car is a romantic and cliché gesture

but I drink it up.

He guides me down a snowy trail.

He's a nature man.

He knows the terrain better than anyone,

whereas I'm already lost.

The chill in the air kisses my cheeks until they're red and blushing,

tender and stinging.

Snowflakes spiral and swirl through the air around us,

beautiful and blurring.

He tells me about snowflakes and their intricate patterns,

they are unique because of their long journey to the ground.

They are charming and cold

—like him

They are dainty and delicate

—like me

He says it takes at least eight million snowflakes to make a snowman.

He likes to build them up,

so he could knock them down.

He tells me I would make the most beautiful snow angel—

I'm shivering and silent,

wondering how many snowflakes I'll displace

once I'm on the ground.







# Two Visuals

By: J.B. Kalf

J.B. Kalf is slipping on ice. Has been published or work forthcoming in *Beaver Magazine*, *BULL*, *Chaotic Merge Magazine*, *Travesties!?*, and elsewhere. Palm frond fanatic. Competed in the Lake Travis Film Festival. Prefers limes to lemons.





# Two Visuals

By: J.B. Kalf





