



**ginosko**

**#26**

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Ceramic mask found on beach at Point Arena, CA

ginosko

A Greek word meaning  
to perceive, understand, realize, come to know;  
knowledge that has an inception, a progress, an attainment.  
The recognition of truth from experience.

γινώσκω

The X factor, the magic, is when we come to those rifts and make those leaps.

A religious devotion to the truth, to the splendor of the authentic, involves the writer in a process rewarding in itself; but when that devotion brings us to undreamed abysses and we find ourselves sailing slowly over them and landing on the other side—that's ecstasy.

— Denise Levertov

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**CONTRIBUTORS**



## **Ranks**

**Denis Bell**

Buddy snatched up the dispatch that had just come in from HQ. Bridge collapse 3 miles south of Amman. 15 dead. Buddy closed his eyes and opened them to the sound of boots converging on his head. Reached out and grabbed the sweaty elliptical piece of cow and threw it to a lanky white boy. Dude did this little rain dance thing that he used to do, then squinted up into the sun and launched a Hail Mary 50 yards downfield. Right into the upstretched palms of Corey D. Corey lived with his gran in a tenement building down the street from Buddy and they were in the same class at Jefferson High. Then they were in boot camp together. Corey had the sort of chiseled features you used to see on cigarette ads in the days when they still had them. Buddy liked Corey more than it was wise to let on back then. Corey was a little slow in the head and could get into some bad shit at times. But Buddy didn't think about that. Buddy thought about the time Corey sat with him all night at the hospital when his mom had her stroke, how they used to share things. Left his guts in the desert in the Spring of 2005 in pursuit of an objective less noble. Buddy remembered it like yesterday, the headlines and the hype. HOME BOY MAKES GOOD. They put his face on a recruiting poster like they owned him now.

# The Pit

Brucie Jacobs

The day I walked into your office, that white sanctuary, everything in place as usual, and spotted the peach pit—the kernel matted with orange hairs still moist—next to the basket of Kleenex on the small table, I imagined you sitting in my chair, the peach in your hand, sinking your teeth into the fruit, biting through the downy skin, sweet with that bitter twinge peaches have. Savoring the fruit, you licked the juice from your lips, leaned forward to take another bite, then another, until you heard me knock. Hastily you wiped your hands on the seat of your pants, went to the door and let me in. But you'd left the peach pit on the table.

I began to understand that despite your Jesuit-like wisdom, your ability to catch my muddled thoughts in mid-air and hand them back polished as precious stones, your composure when I hurled insults at you, your tactful recognition of my unspoken need the day you handed me a couple of plump berries from the plant by the door, your patience when the temptress in me breathed hotly against your ear, your talent at unraveling silken threads from the web of my dreams, you were, after all, simply human.

I sat down and we began. Just as usual.

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## Stick Fingers (Unblocking my ex on Instagram)

Wilson Koewing

I shouldn't have pressed "unblock." She dyed her hair blonde and resembles a pin-up now. She discovered all the vintage clothing she was searching for. Stuck in it with me, she stopped searching. Now she's posting photos of lighthouses in North Carolina. Her posing with perfect homemade pasta. "Come visit" hashtags for the Italian friend who taught her how to make it while abroad. Once, when we started dating, she left out her diary and he happened to be the subject of the page. She wanted him to want her, but he was interested in a girl from Dallas. In her private thoughts to herself, she tried to understand why he didn't. Anytime she mentioned him, my face flushed. I shouldn't have read it. A well-framed shot of her applying lipstick in a mirror, inside the house we shared, leaves me wondering who took the picture. She's back in New Orleans. Haunting familiar haunts. Literal rose colored glasses. A repost of a photo I recognize because I was in it. Now cropped out. But inside the caption lied the horror. Uncle Dave died. I loved Uncle Dave. It has been five months since it happened. She's playing the ukulele now. Selfies in swimwear. Videos of her playing the ukulele. A POV pic from Horseshoe reservoir of a girl I've never seen. "Impossible to express how grateful I am to have found this fierce, brave—" I stop reading after that. Did I turn her? She'd warned early on she possessed a curiosity. Radiant at a music festival, being free in ways I never witnessed. A weird photo of her in the bow of a boat inside a dive bar on south Broadway where I realized she's in the best shape of her life. Cheese and crackers. Her best friend Karen. Karen's now husband Blake who I still talk to often. I was supposed to attend the wedding. I'll see them soon in Toronto where they will skirt around the truth of the death of their friend's relationship and prod the ashes with stick fingers. Plants hanging from the room that was once my office. The window I gazed out of, wondering why I was there. Why I followed her to begin with. Her fall Colorado Aspen photos that mirrored mine. Same mountain passes. Different sunny days. In New Orleans again with her sister. At her favorite Mediterranean spot. The born-again Christian sister. The years of addiction. The heroin baby. The hotel bathtub. Holding her brother's newborn. His blank-faced wife who I never got. The child they were raising that was only his. The dull understanding that if they did not have their own then the other could never be truly loved by her. The last one, a poorly framed photo of an alligator. It appeared to be laughing.

## Execution

Not the flower blooming outside  
the prison walls. Not the stars  
visible on the night they did it.  
Not how blue the sky was  
the morning after. Some other time,  
maybe, a catalog of all that heedless,  
persistent beauty, but not this poem,  
not right now. Just the look on the faces  
of the ones who tried to stop it  
and how they allow themselves,  
for a moment, to take each other's hands.

## Thrift

All day we were careful.  
We walked to the store,  
ladled our share of milk  
from the can, roasted  
chickpeas and called it  
coffee, didn't admit to  
wanting more. Only with  
the constellations did I  
allow it. *How manifold  
are thy works, o lord,*  
turning myself to them  
at the window each night,  
my body a dipper of desire  
for an unrationed sky.

## After the Psychology Conference

I liked to go to the zoo, where  
it seemed to me that the animals  
didn't make so much of everything. Wanting

was just what they did, their bodies sleek  
or bulbous or bony but in any case without  
ambivalence or grievance or the need to

explain so much about it all. There  
sun was sun and rock was rock and water  
water, and the other animals were only –

well maybe their world was just as full of  
loss and longing and the inexact mathematics of  
desire, because what do I really know

about it, but nevertheless I would watch them  
and imagine living without narrative,  
without that knitting of one thing to another,

some kind of story to tell us what or  
why or how. I admit it was hard to imagine,  
more unlikely than picturing myself with

fur or hooves or claws. Would it be restful?  
But also lonely, I thought, my hands already reaching  
for the familiar comfort. So yes in the end I

went back to it, winding my fingers  
in the thick weave of chronicle and account,  
I sank into it again and felt how it held me.



## Fire Escape

Don't think of flame or rescue,  
just the stubborn familial heat  
and this skeletal frame outside the window  
that gives you somewhere else to go.  
Hold it in your mouth, the life you are  
inventing, the cool deliberate interior  
of a child who believes she can choose what to keep.  
Right now you are nothing like the city –  
the streets so blooming and indifferent  
that it may not matter who you saved  
or failed to. Use what you have:  
this keeping track, this noticing,  
this black paint under your legs  
as you dangle not quite inside  
or out. Map the feeling of it  
like the contours of the known world.

## The Confession

When you said *I lied*  
the caul around the room

broke for us –  
that membrane dividing

what was safe to say from what  
you knew had happened –

and we were born there together  
into the actual world

with only the archiving angels  
to notice and record

this particular nakedness  
and the way we sat

looking at it, nodding  
our heads, breathing.

## **WINDOW**

A teenage boy stands before a mirror. He rubs vitamin cream into the scars that run in lines on the right side of his face. He has been told they will fade with time and that they fall in natural creases, but from photographs, he knows of the distortion that occurs each time he smiles. It grows, for him, each day, in its grotesquery. He remembers running down the stairs and out of the gym, to retrieve a ball. He remembers the sound of breaking, coming from far away, as his left hand, his right leg, his face breach the pane. He sees, on the cinema screen, when his eyes are shut, that someone's leg is open, exposing glistening bone. Blood spurts from an artery. The man that lays him down tears off his shirt to make a tourniquet. That man can see, behind the boy, the outline of a star. The boy has no awareness of the window.

## **SILENCE AND THE ROSE**

This afternoon, silence on the drive is welcome. Music plays on Spotify, but I remember silence. Sometimes memories are welcome. At the hospital, I am surprised by a rose garden. As I make my way, up car park levels, via stairs and elevators, passing gantries, to the right place, I know that I will find my students. They wait for me, holding case notes, tight as sprinters on starting blocks hold their heartbeats for the gun. I am glad to find among them an idealist and an optimist. After the tutorial, I remember the garden at the bottom of the steps to my own old school. I am young again. I bend to steal a rose.

## **REVERIE**

Staring through the mesh screen that separates him from the window, on the other side of which raindrops have sequestered; staring out into the world beyond, where steel structures, post-Bauhaus, in the Dahlem Cube, support walls of hanging vines; where the cross beams divide the grey sky into rectangles, a man has, imminently in mind, memories of his son, singing. The son sings of the father experienced as one who never was a father to the son. The man has never heard this voice live, only as recorded, transmitted from cloud to device. He recognises, in the timbre of the voice, something of his own. This memory of sound is textured, for the man, with longing. There is no possibility of conversation.

# Morning Sickness: A Letter I Never Sent

Genevieve Jaser

*“Death is a distant rumor to the young.” – Andrew A. Rooney*

Diana,

I wonder how your cheeks swelled when you said something you shouldn't have, how tightly your eyes shut during your most joyous laugh, how thick you sliced your moments.

My mother says you were life, itself – that you spread out chests of ice, buckets of grapes, your savings, across a beach, and sang *Happy Birthday* and *I love you so* to make sure she knew she was being celebrated.

I would give my savings to see you catwalk the streets, as my mother remembers: cowboy hat, boots, tight jeans with rips – before they were cool – you knew your power, used it for good, and bounced off of people's doubt, taught them how to steal like an artist.

I can't help but wonder how I might find a friend like you, and how people with an abundance of love find others with love to give – sometimes it seems you either unroll your soul, a towel, and dry someone with it, *or* you're the one waiting to be dried off.

*In your hands, O Lord, we humbly entrust -*

Can I ask about the size of your soul on drugs, or who first showed you how to paint your cupid's bow with white. May I learn from you, not mistakes to avoid, but how to design a life after addiction.

My mother says I would've loved you, but I worry what she means is I remind her of you.

Would I have loved you when the drapes in your apartment were drawn, and you crouched in the corner getting high. Would the empty space be stretched out or shrink back when you showed up months after disappearing? Could I have somehow peeled the manic from your mind.

You had a funny way of getting in a blue funk. When you were walking home after a shift at that Japanese restaurant with the bright red walls, you saw a woman get mugged. No one ever saw another pocketbook on your shoulder. I don't blame you – learning through fear is safe.

I've prodded too much, but just let me wonder one more thing – my mother says your friendship ended because you couldn't stop filling your shared apartment with cigarettes, and she started feeling ill, plus, she had a baby growing, me.

Did my mother's morning sickness remind you of one kind of pain, while you slept through your own? Was my birth your demise? My family solidifying must have felt like heat against your dark skin. Like pressure. Like space shrinking. Growing up is like growing out of all your clothes at once, but it must have been more painful to watch as your best friend grew through the roof, stretched with a yawn, and dragged her fingers along the skyline. I'm sorry you felt small.

I promise to memorialize your youth and write to you often, because in a lot of ways, you remind me of me. And, I think we would've been good friends. Because necessary chaos adds energy, and you, my friend, had chaos.

I'm sorry this letter is getting to you so late, it's just that people keep telling me I would've loved people who are dead, and something about death makes me want  
to  
blow  
chunks.

Love,

The Baby You Never Met

## Almost Dead Hen

I suffered the almost dead hen when I was just a boy of ten. On brilliant, warm summer mornings, my grandmother dispatched me to the hen house with a pail to gather eggs in her stead. All for the chickens, it was a house in that it had a door and a lighter screen that slapped shut on a spring behind me just like the kitchen's. It had a roof with shingles and windows. It occurred to me to clean the panes to make their home a bit brighter. Maybe curtains, a mailbox. There was a roost for long winter nights. Wooden boxes lined the walls, tight cubicles for the employees' purpose. But generally, it was one expansive open-concept area like the dayroom of a sanatorium where the birds would wander, lurching about like aimless inmates. The floor was a thick, fetid cushion of feathers and manure, the origin of a dank, acrid aroma of ammonia that caused one to pause and reconsider at the threshold.

I sought the perfectly white ovals and the pretty brown freckled eggs – speckled like Pippy Longstocking, just like the nose and cheeks of my red-headed girlfriend two desks over. The more skittish hens were easily shooed from their spots, but some of the older gals, inclined to raise a brood, pecked at my hand until I learned what it meant to be forthright. Grandma advised, “Quick as you can, reach in and pull em out by the necks.” On the first attempt I was anxious, hesitation resulting in peck, peck, peck. The second try was a rather satisfying accomplishment. I was boss. I was to be reckoned with.

Occasionally I was surprised by a blacksnake who slithered in from a hole along the back wall looking for the same bounty as I. And rats. Henry, grandpa's dog, his constant companion, was often my temporary pal. Henry, who'd sneeze on cue, who'd look out the window to see who's coming for Sunday dinner, the best at catch and tug-of-war, was polite and knew never to bother the birds though canine instinct was a weighty temptation. (I caught a neighbor's dog, a spoiled thoughtless suburban breed, gleefully shaking and ripping up one of our chickens. I slugged it on the snout with my small fist – how one ideally dealt with bullies on the playground.)

One day out back past the burn barrel, between the hen house and the corn crib, Henry barked and scratched at a rusted flat trough turned upside down, used only once to mix concrete for a new porch slab twenty years ago – and upon which we churned gallon after gallon of homemade ice cream during hay-baling season. I flipped the tub over to reveal an enormous, writhing ball of rodents. What must have been a hundred rats scurried for cover. Henry was so flummoxed he didn't know which way to attack and failed to corner one rat. He may have been simply prudent, no penchant for biting down on any of the nasty vermin.

And then there was the almost dead hen which had lost the use of its legs, flattened into the floor, a red combed head and wattle, a yellow beak and eyes surrounded by white feathers. How long it was almost dead I didn't know, but each time I came for

eggs, I looked for it. All the other hens and roosters cruelly trampled and pecked at the poor thing. My young mind found this behavior appalling. Now older, not so much. All the others would lose their heads, feathers, and feet soon enough in a bloody, gory chicken apocalypse – all inevitably canned specimens in tidy rows of Mason jars alongside beef mincemeat, peaches, tomatoes, and green beans.

I wondered why Grandpa didn't put the almost dead hen out of its misery in a swift slice of the shovel as there was obviously no nursing it back to health. He could not be bothered or was it out of genuine pity? He was known to be oddly soft-hearted for a seemingly rough old farmer. I was never sure. Though the almost dead hen likely survived only a few days that summer, this image abides in my memory fifty years later, the moment I learned a little something about grace, the sacraments of helplessness and empathy.



## China

Although I'd like to pretend I'm the bleary-eyed daydreamer, I'm not. Ordinarily I don't search for kittens, Elvis or continents in clouds, but here is China. There's no denying it, a white silhouette against pale blue. China is hopelessly enigmatic in my mind. If it were Italy, its chic, high-heeled boot, I could imagine, gush over, Giotto, Buonarroti, Raphael, around the corner from the Pantheon, Caravaggio at San Luigi dei Francesi, Bernini at the Villa Borghese, lewd frescos at Pompeii, graceful, Greek, peristyled temples at Paestum, the rhythmic lapping of water against a Venetian hotel, exquisite loafers in Milan boutiques.

But no, there's China. There's Tibet and the obvious void, the high Himalayan crevasse where the Dali Lama should sit, the vast ocean steppes of Manchuria and Mongolia, Gobi, absorber of armies and politics. There are the meandering lines, thick with history, the Yangtze, the Great Wall, the Forbidden City, accommodations of oblivious, cloistered emperors. There, there, the graves of millions, starved in Mao's *Great Leap Forward*. There are the Huangshan Mountains, chimerical teeth of dragons brushed in monks' black ink. There are the words, lips of Lao Tzu and Buddha lifted, floating across the Pacific. There, inevitably, words and China turn to vapor.

## Robin Egg Blue

In the holly bush, long after the red berries, Christmas lights and snow are gone, imprudently too low to the ground, a robin has laid four blue eggs in a perfect symmetrical whorl. She guards them fiercely from storms and voyeurs, and she scolds me if I approach. These eggs are just outside the window, so near where I recline to watch vexing contradictions on the TV between tedious staged comedies and the news, tragedies unfolding in distant lands. If I would turn slightly, open the blind, and lift the sash, I might easily admire her jewels when she would allow it: every other Tuesday by appointment. I might climb through the sill and curl up alongside her blue.

I won't insult you by describing this blue as you know it, vividly, from your childhood. One of your first and lasting memories, unlike any other event, you remember when your father picked you up to peer into the nest. Or maybe it was an aunt, a big sister, someone you trusted to grab you by the middle, under your little ribs, and heft you high to view a quiet marvel. It was someone you knew that if they said, "Look," the sight was bound to be remarkable, not to be missed, essential for your comprehension of the world.

You know this blue, as azurine as you first love's eyes – but not quite. This is a flimsy presumption. This blue doesn't fit her celestial gems mined from the sky – electric, brilliantly clear, uncompromising, the purity of an ideal. The blue of the robin's eggs is from the earth and might as well be an ochre or umber. And there's the faulty assumption that blue eyes are prettier and usually paired with blonde hair. Your first love's eyes were brown, a burnt sienna, and more fetching than any sapphire.

(Though my mother's hair was black, her eyes were blue. She was crazy – loony and violently so. The depths of her blue at the height of paranoia, those weeks before and after the judge committed her to the state hospital and later her Thorazine-thick stay in the slightly less draconian but impossibly more expensive psych ward at Mount Carmel Hospital – that blue – was terrifying. So you see, you must be wary of blue. Discernment in everything blue is critical.)

Certainly, I could label her eggs as "cerulean" which is close to the pale blue of a clear summer's day, or which is nearly a baby blue like what young mothers presume for a boy's room until he decides that the color is a stereotype of pigment, a color of gender expectation. And I'll be blunt and point out the complication: cerulean blue is not baby blue. Baby blue, a paint from a can at the hardware store, is artificially, well, sweeter – sugary, a wince making the teeth hurt. Cerulean from the artist's tube has a suggestion of garishness, a small portion of regret. It is older, wiser, a bit jaded. And I doubt the most skilled artist could mix cerulean with another color on the palette to replicate the robin's eggs. So, never mind.

I think you know any imitation is not the wonder. I refuse to be clever, marketing a brand-new-and-improved *Robin Egg Blue*: eye shadow, a frozen drink at the fair, a shiny car in the showroom, or a child's crayon. Periwinkle is close enough. That pretention would wring all the mystery from the robin's small miracles.

## Forty:

remember plunging into paris rapping in the cave st. michel with kelly the proprietor, dining on the rue st. sulphice in a cellar not far from the music and lights of the place st. michel, walking the quais at dusk, the pont des arts, watching the sun go down framed in the reflection of the pont du carrousel, the ducks on the seine carving a still life wake upon the water, the booksellers closing their stalls or patiently waiting for the last browsing customer to return the dusty volume to the rack half-read, the lone willow at the foot of the parc du vert galant, the last green nipple of the ile... the bateaux mouche light up the river like a canyon, blaring at traffic and riverside flats, grumbling, churning up foam as they diesel upstream, past the eglise americain, the louvre, the gare d'orsay, under the petite pont, almost grazing the walls, past notre dame and george whitman's curiosity shop, past the ile st. louis, the canal st. martin.., of course, the canal arrives here underground and empties from the gare de l'arsenal, but it is the same canal anyway... then turning, cranking, back around, down past the same sights in reverse, past the great glass pavilion of the world's fair to the foot of the tour eiffel, and the night lit by lights, leaving a churning rainbowed film upon the water...

## Forty-Two:

in the champagne bars of vienna we committed ourselves to attrition, bleeding our oh-so-social souls upon the cobblestones in the multilingual night... striding the length of the kärntnerstrasse, looking for answers in the stars, or howling beneath Mozart's window for his ghost, howling for redemption, keening for lost loves.., and weren't we the generation that was bound to change the world? what was it, what was change, and how had we come to this?

## **Forty-Eight:**

I used to think if they were mine there would be no more peeking in through the doors of life, no more standing on the edge of the subway platform, no longer smoke from a poorly vented flue, coughing its way through the lungs and reaching desperately for daylight, the sun the bright white host of salvation hoist on a fishhook just a little always beyond my reach, satisfaction no more the thing of song with its numbing throbbing beat and I thought satisfaction must be like something narcotic, numbing only to find that things could be numbing and narcotic and still satisfaction avoids you...

# The Storymaster

Kate Brandt

He arrived in the village one day in March. It was cold and muddy. At first I thought that perhaps he was a beggar, with his worn boots and moth-eaten wool cape, but he did not have the face of a beggar. There was too much pride in the broad forehead and hawk nose. And his eyes--the color of cave ice, a faraway blue.

He stood beside the stall of William Broad, who sold barley corn seed. He raised his voice. "I bring wisdom," he said, "from a faraway place." Jacob the Tavernkeeper stood beside him.

"Well stranger let's have it," said Jacob.

"There lived once a Prince Sugata who had everything," he said. "A splendid palace, fragrant gardens, devoted parents, a beautiful wife. One day a stranger arrived at his court. "Let me show you the world, Sire," said the stranger. And so the two of them went for a walk."

"Outside of his palace, the prince was astonished to see things he had never known existed: an old woman passed, bent over. "What is this?" he asked the stranger. The stranger told him: "this is old age." They passed a leper, begging for coins. "This is sickness," the stranger told him. Finally, a funeral procession passed, the corpse pulled inside a wagon. "Now, prince," said the stranger, "you have seen death."

"When the prince returned to the palace, he was shaken. How could he take pleasure in life when he knew what life really was? For a week he thought about it. It seemed to him there must be something better, and he would find it. His mind made up, he left the palace in the middle of the night and went into the forest wearing nothing but a loincloth. There, he stayed, fasting and praying, for many years."

"Finally, it happened: awakening. Now he understood the way out of suffering. But how to help others? The truth that he had discovered was so subtle, transcendent, and far-reaching that it could not be expressed in words."

The stranger in our midst then stopped. He nodded his head up and down as if speaking with himself. "This is the problem the Awakened One faced."

"Well stranger," said Jacob the Tavernkeeper. "What is the answer?"

"Stories," said the stranger.

At this Jacob the Tavernkeeper threw his head back and laughed. "You call this wisdom?" he said. "A fairy tale about a prince?"

"There is wisdom for those who wish to know," said the stranger. "Come back to the village square in three days, and I will tell a story."

"Who are you?" said Jacob.

"My name is Bartholomew. I come from the city of Erevastia, where the palace has a roof of gold. There they called me the Storymaster.

"And why have you come here?" said Jacob.

The stranger shrugged. "I wander from place to place, bringing what I know. In this village, it is destined that I find an apprentice to carry on my work."

“An apprentice!,” Jacob laughed loudly. “What do you teach? Riddles?” But the rest of us did not laugh with him. I looked from face to face—Mary Carlyle and Window Frederic and William Broad—and I saw that like me, they were hoping. More than for a good harvest or enough rain, they were hoping that the Storymaster would stay.

When Bartholomew came to our village, I was just fifteen. I lived on a farm with my mother, my father having died of the pox when I was eleven. It had never been an easy life, and with his death it became more difficult. The winter he died we ate nothing but turnips.

As a child I was delicate with pale skin and dark curls that clustered around my face. In the village they called me Gerard the Pretty One. I was always shy, and when my father died, I became more so. With my father gone, it fell to me to make the farm work, so I spent long hours in the fields, alone. Perhaps that was why I was drawn to Bartholomew.

When I returned from the village that day, I told my mother about the stranger. “I will work the next two days into the night so that I can go to the village in two days and hear his story,” I said.

My mother, her black hair tied behind her neck, turned away from me. “The last thing we need in this village is a storyteller,” she said.

“Why? I said. She looked over at me and her jaw tightened. “Stories trick us,” she said. “Stories lead us astray.”

“Might they not show us the truth?” I said.

“We can see the truth with our own eyes,” she said.

I worked till midnight for two days so that I could go to town and hear Bartholomew. When I arrived, I found him under a blackthorn tree, a small crowd around him.

“I will tell a story Sugata told,” he said. “Once awakened, he traveled from place to place, teaching and telling stories. One day he came to a village. By now it was known that he was not an ordinary man. A woman came to him. Her daughter had recently died. “Awakened one,” she said—for that was what they called him. “Can you bring her back to life?”

“Sugata agreed. “But first,” he said, “you must go to every house in the village and inquire whether any in the house have recently died. For each of the houses where the answer is yes, you must bring me a mustard seed.”

“The woman did as she was told. In each house of the village, as it turned out, there had been a death not so long ago. By the time she returned to Sugata, her hand was filled with mustard seeds, and she understood.”

I had been standing in the back of the crowd, but at the end of the story, I stepped forward. “Storymaster,” I said. “What is the meaning of this story?”

Bartholomew smiled and waved me toward him. “What is your name?” he said. I told him.

“In this world, Gerard, our hearts rise and fall with our fortunes and those we are close to. But true happiness lies in equanimity. No matter what happens, good or bad, we must maintain a steady heart.”

“Is it wrong to mourn those we love?” I asked.

“It is not wrong to mourn them, said Bartholomew. “But we cannot hold on to that which changes.” More than anything I wanted to be wise, but Bartholomew’s story did not make sense.

“It is true in words,” I stammered. “But not in the heart.” His eyes widened. He beckoned me closer.

“Come Gerard,” said Bartholomew. “Let’s go for a walk.” I could feel the eyes of the others on us as we walked away.

We walked along the road that led to the mill stream. The willows, the first of the trees to green, were beginning to bud, and Bartholomew pointed them out to me.

“What good are stories, Storymaster? I blurted. “Do they not lead people astray?”

“Stories change us,” he said. “At least good ones do.”

“If I were your apprentice, what would I learn?”

“Hard to say, Gerard,” said Bartholomew. “Each of us must find his own path to wisdom.”

From that day, Bartholomew the Storymaster was all I thought of. On the farm, I woke at 4 am. each day to get the work done, so that I could go to the village on the appointed day and hear Bartholomew’s stories. In the fields I thought of Bartholomew with his cave ice eyes.

The next week Bartholomew told the story of the race between the turtle and the rabbit. The lesson behind it: humility is the best path to becoming wise.

The week after that, the story of the Victory Procession. “What is true victory?” said Bartholomew. “True victory belongs to the one who has conquered himself.”

After each story, Bartholomew asked me to walk with him. I asked questions and he explained. The story of the Victory Procession, for instance: to achieve happiness, we must tame our minds.

It was during those walks that I learned more about him. In Erevastia, they had revered him. “I was known there,” said Bartholomew. “I lived in a brick house on the main street of the town and slept on clean sheets. I ate meat every day.”

“You left it all behind,” I said in surprise. “Why?”

“Equanimity, Gerard,” he told me. “Good or bad, one must maintain a steady heart. In Erevastia, I was getting too comfortable.”

It was some weeks after that Bartholomew told me to meet him at dawn just outside the village. “You are ready,” he said. We were walking in the same place we always walked—the road by the mill. It was greener every day.

“We tell wisdom through stories,” said Bartholomew, “but wisdom does not come from stories. Wisdom comes from self-knowledge, and self-knowledge comes from silence. For this you must go into the forest as Sugata did.”

I told my mother that I must travel to the next town to get the plow repaired. The next morning, I woke before dawn and went to meet Bartholomew on the road outside the village. He led me along a path through the woods. Every so often he took a faded ribbon from his pocket and tied it around a tree. We walked for an hour, climbing every higher. At last we reached a high place of rocks and pines.

“Sit,” said the Storymaster, pointing to the base of a pine. He sat across from me. “It is as Sugata discovered,” he said. “People want to be happy, but they go about it in the wrong way. People want things and once they get a thing, they try to hold on to it—a house; a lover; an agreeable idea. Here and there, the mind goes. Back and forth. But when you have trained your mind sufficiently, you will find a kind of silence. Then you will forget yourself,” he said. “Then you will grow wise.”

“How can I stop my thoughts?” I asked.

“You do not have to stop them, Gerard, just don’t let them lead you to and fro. When it is almost sunset, follow the ribbons back and tell me how you’ve done.”

I tried. I sat until my knees ached and my hands were numb from the wind. *Nothing*, I told myself sternly. *Silence. Do not think.* There was one moment when I achieved it. I forgot myself, and all at once, everything was perfect. But then my thoughts rushed in again. All day, and it was only that once I glimpsed It.

Bartholomew was waiting for me when I came down the mountain. “How did you do?” He asked.

I sighed.

“Perhaps I am not meant for it, Storymaster,” I said.

“Perhaps,” said Bartholomew. “But now you begin to know your own mind.”

Each day, I worked until lunchtime, then went into the woods behind our fields. I sat under a tree and tried to achieve It. Each day, there was a small part of a minute when I forgot myself and achieved freedom. Otherwise, my mind ran in circles. I did not know if I could ever master myself as Bartholomew had done.

By May each day was longer and lighter than the day before it. In the woods, a new tree budded out each day.

One day when I came to the village to hear his story, Bartholomew took me aside and announced that he was coming to the woods with me. “Spring is here, Gerard,” he said. “it’s time to enjoy it. I have been given a gift of cheese and apples. Tomorrow I’ll meet you. We’ll eat them for lunch.”

I worked through the night so I could meet him in the morning. In the woods he walked along jauntily and I followed. Everything was better now that the Storymaster was with me. The air was more fragrant; the branches of the trees more graceful. It was if he made everything around him come alive. We rounded a corner and there it was: a shower of white blossoms just ahead of us. Overnight a pear tree had bloomed. How strange and wonderful it was to see it there, in the dark of the woods.

“Look, Gerard,” said Bartholomew. “A wedding tree.” He pushed his face against it to smell and I did the same.

“Spread our blanket, Gerard,” he said. “Let’s enjoy.” I spread the blanket and cut the cheese. When we had eaten, Bartholomew lay on his back with his face in the sun. I



sat with my arms wrapped around my knees.

“I was wondering,” I said, “how you chose me as your apprentice.” Bartholomew opened one eye. “What was it about me?” I said.

“You asked questions,” he said. “You wanted to know.” I was silent, thinking of this. “I asked,” I said, “because I’m not sure I’m meant for it. I’ve tried, but I can’t control my thoughts.”

“Ah.” Bartholomew sat upon his elbows and looked at me. “Our minds run back and forth,” he said, “remembering the past, planning the future. But when we step inside each passing moment...” he stopped. “Then the world is perfect, Gerard.” I fell silent. “Lie down,” he said. “I will show you.” I lay down, reluctantly.

“Close your eyes, Gerard...Good.” The sun was hot on my face. A stick pushed into my back. “Let’s take that shirt off,” he said. I opened my eyes, startled. “Come now,” Bartholomew raised an eyebrow. “Are you shy?” I blushed a little. When I lay back down, I had goose bumps.

“Close your eyes, Gerard,” he said again. I did. I heard a twig snap. There was a faint twitching on the inside of my wrist. It moved slowly, in ever-widening circles. It began to move up my arm. “Don’t think,” said Bartholomew. “Feel.” The leaf slid farther up to my shoulder. A feeling arose in me: it was astonishing. It was as if branches were growing beneath my skin. The places he touched—my chest, my nipples, rose up to meet him. There was a tightening between legs. I felt it pushing against my pants.

“No master,” I sat up. “It’s not right.”

“Ah.” Abruptly the leaf stopped moving. I looked up at him: the cave-ice eyes, the strands of hair that hung down.

“It cannot be this we search for?”

“Follow your heart, Gerard,” said Bartholomew. “Do you know what you want?”

And then I did know. I pulled him down to me. His hands pulled at my clothes, stroked me, and I cried out. The sun was two blue fists pressed into my closed eyelids. I pushed into him: the darkness behind my eyes and the space between us. We did not stop until the sun was thin through the branches and the air had cooled.

Then he left. I wanted to return with him, but he said it was best if we were not seen together. Before he turned away, he stood and looked at me. “Today you’ve had an experience, Gerard,” he said. “Your story has begun.”

Weeks went by. How happy I was. I thought of one thing only, now: Bartholomew. Because of him, nothing was ordinary. The sun angling down between tree branches, the sound of the stream—all were secret messages to me. All said the same thing: a thing that could not be spoken, but filled me with delight. I walked through the woods. I sat under my pine tree. I ate my lunches, all in the same state of pleasure. Once, I remember, I went to the brook and leaned down for a drink. I saw my face reflected in the water’s surface and laughed out loud. Bartholomew the Storymaster could not get enough of me, I thought. Me, Gerard. Bartholomew told me not to come to the village anymore. “Do your work; go into the woods and try to attain it,” he said. “I will meet you each week in the special place.”

One question plagued me more than the others: Sugata had said it was equanimity we must strive for, but now that I had met Bartholomew, it was the opposite I felt.

One day I asked him, "Why do we meet like this?"

"You do not like it?"

"It is the sweetest thing in my life," I said. "But it does not calm my mind."

Bartholomew sat with his knees up, his arms around them. He looked into the trees.

"Come to the village tomorrow, Gerard," he said. "There is a story I want you to hear."

In the few weeks I had been gone, things had changed in the village. Now it was not just a small crowd who gathered around Bartholomew to hear his stories. Much of the village was there—Widow Frederic, Mary Carlyle. Even William Broad. One sight astonished me: handsome Penn, sitting right at Bartholomew's feet. When I saw Penn at Bartholomew's feet, I blushed, angry at myself for doing so, and stepped back in the crowd.

Bartholomew told the story of Sheng the Teacher and Radnek the Student. When Radnek came and asked to be Sheng's student, Sheng accepted him. Radnek expected to receive the secret teachings which would lead to him to happiness and wisdom, but instead Sheng put him to work, building a tower of stone. Sheng pointed to a ridge in the distance. "It should be nine stories," he said. "When you have finished the work, come back to me and I will teach you."

Radnek worked hard in all kinds of weather. He got sores on his back from carrying the stones. When he had finished, after a year, he returned to Sheng, triumphant. But when Sheng saw the tower he began to yell. "You idiot," he screamed. "You buffoon. You've built it in the wrong place."

Sheng made Radnek pull the whole tower down and start over again.

"This went on for the next nine years," said Bartholomew. In that time, Radnek built nine towers for Sheng, and then had to pull them down again. When Radnek finally realized he wasn't going to get the teachings, he decided to kill himself. He found a stout branch, secured it to the side of the tower, and got a rope. Just then, Sheng appeared. "What are you doing?" he said.

"I'm killing myself," said Radnek. "I will never get the teachings."

"You idiot," said Sheng. "Come with me."

Then Sheng took him to this house and taught him."

I did not understand. How could one maintain equanimity in the face of such a thing? And what kind of teacher would treat his student this way?

Bartholomew spoke loudly. "Who can tell me what this story means?" he said.

Penn stood. "The student cannot come to the teacher expecting wisdom to come easily. He must want wisdom more than anything else he could possibly have."

"Well said, Penn," said Bartholomew. "Truly you have been listening."

For the first time, I found myself rebelling against Bartholomew's words. Worse, when I looked up, I saw Bartholomew look at Penn; the hunger in his eyes.

I fled.

All that week I promised myself that I would not go into the woods to meet Bartholomew at our usual place. But when the day came, I went. Before he raised his hand to touch me, I spoke. "I was there yesterday; in the village," I said. "I heard the story of Sheng. I do not see wisdom there; just cruelty." Bartholomew sighed. "Perhaps we learn best when we lose what matters most?" he said.

"It's wrong," I said. Bartholomew did not answer.

"And I saw the way you looked at Penn," I said. "I thought I was your apprentice. You are just like Sheng the teacher. "

Bartholomew looked up at a patch of sky, squinting.

"If I care for Penn, does it mean that I care for you less, Gerard?" he said.

"I thought it was me," I cried. "I thought I was the one delighted you."

"Equanimity, Gerard."

"Then why did you bring me here?" I almost shouted.

"Did you think to overcome desire without ever experiencing it?" said Bartholomew.

"You are a bad man, Bartholomew," I said loudly. "I will not come to meet you anymore." But on my way back to the farm I stopped, bent over. Love cuts like a knife.

It was a difficult harvest. I did not sleep at night.

Each day I went into the woods to sit under a tree and clear my mind, but there was no peace for me. My thoughts stabbed at me.

One day in the woods, sitting under a tree, I opened my eyes and saw a fallen elm, downed by a storm most likely, and still young and strong. I thought of Radnek, building his towers, year after year, and remembered what Penn had said: the student should not expect wisdom to come easily. An idea came. The next day I brought an axe with me, telling my mother that I planned to cut firewood. Then I set to work. On the farm I had only built a shed for the goats we kept, but as I cut and sawed, stacking the planks, I began to see my tower unfolding: the posts that would support it; the smooth, straight walls.

All that summer I sawed and fitted, the sweat drenching my shirt. The silence was with me, and after many days, I realized that I was achieving it. For longer each day, I forgot myself. Then I saw the wisdom of Bartholomew's story. I had wanted wisdom to come to me like magic, but wisdom does not come that way. Wisdom comes through work.

I finished in early September. That night I went to the village and listened to Bartholomew tell a story. Afterwards, I invited my master to meet me in the woods the next day. "I have something to show you," I said. "A gift."

The next day we met on the mill road and walked fast through the woods. When Bartholomew entered the clearing, he threw his head back and laughed.

"My apprentice has been busy," he said.

"Nine stories," I said. "Like the tower Radnek built." Slowly we climbed the stairs to top.

“This is devotion, Gerard,” said Bartholomew. He drew me towards him, his voice husky. His hand crawled under my shirt. His breath was hot in my ear and my own breaths grew ragged, my mind only thinking the one thing. When it was over, we lay on the floor. I had left the roof unfinished; branches dangled above us and sunlight filtered through. One leaf had begun to turn scarlet at the edges. I thought how Bartholomew had come in the springtime, where there were no leaves on the trees. And now it was Fall.

I was happy one week.

It was the next week they came to the village. We were gathered around Bartholomew when they appeared—three burly men in red uniforms. They pushed through us, surrounding Bartholomew, and held him by the arms. I pushed to the front. “Where do you come from?” I asked one of them.

“Erevastia,” said one soldier. “We have been sent to find Prester here.”

“You’ve got the wrong man,” I said. “That is not Prester. That is Bartholomew the Storymaster.”

The three soldiers looked at each other and laughed.

“You changed the name, but kept the title, Prester,” one of them said to Bartholomew.

“And who are *you*?” the first soldier asked me.

“Gerard. His apprentice.”

At this the three of them laughed more riotously. “An apprentice! What has he taught you?” he asked me. I opened my mouth to answer but there was more laughing, and I closed it again.

“I believe,” he said, “you’ve been tricked.” My mouth opened. He smiled. “Don’t worry,” he said. “You won’t be the first. In Erevastia,” —and he shook Bartholomew’s arm—“this man is hated by many.”

They began to walk with Bartholomew between them. “Where are you taking him?” I called.

“Prester here is coming back to Erevastia. Most likely he will be hanged.”

“Hanged!” I half-screamed.

There were villagers all around me, but all of them had begun to step back.

“You can’t do this,” I shouted. “You can’t take him.” The captain spoke to Bartholomew and then he turned to me.

“You mustn’t follow, Gerard,” he said. “You’ll get hurt.”

The soldiers took Bartholomew to the tavern. They put him on a horse, his hands bound behind him.

That was when I learned. There in the Village marketplace, like the first day he had come.

First Mary Caryle came. She was thin, with shadows under her eyes, and under her cloak I could see her stomach sprouting. “What shall I do, Storymaster?” she cried. “I trusted you and look what has come to me.”

“Your choice, Mary,” said Bartholomew from his horse. “Did you not ask for wisdom?”

“And what have I learned?” she cried. Bartholomew did not answer, but looked into the distance.

Then it was Todd Farr. “Master,” he cried, his voice choked. “How can I live without you?”

Bartholomew smiled at him gently. “Equanimity, Todd,” he said. “You had pleasure; now it is gone. Why mourn the loss?”

But the worst for me was Penn. He stood in front of Bartholomew, black hair gleaming.

“Master,” he said. “I shall always remember.”

“My best student, Penn,” he said.

I stepped forward, my voice hoarse.

“Why do you do it, Bartholomew?” I said. “Stories and wisdom and equanimity and it’s all a lie?”

“Not a lie, Gerard,” said Bartholomew. “A truth you don’t want to hear.”

“You took everything from me.”

“You gave freely, Gerard.”

“I have nothing, now!” I shouted. Bartholomew looked toward the road ahead of him.

“Now you find out,” he said. “What nothing can give in return.”

I ran.

Past the mill stream; into the woods. For hours I did not stop; then I saw where I had come to: the tower I had built. Months went by; I stayed there, waiting for death to come. There were days when I woke up with my hands frozen to the wood of the tower; I did not care.

But it did not take long for me to learn something: the body does not want to die. After a week, I went out into the woods—anything for food to eat. I found some berries; killed a rabbit. In this way, I passed through the winter. One day I asked myself what nothing could give me, and it seemed to me that I was beginning to know.

All that Bartholomew had said about Erevastia was true: the streets are paved, and the king’s palace has a roof of gold. I asked everywhere for Bartholomew. He must have run away from the soldiers; all shook their heads.

By the third day I began to tell stories in the marketplace. I had to—I was hungry. That was when I discovered it: the apprentice had become a master. I had wisdom.

I told all of Bartholomew’s stories: the Story of the Mustard Seed; The Story of the Victory Procession; The Story of Radnek and Sheng. As I told them, I made them my own. Coins dropped into a cup; at length I had a roof over my head and decent food. After a month, they sent for me from the palace—the king wanted a story.

I told the King the story of Grizelda, a simple farm girl. A man comes to her village—he is handsome and mysterious. He announces that he knows the secret of happiness, and will give it away to any who want to learn. Grizelda wants the secret. She leaves her farm and moves in with him, cooks for him, works for him. Eventually, she falls in love with him. I lifted my eyes to the king. “Then she does all the things that a wife will do.”

“The stranger does not treat her well. When she asks for the secret of happiness, he says “I’m teaching you.” But Grizelda grows only more miserable.

“This goes on for years,” I said. “The treatment Grizelda receives grows steadily worse. The stranger humiliates her in the marketplace; takes other lovers. Grizelda decides to kill herself. “

The King rose from his throne, eyes angry.

“This is not a good story, Gerard. Why is she so devoted to a stranger who brings her only trouble?”

“But Sire, I said, “for the man who seeks equanimity, trouble can be a kind of gift.”

The King believes I have wisdom, and so I have lived in the palace a year now, in a small wood room with one square window that looks to the east. From time to time, I think of Bartholomew. I wonder where he is, and dream of leaving Erevastia, wandering the land to find him. But then I remember a time in the woods. Suffused with joy, I had told my master that I believed in him.

“To believe in me, Gerard,” he said, “is to believe in a dream; a story that never happened.”

And I suppose he was right.

## Emergency Room Visit

Erika Loh

Last night I went to the emergency room. The emergency room is a place where one arrives almost dead or dying, extricated from an accident and requiring resuscitation. It is an in-between and right-before place. Therefore, it seems absurd — indulgent, even, to visit the emergency room for a migraine. Even now as I write this, I find myself making light of my condition, feeling guilty and embarrassed. Now that the worst has passed, I cannot remember the intensity of the pain.

My friends were in the backseat with me. We've lived together for almost three years now, so I think we're family. I'm habituated to their voices along the corridors, the items left in their wake. I know whose socks those are, and whose voice breaks with emotion late in the night.

\*

Where we live together, on the seventeenth floor, the howls of the midnight wind hurtle through the narrow columns of stairwell to arrive as a screech. Some nights we would pad out of our rooms to greet the wind, slightly alarmed, like young owls awakened by the first rolls of thunder, nervous eyes meeting nervous eyes. Other nights the wind would end up being too strong, having accelerated up the floors, and we would have to hold the window shut and gather fragile things in the middle of the corridor, lest they shattered, these sad trinkets from Salvador and Switzerland that we carted around, to settle here for the time being.

I coped with migraines the way we conducted these night-time rituals, frantically buying time, turning away from the wind and the sun, from danger. I kept the curtains drawn, moth-like and nocturnal as the temperature outside soared throughout the day. Imperceptible increases in heat would intensify my migraine, so staying indoors was a way of acknowledging the limits of my animal body and admitting defeat.

\*

In the lunging cab, in our shared silence, I took comfort in the knowledge that tomorrow would arrive, and we would be back in the apartment laughing about how the freak wind has destroyed our belongings in our absence. Perhaps we would make time to rearrange the hallways, if we remembered what they looked like prior to the wind's intrusion. Perhaps we would leave things strewn about and step over them until we forget where they once stood altogether.

But for now, I was holding it all in: the dizziness, the fatigue, the nausea. I had to be separated from my friends — family — at the emergency room. In the isolation ward, there was a sink, a bed and a vomit bag which I had already filled. The artificial lights were too bright so I had to keep my eyes closed. The people I loved were texting me from the other room, my phone was buzzing with their concern. The clock was loud, so loud. It sounded unreal.

\*

Recently I've been having dreams of owning a small house in a desert, somewhere in the middle of Joshua Tree or New South Wales — far, far away from here. In this other life, the glare of the solar film, the dry air and the arid, barren landscape are sources of comfort rather than causes for migraine. The hardy architecture of the house is an extension of my body, weather-resistant, time-resistant. I keep searching for a familiar presence in the house. It appears as if I am alone, but I have an impression that I am not. I arrive in the bathroom to find water running. Something passes through the garden. I wake up to find the curtains already drawn, letting new light in. Always, there's another life just out of reach.



## **A Fair Amount of Ghosts**

**Zach Murphy**

He plays the trumpet brilliantly on the corner of Grand and Victoria. He doesn't look like he's from this era. He's impeccably dressed, from his crisply fitting suit to his smooth fedora hat. There aren't many folks that can pull that off. He's cooler than the freezer aisle on a sweltering summer day. He performs the type of yearning melodies that give you the goosebumps. I've never seen anyone put any money into his basket.

There's a formidable stone house that sits atop Fairmount Hill. It's been for sale for as long as I can remember. The crooked post sinks deeper into the soil with each passing year. It isn't a place to live in. It's a place to dwell in. There's a dusty rocking chair on the front porch. It's always rocking. Always rocking. I'm not sure if the chair is occupied by an old soul or if it's just the wind. Maybe it's both. I guess the wind is an old soul.

This town is full of posters for Missing Cats. There's one for a sweet, fluffy Maine Coon named "Bear." He's been gone for a while now. I've searched through every alleyway, under every porch, and inside of every bush for him. Sometimes I think I see him out of the corner of my eye. But then he's not there. The rain has pretty much washed away the tattered posters. If he ever turns up, I worry that the posters will be missing.

I met the love of my life in Irvine Park, near the gloriously spouting water fountain, beneath the serene umbrella of oak trees. We spent a small piece of eternity there together. We talked about whether or not the world was coming to an end soon, and if all of our memories will be diminished along with it. After we said our goodbyes and she walked off into the distance, I never saw her again. So I left my heart in Irvine Park.

by Olivia Hajioff

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## The Child Within

You will remember this:

Waiting in an airport lounge, long ago,  
Your feet crouched under you to escape the smashed paper cup  
Oozing grimy coffee grounds  
And the dropped sweet wrapper  
Torn open so that its sticky pinkness shines up at you,  
Vying to reach your shoe.

The flock of folk creating a clamour  
Less of noise than of vibrations in your liver and spleen.  
The dry piped heat so intense that your neck is repulsed by your own hair  
And your forearms fuse to your fleece jacket  
When you wrench it off.

Then comes the growl and fizz of the microphone:  
A three hour weather delay is announced.

A moment of silence as  
The adults resign to what must be.  
That collective hardening of spine and softening of throat  
Is all we can express.

But then, a single yelp: a small, clammy whine of 'Mummy, I want to go home!'

You hear it with your stomach, not your ears.  
Yes! You breathe,  
Yes I want to cry, too.  
And not just with a quiet tear, politely rolling down your cheek.  
What use is that?  
You want to kick the chair and pout  
And stick your tongue out at that staring old busybody across the aisle.

But we can't go home.  
We must perch upright.  
No lap to curl into,  
No soft shoulder to rest our hot cheek.

These comforts are no longer ours to expect  
But that does not mean we have outgrown them.  
The pangs remain forever  
For the child within.

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### **The Girl In The Puddle**

We eat our picnic in the car,  
A gushing storm holds us captive.  
We eat carefully, quietly, no room to be playful.  
But as the world comes into view  
I notice a girl  
Lounging in a puddle.

Her strong limbs stretch out  
As if sunning herself on the shore.  
She waves with the exuberant smile of innocence  
Needing nothing but what she has.

Hers is a gift too great to be measured.  
I already grieve at the loss  
For I know it will be taken, as it is from us all.

So artful is the thief that we do not see him come  
And we do not see him leave.  
His hands tip the hourglass of our youth  
So we remember, and we remember less  
Until what we felt once upon a time  
Is something we only wonder at.  
A charming, yellowed photograph, too grainy to inspect.

As the downpour thins, the girl rises from the water.  
She strolls home, her bare feet unmoved by sharp stones.  
And our coiled spines straighten  
As we release ourselves to join the day.

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## **The Sounds Before The Sounds I Knew Before**

Everyone says it's quieter now, but there are more sounds:  
Not the bird's song, but the first lift of its wing.  
Not a rustling of leaves, but the flip flop as one leaf  
turns over, back and forth.  
The intake of breath before the shout of a child.

When I stand still, I hear the grass tap against its fellow blade.  
When I walk, I hear my foot raise, peeling away from the soft pine needles.  
The sounds before the sounds I knew before.

I should wear a softer jacket.  
I have to hold my arms rigid by my sides to stop the shiny rubbing that mutes all else.  
Otherwise I won't know what I can hear and what I cannot.

The listening itself is a reaching out. A stretching.

Only the trees hold their secret quietness.  
I go close to them and find a cool darkness  
Made of sounds I have yet to hear.

## Flight

I can fly.  
Why shouldn't I? It's easy.

When I was a little girl, I flew down the stairs.  
No one saw me, but I know it's true.

I will tell you how I do it:  
I uptilt my chin and stretch my arms by my sides.  
My fingers point down and I breathe in.  
On the out breath, I rise.  
No flapping of feet, no waving of arms;  
I just come to the surface.

There is no fear, nowhere to fall.

Sometimes I fly just above people's heads  
But they never see me.  
Other times, I shoot far into the sky  
Until the cold air slows me.

This is where life is.  
This is where I can breathe.

## Seek-sorrow

I learned an ancient word today.  
Such a beautiful, sad word:  
Seek-sorrow.

There are those who, in their quest for reality,  
See only the wound, but not the healing skin beneath.  
They immerse in the infinite misery that besets us  
And cannot open ears or eyes to the speckled joys that also share our world.

The seek-sorrow frowns at delights  
And bids you furrow also.  
I know those who are so.  
Perhaps you do, too.

But may we not be beckoned  
By the small, clear, Autumn sky  
And the tide of leaves rushing towards us  
And the mourning dove's strange, creaky-winged flight?

Are such glories to be ignored  
So that we may not distract from suffering?  
Perhaps there is room enough for both  
In our unbounded consciousness

For, in truth, the sorrows need no seeking  
And neither do the joys.

## Connection

I sit with my eyes closed and reach with the tendrils of my mind,  
Like fractals, endlessly extending.  
Everything I have known and cared for, I hold in my heart-hands.  
Near or far makes no difference anymore.

Outside, the breeze-breath draws in and out  
Connecting all of nature.  
We are never alone. We are always alone.

All we wish is to be known, seen, heard.  
Do you think you don't know me? I think you do.  
And I know you, don't I?

## The Spaces Between

I love the spaces between things:  
The sky between branches,  
The still between breaths,  
The quiet between sleep and wake,  
The crowded wine bar of thoughts  
Emptying to leave a wide open mind.

These moments are tiny. Hidden.

Be still and wait. Just wait

For in the space lies calm and peace.

## To Look Into Another's Eyes

What does it mean, to hate?  
To see nothing of yourself reflected back  
When you look into another's eyes.

To look into another's eyes  
Even on a screen, or in a book  
You feel such profound delight at times,  
Don't you?  
You see yourself. Your experience, understood.  
Your hand is held, for that moment.

And yet, you may look into another's eyes  
And see the glassy surface of hate.  
But do not look away.  
Look deeper through the looking-glass  
And you will find, curled in a fist  
None but fear.

And still you must look  
For there, in the eye of the palm of fear  
Is the seed of recognition,  
If you will only look into another's eyes.



## **Fear**

My name is Fear.  
There are none who do not know me well  
But I am never looked upon.  
You avert your eyes; you hide from me  
But I slip beneath your skin.

I am lonely, unloved, misunderstood.  
Do you not know that I am the deepest part of you?  
I am an infant. Howling. Fists fraught.

If you hold me in your arms and look into my eyes  
You will see that I need only be comforted, soothed.  
My frost would be warmed by your gentleness.  
My stiff limbs might yield, softened.

Open your heart. Call me by my name.  
I am not as you believe. I promise.

## Destination

This border between love  
and death, thin as a cat's  
black whisker,  
is not what I expected.

A rattle of breath, deep  
then deeper,  
the stillness while we watch  
for the next rise, fall.

Skin once pale as a fish belly,  
an old joke passed around  
like the nub of a smoke  
scrounged from the neighbor's yard,  
blooms blue, a bruised hyacinth.

Miles from here, a train rumbles,  
whistle cries lonesome but honest,  
dreams of the destination  
not desolate, simply unknown.

## Host

A visitor, I do not expect the sharp tap on my hand  
from an affronted priest.

My own custom – receive the host, hold it tenderly,  
wait to bathe it in ruby-hued symbol,

Christ's blood, shining and shimmering  
benevolence in a brown pottery chalice –

is rejected. Here, touching the holy,  
housed in an air-thin wafer so dry

it becomes my mouth's ceiling  
(clever hiding place for a Jesus tired of the chase),

equals a thought best banished before  
acted upon. I do not look up, simply watch

the priest's fingers snatch the round savior  
only to place it begrudgingly on my

unworthy tongue. A cassock's fractious hiss  
gentled by freesia's girlish perfume.

## Santa Maria de la Sede

Preferring to ride not walk,  
the Moors built a ramp wide enough for a horse  
to reach the top of Giralda bell tower,  
once-minaret spared 15<sup>th</sup> century  
Christian demolition.

Cutting through its heart like an artery  
the ramp now carries travelers  
anxious for a panorama.

At the top, beneath silent bells,  
impossibly large, added by conquerors,  
my gaze drifts to what once was an orange grove,  
patio de los naranjos,  
its central fountain no longer surrounded by those  
desiring to wash hands and feet before prayer  
but tourists eating sandwiches and wearing hats  
against Sevilla's insistent sun.

On my way down I stop,  
admire a bird's nest  
spilling from a gargoyle's mouth  
like too much shredded wheat.  
A woman passes me,  
sweating her way up three hundred thirty feet,  
uttering her quiet supplication,  
a muttered *mamma mia*,  
on an exhausted exhalation.

## **At the end**

of this thorny path  
a divorce waits;  
from a distance, it watches,  
chews its fingernails  
and curses my slow step.

I don't drag time  
as a punishment.  
Instead it's one last thing  
I can hold; this life we built  
is a broken thing,  
but pieces still catch  
fragments of sunlight.

If my heart lingers  
in its playhouse,  
forgive it;  
it is merely being theatrical,  
prolonging a scene to  
avoid our curtain's fall,  
postpone the final bow.

It convinces not even itself  
these days.

## **Transformation**

Thunder rumbles  
and I feel walls shake.

Unease ripples as  
childish fears stir.

Somewhere rivers are rising,  
churning whitecaps, dislodging logs.

Lifting themselves over banks,  
waters congregate,

loiter in fields,  
leave behind a trail

of mud and debris like  
teenagers on spring break.

I contemplate changes,  
the world reshaped with every storm.

Outside, above the rain,  
a songbird trills its indifference.

## **Cameo In Deed**

### **Sochukwu Ivye**

Books in deed define your pet name for you  
I well brook them for their station quite true  
Do you make one thing of such depictions?  
I see but made-up scenes lived like fictions  
A well penned note, a far-famed actor's role  
or a gemstone, books outline, not your soul  
My soul shall not rest boneless for its child,  
your pet name, led and captured in the wild  
Even if moments with you calmed me more  
they left me, each time, with a heart of sore  
Now, I should not learn why on our first day  
my poor spirit caught cold under your sway  
I could have seen what was in store for me,  
but blindfolded, my eyes were not thus free  
My mind is fraught with memories unclean,  
like a frenzied boy's eyes caught at a scene  
I write to sweep my breast of your pictures,  
and breathe thus freshly, eluding strictures  
I should let all these saunter past my grasp  
but they would dwell in me till my last gasp  
As one of those all-youthful twilights came,  
with mates, I sat and eased on all the same  
The abrupt wind which threw in your figure  
might have not longed to assess my vigour  
I had found most of the street's best ladies  
I knew most but could win none or maybes  
A call came; my heart and eyes led my legs,  
and I went for you, although to some dregs  
It did seem that I had made one cute move,  
but if hours, days and years, after did prove  
I heard none else, but listened for your 'yes'  
I was the leopard; you seemed as harmless  
I led the thought that I had seen some gold  
and beat the past, but there was the untold  
There were times my feet even cried in pain

They had to take me to you, though, in vain  
The first years nursed me like a newly born  
Who would evoke the tales of the lovelorn?  
Nothing felt frightful about how hearts halt  
But, O heartache! Into wounds, you rub salt  
Signs cried out to me; my senses sat numb  
Omens played in my eyes; I just grew dumb  
What would destroy my soul arose on time  
You took no time to divulge this love-crime  
How to meet your heart turned to my worry  
If some thoughts met my mind, I was sorry  
My warmth with you was a style of worship  
To lure mates, the female display courtship  
Everybody will say, "Some date themselves"  
Well, who spare any hearts on any shelves?  
My poise was fate-doomed: I left other girls  
but because you dressed like a lot of pearls  
I saw you when, at some girls else, I looked  
in that all my care and lust you had hooked  
My long search for the one came to an end,  
but would fetch a verse I had never penned  
A certain affaire caught our breaths to fare,  
but no man who saw tomorrow would dare  
I had to walk through some muddy love life  
believing that such would win one the wife  
You toyed with my rest and sullied my face,  
thus that I could not lead myself with grace  
Civil linguists say: no schwa, no triphthong  
To merit a four-faced, what was my wrong?  
My mates kept us and adorned your image,  
because they were hopeful of our marriage  
Friends at work, school and on the internet  
did honour my Miss World and her vignette  
All who wished me ill did not want you well  
They won, to have met my right woman fell  
You did cradle their traps to bring me down  
How would I see but roam, about, a clown?  
Whose only lover stabs them from behind?  
Indulge me, how do they like the cut, blind?



One overreached oneself if one's ship sank  
as did mine, a short distance past the bank  
I had once more begun to thrive, it seemed:  
all my vows to you I could score redeemed  
You well noticed how and lauded my nerve  
but the base of your mind laid your reserve  
To tag me new, my past knew less passion  
but this foul-souled lust lent a new fashion  
Your plots I did foil with some selfless acts  
May I applaud your grins that read impacts  
If you confessed your doubts about dating  
you found me hungry for your love, waiting  
I served kind judgement in will and in deed,  
but saw not when I would bewail my breed  
You did have my skin to breed some itches  
and my waking brow to wear more stitches  
I hoped that my silence smelt of most men  
To your requests, my deeds echoed: Amen  
You were well at it while you called me dad,  
your longing and rightfully yours. How sad!  
My groping heart did head for your kindred  
Could it meet them in one year or hundred?  
My nightmares unmasked overhanging ills,  
but you dismissed them as offensive chills  
To your dream men I took you, like a bridge  
Who misreads you cannot repulse a midge  
Except behind closed eyes, I was not yours  
Until you felt hurt, past me shut your doors  
You felt faceless to show me to your peers;  
quick eyes saw: I was the prey all the years  
I came out thus strongly despite your plots  
to confess the fact: we must brave our lots  
Do I miss your hugs I once scored faithful?  
Or, your burning brow I did weigh graceful?  
Now, for my blindness that still beheld love,  
I must watch to tell the hawk from the dove  
Now that yours of all lives is led four-faced,  
who would still run into your likes in haste?  
The eyes that see you have known a Judas

and must give heed to a snake in the grass  
Knowledge is might but I loathe this lesson  
Yet through you, my inner might did lessen  
How you could sift nothing but rip my trust,  
and ask to have it again, struck me trussed  
I did pledge my trust, and met all my words;  
your still small voice did fly away with birds  
You had not come to plant or mend fences,  
but to steal my heart and numb my senses  
That ours was unknown to your confidants  
blew me as my encounters with your aunts  
We had struck as one, but you posed alone  
scratching for woovers, moving on your own  
We named our unborn, having built a home  
An abode solely of steel, glass and chrome  
Who builds a home and for a lifetime plans,  
with a woman who does refuse her hands?  
Fate struck me moneyless to clear my eyes  
I saw one yet nailed downwardly crosswise  
I was the one. Who could have believed all?  
You did not stand me but fashioned my fall  
To have dug my pit and feigned innocence,  
you did shear me in deed of my sixth sense  
I sought your face while I missed my wallet  
If you feigned love, amounts left my pocket  
Think that my ageing parent laid her health,  
so that you would be with me, all by stealth  
She peddled things to get me some money  
You kept all and more. Were taps so runny?  
If mom's and my head abandoned your heft  
you well did in deed not deem them so deft  
My good mother, the marrow for my bones;  
she dared all, just to build up my hormones  
My eyes and mind were tried by some devil  
I could not strive through but, weakly, revel  
In your chasteness, the acts you titled fuss  
you observed with your boys but denied us  
You relished to hear but truths but well lied  
You extolled me as meek but fed your pride

Your yes was but yes and your no sheer no  
because your heart was a rock in the snow  
I did most days bear guilts, could you ever?  
All bent knees were mine, as you felt clever  
The venom you fed me became some soup  
Breaking out of us could not feign a swoop  
I incurred more ache when you feigned pity  
and shook at your plots sticking thus gritty  
When I had smelt myself trapped in a maze  
time past time failed me to defeat my craze  
You were almost done with your fell intents  
when you could pay no heed to my laments  
I saw no hope as your heart failed to shake  
I held my heart soft and faint for more ache  
I watched us turn to walkway souls, quickly  
All my labour forthwith crushed, thus sickly  
I had marked the last of my love times past  
but had yet to vanquish the spells you cast  
Of the most foul-souled, the most silent are  
If I was ruined, who would breed a memoir?  
You chose Janus' month to cast me to rout  
but my God of doorways could lead me out  
Could ceasing one's life taste like a refuge?  
The practice yet finds me as then and huge  
I should gulp some drinks and submit inert  
but something struck my dying deeply hurt  
I saw my mother's book of days half closed  
In front of my heart, her face in tears posed  
The dead parts of me made out of my form;  
they stuck in wait for my breath to conform  
Nothing else held the rest of me but mom's  
Her rheum of distress fell like barrel bombs  
Had my landlord's daughter not run to help,  
who anywhere would take heed of my yelp?  
Chika had but sought to succour my plight;  
the whole of me, her nearness would ignite  
I did predict that she would seize your seat;  
having smelt your place, she called it a feat  
Once again, my soul did meet one so loose

but she found me in your filth thus profuse  
She would fall for a soul with no such work  
and not when she had known many a quirk  
She thought that I should not let you away;  
I knew that she would see better, someday  
She copied your looks and copied your gait  
Not for her use; she is mirthful, but straight  
How much more anguish did I have to feel?  
Which suicide chart had I more to conceal?  
For your foulness, what other grants had I?  
Was there something else I did have to try?  
Except you feigned them expecting returns  
you had no care, but cast my balm to burns  
I thought to myself that I had less strength,  
if I could keep a sweetheart at arm's length  
I wondered what could render me thus foul  
and shorn of wits, but now at myself scowl  
I considered how tides would flow and ebb  
Drowned in ill hopes, I was caught in a web  
How you robbed me of my faith and reason  
but filled your boys' would rout any treason  
It shook me while your voice within lay stiff  
You must have killed her to enjoy your skiff  
If I outlive these days, meet some soul else,  
but like her less, shall we say our farewells?  
While I pray that the well esteemed forgives  
I fear that my scared soul beyond now lives  
The leopard now mourns his meeting a linx  
I could not see myself pull through this jinx  
May all who follow closely mark your mode  
and how you wrecked my spirits and abode  
All that learn from the price that I have paid  
shall meet the oncoming days, better made  
I have loved. All who come after may watch  
He that may wear love, my case is a swatch  
Should I grow feeble and slump at this crux  
all must deny more blood such state of flux  
If anything slits my soul, some shame does  
And through the space, I see but a dim fuzz

I howl in deed to think on these things ours  
but placate my spent spirit, bearing flowers  
How you could hurt and soothe like Cassio,  
Shakespeare knew not the name as Cameo  
Of your foul likes, our era should be cleared  
to keep many from the collapse well feared  
Your followers would with you be punished,  
if they kept not from your path all-banished  
Reap your will, get fat and gain all the world  
From vivid eyes, bear your intent well furled  
Win your admired and let his heart no crack  
but then, may our days at no time turn back  
May your breed never again know my heart,  
whilst I bunch up my fragments flung apart.

## LINDA

You pull into the parking lot of the nursing home and park your navy blue Chevy Suburban in the nearest parking spot. You look into the backseat by instinct, despite having just dropped your daughter off at dance practice. Your therapist says alone times like this should be “you” time. You should get your nails done at the local nail parlour or read a Courtney Milan book in a hammock (or whatever other suburbia mothers do). Instead you take your keys out of the ignition, fluff your hair, walk inside, grab your guest badge at the check in at the nurses’ station. You are on a first name basis with them. One of the nurses, a young 20 something year old named Sarah, asks how your daughter is doing and cracks a joke about her dancing skills. Another nurse compliments your ruby red lipstick. The nurses try to brighten your day. You prefer the small talk over the looks of sympathy they used to give you when you first started visiting.

You open a door (down the hall, to the right, down the hall, to the left). It smells like piss inside. It almost always does. You sit down in a worn chair by the bed, in front of the window, and fidget with your badge.

After a couple minutes of silence, you look into a pair of empty eyes. The pupils are static, unmoving, like those of a doll. But then they blink once, twice, three times. A rapid set of blinks, like when a baby doll with long, lush, black eyelashes gets shaken by a child. The eyes are flawed too, out of order from one too many violent shakes. The eyes are either in rapid motion or completely still, no in-between.

You want to do something, anything, to fix the problem. You want to repair the eyes with a little bit of glue and thin, needle-nosed pliers. But it feels like your hands are tied behind your back and your tools have been lost to time.

You take a deep breath and ask, “How are you doing today, mom?”

Her wrinkled hand reaches out and touches yours, strokes them gently, even though the act should be the other way around. The skin of her hand is thin, constantly becoming more translucent with time. The veins swirl under the skin like a macabre marble cake. It reminds you of parchment paper and the many figures of speech taught in high school classrooms meaning frail or eggshell. But all you can think about is how pale the hand is. How still. How ashen.

One wrong move and everything (head, shoulder, knees, and toes) could come crashing down.

You remember how colorful your mother used to be. She loved to paint her nails a different color every week. She loved to match her nail polish with her lipstick, her clothes, and sometimes her eyeshadow too. You used to hate the smell of nail polish remover. Her home used to stink of it. Yet, it is times like these, where you find yourself missing the pungent smell.

“I know you.” Your mom says. You have come to believe it is the mouth, not the brain, that speaks. It couldn’t be the hippocampus or any of the lobes. Or the neurons,

which are mostly broken anyway. Though the voice sounds like your mother, you think maybe the brainstem is speaking. The doctors told you at the time of diagnosis that it would be the last area of the brain to be affected.

After the brainstem goes, everything (and eyes and ears and mouth and nose) shuts down. You don't know if all of the internal organs shut off at once, like automatic lighting, or if it's more of a flickering affair with each shutting off one at a time.

You don't think you want to know.

After a long pause you ask, "You do?" You know you disassociated there for a second, and for all you know she could have called you a no-good whore or a silly, stupid bitch. Yet, you hate how desperate you still come off as. Your voice raises a little too enthusiastically. There's a tinge of glee to it. You think of how hopeful you are that she knows you. How pathetic you are that you think she knows you.

"You are Linda." The mouth repeats, "Linda, Linda, Linda..." It repeats, until the eyes go blurry and the air stiffens. You do not know "Linda." You never have. Maybe Linda was an old friend or distant family member. Who knows? For all you know, Linda could have been a cashier at a grocery store she met in 1995.

The adult brain weighs around three pounds. The brain stem measures about three inches. You cannot see a neuron with the human eye. You are XXX pounds, X'X high, and visible to the human eye. And still you are beaten by something tiny and miniscule. She doesn't know you. She hasn't known you in years.

Like the weakling you think you are.

You remove your hand from hers and twiddle your thumbs. Twiddle dee. Tweedle doo. You look at the birds in front of you, chirping joyfully outside the window beside her bed. You think of their little brains, impossibly small. You think of their lobes and their neurons and their happiness.

A human can live without a brain for a long period of time. Up to twelve years you've heard. You are not sure how much longer you can handle this. Twelve years is a long time. Twelve years to act on climate change. Twelve more years to observe the birds in front of you. Twelve years to get your nails done at the nail parlour and read every Courtney Milan book three times over.

You remember when your mother first moved to this place. You remember when you first started to visit her. It was like visiting her at her home, except the white ranch style home two blocks from your house was now a small room tucked away in a corner of a nursing home. You would drink coffee with her, talk about the weather, and watch the birds outside together. You would show her pictures of her granddaughter. You would joke around and deep inside the back of your mind, you hope you can do this again. You wish you could travel back in time and have a coffee with your mother instead of alone at a Starbucks at 4:00 in the afternoon.

You think about reaching out and removing the brain stem yourself, ending it all, but even a beheaded chicken can survive for 18 months (you remember his name was Mike). It's easy to miss the brain stem with an axe. And you are no farmer nor practicing physician. Sadist, maybe (but your therapist says this is all par for the course).

When a chicken gets its head cut off, it can still “crow.” It gurgles through the back of its throat. When your mother loses her mind, she can still “talk.” She gurgles through the brain stem.



## STORK

With its mammoth mouth and oversized wings, the stork has always struck me as a strange creature to represent birth. As a mostly mute bird, the only sound coming from a stork would be one of alarm, perhaps because a newborn has suddenly been placed in its mouth. I think of the stork cursing to itself, begrudgingly thinking, the universe has damned me again.

It is not important to know who I am. I am but a mere observer of the universe, a passerby from below looking above and perceiving the world around me. All you need to know about me is that I know storks are carnivorous little bastards known to snack on a small alligator now and then.

And storks have teeth, you know? They are as terrifying as geese teeth. Ragged, jagged, and all things terrifying and bad, the teeth line their mouth like tines to a fork. When storks carry little bundles of joy, do they cut the straps? Do the babies ever inadvertently fly on their own?

Mortality rates are no kinder to the baby than they are to the stork. Storks are victims of predators, losers of bloody battles shown on *Animal Planet*. Once their legs are broken, it is as if they have been tied down to the ground. Unable to fly. Unable to take off. Another victim of the cruel mistress; Earth, or more specifically Mother Nature. She watches from above with her hands held up in self-defense, as if to say, "You did this to yourself." Mother Nature nurtures, but also controls the world with an iron fist. I think, in that sense, she seems lonely. I wonder if she thinks of her loved ones, or which she has few.

I can't imagine the sun, moon, or stars are great company.

My company are the strangers I observe. I learned long ago that it was not worth my time to make friends or have lovers. All people, animals, and things pass me too quickly.

Many times I also wonder, how often do birds think of their loved ones? Birds are quick and tricky creatures. Their lives are much shorter than mine. Do other storks ever cross their minds once they are gone, leaving them as lonely as Mother Nature or as impartial as I? I could sit at home and ponder these questions all night long.

Home is a tricky word. It sits bitterly on my tongue, like a nest collapsing during a storm. It is a human's natural instinct to look away from a trio of dead baby birds. They may feel sorry. They may even pout. Almost every human likes to gawk, whether it be in their own backyard or from behind a glass wall.

Behind any glass wall of a hospital nursery lie hundreds of thousands of babies: squealing, gooing, crying, silent. Are they home? Why they have been dropped off with their families, haven't they; cradled in the sterilized arms of a faint mother, ogled by a grandma with the camera flash on too high, serenaded poorly by an aunt from Louisiana.

Yet, a number of babies, as many as those that lie behind glass walls, lie in plastic domes.

A different kind of gawking occurs during an early delivery; one that is not so kind. Sure, some happy endings arrive later than expected; A gooing baby being driven away in a Blue Suburban, the mother riding in the back just to gaze fondly. Yet, it is the quiet pushing of baby-sized stretchers down hospital halls that I think of the most. The places where no stork is allowed.

Like a stork migrating through the worst of weather, I find it hard to escape the West, the United States in particular. The ideal West. The ideal United States. The American dream land where all babies are heard and seen and dropped off. Where the storks are immortalized in announcement signs and banners; a pristine white stork, the vision of responsibility, cradling a grinning baby in its wake. A delivery man. A viral USPS worker.

Glorious.

Storks are good at keeping humankind's secrets. Evil or sympathetic bastards storks are hiding behind dumpsters or landing at fire stations and watching the darkest underbellies of birth; accidental misfires in a bathtub, escapes from public restrooms. These birds are the ones you don't see on signs. Dirty things, sad and tragic, no time for grand announcements, they are too busy in other places.

Don't even get me started on the flocks of storks.

Flocks are no secret keepers, at least not in the traditional sense. Part of an open secret or scheme maybe. Certainly no Scorpio, Taurus, or Pisces. More of a fire sign, fanning the flames. The babies in the flames are loud and nasally, akin to braying donkeys. Desperate to make contact with others. Desperate for human touch.

The bray is the noisiest at orphanages where babies are kept like donkeys; two to a bed, a group on the floor, all vying for the same attention. The cribs are lined up like stalls. Feed me, touch me, play with me, they say.

And again, humans gawk as humans do, shoving a bottle in the baby's mouths like it's a carrot for a donkey.

*Haw. Haw.*

Westerners from thousands of miles away love to watch the flocks of storks go by. I think the storks are like airplanes to them because they always squint at them with their binoculars. Wait for them to pluck a passenger from a young, poverty-stricken mother's arms after the mother has groggily signed a set of papers. Pay close attention to the color of the basket. Look for the perfect one and gawk at hundreds more. With that, the Westerners bring their tried and true traditions. They clap when the storks land and place a baby in their arms. They pay a pretty penny to fly home.

No need for a stork in that situation.

Like storks migrating across the ocean, home is interchangeable for babies. Home is moveable, if you pay the right price and have the right resources, then home can be anywhere. Illinois. Maryland. Delaware. Ontario. And I have seen just as many successful adoptions as failed ones. I have seen just as many good storks as bad ones.

However, no matter the outcome, the stork becomes a meaningless symbol to me, just a silly mascot to plaster on walls and cars.

Like migration, the route of orphans also repeats itself. It's a complicated path with more endings and beginnings than one can count and it's a path storks stay on the sidelines for.

Maybe a formation of a workers' union is overdue because somewhere along the way, a stork confuses a nice two-story home in American suburbia with a crowded foster home consisting of a dozen starving kids. Another stork dies crossing a foreign border. It drowns, flapping its wings; a silent, desperate call for help. News consumers gawk at the sight of the scatterbrained bird. The surrounding storks gawk too, afraid of their own fate if they do not escape the muddy waters. Thousands of people share the video, once, twice, three times, before it enters the trending pages and leaves just as quickly as it was posted. Stared at by thousands, yet saved by no one.

With its gaping mouth and beady eyes, the stork still strikes me as a strange beast to represent the arrival of new life. But, I suspect that the stork is not all at fault here, for it cannot help its funky looks and strange motivations. A stork can also not control its own destiny. It is another mere victim of the cruel universe, another victim at the hands of Mother Nature, humans, despair, and all terrible things in between, just like the baby it carries in its beak.

## SMALL TOWN SUMMER

The emo kids always bought Monster Energy drinks. They were the cheapest at your local Dollar General: \$1.00. The drink was also \$1.00 at the Aerco down the street, but there was a chance of being heckled by old haggard-looking men there. You did not understand why the darkly clad teens loved the drink so much. To you, Monster Energy tastes like Mountain Dew that has been left in the sun too long. You were always a tea person and that summer you were especially addicted to Gold Peak sweet tea, despite its sickly sweet taste.

The emo kids stuck out like a sore thumb in your small town of 10,000. They huddled together like penguins under the light pole. On your way to work, you would always see them there; smoking a pack of swiped cigarettes, passing around a joint, or pooling money together for a Monster Energy run.

In a way, they were cute, definitely endearing and some of your favorite customers. You became acquainted with a few of them over the long summer. You remember their youthful joy after coming back from Warped Tour. The group of kids had visited your workplace the day after they returned from the concerts. Apparently, seven of them had crammed into an old Honda Civic for the three-hour ride up to Chicago. They all rented one room out of a dingy motel and spent most of their money bribing managers to get backstage. One of the kids, a 16-year-old named Jenny, came back with Gerard Way's signature tattooed on her lower forearm.

As a rising senior in college, you thought the tattoo was hilarious. Now, you wonder if Jenny ever covered the tattoo up, or if she is still crowd surfing at a My Chemical Romance concert.

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You were stuck in the small Illinois town for the summer against your will. One of your professors wanted you on campus for a research project; some outdated, outreach program about the effects of SARS. Turns out, a research project did not equate to an internship and despite spending hours going door to door with a SARS survey, you were not getting paid by the college. You were unemployed, 2000 miles away from home and your dad had just been let go from his job. You were broke.

You applied for several jobs but soon found out that small towns liked to hire locals. It did not matter if you were older or more experienced than them. Even if the applicant was sixteen and had just gotten their license, they were still preferred over you. Nobody knew you, and frankly, it did not seem like a lot of the locals liked you.

Maybe it was your distaste for eye contact and verbal communication or your love for athletic wear. You had never met such talkative people. You had never seen so many people in button-up shirts in one place.

It was astonishing.

You ran into one of the emo kids, a boy named Andrew, during one of your job interviews. It was at the local Dairy Queen. You both stuck out like sore thumbs in your own ways. Andrew's eyes were ringed with charcoal black eyeliner and had an

eyebrow piercing. You forgot to wear slacks and a shirt that wasn't a tank top. The manager, a well-known soccer mom in the community, looked at you both with disdain. You thought that maybe you had a chance at getting hired here. You even took out your ear piercings specifically for the interview.

You both didn't get far into the interview before being abruptly dismissed.

Andrew shrugged at you and tried to scrounge up enough money for a small blizzard. You ended up paying for blizzards for both of you and he gave you a nod of approval before skateboarding into the afternoon.

Dollar General became your safe haven. It was the town outcasts' safe haven. The flickering yellow sign was the outcasts' red light. The dingy, dirty building on the Southside of town rarely received any applications (or foot traffic) from high school students. The light poles surrounding the building only worked about half the time and local mothers did not want their precious children to walk alone near there in the dark. Even the emo kids' parents were apprehensive of them being hired at the store, despite them hanging around the light poles almost every day of the week. It always smelled like a mix of marijuana, Monster Energy, and butchered pork in the parking lot. There was a cheap, dimly lit, deli next door.

There wasn't a lot of competition.

So, you were hired on the spot.

The store needed a lot of help. Despite being midsized, there were only a few other employees, all middle-aged white women with baby boomer names; Mary, Susan, Sandy, and Terri. You thought Terri was the store manager, but all of the women ran the store with an iron fist; sweeping every hour, making sure the emo kids and other local teenagers weren't stealing candy bars, both check-out lanes always open, candy arranged by size and brand, fake flowers arranged by color. Business came in waves and some days passed by with hardly any business at all. You often wondered how the Dollar General stayed open, or if it was still open today. Before you graduated from college, a new, shiny Dollar General was being built on the Northside of town and you had not visited the small town in over ten years.

By the end of your college career, the emo kids had migrated elsewhere. Some ended up going to college and others joined the workforce. They grew up. They went away. Maybe, they even went to work at the new and shiny Northside Dollar General. In a lot of ways, your baby boomer co-workers seemed like the only stagnant people you knew.

You remember a regional director, a man by the name of Paul. He was a hot topic during lazy afternoons. Paul lived in a pretty, two-story brick house in a gated community a city over. He hardly came around and you only met him a handful of times. You remember his handshake being a little too firm and a little too sweaty. His mustache grew too long over his lips and his dress pants were around an inch too long. Mary said he owned all of the local Dollar Generals and was making a fortune, except for the one where you started working. And all he had to show for it was his allegedly beautiful home and leased new model Nissan. Susan said he was too busy in his in-ground pool to care about his pants dragging too low or a bunch of women making

minimum wage.

All of the ladies had pristine looking uniforms. The collars of their black polos were stiff and their black Bobbie Brooks slacks were always lint-free. Terri even kept a lint brush from the bargain bin by the cash register. There was not a strict dress code at Dollar General; black shirt, black pants or jeans, and badge with your name. You had everything but the badge stuffed in your dorm closet; a plain black top from Kmart, plain jeans from Abercrombie and Fitch, or your sister's slacks from her debate days. You received the badge from Terri on the first day of work. She pinned it neatly on your shirt.

Terri shook her head at you when you clocked in for your first day of work. She let out a disapproving grunt and handed you a lint brush. She ordered you an embroidered Dollar General polo from a crumpled employee magazine and took the money for it from your first paycheck.

"You need to get an iron," Terri grumbled on your lunch hour. "Kids these days don't iron anything."

"I have a steamer," you replied and Terri only shook her head again and mumbled something about "Californians."

You picked up a small, handheld iron from the Home Goods section that night after work. It was blue and it was cheap, but it lasted you until late last year.

You remember Sandy saying "We don't get a lot of people like you around here" when she bagged your iron. You were sweeping the yellowing tiled floor as she bagged. It was your third and last sweep of the day and you were relieved. You wanted to climb into your bed, turn on your television, and fall asleep, not think about your place on this Earth. You dumbly asked what Sandy meant and Sandy only laughed in return.

You thought Sandy was talking about how Dollar General didn't attract a lot of college students. After all, you were the only one you had seen at the store.

That night, before falling asleep, you looked into the cracked mirror in your dorm and let out a long "oh" and tied back your long, black hair and sighed.

Sandy hadn't been talking about you being a college student.

You looked at your desk. There was a pile of surveys stacked high on the right side of it. You sighed again and rubbed at your temples. You received an email from your mother that night. She asked how work was going and if you carried your pepper spray with you.

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You looked a lot different from the people living in your college town. Your long black hair, tanned skin and deep brown eyes contrasted from the sea of light haired, light eyed, light skinned citizens. Your nose was a little too big and wide. Your eyes were too small. Your hair was too thick and coarse. Sure, there were people who looked like you at your college, but your campus was separated from the town. More separated than you initially thought. To you, the campus was a haven. It was its own little city. On every college flyer you received in the mail, the admissions office boasted

students had everything they needed on campus. There was no need to venture off into the real world when there was a bagel shop next to the dining hall.

You didn't leave campus a lot during the regular school year. You had several friends who you liked to hang out with. You liked to grab coffee with them and study together in the big, old library. Occasionally, you all would venture off campus to grab McDonald's, or, if you were feeling particularly rebellious, you would carpool to the nearest city. The city had a mall and a Walmart: every shopping essential a college student would need back in 2006.

Looking back, you realize that a lot of your friends were sheltered. They came from gated communities and luxurious condos. They were afraid of venturing outside your college campus. It was their safe haven. It was their red light.

Your college friends didn't have a lot of experience with being outcasts or outsiders. Your college friends couldn't stand the thought of finding themselves on the "wrong" side of town. The summer you worked at Dollar General, you kept your mouth shut about where you worked. For all they knew, you could have been working at the local McDonald's all summer, and even that disgusted them. Your friends were all from places where McDonald's was a place you only ventured if you were drunk and wanted fries and your favorite gourmet burger place closed before midnight. It was never a place you went to if you were actually hungry.

They weren't used to working at all, aside from some small gigs on campus, but you highly doubted that working at the library in circulation was comparable to working in retail.

---

It was an early morning when Mary accused you of tearing down her parents' home, her childhood home.

"You tore down my mom and dad's house." She blamed you over a morning coffee (black and bitter, the only kind in the break room). She was only teasing you about your college buying up properties and tearing them down, but it was too early in the morning for you to recognize that and the caffeine had not entered your system yet (you were still used to caramel macchiatos). Instead, you raised your eyebrows in shock.

"I'm from California, Mary," you replied.

She laughed and laughed. It was a hoarse, "rattle your bones" laugh that made the air smell like smoke and nicotine. Snorts came loudly from her nostrils, and she coughed "I know that honey. Anyone around you would know that" She caught her breath, and wheezed "I mean your college. You shoulda' seen your face-"

"My college?"

Mary let out an impatient sigh, and clambered for her inhaler, "Your college tore down my parents' home. Built that nice science building where it was...didn't have enough money to fight the bank for it even though mom left it for us kids, so the college bought it instead. You know, big bucks," She made a big circling motion with her hands and handed you a broom.

Before you could say anything she said, “Doesn’t matter now, get to dustin’ missy.”

And you nodded and got to dusting.

Andrew, Jenny, and their friends whose names you can’t remember, came in later that day. You were stocking shelves and they were buying copious bags of Doritos and Cheetos. You asked them about the college tearing down homes and reacted casually as if you had asked how they felt about a Billboard pop single from ten years ago. They told you it happened all the time. The college tore down a lot and their parents complained about it. They didn’t care. But, of course, they were just kids who hated their small town.

“The college is rich and we aren’t.” Jenny shrugged and chewed at her lip ring, “That’s just how things are. That’s how they’ve always been.”

---

Sandy’s husband almost shot you in the head a month into your job. You were not at work, but instead doing door-to-door SARS surveys. It was a slow day. At least four doors had been slammed in your face and only one person had not been reluctant to give you data. It was Jenny, the emo girl who frequented the Dollar General. Jenny was a minor and you were not supposed to gather data directly from minors, but sixteen rounded to eighteen and, as Terri would say, you were up shit creek without a paddle.

Sandy and her family lived up the street from Jenny in a tan double-wide with baby blue shutters. She had flowers planted out front: blue and white Hardys. There were hanging baskets of pink petunias on metal hangers, rainbow-colored spinners, and stone statues of little girls. Dandelions intertwined with overgrown grass and windchimes blew gently in the wind.

What you did not know was that Sandy’s husband kept a shotgun next to the front door or how “weary” he was of solicitors. He saw you walking down the street and watched you through the bedroom blinds as you walked up his porch and knocked three times. He watched from the kitchen as you tapped your foot impatiently and opened the unlocked screen door to knock on the front door.

He stared you down and pointed the barrel of the gun at your temple.

You dropped your survey papers. They scattered around you like a herd of doves escaping a bullet. You raised your hands, high, and dropped to your knees. You squeezed your eyes shut and could feel the world spinning around on its axis.

The bullet never came, of course, it didn’t, you were still alive after all.

Sandy’s husband dropped his gun and stared at his hands. Before he could say anything to you, you took your chance to run. Jenny saw you running. You remember seeing her blank stare and tiny o-shaped mouth. She looked down the street and back to you and shut her blinds. She never mentioned the situation directly to you, but when you saw her again she stared at your forehead like you had a third eye.



You locked yourself in your dorm for a few days. You called sick into work and emailed your professor you caught the flu and had a fever of 103 degrees in the middle of summertime.

You didn't do door-to-door survey testing after going to Sandy's house. Out of sheer luck, your professor assigned you to do lab work instead. God forbid, you cause a flu outbreak in the small town. To you, the flu was the least of your worries. But, you supposed that a flu outbreak would be disastrous to a small town where half of its population couldn't afford a general checkup.

You never told your professor what happened at Sandy's house. A little voice in the back of your head told you if the college knew about Sandy's husband, they would tear her house down too. You never told anyone, although you suspected all of your coworkers knew what happened. Their once nosy questions about SARS and surveys ceased to exist once you went back to work. You noticed on your next paycheck that you were paid for your sick days.

You did not tell your parents either. According to your father's monotone voice and your mother's overly cheerful tone during phone calls, they had bigger problems to worry about.

You never called the police. Something in your stomach told you that it was wrong to. Maybe it was liberal, big city thinking, but you thought the police could not solve this type of problem. And maybe it was dumb, but you could not stand the thought of hurting Sandy's feelings. You had to work at Dollar General for the rest of the summer after all.

And who knows, maybe your dad would commit tax fraud in the future. Anything to meet ends meet, right?

---

You found out you were almost shot by Sandy's husband the next day you showed up to work. Sandy apologized to you profusely as soon as she saw you walk in the door. You were confused at first, but things quickly clicked together. Between her choked sobs, you could make out the words "husband" and "sorry." You hugged her tight. She handed you dozens of crumpled SARS survey papers that you later recycled at your dorm.

Sandy took you out to dinner that night. She took you to the nicest restaurant in town: a small steakhouse bordering on the city limits. You knew she couldn't afford to take you there on her minimum wage income, but you let her take you anyway. You ended up paying for half of the meal after seeing Sandy was paying with a tattered credit card. You slipped a \$20 bill to the waiter while Sandy was in the bathroom and the waiter knew what to do with it.

You both looked terribly out of place in the steakhouse in your Dollar General uniforms. You ordered fettuccine alfredo with some kind of fancy steak and Sandy ordered Top Sirloin. You remember how tickled she was that they put chives and green

onions on her side baked potato.

You guys made small talk. You mainly talked about the bread basket between the two of you. You both weren't used to eating sweet buns.

After a while, you learned that Sandy's husband had PTSD from the Vietnam War. He was off his medications again. He was off of them frequently due to how expensive they were and how inflated the costs have gotten over the years. The nearest veteran's hospital was over one hundred miles away and their car, a beat-up Honda Accord, only worked on certain days. Carpools were easy to find in town, but carpools up to the nearest micropolitan area were much harder to come by.

She thanked you for not calling the police. Sandy feared them. As unhappy as she was in her marriage, she could not bear the thought of losing her husband. She feared him being whisked away to a psych ward, or even worse, jail or prison.

She said you reminded him of the war with your long black hair and wide black eyes and you just nodded your head and chewed your sweet bun thoughtfully.

---

You spent half of your paycheck getting your hair bleached, cut, and toned sometime after your dinner with Sandy. You felt a little guilty afterwards. You could get your hair done, but your parents were not sure if they could replace the broken microwave or fix the leaking roof. In one email, your mom had put in between sparkling cat pictures to live a little.

So you did.

You don't remember specifically when you got your hair done, but you remember your hairdresser. Ironically, it was Andrew's mother despite Andrew being the only kid in his friend group with natural hair color.

She had his pictures taped up to the big lit-up mirror and ts'k'd when you said you knew her son (the eyebrow ring is removable).

"He's so smart. He's a good kid, but all he wants to do is leave town since he opened up a My Place," She sectioned off another chunk of hair, "Every kid's been leaving town or cooping themselves up on that goddamn college campus and the town's left with a bunch of nobodies like me."

"You're not a nobody."

"Oh, baby, I'm a hairdresser. I know that I mean somethin' to people, but you said, you're what pre-medical? Look at where you'll go and I love it here, but, I'll be here forever."

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Your dad was hired for a new job in August. He made more money than he had in his entire life and the first thing he told you was quit your job. He wanted you to focus on your studies and go into a stable career, one where you'd never be fired. And, you did quit. At the end of the day, you were a college student. You missed having fun on

campus. You missed not knowing what you learned over the summer. And things worked out for you like they always did.

You tried to keep in contact with your co-workers, but there was a divide between you after you quit.

Even with Sandy.

You were a regular college student again and they were just a bunch of southside townies. They noticed your new purse when you visited and you noticed the dark circles underneath their eyes. Sandy dropped off treats outside your dorm a couple times. She stopped after a few months though. You never found out why, but you suspected it was because you lived with girls who got gourmet cupcakes delivered to them on their birthdays.

You watched the emo kids leave one by one from town. Potential going to cities and states around the country. And you were proud of them. You still are proud of them. You sent a friend request to Jenny and Andrew on Facebook and was glad to see they are doing well. And you tried to ignore the dilapidated states of their parents' houses and the clean floors of their apartments and houses.

You lived in a clean floored house yourself, located in a nice neighborhood just outside of a big, liberal city. Your parents lived in a nice neighborhood too. They lived in a condo in a nice little retirement community in Florida. You think that in a lot of ways, money bought happiness for them.

Sometimes you feel guilt in the pit of your stomach. There are nights where you lie in bed and think of why you couldn't have paid for Sandy's hospital bills or built houses around the college. But, you were just a kid and there's nothing you really could have done. And, still, there's little to nothing to do. You are a doctor now, but it's not like you can treat the entire town for every illness and disease free of charge.

You have to live too.

But, still you feel guilty. You make the occasional donation to the local public school. You send over toys and books for the annual Christmas donation drive. When you come back for class reunions, you try to host some sort of free clinic. You're an alumni of the college now. You allocate your money to the town and college connections and pray it actually goes there.

And at the end of the day, you feel nothing.

And at the end of the day, you can still do nothing.

## One Life

### Kevin Brown

SARS.

Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome.

Begins with a high fever, 38° Celsius or more, accompanied by headache, discomfort, and body pain. Ten to twenty percent of patients get diarrhea. Within two to seven days a dry cough develops, usually followed by pneumonia.

Worldwide, 8,098 people are sick with SARS. Of these, 774 are dead.

One of them, my wife Mei Lin.

Stepping off Cathay Pacific Flight 6121 at Hong Kong International, I breathe in a chest-load of air, slide my hand along the tunnel rail, and wipe my mouth.

If there's a God, I'll be 775.

Leaving the terminal, I pass the luggage carousels headed for immigration check-in. This time, there's no suitcases or travel bags so full they barely zip. No gifts from America or tax free airport wine for Mei Lin's parents. Everything I own is in a black travel pouch strapped around my waist.

On your way to die, it's funny how the things most important fit nicely into a travel pouch.

At the counter, a thin man checks my passport, staring at me over a baby blue surgeon's mask. He stamps the book beside the stamps of other trips to Hong Kong—our wedding. Christmas and summer visits. Mei Lin's funeral.

He slides the passport back to me and, muffled behind his mask, says, "Immigrant Entrance Card." I hand him the small yellow card I filled out on the plane. The writing is barely legible, and I'm not sure if that's from turbulence or because my hands are still shaking.

"Enjoy your stay," he tells me, and I step in. Cutting through the swarm of people in the central lobby, I drop my passport in a trash container near the exit, letting my fingertips smear the edge of its opening.

Outside the airport, I walk toward the bus stop. Tai Mo Shan and the Eight Dragon Mountains are wrapped around the back of the island, dark and green and disappearing into the morning skyline. Two years ago, Mei Lin and I stood in this same bus line, huddled against the wind coming off the South China Sea. It was December, and we were staying through Chinese New Year.

"The dragon dancers," she told me, "come right into your home—even if you live on the fortieth floor—and dance in each room." Smiling, she said, "For good luck."

I board the KMB City Bus and spiral up the stairs to the top level, sliding my hand over the handrail to lift as many germs as possible. There are six or seven passengers, everyone spread out at least five seats apart. Except for an old man near

the middle, they're all wearing surgical masks, their eyes following me until I pass.

I drop into the seat beside the old man, lean in close, and take a deep breath, patting him on the hand. His forehead bunches up. "Tsi sing, gwai lo," he says in Cantonese, calling me a crazy white man. He stands and plows over me, heading for the staircase. Over the hiss of the bus pulling away, he yells something else I can't hear, shakes his head, and drops down the stairs out of sight.

I breathe in deep through my mouth and hold it.

The other passengers are twisted toward me in their seats, all eyes and muffled breathing. A couple of their masks are blank, but the others are decorated with words and colors, pictures and symbols.

There's a British-Hong Kong flag.

A "Peace" sign.

A teenage girl a few seats up, her mask says: "NO KISSING."

The people are wearing these masks because it can be transmitted by air. If someone sneezes or coughs, the corona virus is released, back flipping in the air until it finds a surface or is breathed in with your cologne or perfume. With the smell of your breakfast or green tea, your own oxygen leads it straight through the front door.

Sort of a new millennium Judas.

I take another deep breath and kiss the window glass. Outside, we're crossing the Tsing Ma Bridge, headed into the congested streets of the New Territories. The bus brakes hard every few seconds, squealing and stopping inches away from the double-decker ahead.

I unzip the travel pouch and lay the contents across my lap. There's Mei Lin's wedding ring. An envelope with forty-five thousand Hong Kong dollars. There's a wedding reception photo of us standing above our red and gold cake, our arms hooked at the elbow, drinking after a toast. Her mouth is covered in red icing, her cheeks flushed from the champagne, the way they always did with alcohol. In the photo, I'm so nervous my glass is blurry from shaking.

I hold the wedding ring up and look at the inscription: Chinese characters meaning, "One life, One love." I slide it onto my little finger and twist it around, the light reflecting off the gold. The bus slips through a tunnel, and the ring and everyone staring goes black.

Tragedy and disease are educational. They teach you in a week what it takes months to memorize in any medical school. A son suffers massive head trauma in a motorcycle accident, give it a few days and his parents will be talking about brain injuries in words you can barely pronounce, much less spell. Your wife gets SARS, you learn she died without knowing she was dying. She's got a cold, then she's dead.

What's left are facts. The statistics. And you learn them all because now, that's your relationship with your wife. It's as close as you can get to being close.

And your memories, even after a few months they're just loose strings that used to have knots. Like medical facts you've heard of but never experienced.

With my wife, I remember washing dishes. Side-by-side, one washing, one drying. Me helping her with English, her teaching me Cantonese. I'd tell her the rules of "American" football, and she'd tell me about Chinese history and culture—legends and mythology. Superstitions. She told me that red is like their white, so it's worn at weddings for good luck. "White's our black," she said, rinsing a soup bowl. "It symbolizes death, so we wear it at funerals." She told how they avoid the number four because it's pronounced the same as "death." "So really," she said, "four's our thirteen."

I heard about the switchback from British to Chinese rule.

That street gangs fight with knives instead of guns, and that spitting is a good thing. "Spitting," she said, handing me a wine glass, "is our 'knock on wood.'"

One night, at the sink, she said, "My grandmother believes that to reunite with loved ones in the afterlife, those loved ones must die the same way." Standing at the sink, scrubbing fettuccini from a dinner plate, she said there's a different afterlife for every way of dying. "If a father dies of a heart attack and his son dies in a war, the real tragedy is they won't be together in spirit." Then she slapped me on the shoulder and said, "But that's bad luck talk," and laughing, we both spat into the sink.

I remember all this, but it's slipping. Becoming a fragment.

I also remember her sister getting breast cancer last year, starting treatment in January. And Mei Lin flying over to be with her. And me not being able to get off work. Her sister recovering and my wife contracting SARS, and not much else except for the facts and silence and everyone dressed in white.

I step off the bus in the Shatin shopping district, and everything's shoulder to shoulder. Cutting through the crowd, they move around me, just staring eyes over the tops of their masks.

One mask has puckered red lips.

There's buck teeth and freckles on another.

I walk through the shopping malls, running my hands along the escalator rails. Using the crowded restrooms, not washing my hands. Hoping to find the germ, I touch the toilet seats and wipe my nose. I force my way into overcrowded elevators.

All this, it's desperation. I'm running out of time. The news said the World Health Organization's found a cure, and by now all the hospitals have be quarantined off. Right in time to stop me, but not in time to save Mei. The window's closing. And if God closes one window and opens another, I'm fucked.

Outside, I take a mini-bus and get off in Tsim Sha Tsui in Kowloon and walk along Victoria Harbor, on the Avenue of Stars. It's starting to drizzle and, chilly, I take my coat off and let the wind eat at my skin. Catching a cold, my immune system would be weaker. Sort of a "Welcome" mat for the germ.

I place my hands in the cemented handprints of all the Asian film stars along the walkway, thinking how many people might have touched here recently. Thinking about the germs possibly waiting in the palm of Jackie Chan's hand. The viruses on Sammi Cheng's fingertips. Death in Bruce Lee's fist.

I look out at the dark sea, the surface like dragon scales in the breeze. Mei Lin said this water is some of the filthiest in the world. That if you fall in, it takes days to get the smell out of your skin.

And behind me, I hear: "Sir? You want picture?"

I hear: "Clouds make good picture."

A man walks toward me carrying a camera and tripod, a mask tied over his mouth that says: "SMILE!" "Cheap picture," he says.

On my first visit, Mei Lin and I had our picture taken on the harbor at night, the city lit up behind us. The sky full of color from the light shows. It was probably this exact place. Maybe this exact man.

I lift my hand and shake my head no. I pull out the envelope of money and slip out two thousand dollars. Pointing at the sea, I hold the cash up and say, "But, I'll give you this if you can get me a glass of that water."

I take the Star Ferry from Kowloon to Hong Kong Island. Usually, the ferry is spilling over with tourists, but now it's just me and an older Chinese lady sitting a row over. She's wearing a mask and watching me, an expressionless expression on the top part of her face. A few gray bands of hair mouse-tail over her eyes, and she glances down at the glass Coke bottle of seawater I'm holding.

Inside the bottle, trash and debris whip around like a shook snow globe, and some kind of thin, oily liquid is layered at the top. The man with the tripod and camera, after he filled the bottle I gave him an extra thousand dollars because his hand got wet.

I hold it up, say, "Water," in Cantonese, and take a sip, nearly gagging. The lady looks away and I spit something gritty out. It's risky, I know. Drinking this, there's all kinds of other diseases I could get. But like I said, I'm getting desperate.

Stepping off the ferry dock, I grab a cab and hop inside.

"Where you going?" the cab driver says in the rearview mirror.

"To my wife," I tell him.

He says, "Where she at?"

"She's dead," I say, and he spins around in the seat, his mask deflating over his mouth as he breathes. "Gallant Garden Cemetery," I tell him, and take another drink.

Cemeteries here, they're different than in the States. Space is limited where population is not, so the dead are buried on a steep slope. Like their houses, they go up instead of out. Mei Lin said after six years, the bodies are dug up for the space to be reused. One afternoon, staring at her grandmother's headstone, she told me, "If the family is wealthy, they can pay to have the skeletons cleaned and reburied in the same place."

She sat beside the grave, above where she'd be buried in under a year and, squinting at the sun said, "If they can't afford it, the remains are cremated."

I step through the gates and already there are four or five fresh mounds of dirt. Probably SARS, taking someone else's wife or husband. Mother or son. At one of the mounds, a lady is on her knees, her hands finger-to-finger, palm-to-palm and laced

with Buddhist prayer beads, chanting, "*Namo Amituo Fo*," over and over.

I walk to Mei Lin's grave and sit down. White roses are spread out like a Chinese fan in front of the tombstone, and at the foot there are three incense sticks burned to the stem.

It's the first time I've been here since the funeral.

I close my eyes tight and try to cry but can't. Those things are gone now. This is just a rock and a patch of grass. Below that, a sunken mound of dirt crushing a box with nothing like my wife inside.

It's not I'm moving on. I'm moving to.

"*Namo Amituo Fo*," the lady behind me says.

I open my eyes and for a second, I see Mei Lin in front of me, like the day we saw her grandmother. She looks at me and, squinting her eyes in the wind, disappears.

My hands tremor and I slip the wedding ring off my pinky and hold it up. One life, one love, but all I need is one death. "I'm on my way," I say, and pop the ring inside my mouth. Throwing my head back, I turn the Coke bottle up and swallow the ring with the rest of the seawater.

It's getting late. The sky is the color of soaked newspaper and the buildings are blinking silhouettes. What's left of the light is sliding behind the mountains like a drop of dishwater on a wine glass.

I ferry back across the harbor to Tsim Sha Tsui. It's time to stop wasting time. To end this. Get through the window before the window shuts.

Leaving the shore, I place the envelope of money and picture in my shoe and walk toward Nathan Road. To where the dirty shit goes down and my odds go up.

To the Chungking Mansions.

Four towers of boarding houses, this place is seventeen stories high. Outside, air conditioners are knotted out of windows, and the façade is chipped and peeling like skin. Through the heavy glass doors, the first two floors are a maze of curry messes smelling like old chicken blood. Poorly lit sweat-shops and rundown sari stores.

Mei Lin said the Mansions are known for murderers and drug dealers. Prostitution and gambling. Illegal immigrants from India and Sri Lanka wander the labyrinth of halls and alleys. "And the poor," she said, "they're crammed together, sleeping in the alleys, begging for scraps of food like so many pigs."

I step inside and the heat and sweat and food melts to my face. I walk through, letting my fingertips slide along the dingy surfaces. The graffiti covered walls and snot-smearred handrails. Shoving through the hordes of people, I pass a shop where thin, patchy chickens flutter inside small cages. A fabric store where a stained Yin and Yang blanket hangs from a wire. The sign: "16 HKD" stapled to it. Neon signs reflect in the main hall's mirrored ceiling, where banners and Chinese lamps twist in a half-arc.

And I feel the hands reaching into my pockets, clawing at whatever I may be carrying.



Someone grabs the Coke bottle in my pocket, drops it, and pinches me.

Another hand, a ring gets caught and rips my pocket open. My travel pouch is clicked off and snatched away.

I keep my head down. If I take a knife to the guts, show's over. Curtain closed. My wife, any hope of seeing her again is out the wrong window.

I step inside a bric-a-brac shop and in the corner, an old fortuneteller watches me cross the room. His hair white and ratty, he stands and follows me down an isle.

"Fortune?" he says. "Fortune today?"

I hold my palm out flat and he takes it in his twitching fingers.

He looks up at me, then back at my hand. At me. My hand.

He smiles and shakes his head. "Good fortune, gwai lo." Patting my hand, he says, "Long life."

I snatch my hand away and tell him he's wrong. I say, "You're a liar," and step out, disappearing into the crowd.

At a food outlet, I stop and order a box of Indian curry.

"Something else?" the man taking my order says, and I tell him, "Not unless you'll touch the food with your bare hands."

I move on, taking large bites of curry and rice with my fingertips. It's cold and gummy inside my mouth, and the chicken meat's not chicken.

I turn down an alley that's empty except for a pair of small legs sticking straight up out of a trash dumpster. Beside the legs, a baby carriage. After a few minutes, the legs seesaw at the waist and a frail girl slides over the lip of the dumpster, back to the ground. She's holding a glass bottle in each hand.

She places the bottles in a plastic bag hanging on the carriage handle. I walk toward her, licking slimy green curry off each finger. The light is weak, making the hall fluorescent green. When she sees me, she freezes, her eyes wide, and grabs the carriage, pushing it down the alley.

"Wait," I tell her in Cantonese. I say, "I won't hurt you."

Over her shoulder she's watching me, the carriage rattling on the rough floor. A wheel catches on a garbage bag, turning the carriage sideways, almost tipping it.

I run toward her.

Near the dumpster, something like rotting meat cobwebs my head and I cover my nose with my arm.

"Please," I tell her. "Let me help."

She rights the carriage, never taking her eyes off me. Her cheeks and clothes are smudged in something tar black and she smells like the dumpster.

"Dau tze," she says, her teeth rotten and knotted, and I tell her, "You're welcome."

Inside the plastic bag, there are several beer and wine bottles. Inside the carriage, a baby, completely covered by a dirty white blanket.

I've heard about these children. How the Chinese, the pregnant mothers, would come over and give birth to their babies, then after a while go back to the mainland without the children. Most die. Some are taken care of by other homeless children.

"The lucky ones," Mei Lin told me, "they have to find things to sell."

Like bottles. Cans and trash.

“Family?” I ask the girl, pointing at the baby.

And she says, “Sister,” never taking her eyes off me.

Reaching real slow like into my pocket, I pull out the Coke bottle, hold it up, and place it in the bag.

She bows, watching.

And suddenly, I lean down and start digging through the piles of garbage. Looking for bottles—for anything—I tear holes in the bags and empty them on the floor. Every one I move, the odor goes through my nose and my eyes water. As bad as it is, the dumpster smell is worse.

I find a Blue Girl beer bottle and slip it inside the bag. She watches me a few seconds, then gets down and sifts through the junk beside me.

I find a bottle.

She finds a can.

I’m digging faster and faster, running my hands through dark wet trash, clawing for anything worth something. The smell getting stronger, I pull bottles out like babies from a womb. Saving them. Harvesting them.

After I’ve checked all the bags I stand, my pants cold and sticking to my knees and thighs.

The little girl is still digging, holding a bag bottom up and emptying it out in wads of muck that scatter like a virus.

I watch her, wiping my mouth with the back of my hand.

And then, all quiet, I reach down and lift the baby from the carriage.

And I find the smell.

I pull the blanket back from her face and can tell she’s been dead at least three weeks. Not much is left of the cheeks and nose. The lips are gone, eaten away from the gums where teeth never got to grow.

The girl sees me and stands, again eyes wide. “Please give me sister,” she says, “Please give me sister.” She holds her arms out, her hands shaking so bad they’re almost blurry.

I smile, hold my index finger to my lips, and say, “Ssh.” Pulling the blanket over the baby’s face, I lay it back down, slow and easy, into the carriage.

She puts her arm over her sister, still staring up at me. Reaching down to my foot, I slip my shoe off and take out the envelope of money. I lay it down on the baby’s still stomach and walk back up the ally.

At the sink, Mei Lin told me how the Mongols were able to conquer most of the Eastern world by wearing silk shirts.

I laughed.

“Not kidding,” she said, a soap bubble on her nose. If a Mongolian warrior was hit by an arrow, he’d just grab a fistful of shirt on each side of the shaft and pull in opposite directions. Rinsing a dumpling plate, she said, “Because it couldn’t go through the silk, the arrow popped right out.”

What’s left are the facts. As if they really matter.

Leaving the Mansions, I grab a young guy by the arm, twist him toward me, and say, "If we just had silk shirts, the whole world could stay alive." The guy, he snatches his arm away and backs inside, watching me.

I walk back to the Avenue of Stars, still covered in wet black. Across the harbor, the light show's started, and red and blue, yellow and violet reflections are thrown across the dragon scales in the water. I sit at the railing and watch.

After a while, I pull out the wedding picture and stare at it. My shaking hands. Her red face. The lights throw shadows across me, then her. Me, then her.

Me nervous. Her laughing.

Everything red for luck.

A single tear slips over my cheek and snakes through the caked curry and trash on my face.

I wipe my eye and laugh. Things like crying are gone now. Like strings without knots. Warriors without silk.

The shadow covers me. Covers her.

Me.

Her.

And I put my fist to my mouth, close my eyes, and wait to start coughing.

## ***The Beach***

***Grace Parsons***

*“Take some good photos, okay?”*

I hold the camera; she strolls into the ocean.

*“How should I pose?”*

I tell her to just be herself. She frowns, like she was expecting a different answer. I snap a few photos of the waves brushing over her ankles.

*“Well, what should I do?”*

I shrug and tell her she should keep walking around. Just for some candid photos. She looks exasperated. Like she'd rather I build the photo from scratch. She wants me to pick the pose, frame the background, and sculpt her expression. I snapped another photo.

*“I think people are looking at us”*

I tell her it's the dress, of course people are looking at us. She's in a dress and I'm juggling four different cameras hoping that just *one* can capture a fraction of what I'm

seeing. She wades deeper into the ocean.

*“Are you getting anything?”*

I give her a vigorous nod of affirmation and a thumbs up. The water is up to her knees now, and she’s too far away for my liking. I step into the ocean. The shock of the frozen water makes me jolt and my hands grip the camera, so it doesn’t fall. I hold the camera up to my sea salted eyes and look through the pinhole. I don’t think these photos will come out well.

*“Hey! Aren’t you cold?”*

She sees me wading deeper into the ocean after her, and she starts to turn back toward me. No, I assure her. I hold up the camera and let her know that the photos will be well worth the cold feet. She pauses for a moment, then turns back around and lets the water swallow her. The waves form around her and the morning fog has lifted a little. The sun starts to shine through.

*“It’s beautiful here”*

I agree.

## ***Girl in the Doorway***

**Chris Parent**

*“I have a dream that one day ... little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.”*

*Martin Luther King Jr.*

Race and money made for an easy roadmap in 1978 Atlanta. It was orderly. The white and black communities knew where to go and not to go. Each knew where to eat, where to shop, where to live, and where to send their kids to school. Against this backdrop, controversy brewed when my classmate Raquel delivered invitations to her birthday party.

The parents focused on the trivial at first for Raquel had delivered her invitations on Monday, which was her first *faux pas*. It was only five days before her birthday party. Atlanta society required at least two-weeks' notice.

Raquel's second error was more subtle: she was the only African American member of my second grade class. By the late 1970s, Atlanta had made strides in race relations, but the upper class white gentry still remained uneasy when their kids interacted too closely with the black children who attended the stable of private schools, including the prestigious Catholic school I attended.

The invitations proved incendiary. They were handwritten and delivered on white-lined paper rather than Laura Ashley stationery or blazoned with traditional cartoon characters like Snoopy, Scooby Doo, or the Super Friends. My mother had little time to review the invitation, which I had jammed in my Incredible Hulk folder, when she received the first call.

“Did Chris show you the invitation?” my friend's mother said in a drawl that reminded one of pecan pie and okra.

“It's from the black girl who stands in the doorway. This has to be a joke. There's no way I'm sending Hunter. It'll be way too dangerous. And we have plans anyway.”

For Raquel, entering class was a daily struggle. She would stand in the doorway well after the bell had rung. I presume, out of either shyness, terror, or a combination of both, she did not move. It took cajoling from our teacher, the principal and sometimes other faculty to convince Raquel to join her class for the day's lessons. The school taught us core values and provided its students a moral compass at a young age. But Raquel saw something different. She saw white kids. Most of our families ignored the black community unless we needed something. We were separate and definitely not equal.

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By the time I reached second grade, my family and I had lived in Atlanta for only a year. Our Southern experiment would prove a short one as we would move back to Connecticut before I turned 8. It was a difficult transition for my parents, who were born and raised in Yonkers, New York, a lower middle-class suburb of New York City.

Growing up in the 1950s and 60s, they had been exposed to different cultures, including African Americans. Poverty is a great equalizer and both of my parents, especially my father, grew up poor.

My father was by no means a champion of the black cause, but he believed in fairness above everything else. He was an egalitarian in his approach to life: everyone was a threat until they proved otherwise. He had a hard edge, sharpened by being the youngest of seven children and raised by his 5 sisters and, less frequently, by his absent alcoholic father. My father began his career on Wall Street after serving in the Vietnam War. He was an Army grunt who spoke little of his experience but was apt to show approval when meeting someone else who had served in combat. A testament to the American Dream, he was recruited by Shearson Lehman in their fledgling Atlanta office after working his way up the Wall Street ladder. Mostly, they wanted him to bring his New York swagger to toughen up a trading floor occupied by Southern gentlemen who wore white bucks and madras shirts and who were boosters of universities with big-time football programs.

My mother's experience in Atlanta was characterized by a far more compelling force: loneliness. She recognized that while her neighbors and members of the P.T.O. dined with her, gossiped with her and traded recipes, she too was an outcast. She could never be their true friends. They could be her acquaintance, but never a true confidant like the Italian, Cuban, and Ukrainian friends my mother had grown to respect while being raised in New York.

My maternal grandparents lived in an apartment in the same neighborhood of Yonkers where they had raised my mother and her older sister, and where my father had courted my mother as high school sweethearts. Yonkers was chaotic. It was dirty and had crime. And when you're poor and trying to survive, you reach a common understanding and tolerance. You fight, bicker, pick yourself up, and move on.

More than anyone, my mother understood how Raquel felt every day. Leaving the familiarity of home in pursuit of opportunity offers the prospect of hope and joy. But that goal is distant and the journey is paved with profound loneliness. My mother had made her decision before she received the second call from another worried parent. And while the dads tried to convince my father I should "sit this one out," he did not want to be told how to raise his child by the Southern gentry. He objected at first, citing safety concerns, but ultimately came around to joining my mother in her mission. I would be attending the party. Short notice be damned.

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Raquel's house was a small post-war salt box in the neighborhood of Kirkwood. In the 1960s, Kirkwood transitioned from a white neighborhood to a primarily working class black one. As we entered Kirkwood, my father's reservations emerged. He ordered me to roll up my windows, a curious request considering that he was going to turn me over soon to the environs he now feared even while rolling through stop signs in our new Ford Thunderbird.

My father was typically punctual but he tried to buy me some time. I was fashionably late to the party. My father awkwardly hung around the house before leaving. Like a soldier on a mission with a job to do, he wanted the party to go quickly and without casualty. He wanted me back in one piece. By the time I arrived, the house was packed with family, friends, and neighbors. But it was clear that the white parents' sabotage had been successful. Only three other members of my class were there.

Wes had been the first to arrive. He was tall and lanky and looked like a science beaker. I did not play with him much, but when I did, the game of choice was Star Wars. He was C-3PO, and I played the role of R2D2. He found his way to the party because his parents were still hippies and sending Wes to the party was a way to stick it to the establishment. Wes had actually gotten there so early that his parents had helped set up before Raquel's family assured them that they had everything under control.

The second member of our breakaway clan was Monica, whose parents were away that week but who were staunch advocates of Monica's attendance. The significance of the invitation never dawned on her grandparents, who jumped at the opportunity to rid themselves of their battery-charged granddaughter for a couple of hours.

Whatever angst I had was put at ease when I saw my best friend Paul Rosario. Paul's family had moved from Chicago a few years before. Our parents bonded quickly as they both shared a skepticism about the Southern way of life. Paul and I were forced to hang around each other, and it helped that we both suffered from the same hairstyle – the salad bowl cut made popular by such icons as John Denver and Dorothy Hamill.

Paul was short and scrawny and had a brilliant mind. He would spend his days doing accelerated Math and helping our teacher explain difficult concepts. This made him self-conscious, a disposition made worse by a condition that made walking a challenge. By the age of 7, Paul realized he'd have a difficult time keeping up with his counterparts, so he pondered ways to conserve energy and maximize his limited physical resources. Each of our games was methodically planned out and contemplated so that the action was efficient but intense.

Paul and I would spend countless hours at each other's house, spying on neighbors with our walkie talkies, playing with our Adventure People, trading football and baseball cards, and often acting out highlights of the latest sporting event. Paul was also the manager of our school's football team, of which I was the team's Running Back. Our annual goal was to beat our rival Methodist school, a goal so important that the Monsignor would attend games. At 7 years old, Paul would roam the sidelines next to Coach Perini and take notes. After the game, we would dine on hot dogs at The Varsity while he regurgitated statistics from the game. Honesty was his best trait.

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After surveying the situation at the party, the four of us made our way to the backyard, which we deemed a safe haven. Monica quickly became unhinged as the sight of the modest houses of the surrounding neighborhood started to sink in. Paul was scared and opted to sit down with his legs crossed and pick at blades of grass, which were hard to find in the barren, rocky yard. If the pit bull next door escaped from his leash, Paul knew he would be the first to go. For once in his early life, Paul didn't have an answer.

Wes and I opted to be men of action and launched into our Star Wars reenactment. This entailed me putting my shoulders tightly together, and Wes to adopt a British accent like that of C3PO. It was a sad sight as a Southern boy with an afro and bad British accent awkwardly chased a short kid with a bad haircut who shuffled around the backyard with his shoulders taut. And, for the first time, our Star Wars theatre had background music as it was accompanied by the sweet sounds of Earth, Wind & Fire and Marvin Gaye that emanated from Raquel's house. A group of men on a patio watched us while barbecuing and enjoying the strange show that was now before them.

This only bought us so much time. As we struggled to avoid being noticed, the party in the house was reaching a fever-pitch. "Let's Groove Tonight" blared on the stereo as smells of food we had never experienced wafted over to our young naïve noses. We could see inside the house as the screen door opened and the party emptied to the patio. Raquel, to our shock, was not the shy girl who never spoke. She was loud and happy while celebrating her birthday like every kid should. Her passion about being one-year older was genuine. We wanted to be reborn and join, but we could only watch, too uncomfortable to engage.

During a break in the revelry with her family and neighbors, Raquel saw us huddled in the middle of the yard and gestured to join her inside. The fear in our eyes registered in hers. We were guests in her house, but we didn't feel welcome to the strange customs. When none of us moved, she ran outside, and grabbed my hand. I grabbed Monica's. She grabbed Paul's and Wes followed. We were four frightened white kids tethered to a joyous little girl no longer burdened by insecurity and fear. She led and we graciously followed.

The transition was an easy one. We soon found ourselves laughing and drinking flavors of soda I never knew existed. It gave me a sugar high that kept me up all night. I tried the soul food and hated most of it, something I would later outgrow. I loved the music and would demand a Kool & the Gang record for Christmas.

Raquel first opened the presents we had brought. She politely embraced the Snoopy blanket, the Scooby Doo lunch box, and Holly Hobby doll set. The party reached a climax when Raquel's family brought out a mutt that she hugged as if it were a long-lost sister. We had given her presents. Her family had given her life.

As I watched Raquel embrace her new friend, Raquel's grandmother grabbed me and hugged me as if I were her own puppy. She brought me into her chest and started muttering in a sharp cadence that made me think I was in trouble. "Oh crap," I thought, "this is where it goes down. This is what my friends had warned me about." But I was

soon comforted by the rhythmic “Praises” and “Childs” that emanated from her lips over-and-over again for what seemed like an eternity.

“Thank you, my child. Thank you. You didn’t have to, but you did. You didn’t have to, but you did...” the grandmother repeated. In a small house in Kirkwood, I felt at home in Atlanta for the first time.

As the party wound down, one of Raquel’s uncles told me that my father was outside.

“He’s been out there awhile,” he said.

After I said my goodbyes and gathered my belongings I exited to find my father under the hood of a car with three other African American men looking on. My father finished up his diagnosis, shook hands and said farewell. He had arrived at the party an hour before to pull me out, witnessed my enjoyment and backed away only to discover that he too was looking for something more than what we had in our posh neighborhood. What he initially deemed threatening he now deemed comforting, hope in an inner city that was more familiar to him than the well-heeled segregated suburbs. He missed the city life where you were judged by what you did and who you were and not where you came from.

“Jerome was in ‘Nam,” he said approvingly as he looked me up and down and made sure I was still in one piece.

On our way home, I assumed control of the radio and changed the dial to the R&B station.

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When we returned to school the following Monday, I ran to my seat and opened my Mead organizer. I nodded to Wes, Paul, and Monica. I felt superior to everyone else. I looked for Raquel but did not see her. After a few minutes, I noticed that she was in the classroom doorway, cowering as she had done on most mornings of our young school careers. While each of us sat in our seats, Raquel was the same scared second grader as the one who started school on Friday. I was devastated that the party had not washed away those feelings of insecurity. Didn’t she realize that she belonged and that at least a few of us cared about her? I thought our small strike force team had washed away racial injustice at least in the mind of one girl.

As Raquel stalled in the doorway and we opened our books for the day, our teacher, Mrs. Colby, began the daily ritual of prodding Raquel to join us. I still remember Mrs. Colby as an amazing woman who taught us tolerance and compassion. But she knew best that those were just words and solving a century of racial tension was above her pay grade.

After fifteen minutes, there remained no progress as we were told to open our books and read while Mrs. Colby continued to coax Raquel, who remained frightened and uncomfortable. Of the twenty-six children she had invited to attend her party, only four had shown up. None of the other students had an acceptance rate so low for their own parties. It was the “short notice” many parents would later claim. “Hunter would have gone but darn, we just had other plans.”

And now, at school, there was no Earth, Wind & Fire playing in the background, the comforting embrace of her grandmother, or any other sights, sounds, or smells that eased her discomfort. Instead, she looked at the faces of twenty-six white kids, twenty-two of whom had declined her invitations for reasons varying from fear and ignorance to sheer disdain.

As we shuffled awkwardly in our seats waiting for the stand-off to end, Mrs. Colby asked us to stay seated as she was going to get our principal, Sister Francis. Then Paul did what all of us from the party wanted to do and Mrs. Colby could not. Paul mustered up his energy, arose, and limped over to Raquel with a determined gait. He was motivated less by MLK's dream and more by an answer – a simple one – and he was not going to be denied. He grabbed Raquel's hand and held it purposefully. He then led her to her seat in the classroom. Raquel followed, sat down and opened her book to begin the day with the rest of her classmates. Paul went back to reading his workbook. He said nothing. Nor did I. Nor did Wes and Monica. I heard Raquel say, "thank you" but she didn't have to.

## The Score

My 13 year old memories sat  
in a still car outside a trailer park,  
my mother inside scoring heroin.

She sent a dirty man to drive us  
into the village of sad eyed addiction  
but I felt threatened and abducted

so I screamed and my siblings  
held each other for protection.  
Mother had business to attend,

my concerns became inconvenient.

*Don't botch the score kid!*

*We've done this dozens of times now,*

*you want to blow our cover?*

So I found myself apologizing;  
to the dopesick congregation,

to my dad when I came home late,  
to the grandparents dynasty of dementia.  
I've let everyone down again.

Pulling away from the scene  
my 13 year old memories saw  
a factory next door packed full

with herds of fiberglass animals  
airbrushed to perfection and ready  
for carousels, coin operated rides,

playground structures.

My 13 year old memories received  
a breath of rejuvenation that balanced

the scales into the rest of my  
fleeting life, one factory filled  
with magic never to be forgotten as

long as I will live.

## Reunion Dr.

You are parking your beaten  
and paint chipped car onto  
the side road of Reunion Drive.

There, you will wait  
with your radio pushing something  
non operatic through tiny car speakers.

All three mirrors will serve  
trustworthy reflection  
as you observe from one to the next.

You are looking back at the road  
that is stretched out behind you.  
There will be a tinge of wonder,

with calm and worry wrestling  
at each other about what kind  
of firetruck is gonna come

ripping over the horizon and  
straight down this drive.

But when you parked,  
you realized that the hazards  
were not signaling,

and you sighed a breath of relief.

There are some reunions  
in this lifetime that one cannot  
possibly prepare for.

You pull back out onto the drive,  
looking for the next available  
intersection,

and as you turn over onto it,  
you shift the gears back  
and into cruise control.

## Wake Up

It is my job to wake  
my children every morning.  
I enter their chambers,  
always with the best of intentions.

They lie in mounds and heaps,  
their hair tousled as if  
they were frozen upon  
a large bed of water.

They are careful to stay put,  
they do not want to let on  
that it is time to move.

I urge them as bears, bumblebees,  
as royalty at times to please rise,  
the clock ticks away.

My children know the chips  
are down, a whole new maze  
of challenges awaits their mastering.

But the sun glints through curtain  
with a bitter tinge of chore.  
There is no grace in the ritual.  
I cannot stir this glassy moment.

And if I pull back the warm  
and soft covers from their  
slumbering bodies, Gods be warned,  
and Mothers be damned!

It is unfortunate and unusual  
to discover after all these mornings,  
that I wake my children unawares  
the same way my father attempted  
to once wake me,

save for the bed of waters

I awoke in the middle of-

they were boiling and my  
fathers foot was on my forehead,  
pushing me down, down, down.

## Suppose.

Emily Black

*To think or assume that something is probable but lack proof or certain knowledge.*

When I looked at Lucas, it was mostly at the back of his head. I wasn't sure if that's what lovers did, and *Cosmopolitan* didn't have a section on how to look your partner in the eyes, not in the ear, or mouth.

Every Friday we had dinner at The Local: battered cod with a side of mushy peas. Over the top of our beers, his eyes met my lips, and my eyes met his beard. I laughed when he spilt beer on his t-shirt, and he laughed when the head left white foam on my nose. 'Messy baby!' he crowed.

We were safe, three years into our rituals of belittlement. When you've been together long enough, it's good to twang the heartstrings with a little shame and mocking. We found bliss in battered cod and the same joke about each other's parents, over, and over. *God, you sound like your mother*—nothing riles them up like Freud.

We retreated home to duck under the yellow blanket on the sofa, and watch TV in our underwear.

It was during winter that dinners out with Lucas, and Lucas alone, lost their appeal. I remember because we got a taxi to The Local, I was too cold to walk in tights, and Lucas looked at me as though I were gum on his shoe for making him pay the fiver to get to the end of our road. We spent more time with friends, together and apart: work friends, old uni friends, anyone to force us onto our best behaviour. Being behind the four walls of home was like playing with knives, so we locked ourselves out of the kitchen, instead of learning not to play pin-finger.

He presumed I was maternal, a soft pink landscape on which he could paint. Age twenty-seven, '*surely I'd thought of children?*' It would be *unnatural* to assume I didn't want them.

After pints with his work friends, the married ones with the serious stares, we slipped up and left the safe presence of other people. One too many seconds passed, Ken and Barbie stood in a box. The beer spoke for me: I never wanted babies, not infants, no children, no newborns, no. I garbled and coughed like the bar tap, and summoned ghosts of those who came before him. They rose behind my back: naked and sad. Pink shot through my cheeks, alcohol flush, and he looked at the wall, anywhere but at me.

I held this truth, and walked under the weight of my decision. It was a rucksack of rocks. We became lonely in our lives together, the flat gargled, and spat us out. We no longer wanted the same, but it was a fun, cruel game to pretend we did. Every decision to do something, is a decision not to do something else. The millions of things we decided not to say accumulated in the cob-web corners and the dust that settled on the untouched yellow blanket.

I spent hours choosing, arranging and rearranging the flowers on the table, being womanly, but all they did was weep for us: wilted petals on an oak surface. I spent the



days searching for a sixth sense which didn't exist. Where mothers and grandmothers flourished, I fell flat.

He stopped calling me baby, because it was ironic, stupid. He smacked his lips like a trout when he went to say it, then stopped himself. I laughed, a cackle, because I couldn't help it, it was funny; in the same way jokes about parents are funny.

I suspected he moved on when he came home with a fine blonde hair on his neck tie. Not my *002 Auburn*. I studied his neck at this point—his mouth was getting boring. I shook him from me like a feeble creature in my care, I screamed my banshee cry and exiled him from our space. I sniffed him like a hound. I sniffed him, and smelt *her*. Staccato barks filled the night. The neighbours didn't complain, because they knew that it only had to happen once. Yet when he walked out, I felt as though it were my fault, a quiet failing of mine.

Three years later, I suppose he's moved on. I walk back from The Local alone. No battered cod and cool beer, only double vodka and bitter lemon. Lemon stings cracked lips, and loneliness stings cracked hearts.

Walking towards my road, winter cuts the air again. I pass his house. There's a dim yellow light behind the drawn curtain. The roar of the traffic goes quiet. All I can hear is an infant wailing.

## Madrid Hotel Room

Declan Geraghty

My teeth are yellow. They usually look whiter, but are yellow in this mirror. Even though it's one of those mirrors that makes you look better looking than really you are. The white of the sun cream makes me look a bit clownish, and I rub my eyes with tiredness. The sun cream stings. But I still rub them. I always keep rubbing them. The cold water from the sink doesn't help much either. Just time, and beer, and time. Time passing. And Spanish TV is headache inducing, it took me years to figure out what they were saying. Now I have no interest. Talk show king pins bullshit on about earthshaking scandals about celebrities. Left and right leaning stations, their candidates talk from newsrooms. From pulpits of their own creations. Perfectly preened, perfectly turned out. Their retorts almost like one upmanship. It's seems like an awful lot of energy. A lot of energy over nothing. And songs in Spanish from the eighties and nineties you never heard of. I wonder to myself, what I was doing the day they made that video. I would have been a kid in school, or out playing football. Maybe I was in mass on a Sunday or watching a film.

I open up a beer. It's cold. It goes down well. If all beers went down that well you'd drink all day, which I do anyway. But I'd drink more. More than this for sure. The Spanish always ask why does everybody drink warm beer in Ireland. And I have no answer for them. I sometimes try to defend us, but I wonder why myself. I'd imagine the answer is laziness, but I never tell them that. Don't show them any weakness and all that. I flick through songs and interviews on my phone on youtube. And before I know it, the night stand by my bed is full of half empty beer cans. They still have weight to them, but I always leave a bit in the end. Tastes horrible for some reason. I switch on and off the air conditioning. It's either too warm or too cold. I always seem to get a sore throat but it's worth it. Worth it to avoid that heat. That forty degree July heat. I open the window. It looks out onto a shaded court yard. The Building must be eight floors high. I look up, almost creaking my neck, and catch a glimpse of the baby blue Madrid sky.

I hear echos dart upwards. Bouncing of the beige brick walls, into the open expanse of Madrid nothingness, and off. Like everything else. Gone. I see two floors below me a south American woman doing housework. I'm glad I'm not her, not now anyway. I realise I only have one beer left. I open it up and get back to my phone. It buzzes and its Pilar. She says she can't meet, something about her kids. She did that last year as well, and it's been literally a year and a half since we did it. I send her a pissed off text. She doesn't reply. Her body seems more like a twenty year old than a woman of forty. It must be the diet over here. I wondered was she with me for some kind of rebelliousness. But what did it matter. I was lucky to get her. All those times I was with her. They faded each year, to less and less. Until they looked like they would eventually disappear into nothingness. Ghosted or ignored. Maybe just plain forgotten. Gone. Like

everything in the end. I suppose.

The beer is finished, I mull about getting up. But I do eventually. Fuck hanging around here sober. The door weighs a tonne closing it. The girl on the desk gives me a friendly nod. The stairs wind around and around, and there's an old elevator that fits about 2 people. It's wooden doors and steel cage run up through the building like a tree trunk. On the ground floor the doors swoosh open, and I'm suddenly blasted by a world of heat. My body is enveloped in roaring sun light, car fumes, foreign sounds and sandals.

The shop is empty and an Asian guy serves me. He watches some hyperactive Chinese soap opera, on an old small square TV. I look at it. Uninterested yet at the same time enthralled. I take my beers and go back to the hotel. The door weighs a tonne and I put back on the air conditioning. I rub my eyes with tiredness. Cheap Ryanair flights at six in the morning are not good for your health. At least I'll get my daughter tomorrow. Back to Dublin for a few weeks. The relief of seeing her. Like a weight is lifted. I take a beer from the white plastic bag I left on the bed. I sit down and open it up. There's nothing on TV. There never is but I watch it anyway. I wait on a text from Pilar. But it never comes.

### **Broken Sonnet for a Pre-Conquest Mexico**

It takes great focus and soft hands to snatch  
A Quetzal from emerald treetops,  
Pluck turquoise tailfeathers, attach to headdresses  
Worn atop the wise stone of the Sun's Pyramid—  
Then to release the bird, watch it soar away.  
It takes great care—and guts—to build a city  
Atop a sinking swamp, where homes store food grown  
on chinampas, floating gardens careful hands canoe between.  
Frijoles y nopales for lunch with  
Adobe-crust hands from so much building.  
When strangers stumbled off worn ships, putrid-  
Smelling, teeth rotting, faces  
Warped by hunger,  
We pitied them

### **Broken Sonnet *Para La Noche Triste***

Noble, holy blood fresh on temple walls  
A traitor bawls on the terrace preaching peace  
But we who saw blades gleam in moonlight  
Need no teaching when it comes to the  
long-swords aimed at our necks—  
Buildings fall beneath our cries and fists  
Eagle Warriors, clubs in-hand, chase them into the lake  
Our gold fills their pockets, drags each one,  
Their strange language and god, all to the bottom—  
When a mirror-still surface swallows the last one  
We dance, take time to mourn, not knowing  
flags, faces on money would change, but  
swords remain, not knowing such carnage  
Could only be a beginning.

## ***Intervención Estadounidense en México (1846) as Broken Sonnet***

*Loss isn't something we're born used to—  
It takes practice, like an art. When we parted with  
our very selves, lined their church pews,  
like cans on shelves, our names strange shapes on  
twisted tongues, the ones we took in shot us in the  
night to keep their slaves; and now  
and now they want the land,  
bandits who'll see to it  
The closest you get to a fair shake  
Is negotiations with guns aimed  
At your skull. But, looking around,  
We see there are more of us than them, a lot more,  
And anyone can do that math. I hope you can*

## **Zoot Suit Broken Sonnet**

Stripped and beat in the street, called “unpatriotic,”  
But to whose America? So many bandages for  
so many things that cannot be bandaged  
Entire cultures sanded smooth, painted  
Over with dollar signs and prison cells  
Vultures pecking at our remnants.  
Self-defense pleas, they walk free—  
And maybe they're right.  
Maybe my skin, its scars, its  
History, its resilience, is a threat. Maybe  
It's a weapon that, when aimed right, can  
generate enough force to shatter  
chains, split economies in two, build  
something better atop the ashes.

## **Sonnet for gasping high schoolers**

I saw it for myself, when driving to work:  
A chemical plant right next to a high school—  
far-reaching smokestack shadow climbing  
over concrete landscape, hurried teens shuffling  
Beneath, no escape. Behold: the rewards for  
Descendants of chiefs  
And kings and  
blood-spattered revolutionaries:  
Dead Mexicans who don't even know  
They're Mexican—histories sold to  
The highest bidder. If only  
they knew—  
and some will—maybe they'll read this  
and maybe poems can start fires.

## Heritage

Your father teaches you to fish the side waters  
of rapid rivers as his mother taught him

and your mother teaches you to prepare  
your catch for supper,

absorb the grit of your ancestors  
from patterns on your plate.

Your ambered hair curls as intently  
as your mind absorbs actions around you.

Your indigo eyes glow  
with the never-rest intelligence of starlight.

Each grandparent weaves blood red  
fireweed into your curls and you learn

how to open a cactus in drought,  
drink its salvaged water,

how to seal your boots before you cross  
meadows soggy with other people's plans,

how to scale a granite mountain to carve  
your own trail even if clouds descend on it

and you must then navigate blind in white light  
but still celebrate where you stand.

## Mountain Morning

Startled awake by vivid dreams,  
the kind that plagues me at high altitude:

all I hold precious dissolves into air.  
My dog greets me with a thump of tail,

his eyes barely open after I cup his head  
and rub his flanks. He follows me

to my favorite chair, lies down beside it.  
lifts his head and rests it on his paws,

watches me watch sky turn from grey  
to orange as light crests the peaks,

turn again from yellow to cream.  
Hints of clear sky streak pale

through stayed clouds  
transparent as layers of thin ice.

Pine branches glow green to gold,  
their needles and cones shimmer

while fragrant drops of moisture  
slowly evaporate in simple quiet.

We can hike trails to celebrate  
no fires today, not yet.



## **A Storm in August**

Across the sky sidewinder streaks  
glow as if infused  
with radioactive dye.

Vibrating veins feed capillaries  
white serum electricity,  
spurs erratic attacks into earth,

which responds the way  
coiled rattlesnakes leap to inject  
a deadly venom into intruders.

Whole regions light up  
in multiple strikes splayed to form  
an arterial map of quick-flash pathways.

Thunder arrives  
in a clap and roll sequence  
behind tumbles of gravid clouds.

The rare torrent  
might settle summer's dust,  
cause reptiles to hide.

But lightning resumes its frenzy,  
heat dissipates the moisture  
before it reaches ground.

## **Summer Redux**

The horror ignites  
with a tiny crackle,  
transforms itself  
into a wild creature  
that races across ground,  
expands wider and higher  
until it engulfs  
the entire scene.

The fire generates  
its own wind,  
loud as a train roaring  
through tunnels,  
whips up, then down  
into an unholy swirl,  
consumes everything,  
so intense,  
sky bends light.

All kneel, curl,  
disappear into ash,  
bitter evidence  
of this cruel act.

# Burial

Brucie Jacobs

The night air is sharp with the smell of apples fallen to the ground, the leaves just starting to turn. In the woods behind their old stone house, a woman shines a flashlight at the hole in the ground and watches her husband hack away at the hole with a pick-ax. Dirt spills into the hole with each whack. When a clump of tree roots, fat as snakes, pops out, he severs the roots with one swift chop.

A thin sweater over her nightgown, the woman hugs herself. The air is cool. Bugs dart in and out of the beam from the flashlight, drawn to the warmth. Secret night sounds of the woods mingle with the cadence of a million crickets. The woman glances at her husband, bone-thin and tall, his small face pale as a moon. Raising the ax, he sinks it into the hole, again and again. In his black sweatshirt, the hood pulled close about his head and tied tight under his chin, there is something brittle about him, a lonesomeness.

When he stops to rest, leaning heavily against the ax, she hands him the light and begins to shovel dirt from the hole. She tries to recall when they last did anything together, without the children. Except this. Hardly a word has passed between them since they put the children to bed an hour ago. She wants to tell him what it had been like at the vet that afternoon, how their golden retriever had been limp as a bundle of old bones in her arms when she carried him from the car into the vet, how Peaches lay still on the examination table, not once protesting, his leg lame, stiff with arthritis. When the vet—a fireplug of a man whose movements were brisk, full of self-assurance—brought the injection, a long needle that bulged with pink liquid inside, she almost changed her mind. For just a moment, she'd been taken in by the gleam still in Peaches' eyes, wide as cups on her. Now, still shoveling, tossing dirt to the side, she sifts through her thoughts for something to say. She tries to imagine what other couples, burying a dog, would talk about. Lately, their only intimate conversations have been in the presence of the marriage counselor she found for them three months before. On the verge of leaving him, she'd wanted to give the marriage a final chance, to poke about the embers for a live spark. "What is it you want?" he'd demanded when she'd told him.

"Peaches probably wouldn't have made it through another winter," she says at last. They'd found the dog lost in the woods, fourteen years ago, just after their marriage. Only during the past year had Peaches begun to droop.

He flicks the flashlight in her face. "He was a good dog. A survivor," he says easily. He might have lasted another year. You never know."

Peaches' cries come to her, the whimpering that had crept into her sleep night after night, waking her. While her husband slept on, she'd slipped downstairs to give the dog more water and painkillers. Other nights, she tossed fitfully in bed, a blanket over her ears, wanting to snuff out the sounds.

"But he was miserable," she says. "Before he gave him the shot, the vet said--"

"You didn't stay, did you?" he asks, puzzled, beaming the light at her again.

"Of course I did. Why not?" She scoops out the last of the dirt, leans the shovel against a tree. "It only took a few seconds," she tells him crisply.

Shrugging, he hands her the flashlight, then plunges the ax into the hole. When he strikes a rock, the harsh twang sends a jolt through her.

Muttering under his breath, he bends to pry the rock loose with his hands. She steps closer, steadying the light on the rock while he wrenches it from the ground.

Leaves rustle in the small breeze, twirl soundlessly to the ground.

She'd watched the light vanish from Peaches' eyes that afternoon. "The heart's stopped," the vet told her kindly, raising the stethoscope from the dog's chest, folding it neatly in his breast pocket. When he looked at her over the dog's body, his eyes just missed hers. She'd seen his embarrassment, understood he was waiting for her to leave. Forcing a smile, she thanked him, and suddenly needed to escape the starkness of death hovering between them. She'd dreaded this moment; to avoid it, she'd clung to a last shred of life left in the dog.

Now her husband tosses the rock into the trees, hacks away at the hole. When he stops to take off his sweatshirt, hanging it on a limb, he glances at her. She looks away, fidgets with the flashlight.

"Your turn," he says, wiping his brow.

She hands him the light and begins to shovel again.

After a few minutes, he looks at his watch. "You know, this is a hell of a lot of trouble."

"We're almost done," she tells him after a pause. "It's deep enough, don't you think?"

He beams the flashlight in her eyes. "I still don't see why you couldn't just have left Peaches at the vet, like I told you—"

"Yes, I could have," she says thinly, continuing to shovel, suddenly wanting the ax instead. "But I didn't. How many times do we have to discuss—"

"Well, you should have," he blurts. "They would have cremated him. Do you think a dog would know the difference?"

The air prickles with white silence.  
it's too late now," she says.

"Well,

Sighing, he stuffs the flashlight into his pants pocket. "I'll get him," he murmurs.

Leaves and dry twigs crunch under his feet as he tramps out of the woods and across the lawn to her car. Peaches' body, wrapped in a plastic trash bag, is lying in the trunk where the vet left him. It will be rigid by now, she thinks. And cold as bricks. The crickets' song rises and falls all around her, shrilling in her ears. Impulsively, she grabs the ax, raises it over her shoulder, and swings the ax into the hole. Loosening tiny avalanches of dirt and stone, tearing roots apart, she whacks, over and over until she hears their wheelbarrow clunking towards her. She watches through the trees as he pushes the old wheelbarrow, wobbling under its load, through the grass. His shoulders bent forward, he stops and starts, working to keep the wheelbarrow from tipping.

When he reaches her, the sweat glistens on his brow, his breathing quick.

"Shine the light over here, will you?" he says.

As she aims the light at the wheelbarrow, he reaches down and runs his hands over the trash bag inside, fumbling until he finds where the vet tied it closed.

"What are you doing?" she asks when he loosens the knot.

"Just making sure."

"Don't open it," she insists.

He pulls apart the knot. Quickly she turns away. A hush like a fog settles in the air around them.

He ties the bag, lifting the bundle from the wheelbarrow into the hole. Leaning, he shifts the bag from side to side, until it fits snugly down.

She shovels dirt into the hole, smooths it with her palms. She stands and pulls her thin sweater close, looking on while he places stones to mark the grave. Finally, a satisfied look on his face, he glances up at her.

"Well, it's done," he says.

## BOTTLE IT UP

*Bottle it up the way we feel right now  
Whenever I get lonely gonna drink a little down—Jade Jackson*

every night, in one town and then another,  
the singer pours her latest deathless lyrics  
into the dark beyond the stage  
while her tour bus idles in the alleyway,  
but I am waking up with you

weeping with envy of the blindfolded prisoner  
exhaling a drag from his final cigarette,  
the vampire sharpens a stake  
for his own heart,  
but I am waking up with you

the trapeze artist flings herself  
higher and higher and higher,  
over her partner's outstretched arms,  
over ooohs and aaahs  
from a sea of upturned mouths,

she has

let go

into her most beautiful moment,  
and I am waking up with you

## **CAPRICE AT FOLLY BEACH**

walking ankle-deep in tide-wash,  
she touches a naked earlobe,

laughs, unhooks a pearl earring,  
tosses it into the moonlit surf

later, I watch a frown  
pucker her sleeping face,

the missing pearl peeking  
from beneath her pillow

## THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO SANCHO PANZA

I watched him laid low,  
and I watched him rise again

I saw him beaten and scorned  
by faithful and heathen alike

many times his words baffled me,  
yet I felt their truth from his heart's core

even when he called me an ass,  
I believe he saw me more than beast

I love my fat Teresa despite ourselves,  
and I love poor Dapple, lost and found,

yet for all the times I heard a priest speak  
of love for love's sake, I had to see it

what he loved, to that he gave his all—  
to what greater glory can any fool aspire?



## **MOURNING SEASON**

into each life  
some rain must fall,  
though never  
on  
the pure  
of heart

time wounds  
all heels,  
Achilles

only the good  
die young,  
so  
here  
we are

now anything  
is possible

## READING ABOUT THE IMMORTAL HENRIETTA LACKS, I RECALL

my late wife asking if I were a serial killer—  
accustomed though she was to my disappearances  
for two or three hours each Sunday morning—

solitary pursuits invite suspicion

after a run one morning over Honey Nut Cheerios  
and the shared newspaper she  
(lover of crime novels police procedurals  
and all manner of true crime)

casually brought forth that question

when we were newlyweds she had read to me  
about Blanche Taylor Moore  
taking peanut butter milkshakes laced with arsenic  
to her mysteriously-stricken husband's hospital bed

and gushed about her internship  
at the justice academy  
learning about luminol fingerprinting  
how to recognize when a suspect was lying

so I tried to be a good husband

and she was a good sweet wife  
not a murderous bone  
in her body despite the mayhem  
in the books on her nightstand  
& the TV shows I never watched with her

but her sense of irony was still alive that morning  
as she considered how keen it would be  
if her sweetheart were a gifted sociopath

this morning I breakfast over the story of Henrietta Lacks  
who one could say is still fighting the killer  
that took her in the Colored Ward of Johns Hopkins  
and wonder

if that morning      my wife's fate was already    stalking her

## **TOWER OF BABEL**

when the big boss men looked down  
from their mountaintop into  
the mill villages and saw  
on porches and front steps  
and bare dirt yards and street corners  
in the summer evening heat  
the poor people  
black and white together  
women, men, children  
singing the same new songs

they charged the preachers to  
bring forth the old-time thunder  
and confuse their tongues,  
but the songs the people raised  
were beautiful and terrifying  
and drowned the preachers out

so the big men sent their avenging angels  
to fall upon them with truncheons and bullets,  
not to still their tongues but to  
stoke their fears and sow discord  
in their hearts and turn them  
against each other

and the angels issued forth  
to do their work so well  
that long after their return  
the big men felt the heat still rising  
from torches, heard the cacophony  
of stones shattering song

and they called it good

## LIVING WITH THE ANIMALS

David K. Slay

We had moved from a small, dank apartment in the Pacific Northwest to a rather charming Spanish-style stucco in sunny Southern California. It was the early seventies, I had completed my student teaching and landed a position teaching high school English in a working-class suburb of Los Angeles. Although it had only one bedroom, the dwelling was built over four single garages and the living areas were spacious and airy. It had original black and lavender tile in the bathroom, lovingly refinished hardwood floors, and even a small but nice dining room separate from the kitchen. But best of all, the place sat alone at the back of deep lot, secluded from the street by a huge, overgrown pepper tree.

As our first year there progressed toward summer, however, we discovered we hadn't quite escaped the tribulations of apartment living. An ugly two-story version sat crowding the lot next to us. The building was narrow and deep such that all the units faced our bucolic setting, with its inviting yard, flowers, and the huge, weeping shade tree. Former owners of our place had planted a hedge of red geraniums and lavender marguerites between our yard and the apartment building walkway, but it provided scant protection.

So it was with growing indignation that we watched from our upstairs windows as the apartment dwellers, mostly young layabouts who all seemed to know each other, blithely incorporated our front yard into their leisure-time activities. They would spread out beach towels and loll around drinking beer in our yard during sunny afternoons. On weekends they'd wash their cars on our grass using our water and our garden hose. They thought nothing of driving over the sidewalk and up their walkway to unload groceries and cases of beer. Their clunkers left oil stains on the sidewalk.

Just as we were getting completely fed up with the interlopers, one of them bounded up the stairs and banged on our door. It was a warm afternoon and he presented himself shirtless, in frayed and dirty corduroy cut-offs, and still had on dusty orange work boots.

"Hey man, the name's Eddie," he said. "I live down there." He jerked his head toward a lower apartment next door and stuck out a dirty, calloused hand.

"Yeah," I said, "seen you 'round. What's up?" His hand felt like a leather gardener's glove. He was somewhat younger than I—in his late twenties—with stringy, shoulder-length blond hair and was well-muscled. There was a muddy, indecipherable tattoo on one bicep.

"Yeah, well, I just thought I'd be neighborly. I hang drywall. Well, I did until I broke my fucking wrist." He raised his left arm to display a relatively clean plaster cast encasing his forearm down to encircle his thumb, with fingers sticking out the end. As he held up his arm, his fingers caught his attention, and he wiggled them, as if to verify they still were connected. Some of the nails were blue-black. Then he looked back at me as if we hadn't just met. He was stoned.

“Yeah, well...I thought maybe you’d like some of this—you take a toke now and then, right?” He grinned impishly and with his good hand dug a plastic 35mm film can from a pocket. He eased off the gray lid with his thumb and showed me several chunks of hashish. “What say, man, can I lay this on you?” He still had a smile, but it began to look fixed, like a mask.

“Gee, Eddie, you know, I used to get stoned a lot but now I gotta be on the straight and narrow, being a teacher and all.”

“A teacher?”

“Yeah, I teach high school, so, you know, I can’t afford to mess around—maybe get busted. I could lose my credential.”

“Oh, right, right. . .” He scratched his chin and seemed to ponder this thought, that there could be a reason to turn down free drugs. “Um, there is something I wanted to ask you, though.”

I already had surmised there would be strings attached.

“I wondered if maybe I could rent one of your garages—you know, just to store some things, that’s all.” He peered at me expectantly.

“Well,” I began, my mind racing for the right words to mollify him, “I know it looks like a lot of space down there, but we’re actually using all the garages right now.”

He cocked his head and squinted at me.

“Really? Well, it’s just for a short time, man. I don’t need much space, and you got, like, *four garages*, man.”

I tried to look sympathetic. “I’m sorry, man. I’d really like to help you out, but we just don’t have the space.” It wasn’t true of course, but I was having visions of what would come from this camel’s nose getting under the tent. I started to back up and reach for the door.

“Hey man, just hear me out, ok?” His ears were getting red and he began to twist the cast on his arm, as if there were an itch inside. “The thing is, Roxie’s kicking me out. I can’t work until this cast comes off. I really need somewhere to store my tools and stuff until I find another place.”

I nodded toward the apartment building. “What about some of your friends and neighbors?” I knew what the answer would be but I was stalling.

“Aw, they don’t have any space, man. You know garages don’t come with those places, unless you pay beaucoup extra. Come on, man, it’ll only be for a short time.”

“I can’t, Eddie. We really are using all the garages.”

He stared at me with a mixture of disbelief, frustration, and then stifled anger.

“But hey,” I said, “I really want to thank you for the offer of the dope, man. That was real neighborly of you.”

“Yeah, that’s ok, but. . .”

“Thanks again—see you around.” I backed into the house, closing the door between us.

I knew who Roxie was. Most evenings of the week she could be heard and seen rushing around getting ready for a night shift as a cocktail waitress. If I happened to be down in our yard, watering the plants or pruning something, I could hear her opening

and closing drawers and cupboards, swearing as she went from room to room getting ready to leave. She always seemed to be running late. She never closed her blinds so sometimes I caught glimpses of her half-dressed. Her breasts were small and her hips were narrow, but watching her blow-dry her hair while topless was hard to ignore. I didn't think she was an exhibitionist—she just didn't seem to know, or care, how visible she was with the lights on inside her place. Then she would emerge around 6:30 in a short black uniform pinched at the waist and trimmed in white ruffles. It barely covered her bottom and wouldn't if she bent over. She'd lock her door, rummage through an oversized purse for a cigarette and light up. Then she'd hurry down to the street to look for her car, smoke trailing behind her.

Soon after Eddie's visit, he and most of the apartment building crew piled into their vans and muscle cars and towed a dune buggy out to the desert for one of their off-road weekends. The leader of the pack, the one with the stripped and converted VW, was older than the others—pushing 40 maybe—and most of the group spent a lot of time in his unit getting high and listening to music. Even from our place, we could tell he had the best stereo among them. Megan and I had nicknamed him Rommel because he looked and dressed like a desert rat. His usual attire consisted of a khaki hunting vest over a bare chest, cut-off pants, and mirrored sunglasses under a sweat-stained bush hat.

After they cleared out, Megan broached the idea of putting a fence along the walkway that ran between our yard and the apartment building, and to do it while they all were gone. She had discovered several rolls of weathered grape-stake fencing in a wire mesh in one of our garages, apparently left behind by the former owner. She theorized the fencing had been used in the past, maybe to fence in a dog, so why not use it now to put a stop to the unwanted incursions?

Something about the plan made me uneasy, but we felt we had to take a stand, and we were well within our rights to protect our turf. We didn't have time to mix cement to set the posts and do the job correctly, but still it took most of the day. We had only enough fencing to string along the property line between our lot and the neighbors, and then part way across the front. Most of the geraniums and marguerites ended up just inside the fence. With the job done, late that afternoon, Megan took off her gloves, brushed the dirt from her pants and quoted a favorite poet: "Good fences make good neighbors." Looking at the results of our labor, however, I doubted these neighbors would see it that way.

The next day was Saturday and when the mailman came, I was downstairs pruning the plants that had become crowded by the impromptu fence. "Nice fence," he said, handing me our mail. "Is that new?" He took off his summer pith helmet and wiped the inside band and the back of his neck with a handkerchief. "How come it doesn't go all the way across the front, and up the other side of the yard? Did you run out?"

The following evening, just as it was getting dark, Megan and I held our breath and watched while one of their vans started to pull over the sidewalk, only to be blocked by the corner of the fencing we had erected. The driver revved the engine several times and then turned it off. The headlights displayed what we had done in stark relief.

Several of them gathered to stare at the fence with hands on hips, but then they unloaded and carried their paraphernalia and grocery bags up the walkway to their apartments. I watched Eddie and Rommel lug an ice chest along the now narrow walkway. Even in the twilight, I could see Eddie muttering and glaring up at our darkened windows. I didn't think he could see us, but my chest tightened when he gave the finger in our direction just before going inside.

In the middle of that night I was jolted awake by the ceiling light blazing in my eyes, and the sounds of thumping and other worrisome noises accompanied by The Doors. It had been a while, but I recognized the unsettling dissonance of "The End." The bedroom clock showed 2:13. As I lay squinting at the light, the thumping noises came closer and I began to recognize the sound of Megan's bare heels on our hardwood floor. She seemed to be searching for something, pacing in the hallway, opening and closing doors. I couldn't imagine what she possibly could be looking for in the middle of the night. When I peered into the hallway, she was sitting cross-legged on the floor, in the long t-shirt she used for pajamas, fumbling with the phone book in her lap. There was a telephone nook in the hallway. Our faux antique candlestick telephone sat next to her on the floor.

"Where's the number for the police?" she yelled at the phone book, hands raised in exasperation. She looked up at me with a mixture of disbelief and outrage. "Those sonsabitches tore down our fence!"

I went to the window next to the front door overlooking our front yard. Below, someone sprinted out of the darkness toward our place, and then turned and jumped our hedge toward the apartment building next door. It was mostly dark but I could tell it was Eddie. The white plaster cast on his forearm reflected the glow of our porch light. Rommel and his apartment buddies were cheering him from their balcony above, just as Jim Morrison reached his screaming climax. As he ran into Roxie's apartment and slammed the door, I thought of the title of another, very different, LP from the late sixties: "Living with the Animals."

The police arrived about a half-hour later. By then all the revelers had retreated behind closed doors and turned off the music and their lights. The cool damp air suddenly was devoid of commotion. When I saw the police car's amber lights winking through the tree foliage, I went down and met them on the grass where the interlopers used to wash their cars, with our water. The cops both were tall, well-built guys about my age, in navy blue uniforms, no hats, and black leather belts that creaked when they moved. One had a long, five-cell flashlight that he trained on the shattered fence. I hadn't yet seen the extent of the damage done. It looked like the remnants of a one-man suspension bridge that had fallen into a ravine.

"What happened here?" he said.

"Well, our neighbors there didn't like a fence we put up so they tore it down." I shrugged and made a noncommittal nod toward the apartment building.

"These neighbors?" The spot from his light roamed over the doors and windows of the now dark and placid-looking building. Maybe because her unit was closest to the mess, the light seemed to linger on Roxie's windows and door. I guessed she wasn't

home from work yet.

“Did you see ‘em do it?” He holstered the flashlight and took a small notepad and pen from the pocket under his badge. His partner drew closer, arms folded across his chest, listening. He was mechanically chewing gum, like a baseball coach on the sidelines.

“Not exactly,” I said, “but my wife did. I was asleep but she ran downstairs and saw them. She yelled at them.”

“How come they didn’t like the fence?” the second officer said.

I had a dull sinking feeling in my stomach, like when getting caught in a lie.

“Look. These people kept using our yard for all kinds of things and we got tired of it, so we put up the fence.” The officers were impassive. “It doesn’t matter if they liked it or not,” I added, “they shouldn’t have torn it down. It’s our property. They intentionally damaged our property.”

“Well, you got that right,” the first one said. “It’s definitely damaged property.”

The second one turned away, unable to suppress a smile, and spat his gum on the grass.

“Well,” the first one said, “if you wanna file a complaint, we’ll have to talk to your wife and get a statement.” He looked at me, waiting for a response.

“What would happen then?” I said. “It’s not like you could do anything, right?”

“No,” he said, “but if you know who did it, and where they live, you could take them to court for damages maybe.”

The other cop had wandered over to the fence and was poking it with his foot. I looked over at Roxie’s door and windows and thought about Eddie running through our yard, jumping the flowers and going in to her place.

“No,” I said, “I don’t think so. It’s not that big a deal.”

“It’s your call,” he said. He clicked the pen and returned it to his pocket.

“Thanks but no thanks. We’ll just take care of it ourselves.”

Late the next morning, I happened to be in the alley behind our garages, vacuuming out one of our cars. I intentionally hadn’t done anything about the fence, preferring to let it stay there, speaking for itself. In the sober light of day, it made quite a mess. In addition to flattening the flower bushes, it covered most of the apartment building walkway, down to the sidewalk. The perpetrators wouldn’t be able to ignore it as they went to and from the street—they would have to traipse around it, or over it. I told Megan, and myself, it was just deserts for their misdeeds. I was ruminating about the situation while vacuuming when Eddie walked up and, a little too eagerly, gestured for me to turn off the vacuum so he could say something.

“Man oh man!” he said, “What happened to your *fence*?” He was giddy with barely suppressed glee.

“Beats me,” I said. “What do *you* think happened to it?”

“How would I know?” He grinned and looked around the corner of the garages, up the walkway. “Man. That thing is *wasted*. Who would do something like that?”

“You can drop the act, Eddie. I know you were there last night—you’re one of the assholes who tore it down!”



“No way Jose. Don’t know nothin’ ‘bout it.” Now he was openly smirking.

I pointed to the cast on his left forearm. “Eddie—I saw you. I saw your cast as you jumped over our flowers getting back into your apartment.”

Then he dropped his pretense. “Yeah, you prick, and you sent your old lady down, too. Why didn’t *you* come down?”

We glared at each other, but after a few seconds he turned abruptly and strode away.

“Fuck you,” he said as he went, “*and* your fucking garages.”

After the dustup with Eddie, I became resolute about leaving the fence where it lay. I told myself eventually one of them would feel bad about what had happened and clean it up. I know—wishful thinking. But I had to stand my ground, what little was left. Although it had been her idea to begin with, Megan was over it. She came and went from the garages and alley anyway, so she could ignore the whole mess. Also she pointed out we had nevertheless achieved our goal: The neighbors no longer were using our yard. “If it works, why fix it,” she chirped. “Que será, será.”

Later that day, soon after Megan left to do some shopping, there was a quiet knock on the door. It was Roxie. I almost didn’t recognize her—no makeup, hair pulled back into a long ponytail, turquoise tube top, white hip huggers. The stretchy top made her look almost flat.

“Sorry to bother you,” she said, “but can we talk a minute?”

She pointed with her chin slightly, to indicate she wanted to come inside.

“Of course,” I said. I opened the door wider and let her in. As she passed I smelled a blend of Herbal Essence shampoo and cigarette smoke. We stood just inside the closed front door. Except for the exposed midriff, she looked like she could be one of my students.

“I need a favor” she said, watching me closely.

“I’m not sure what you mean.” Eddie had wanted a favor too but Roxie certainly was more direct about it.

“I saw the police out front last night when I came home from work. You were talking to them. After they left I went inside and Eddie was freaking about your fence getting smashed. He said you think he did it.”

“I *know* he did it,” I said. “There may have been others, but I saw *him* running around in our yard last night when it happened. *And* we had a little chat about it this morning in the alley. He all but admitted it.”

“Did you turn him in, or say where he lives?” She kept her eyes fastened on mine.

“Well, not exactly. I told the police we’d handle it ourselves. But I can still file a complaint.”

“Look,” she said, “I don’t care what happens to Eddie, but just don’t get me involved, okay?”

Surprised, I waited for more.

“I’m on probation. If I get another violation I could lose my job.”

“Another violation?”

Her composure slipped. Her eyes got wet, but I could see she was determined not to cry. “Look, please don’t make a complaint, or say Eddie has anything to do with me, okay? He’s big trouble. If my P.O. finds out I’ve been ‘associating’ with him, I’m screwed.”

“Well. I don’t know about all that, but there is this little problem of the destroyed fence—our ‘damaged property.’ What do you think should be done about that?”

“I can’t pay for it, if that’s what you mean. I can barely make my rent.”

“I wasn’t thinking about money.”

Her face got hard and her eyes narrowed. “You prick. You fucking prick.” She put her hands on her hips and looked past me into the space of the room. “I should’ve figured.”

“Whoa there, hold on. I was only thinking about who’ll clean up the mess, that’s all. I’m certainly not going to do it.”

“Yeah, right, that’s all you were thinking about.” She straightened up, folded her arms across her chest and took a breath. “Ok,” she said, “here’s the deal. You don’t make trouble for me and I won’t make trouble for you.”

“And just what, exactly, does *that* mean?” I was beginning to get very annoyed. First Eddie the drywall hanger and now Roxie the cocktail waitress was leaning on me.

“You watch me,” she said.

“Watch you what? What do you think you’re going to do?”

“You watch me in my apartment. You pretend you’re watering your stupid flowers but you watch me getting ready for work.”

“What? Now just you wait one minute. I water my ‘stupid flowers’ standing in my own front yard and you run around half dressed with the blinds open. No one would blame me for noticing.”

“Yeah, well, that doesn’t make it right, does it?”

Again I had that sinking feeling in my stomach. Somehow this conversation had gotten way off track.

“Look,” I said. “If that mess down there just gets cleaned up, I’m done with the whole damn thing—like it never happened. *And* I won’t need to file a complaint.”

I brusquely opened the door for her to leave. “But do yourself a favor and start closing your blinds.”

She stood pat. “The blinds don’t work. Eddie messed them up trying to break in. And I can’t complain to the fucking landlord because I’m behind on my rent.”

She turned to leave, but paused on her way out, inches from my face. “Just keep away from me, or I’ll tell everyone around here you’re a peeping tom.”

Several days passed while I mulled my options. The fence continued to lay in the sun like the bones of a beached whale. On Thursday the mailman clomped up our stairs to deliver a pointed message along with the mail. “What’s the story with the fence?” he said. He looked peeved. “It’s getting to be a navigational hazard, if you catch my drift. Someone needs to clean it up.”

That weekend Megan and I were the dining room, quite early on Sunday morning. She was munching granola and sipping coffee while reading the paper on the dining

room table—her usual Sunday A.M. routine. I was trying to work on lesson plans but mostly was obsessing about the fence. School would start in two weeks and I was not exactly prepared. I hadn't been sleeping well since the night with The Doors and the police coming. How could such a seemingly simple thing evolve into such a...

Then I sensed some activity below in our yard. I took my coffee cup and peeked out the window by the front door. In the gray morning light, Rommel and Roxie were quietly working together, pulling the fence out of the flowers and off the walkway. At first I didn't recognize him, in a faded Hawaiian shirt and baggy sweatpants. Without his hat, I could see he was mostly bald. Roxie was in a white sweatshirt and bluejeans. They looked like they could be father and daughter. I watched them for a minute as they worked to untangle the fence, and then slipped on my loafers and went downstairs. We worked together without speaking. After the fencing was back in three neat rolls, Rommel helped me carry them around to the alley and into one of our garages. When we returned to the front, Roxie was nowhere to be seen, and I noticed now her blinds were closed.

We stood on the newly cleared walkway between our buildings, looking down toward the sidewalk. As the rising sun began to burn off the morning overcast, the area again looked open and inviting, with the huge shade tree and grass beyond. Many of the marguerites and geraniums were worse for the wear, but they would recover.

Rommel lit a cigarette with a turquoise Bic and took a long drag. "Sorry about the hassle, man." He was still looking toward the street, but sounded passably contrite.

"Well, maybe the fence wasn't such a great idea in the first place."

"You know, you got a lot of garages, man, and I need to store a dune buggy. You wanna rent one?"

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## Two Bits

My timing's on the dot. At 9:59  
as I start across the lot, a woman,  
a hairdresser, not a barber,  
kneels to unlock the glass  
door. Five car doors swing wide  
and in three seconds, five  
men and three boys are ahead  
of me in line. "Toadstools!"  
my mind cries. *The grace and  
punctuality of a sprinkler-planted  
lawn.* I walk back to my  
bathroom. Mike cuts my hair  
for free, with contented  
concentration. A barbershop called  
*The Barbershop*  
came to our neighborhood  
(stranger-hood?) and tucked itself  
between *Forward Dental* and an eye  
doctor. It's the quaintest,  
potentially most heartbreaking of  
the ventures riding a boom  
virtually to our door. The sign  
declares: *A Hairdresser for Men.*  
The subtitle is probably unnecessary.  
Still, some higher-up corporate  
barbers thought, "Best not tempt new  
men's ignorance of the past."  
This is the day — I'm a bit  
nervous but glad  
it's open on the Sabbath  
and a three-minute walk —  
I test it. Also the day I continue,  
with an old friend online, a debate  
over linguistic determinism  
(I'm agin it). I tell Jeff I'm finally  
listening to Earth, Wind and Fire,  
marveling, "Jesus Horatio  
Hornblower Christ,  
those guys could sing together!"

## The Beautiful 400 Restaurant

“The Duke is on the air.” I look up, don’t see but hear him pulsing from the northeast corner of the room, the Harlem of my little nation, drumming rhythm’s hope to all squares. There is, in these acetate discs, a paper-thin clarity and the risk that only the necessary has been preserved. It’s easy on the nerves like the depressing greenish rainy-ness that turns today’s sky to turf. I leave spongy prints, plodding across the clouds, trying to catch the orchestra up, wishing I could compress my hits and flops to something like this acetate 40s sound. Without, of course, Billy Strayhorn hiding his light and love under Duke’s bushel; or Duke’s worry for his players’ welfare, muting trumpets and trombones in the South. My Vietnamese boyfriend walks into the room and grins, amused at my “ancient music.” He’s been reading the news online again: *Scotland Likely to Leave U.K.* “England is strange,” he says. “In most countries the North dominates the South.” And, “That’s catchy. What is it.” “Take the A Train,” I sing. “A measure of ancient advice.”

## After Death

It's 2020. The species has decided to settle on one scheme. I'm going to vote for the Shirley MacLaine. I don't see myself as a Buddha or a bug, an overheated S or M, a Stepford angel in Jehovah's domain, a drop of nothing in the infinite bucket. I see Mike and me at each other's side. Again and again, life after life incarnating the male couple, we locate hovel or mansion door and unlock it. For the next and the next and the next go-round, already I have something in mind. First with lithe limbs and a drummer for a heart — jazz, ballet, hiphop, tap — a Lord of the Dance! The body of a man-boy who for a time absorbs and emits a joy that demands a steep price. Then, if not a winner, at least a finisher in the Tour de France; who in the off season thinks nothing of stepping from a plane and riding the air down, down through ecstasy to the shock of landing; who hang glides, paraglides, and sits at the heart of human-powered aircraft. Next, a tool-man for whom the songs of saws and drills thrills higher and deeper than any Mormon choir; a pair of hands, the holes in which seeds that grow tools are trustingly planted; an eye that sees the structure of all that's constructed and the path to its construction (seemingly without teaching); that accepts gashes and scars, loss of

finger or hand, no matter the  
caution and command of his  
implements. Merry hae I been at  
my father's building elbow. Merry  
in fierce debate with the lover of  
my last decades. Merrily hae we  
taken turns teaching Pythagoras and  
Robbie Burns. Merriness has  
exempted us from sin and merry  
and exempted we will be again.

## **B Side**

His first job wrapped him  
loosely in brown polyester  
Ponderosa slacks —  
humiliated, exhausted,  
elevated him — coated his  
skin with the smell of  
sirloin — squandered his  
defenses before driving him  
home in a Pinto to fight  
with a mom who wanted  
to have him cured “like a  
goddamn ham!” Fights  
brought him to unclean,  
un-cleansing tears. Maybe  
her too. He never said and  
maybe never knew. The  
waitress he married tied  
him up as dispassionately  
as a chemistry teacher  
locks a bike in a rack.  
She knew he liked guys.  
Hearing him whimper for  
it, helping him get it was  
how she proved her love  
and how she shut him up.  
His second job was  
midnight janitor at the  
local high school. His  
wife went in most nights  
to mop and keep him  
awake. They called once  
at three in the morning,  
broadcast his and my  
phone sex on loud speaker.  
For twenty minutes she  
waded the wet floors past  
lockers flapping their doors,  
eight hundred hawks too  
heavy to fly — past ghostly



trophy cases, enormous  
grainy black and white  
forgotten idols — past the juke-  
box the principal opened  
one lunchtime to stop the  
flip-side of “Starting Over” —  
Yoko howling, “Motto,  
motto!” back when there was  
always more.

## Call, Text, Ad

Say it's your fault one more time and  
I'll pull the right side of my hair out.  
Say blame's not in your vocabulary  
and I'll pull out the left side. I'll look

like my brother, bald as a bug. With  
two great fist-tugs I'll undo the head-  
start he got in high school. The text  
is about dating. Mom's like the Dad

in the movie where Russel Crowe  
kisses a lad in a red flannel shirt, each  
glad with a Fosters bottle rising from  
his thigh. I say I've put feelers out,

confident she'll never see the ad.  
*Looking for an Aussie sleeping curled  
up like the belt in my underwear  
drawer. Who's fluent in exhaustion*

*and pretends absent-mindedness so I  
won't feel alone. Who, obsessed with  
posture, trains himself to walk with  
a library balanced on his head. Who*

*aggressively has no tale to tell, has  
never made a collage, not even a  
ransom note. Who takes photos of air  
but never develops them. Who can*

*imagine how this ad will end and  
longs for one helpful shove. Who  
compulsively invents old-fashioned  
gestures and foretells mutations*

*resting on the Atlantic floor. He sings  
of them till I sleep too. I wake to him  
whispering, "Even organisms that  
live without feeding would feed on you."*

## December Song 1

He will take me home. Only  
then will I feel lost and pray  
to return to the coast where

every open window is a  
temptation to flirt with every  
passing beach bum, particle

of air, sand, dirt, scum. Only  
then will he say my name with  
something like recognition.

## December Song 2

Now that I have you here in my  
clutches, in a poem that doesn't

exist yet, climbing like Spiderman  
on its scaffolding, hanging on its

crutches, hanging from armpits  
the sight of which would leave

me armpit-blind as the Himalayas  
leave insufficiently prepared

explorers blind, I  
decide what you see.

## December Song 3

If I were your dash-cam  
here are the ways I'd betray  
you. Here are the lies I'd

tell to protect you. Here  
are the flashes of light I'd  
use to create the impression

of a miracle unfolding ten  
feet in front of you. Here's  
my false incontrovertible

evidence of the devastation  
the miracle would visit on  
passersby, cops and EMTs.

## Early November Snow

My lower back hurts —  
not enough to keep me

from work, my students,  
my *raison de joie*. The

snow is lovely and  
modest — the way

Victorian men supposedly  
wanted their wives —

the way I like to imagine  
Jesus before he lost

touch with reality and  
whitened so many lives.

Look! It's Blake  
astride a flake!

## Envelope

The envelope is in my hand, light as a birthmark. I'm stalling, looking through the panes of the sliding glass door one at a time, holding my breath for I can't explain this talent for focus I didn't have when I went to bed. Backlighting

makes the buds on the trees look like tumors. On a low branch a blond twink impersonates the bashful girl from the famous Coppertone ad. Instead of bikini bottoms the pup tugs sweatpants' elastic band revealing no tan-line.

On the thinnest twigs a weightlifter squats and grips a bar bearing 150 pounds on each end. Appalled by this cheesy surrealism, I look at the envelope in my hand. No addresses, an illegible postmark. On the stamp a capped

sailor in blue dips and kisses a sailor in white, wrapping the Seaman Recruit in a new patriotism. The birthmark starts to itch and birdsong, a virus of good cheer, infects the air. The white sailor's cap falls daintily to the street.

## About the Dirty-Shirt Boy and the Orange Balloon

He's just another dirty-shirt boy, carameled-skinned, barefoot, and his basketball shorts say: 04 Knicks.

It's hot. He's motionless on the cobblestones with a bull ring behind him. He's not a toreador,

will never sport a red cape, though he has chased baby bulls down a narrow street. But what's he doing

now? Standing, hands hanging open-palmed, head back, eyes gazing upwards. His cleft lip has been

fixed by a summer surgeon who made him beautiful, though he might not know it. Up and up he looks

at a stringless, out-of-reach balloon bobbing along above his head. There's writing on the balloon.

It says: *¡Intenta salvar vidas*. Try to save lives! Which life? His? He's not moving, but if he chooses, if he jumps,

he may—he's Knicks 04 and can smile now—even catch that sky-high, stringless orange balloon.

## HOW TO KILL A DOCTOR

Listen. . . I was a girl, too small, the doctor  
told me, for a speculum.

He had to use his fingers, he said. His nurse  
wasn't there.

Nor my mother, so I pretended to be a sleepy  
caterpillar in a chrysalis,

or I was Alice grown small as the White Rabbit  
who stood between my legs

checking his watch. Alice, of course, didn't have  
inky hair and eyes

like black coals. Alice did not do gymnastics.  
She was able to throw

cards in the air, listen to a white knight's song,  
but the doctor

was not a card or a knight. He did not see  
me becoming.

He didn't know the butterfly effect  
and how it

could kill a doctor with  
words

## LOSING PARADISE

Into the shadowed smoke, white air, white ash, a brick chimney is all that remains. My son and I are walking hand in hand toward tomorrow, toward days of fragments of past ones. Was this our house? Is this where the closet wall measured our heights? Did Santa come here and the Tooth Fairy? Where is the apple tree you fell from? Your baseball cards? What happened to your helmet and pads, the chessmen, the jigsaw map of California hung on the kitchen wall? When? How? We don't talk about your mother, son, or think about her car, the flames. Instead we must walk along the hall and through each of the rooms at night in our dreams—searching always for a doorway, that offers, not just memories, but some small consolation.



## TO HEAR THE FAINT SOUND OF OARS

Sometimes a dory on a day in Maine  
or on a rowboat in northern Minnesota—

measured lunges against dark water.  
Oar-gurgle but also complaint, creak

and whine of oarlocks jars me back  
to what it meant to be seventeen,

anchored midday by the sandbar  
of a deep lake, fishing line unreeling,

as I read *Anna Karenina* and wanted  
to become Kitty. Now far beyond Kitty

or Anna, living my own odd unreality,  
paddling a kayak, loving its silence,

I find at the top of a tall Norway pine  
a bald eagle, huge and female.

Stowing my paddle, I gaze upwards.  
No slash of oars or oarlock screech

and without book or pole, I float,  
as she watches me while I watch her.

# An Elegy for Esmeralda

Ken Wetherington

She had the kind of beauty that made men stupid. Before the revolution, I saw her often in smoky cafés and dives, always in the company of a poet or singer. One by one, bards offered adoration in romantic odes, without restraint or embarrassment, only to find, in time, her affection deserting each of them for another of their peers. Deep, despairing laments followed, proclaiming the loss of innocence—sometimes hers, sometimes theirs.

Her white blouses, flowing multicolored skirts, and dark eyes gave a Roma vibe, though her ethnicity was uncertain. Whatever her origin, all men hoped to be the next object of her affection for as long as she chose.

I first noticed her one evening at The Jack of Diamonds as she sat with Luther Del Ray at a table near the stage where Manu Burman strummed his guitar and sang lyrically of protest and rebellion.

I leaned over the bar and motioned to Sullivan. “What’s her name?”

The burly bartender bent forward with a groan. “She’ll break your heart, kid. Stay away from her.” Later, I discovered Sullivan harbored desires for her, too. Perhaps I should have guessed.

“Come on, man. Who is she?”

He gave a sigh and a shrug. “She goes by Esmeralda.” He straightened up. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

“Is she a prostitute?”

“Don’t be crude, kid.” With that, he turned away.

I barely heard Manu’s vocals or the clink of glasses or the drunken chatter around me as the evening slipped by. I watched as she laughed and traced the contours of Luther’s ear with long, delicate fingers. After midnight, they called it an evening, departing arm in arm.

Manu played another set despite the thinning crowd. When Sullivan announced last call, I made my way backstage. Manu sat wearily on a worn-out sofa, running a hand through his curly black hair. He peered at me over wire-rimmed glasses.

I flashed a thumbs-up. “Great set, man.”

“Thanks, Dimitri. Aren’t you up late for a school night?”

“No classes ‘til noon tomorrow. Hey, did you know that lady by the stage?”

“With Luther? Sure. Esmeralda. Be careful what you wish for, kid.”

“What I wish for is that everyone would stop calling me kid. I’m of legal age.”

Manu laughed. “Dimitri, then. She’s out of your league. Goes for artist types. Come on, let’s see if we can wheedle a couple of beers out of Sullivan before he locks up.”

\*\*\*

I haunted The Jack of Diamonds nightly, hoping to see her again. My studies suffered. It must have been a week or so later when she resurfaced, this time with Santiago Alvarez. His writings, like Luther's, had angered the authorities. Romans à clef dotted his thinly veiled fiction.

Getting close enough to even speak to her seemed impossible. Besides, Santiago's wrath and penchant for violence were well known. When they rose to leave, I headed for the door and held it open as they passed. Her eyes met mine, and she smiled. Santiago gave her arm a tug and grunted. Out on the sidewalk, they went one way and I the other. That night, I dreamed of her smile.

It became frustrating to worship her from across a smoky barroom. For my sanity, I ceased going to the café and refocused on my studies. Weeks later when I emerged from my scholarly cocoon, I found soldiers patrolling the streets in unusually high numbers. Many cafés had been closed, yet The Jack of Diamonds remained open. As a university student, my papers allowed me to pass the newly established checkpoints. Others weren't so lucky. I witnessed countless confrontations ending in arrests. With the closure of competing venues, The Jack of Diamonds prospered, though most of the regulars no longer performed.

On a crowded night, I saw her once again with Luther Del Ray. I had been there only a short while when Santiago came in, reeling like a drunkard, and charged up to their table. Angry words were exchanged, then punches. Patrons scattered. Sullivan hollered and waded through the crowd, a wooden club in his hand. I scrambled after him. In the chaos, I grabbed Esmeralda by the hand and led her backstage and through the rear door.

In the alley, I asked, "Where can I take you?"

Out of the darkness came the answer I wished for. "Your place," she whispered.

We didn't speak until arriving at my tiny, single room on the second floor of a shabby apartment building. She collapsed on the bed, the only other furniture being a small wooden chair and desk. I dragged the chair over to the bed and waited, unable to bring myself to provide a comforting touch.

She slowly raised her head. Redness colored her eyes. In spite of her disheveled appearance, she was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen.

"He wanted to possess me." Her words were barely audible.

"Santiago?"

"Yes ... Luther, too. May I stay here tonight?"

I nodded. "You can have the bed."

With a glance she surveyed my sparse lodgings. "We'll share."

"It's small."

"It'll be okay. You're Dimitri, aren't you?"

I had no idea she knew my name. Was it an indication of some feeling for me? How could that be? "Yes. Who told you?"

"Your friend, Manu."

I wondered what else he told her. Surely she realized I desired her. "I have a pair of pajamas you can use."

She changed in the bathroom down the hall. I stripped to my underwear, and we got into bed together. Still not daring to touch her, I stared at the ceiling, illuminated by an occasional flash of headlights through the window. She moved closer, nestled her head upon my shoulder, and slept. I, however, lay awake, excited by the warmth of her body, yet lulled by her soft, rhythmic breathing. Sleep seemed hopeless, but sometime before dawn, it came.

I awoke to a sunbeam streaming across the bed. In the morning light, her beauty had increased, a phenomenon I thought impossible.

With our faces inches apart, she spoke. "You can't let anybody know I've been here. Santiago wouldn't understand. Luther, too. It's for your safety." For several minutes, a peaceful silence lingered before she whispered, "I've got to go now."

\*\*\*

Then the hammer came down. Most of my acquaintances fled or sought refuge with the resistance. My classmates and I were safe for the moment, but for how long? The perpetual operation of The Jack of Diamonds surprised me. Perhaps a shift in the slate of performers allowed it to continue. Gone were the radical anthems of social change, supplanted by paeans to the glory of the state or simple, innocuous love songs. The crowds morphed, too, of course. Sullivan remained the only constant.

Weeks passed. Word reached me that Manu had eluded capture and had found refuge in the underground. I searched for him, but his trail had grown cold.

Repression stretched its icy fingers into the university. History was changed and science altered. Free discourse vanished from classrooms. Some students withdrew and slipped across the border. Escape was possible for those who had friends in high places ... or money. I had neither.

\*\*\*

Winter came and with it a dusting of snow. I ceased attending class, jeopardizing my student status. My room and its inadequate heating became a chilly sanctuary. When the temperature dropped to an unbearable level, I ventured out to the cafés for warmth.

On a bitterly cold evening, I trundled over to The Jack of Diamonds and sat at the bar while a young man sang strident songs of racial purity. Sullivan tapped my shoulder and nodded toward a table in a far corner. I saw only an officer and his woman. Was Sullivan warning me of danger? I focused again, and something in the way the woman tilted her head made a connection. It was her.

I took my beer to a nearby table. She wore a finely tailored suit and a fashionable hat, which obscured her wild, dark hair. I tried not to stare. Was she aware of my presence? I couldn't tell. When the officer called for the check, I did likewise. At the door, I held it for them as I had before. When our eyes met, I saw sadness. She quickly

averted her gaze, and I turned toward home without even the thought of looking back.

\*\*\*

Flight became my only concern. I knew a former student who successfully managed clandestine departures. Lacking financial resources, I relied on the comradery of our shared university connection. He remembered me and consented to make the necessary arrangements. A date was set. The instructions were simple. Pack a single bag and meet with a dozen others at a warehouse near the railroad tracks at midnight.

I stayed in bed late on the appointed morning, attempting to conserve energy for what would be an arduous trek. An unexpected knock on the door startled me. I almost didn't answer it, fearing the authorities had discovered my intentions.

She stumbled into my room, grabbing my arm for support. "Dimitri, help me." Fear and desperation permeated her words, but a military-style uniform raised suspicions. Was she a pawn in a ruse to entrap me? If so, someone knew my weakness.

"I have to get out," she pleaded.

My heart argued for her sincerity. With no time for deliberation, I gave in and revealed my plan. She agreed to meet at the warehouse. Had I betrayed the other refugees? Would soldiers be waiting? The anxious hours crawled by. I tried unsuccessfully to sleep. Mercifully, the hour finally approached midnight.

I grabbed my backpack, put on my warmest coat, and walked briskly to the warehouse where I found others waiting in the dimly lit interior. A big man with a moustache who called himself "Bear" organized us in groups of three. How could I explain Esmeralda's imminent arrival to Bear? None of the scenarios in my head sounded feasible. I hoped her beauty would help her one more time.

An explosion down the street alarmed us. Nervous glances circulated. Distant gunshots broke out. After a few minutes, another round of gunfire erupted, closer this time. Perhaps she had sold me out in exchange for her own safety.

"Now," whispered Bear. "Group one, go." They scurried across the tracks and climbed into the specified boxcar. Group two followed. I went with the third. When all were inside, the doors clanged shut. I felt trapped, rather than safe. A measure of relief came when the train began to roll.

\*\*\*

Miserable conditions pervaded the refugee camp. Proper sanitation didn't exist, and food was severely rationed. The whole place stank. The organizers placed me in a tent with a family of six, who chattered in a language I didn't understand, and an old woman who never spoke, but cackled constantly. Despite the frigid temperature, I spent little time in their company. As bad as my situation was, many were worse off. The sick and dying produced a steady cacophony of despair.

I lost track of time, but months must have passed. Then one day as a gray rain fell,

I heard my name called. It took a moment to pinpoint the speaker among the dirty, ragged multitude.

“Manu? My god ...”

We embraced and sobbed together for long minutes. The cold dissipated, replaced by the warmth of his body. I struggled to speak through the tears. Finally, with difficulty, we were able to relate the details of our escapes. Then the talk turned to those we knew. Some had perished. Others somehow got out. The fate of a few remained a mystery.

“What about Esmeralda?” I asked. “She was supposed to come with me, but she didn’t show. Perhaps she changed her mind ... or someone prevented her departure.”

Manu took a deep breath and slowly exhaled. “I heard she died. Rumors say a jealous lover shot her. Santiago, maybe. Others swear the authorities executed her for consorting with him or some other dissident.” After a pause, he continued. “We were lovers once.”

“I didn’t know. You loved her?”

“I guess. It’s hard to know that sort of thing now. You?”

“I thought I loved her, but I never really knew her. I guess you could say I loved her from afar. That’s not really love, is it?”

“It’s a kind of love. Better than not loving. I wrote a song for her. More of an elegy, actually.”

“Sing it for me.”

\*\*\*

In time, Manu and I received our releases from the camp. I resumed my education as an expatriate in a foreign land and became a teacher. Manu carved out a career as a singer, deftly balancing popular material with songs of social consciousness. I attended his concerts when I could but never again heard him sing *Elegy for Esmeralda*.

## Imperfect

the wind has stopped. I look to Paz for guidance.  
I try to remember happiness. the nest intact.  
I listen to the silence. I remember Barragán.  
I sweep the sidewalk. the books are many.  
the giraffe is in the oak.

## **I Focus on a Leaf**

we are all equal within

my socks have holes  
I sew them by hand

we are all abstract visions

the pen & page  
a blue cornflower

bamboo is self-referential

the old dog wanders  
in the garden

I have faith in rain



## Conjuring Light

possibilities like music written across waves  
the sea endless portals & oaks

red teakettle white rose ship bookends  
five bears in the wilderness

ourselves: dreams perennials roads

## **Monologues & Acorns**

the dog paces continuously  
I can't sleep

draw the tree in the wave

self-portrait happenstance  
I board the train

## Salvaged

trashcans manuscripts collages pincushions clothespins

a pink geranium has survived the elements & arises from a blue patterned bowl

Creeley's *Just In Time* Steven's *Necessary Angel* Vicuña's *Precario/Precarious*

fields of sunflowers fields of lavender fields of stars

## Cappadocia

There is always more rock  
and somewhere, probably,  
paths. The hills are half-covered  
by scrub, the other  
half not. At their foot  
weeds grow short  
and close, then appear  
to give up. The mountains along  
each horizon aspire  
to grandeur, achieve  
haze.

    In the caves,  
the eyes of saints fading  
to stone were not only  
gouged, says the guide, by invading  
Moslems, but earlier,  
doctrinally. Scraps  
of purple-trimmed robes, grey flesh.

Below, some thousands  
of people lived  
some thousands of years on multiple  
levels. If soldiers  
penetrated, they rolled  
large circular stones  
across entrances. Had  
escape routes, and the smoke  
of cooking fires and the occasional  
oil lamp rose  
from secret places in the hills.

## Sortie

During the pandemic (which phrasing implies it will end, and an historical sense), two youths in flipflops bearing a box of free blue masks approach pedestrians and eaters at a mall. The youths, though also white, are perceived as a threat: they're young. And selling something – no, worse. “Free of charge! Would you wear one?” A fiftyish blonde asks if they've heard of God. They attempt a definition. “I've got God. I know where I'm going.” One lad seeks clarity, but the heretofore quiescent husband rumbles. – “No” from a walker. “No” from another. There may be a “No, thanks.” – “Fuck off.” – “I won't be muzzled like a dog!” (No, *he* was elsewhere.) – A terse, disdainful discourse about the hoax engineered by Soros and the Deep State. “Are you Antifa?” – “Just get the fuck away”: a walker, ten feet distant. “They're free – “ “Do you want a piece of me?” comes the challenge (though oddly the last word is “this,” with a gesture towards the belly-chest as if it were a muscle-sheet) while he continues to edge away.

Departing with their box, they may reflect that soon all retail will resemble, as much already does, this mall: triumphant chains pretending to be small boutiques (though without Orange County's pleasant ocean lapping the concrete). They are recorded saying one should not wear flipflops where there's a risk of fighting the unmasked.

## The Lost European

Disconsolately roaming  
my shelves – which, I once proudly  
knew but didn't say, would fill  
a decent literary bookstore,  
and now replace it – I'm looking for  
a certain poet, name lost.  
Not American. Reinhard Niemand.  
Paul Personne. Irmgard Ingen.  
One from *les trente glorieuses*.  
Who still hears the late rude knock  
or, more subtly cruel, its suspension  
by order of some grander ideology.  
Who remains deep red in the old sense  
to the end, which like betrayal  
is always already.  
Whose metaphors if not dreams are full  
of nomads who, except for thirst,  
would dream of burning cities.  
Plazas where someone appears,  
the view then blocked by cars for years.  
Heather and juniper that won't survive  
tanks heading west, then east,  
nor bloom in another world, but stain  
the page. And over all, progenitive,  
small as the sky, das  
Nichts ... He or she can't  
be Brit, my poet.  
No country walks. Yet I wonder who  
composed that sign lately placed in London:  
No American allowed without an adult.

## Voice from the Terrace

“At a certain moment, language will collapse into math. And we with our Campari and lime, our long-forgotten, not-even-subject-to-nostalgia BAs in English will feel as if we’d had a stroke. We’ll pull out our phones, checkbooks, try to divide, to remember quadratic equations. But no one will be prepared. Silicon Valley honchos will know the Singularity has come, but not as they’d meant; they’ll see themselves wholly the way they had in part, as relatively minor nodes of debt. The very wealthiest men will become something like stars. But where can a star go, what can it *do*, actually? The hardest hit will be pure kleptocrats, because the world of math is transparent – *a priori*, remember; they’ll feel completely exposed. So-called white- and blue-collar life and perceptions won’t change much. The best-off will be those people who make \$200 a year; they’ll be absorbed and strengthened by the Spirit of the Ancestors, which we’ll see as a giant elephant.”

## Lucky Jim

The last humanities graduate  
(Political Science) finds a job  
at the last community college  
in one of those states that have  
few amenities, little sanity,  
but great political clout.  
The bus smells and functions  
worse as it proceeds  
into the heartland. Herd animals,  
mutant crops. Near the town,  
one of those gated, guarded  
demesnes where the real people live;  
visible beyond its wall, the only green.  
Then homes, bars, churches,  
and, loitering by them, patriarchs,  
proclaimed as such by belly, beard, and gun,  
displaying the camaraderie of those  
who each believe they will someday reign alone.  
They will come for me, thinks Jim –  
as soon as I open my mouth  
in class – in whatever dreadful room  
I find above a painkiller dispensary.  
Into what ether, then,  
shall my crushing student debt  
ascend (his thoughts continue elegiacally)?  
At the school, most of his colleagues  
reflect the native earth.  
One or two, stereotypically,  
inveigh against stereotypes, advise  
listening, and are deafened by their virtue.  
One burnout takes Jim under  
his flightless wing and outlines the various  
cohorts: those consecrate  
to hatred, despair, or football. Facing them  
in class, Jim nods, then turns  
and writes with breaking chalk  
on the board: *It is the State  
that generates the individual,  
not the reverse. Discuss.*



## To Be Preserved

For a long time it's unclear –  
it may still be unclear – whether the garden  
was meant to go to seed or whether  
the wrack is accidental. The former  
seems unlikely. But moss  
and fungus eating small neoclassical  
gods looks more fitting  
than if, say, a Lipschitz or Henry Moore  
were being interred. The fountains trees  
and shrubs are deconstructing insist  
they were fountains. The smell  
of stagnant water lurking among weeds  
(are pipes still flowing?) backs them up.  
And the birds, a loud and astonishing  
variety, feel at home either way.

No vine or fox has yet invaded  
the house, whose inhabitants  
are nervous shifting lozenges  
of light from windows. Titles in the walls  
of books can almost be read; some of the paintings  
can almost be seen,  
in novel registers, trying for alien moods.  
Are secrets in credenzas, sculpted hutches,  
secret if no one cares? But anyone would care,  
however briefly, for the papers  
left on the desk – documents have  
that effect. So does the laptop  
in a drawer. Like everything else  
in that room, in the house,  
it awaits only power.

On the laptop, images  
of a manuscript. Quite a large file.  
The bearers, says the writer, have returned  
to their villages. The headman came to him and said,  
perhaps with contempt, perhaps residual loyalty,  
that it wasn't the wages or danger;  
it had to do with freedom and manhood.  
Now everything is strewn across the camp.

He (the explorer) went to tell the scientists,  
whom he found crying. Not  
from fear, but because they were finding  
countless new species, and each, as soon as designated,  
died. – The text contains subtle  
anachronisms. Pages are torn, yellowed, foxed, but  
all that can be faked.

The slabs of light have merged and blurred.  
Somewhere in the walls  
a mouse makes a statement, or perhaps it's  
the walls. Power, again,  
is all that's needed, but it won't be forthcoming,  
except for that dying in my flashlight  
to lead me out, not knowing where to go.

## The Red Flag

*i. m. Yannis Ritsos*

If you plural ever return  
from the dump, you'll scare us  
at first (zombie apocalypse!), but soon  
we'll sense your lidless eyes  
aren't staring at us or anything  
we see; and that if you're hungry,  
it isn't for us; and you'll pass  
through us, walls, cars, malls, your  
flags rotted shreds the color  
dried blood takes when it's very old  
(or which any color takes,  
exposed to cultural repurposing),  
banners illegible. Our phones will record  
a blur like an erasure, a  
sigh, though you're obviously marching,  
tonguelessly singing, disarticulated  
fists clenched. Rubes with guns  
will shoot at you, bullets passing  
through you to hit other rubes. Elites,  
intellectuals will try not to  
look in the direction you endlessly  
march. You'll become  
a meme, a late-night laugh, more  
clutter.

## Your Own Way

In *The Fly*, Jeff Goldblum,  
turning into a fly, sits  
in a small sterile scientific room  
in low blue light. Which is kind, you suppose,  
to his eyes, already huge and multifaceted.  
Graphics and makeup have done well  
in this mostly pre-computer film; he looks  
vile. Soon he'll break out, and  
(in one of those scenes you wish,  
like so many in life and art, you could  
unsee) maim, half-dissolve  
with some sort of digestive acid,  
two researchers. But for now  
the human or ethical part still  
prevails; he seems reflective.  
(Is connected to many monitors,  
which buzz.) His wife or girlfriend  
comes a last time to see him.  
Behind thick glass or lucite, her voice  
is stricken: "You're getting worse."  
And he, in inhuman tones: "I'm getting *better*."  
Which, if you're an artist,  
is a good slogan to remember  
when no one but you likes your work.

## The Test Site

There are three women. One is armored  
in her expertise, which includes preventative  
measures against men who would steal credit.  
The second is exhausted from still seeking  
collegiality and remembering  
to smile. Both are scientists.  
The scientists wear labcoats. The suits  
are mostly corporate. They also wear  
the molar-grinding smile that,  
if today is successful, will widen in triumph  
transmitted to a more important  
and better suit who, for risk of failure,  
isn't here. The worst suit,  
though better than it once was,  
is government. An academic  
labcoat explains to him what's happening, waiting  
for the moment his look shows  
he feels he looks stupid. Another labcoat,  
a Dutchman only tangentially here,  
imagines a long moment  
with a long drink in the silent hazardous  
desert outside. A tech, that rare being  
secure in her job, counts pleasantly down.  
A grinding squealing noise,  
different from that of the atom blasts  
no one remembers, fills  
the bunker, which rocks. The screens  
turn mottled, hissy. Observing them,  
the Dutchman somehow recalls  
Frans Hals's tip on how to spot  
the reigning swine in a group portrait.

## Story of the Eye

The suspect (innocent, by the way)  
knows where  
the other cameras are,  
new, small, subtly hidden  
while the one in a ceiling corner  
whirs. He feels a bond with them:  
neither curling spiderlike  
around his core nor stupidly  
affecting ease, he sits erect.  
The unspecifiable  
grime of the walls becomes his frame,  
and a frame is his theme as,  
curtailing his ever-suspect  
civilized tone, he responds  
to inquiries about his works and days.  
His only random thought  
is not what the detectives might expect:  
he imagines night  
outdoors among other automated  
systems, streetlights, stoplights,  
cameras. The detective across  
from him and the one to his right,  
seated for hours, now get up,  
destroying the composition. One  
or another blocks views;  
they may even, he considers, stop them,  
slam his head on the table, return him  
to what Ginsberg correctly called  
the total animal soup  
of time.

## Orthopnea

My mother calls, she's out of breath,  
she cannot breathe freely.  
I say call the ambulance, pull the cord  
if you can't breathe freely.

We're at the ER overnight, Xray and CAT scan—  
there are metastases all over, even I can see freely

I take her home, she calls again  
my waiting room's full  
patients are waiting  
I cannot leave freely

but she demands it; she's angry at God—  
that he makes such pain, she can't believe freely

I'm angry too. I hurry through snow  
and ice. I'm not allowed to grieve freely

honey, baby girl  
the day will come  
you'll know when it's likely—  
when you can't breathe freely.

## Paisley

1.

It started with a memory of those Indian bedspreads we all had, the rich earthtone colors, the mandala-like patterns, no two alike, bought in the shops with patchouli oil soaking the air, funny little pipes and day of the dead skeletons hanging from the ceilings. We'd hang them in our dorm rooms or rented tenements, covering the peeling paint ceilings and bouncing on our waterbeds with hints of sitar in the background as we read the lord of the rings and hoped to heal our acid addled brains.

2.

Then Parvaneh, who would be Persian, never Iranian, who, graying hair clipped short, unglamorous but certain of herself, Parvaneh, who told us nothing until she'd told us her name meant Butterfly in Farsi (so many beautiful words for the cousin of the moth around the world,) said it was bouth, and I heard a flame, a seed, a leaf, and all young Persian men, not just the Zoroastrians, leap over a flame on New Year's Eve.

3.

You are the master of maps, you know where Azerbaijan fits in the jigsaw of Asian Europe, you know who lives there, what peoples, where the most beautiful valleys are, and of course you know the rivers, know how the shape might have travelled, camelback? horseback? Silk road? Now you have turned on Hendrix and it is just right, the little dancers March then sound when the guitars ring into static, not Hendrix, Cream, and the drumsticks send us over the map past Caucasus to Asia, Sunshine of your love to India, to the mango, to the shape of the mango seed, and I suppose the color of the ripe fruit, the color it might stain my hands, the color my skin might ripen to—

4.

Madras, another name of a place that was a cloth that was a kind of clothing that was a kind of cloth and clothing for a time a place in the year. I had madras shorts, they were, I believe a kind of nearly neon plaid that bled into itself and we are in the Balkans, bought through the East India Company as a protective charm to ward off evil demons, perhaps all those eyes, those almond shaped curves, and there were evil spirits enough, Ottoman Turks, all those scary men on horseback, and Serbian amazons, swords curving



overhead, mothers wrapped in silk and Kashmir wool, hidden faces,  
but the colors remembered, patterns.

5.

Carried for mass production to Marseilles, another kind of victory,  
as paisley was forbidden in France by royal decree from 1686 to 1759. Think of it!  
Cloth important enough to be barred by the King! British soldiers  
returning from the colonies bring home Kashmir shawls  
to be copied on handlooms, two colors, and then by weavers  
in the town of—say it—Paisley, in Renfrewshire, in Scotland,  
on Jacquard looms in five colors, now the Paisley pattern, by 1860, Paisley  
could produce shawls with fifteen colors, beautiful, but still  
only a quarter of the colors in the paisleys from Kashmir.

6.

Now, let us visit Scotland's Paisley Museum and Art Gallery: paisley  
patterns are printed, rather than woven, onto other textiles.  
Printed rather than woven paisley is affordable to all! To the masses!  
To the slave on the plantation, to the cowboy riding the west,  
to the hippies in the sixties,  
to me!

## **Pennsylvania Extreme Lottery**

Michael's Diner is open, on the other side of City Line Ave: that's Cheltenham, they haven't shut down their restaurants yet. They have in Philadelphia. The test site's at a Rite Aid, not far from the food bank at the Remnant Church of God and the silent Church of the Broken Hearted. Only a few cars have lined up. It's Sunday morning, even the churches are still empty. At 9:03 a guard whose uniform reads 'Maximum Security Firm' begins to remove the cones: only one car at a time, only one occupant, the driver, no passenger. An old brown van waits behind me, and a dulled green, once Emerald, sedan, chrome strips peeling. I recognize it from the parking lot at Four Freedoms High Rise Senior subsidized Housing. The lines are longer at Dunkin' Donuts. A woman weaves through our few cars clutching a hand-made light-up rugged cross: combat fatigues, hair piled on her head in a red spray painted bun, face mask with sequins spelling out LOVE. Blessing us blessing us blessing us. There are only two guys working, in t-shirts and cargo shorts. No masks. No face shields. No PPE. For some reason there's a child's blue plastic slide in the tent next to anonymous boxes. I roll down my window when asked. A boy passes in a red plastic basket (the kind that would hold french fries on a diner napkin) with a little metal reacher hand. It holds just of couple of items. He tells me to confirm my name and date of birth. Tear open the swab package. Unscrew the tube. Push the swab in my nostril until I feel bone. A slight resistance. Swab one nostril to a count of five. Swab the other. Ten. Snap the stick, place ends in the little bottle. Screw the cap. Pass it back. Drive on. I realize I forgot to read his t-shirt. I want to ask him about the blue slide. He is waiting on the next car. I turn back onto the street. On a billboard above a boarded up body shop a beaver holds an ice cream cone "Get the million dollar scoop." Or perhaps it's a ground hog. A gopher. Pennsylvania Extreme Lottery.

# As Far As the Eye Could See

Paul Smith

In the beginning there was the two of us, joined somehow. Maybe there was an attraction. I can't remember. It didn't work out, though, her with the mountains inside her and me with the desert. On the surface it seemed it might. She had this fortitude thing going and I had perseverance. But we were too much alike and too different. She also had this anger thing, which manifested itself frequently – earthquakes, tremors, avalanches – all things of great beauty but also of destructiveness. Where this anger came from I don't know. It was as much a part of her as the craggy peaks and the antisynclines of her foundation. I would just lay low in one of my hot dusty basins and watch her explode till her wrath passed. She never said she was sorry or made any attempt to explain. My only theory is that mountains are created out of wrath, thrust up from the same place I grew up in, vertically forced to be masters of a terrain that they were at one time in peace with. Then we would go on again, pretending nothing happened, her towering over me, looking down with her pitiful gaze.

And so we parted. Little was said. She huffed and took her cordillera of granite and stalked off. I stayed behind here in this lowland of sandstone and basalt, the sun hovering, sucking out every ounce of moisture from the low vegetation that claimed me. I was not lonely. Deserts are not meant for conflict. Deserts are a place for solitary worship. With her gone I could take a look at myself and see there was some good left over, not the beauty of a meadow or pasture, but a desolate spare acceptance of dryness and the play of purple light at sunset. Eventually that was not enough. So I sought out companionship.

First I looked to the sea. She was promising and drew me near with her brine. She surrounded us all with her waves, her depth, her bights and her currents. We intertwined briefly. Like the mountains she was strong-willed. I admired the fury of her tempests and her insatiable wanderlust. After a while she was off to the Bay of Bengal or the Celebes Sea. No apology was offered. My constancy bored her. When she had the oceans at her disposal, would anyone think she could find contentment in my airless dustbin, barely sustaining a waterhole? She came back, but one night she left again with a whisper that the North Wind had found her and the two of them were trekking to gawk at the Aurora Borealis. She was gone for good. I watched from my declivity as the sun went down. They embraced robustly and blew their way up her crevasse to where the Trade Winds took them to the ancestral home of Prince Henry the Navigator.

I was inconsolable. Not that I missed her, although I did, somewhat. But now I would have to come to grips with my environs. The desert was not just where I was, it was me. I was an arid sort. Too much moisture gave me those washerwoman wrinkles you get from scrubbing your floor. Emptiness suited me, and the glare overhead. In the day, it was the Sun. At night, when it was cool in my saline depressions, it was the stars. They started whispering to me, of someone or something that contained all of them,

pronouncing the name in a hushed, low voice. As far as I could see there were pinpoints of light, other worlds composed of igneous rock and mountain and sea, all clamoring for notice from beyond. And at daybreak, the Sun came out, suggesting to me there was something bigger than him that held him and everything else above me. I wondered what it might be. My emptiness turned to curiosity, my barren sandstone became inquisitive under the Sun's overbearing heat and the glimmer of the faraway starlight. Finally one night the voice of that someone or something spoke.

'Nix,' She said.

I didn't know what to make of that. I assumed, though, from the nature of the word, which meant 'no,' or some kind of refusal, that this presence above me must be female. She was saying 'no' to me or what I wanted, or maybe it was a universal 'no,' a 'no' so powerful it transcended the mountains, the desert, the seas and everything else. It was comforting, like the end of all my longing. She said nothing more. Her single word coalesced in my mind, settled into the cavities of my endless dunes and wastelands. When day came, Her Sun repeated Her word, and at night the stars did it again till all of me was filled with nothing. After a while I got it. She was the Universe, more or less, and she was saying that as much as we try to fill up the Universe with us, we never can. It is too big. Or maybe She was saying She was full of nothing and so were we so just get used to it. She was the vastness that was existence and only had some stars and us and our musings to entertain Her. I once wanted mountains to help fill up my emptiness. Then I wanted the sea. Neither one worked. My emptiness was too big. What she was saying was that emptiness was just as much me as the dust devils, the mesquite and the jojoba. Once I embraced it, I could embrace Her. So I reached down into my waterless scrub and took it for what it was, a home of unfulfilled desires, a longing for something, the scratching of an itch, a thirst that could never be slaked. That is how we got to know each other. In that context, our love blossomed. We spent all day and all night together celebrating our loneliness. We became so close I thought a wedding of some kind was appropriate. Never really having said anything to Her, I thought of speaking a word, maybe just one word, like She did, to show Her we were united. So one night while Her stars twinkled, and I could see She sort of went along with the whole thing, I spoke the word I came upon that would signify my understanding.

'Foursquare,' I whispered to Her.

There was a brief pause in the cosmos, a shutting down of the continuum as She digested it. Then, having looked it up or turning it over in Her mind, Her stars turned frosty and blinked like comets and all my barrenness stopped as moisture gushed out of me and I became an oasis.

## A Street Name

A street name on  
a note card, tucked in  
the leaves of my paperback  
copy of Philip Roth's novel  
*American Pastoral*, a work  
awash in a winding river  
of one man's private pain.

Re-reading the book after  
sixteen years, my heart is  
broken by page twenty-five.

Farther inside, left between  
seventy-four and seventy-five,  
I find Kahn's Creek Road. No  
house number. No city or  
postal code. No country.

A mere three words placed out  
of place in another person's story,  
forgotten by pen and hand in  
a lost and found of my own.

There are fourteen blue letters  
made with the type of cheap  
ballpoint I have not wielded  
since my weapons graduated  
to march with my ambitions.

Where was I, where did I hope  
or need to be, to write  
an address shorn of proper  
clothing? Under indictment  
now, fingering this slip of paper,  
I am held captive, pinioned, by  
the connective tissue of language.

## Other Versions

He tried so to love her,  
but she made it so hard,  
so often, that he lost count  
of the days and the ways.

Her refuge was thick socks  
and cabled woolen sweaters  
with high collars: the fabrics  
of cold comfort and self-doubt.

## Pianissimo

The softer the better.  
Beethoven in the rain,  
a dark afternoon, playing  
only to play. Only for her  
self. Playing solitaire in E-flat.

Her own best audience, she  
closes her eyes, attends  
otherwise. This audience  
sits alone and takes its  
self seriously. It audits.

Two Aprils ago, my sons  
and I gave her the piano on  
her seventieth birthday.  
Today, I have absented my  
self...another gift.

## **Temple of Artemis: Sardis, Turkey 1966**

In her temple,  
Artemis, her bones  
slightly askew, broken by  
lightning, stands far below  
the necropolis, guarding  
all the dead who have not  
had the time to find a place  
in the grains of others' memory.

Once each summer, we leave  
our tools from that year's  
excavations behind, bring instead  
our evening's food to the floor of  
her heart, wait for the moon  
to swing over the thin ribbon  
of river, the gold-bearing Pactolus,  
which once fed Croesus and his hungry  
myth to the mouth of history.

From the village a few kilometres  
downstream, the musicians come  
up the rutted road, share our meal,  
and wet our eyes with their songs.

It is proper only for the men among  
us to dance, and our colleagues,  
skirted and modest in long sleeves,  
are relieved, simply to sit in  
the night light, whispering,  
watching, drinking.

There is no lightning  
to mark the mood.  
There is no need.

## Seeing Red

Who has history on their side when they say "We want our country back" -- rednecks, redskins, whitebreads, bluebloods?

If they got stoned together and lay side by side, gazing at the night sky, each sculpting it into unique, distinct constellations, would that create a link, lead them to share a dream of earth?

Or is the breath time, the color shift of that moment, the interval of hope that starlight would take to reach us?



## States of Being: A Triptych

### 1. Being Right: Sex

Tell me if I am doing it right.  
Then, tell me if I am explaining it right.  
And even if I am doing it wrong,  
let me know if I am explaining  
the wrong way the right way.

### 2. Being Late: Marriage

Hi, I'm Patrick,  
Alice's late husband.  
No problem, no need  
for sympathy. I'm  
really okay. Compared  
to what life was like  
before, being dead  
won't be so bad.

### 3. Being Ready: Death

You could slip into it  
easily, as it seems  
to have no seams,  
or front, or back,  
a sack in feel if  
not in fact.

It could be  
someone else's  
idea of modernity.

But being of sound mind,  
and coming from the time  
of ignorance before  
the revelation or prophecy,  
you believe in the body and  
put nothing in writing,  
knowing that where there's  
a will there's a line and that  
the shroud can wrap around  
itself and shrug off all  
hands and claims.

## Disbelief: 2016

Samuel Taylor Coleridge: “the willing suspension of disbelief which is poetic faith.”  
*Biographia Literaria*, 1817.

The most exhausting part is to discover, later in life’s season, that you have exhausted even disbelief itself.

Blinded by accident is to have to re-invent the world, suddenly to be thrown on the creative mercy of touch, sound, distaste, each of the other second-class senses.

Is there comfort in knowing you are not alone? That you rage with the woman whose face and sign scream “I can’t believe I have to protest all this shit again,” to recognize with your starved imagination that protest alone cannot suffice?

The augurs and seers were blind too, but in a worse way, lacking not sight but insight. As glib after the fact as before, and unlike us, still full of belief in themselves, they sat framed on screen and page, never at a loss for words or data, so that even the recriminations soon grew tired, and everyone was back to the business of politics as if the world was usual, defeated not just by hate, but by habit.

## **My Father Was Here**

My father was here  
all these years, but he  
went away a lot to  
his other life. When  
my mother would say  
“only the boring get bored,”  
he’d lift his eyebrows to me  
and wink, feigning boredom.

## **Divinity**

Unless,  
of course,  
you know  
what you  
are doing,  
I’d rather  
not be  
whipped.

A red pen  
is fine.

To need  
correction  
is human.

To be  
well-edited  
divine.

## Clio's Questions

Whose instruments  
address the rights  
and wrongs of man,  
or the duties and  
demands of woman?

The good doctor's humane  
device for delivering death,  
the Chinese powder  
with its misguided  
missiles, or the hangman's  
measure for measure?

What dream or dread, what  
memory or regret, guided  
Louis and Madame walking  
in the Tuileries? Did the Queen's  
sweet tooth cost them their heads?

Did that other king and lady  
*en parade* in Dallas wonder if youth  
or beauty were adequate armor  
against bullets, whether Texas  
was really this gracious or tame,  
and the future that short-lived?

And what plots and forecasts,  
what revelations on the fate of  
the Great War, and the Revolution's  
quick betrayal, were penned up inside  
the exiled prophet's Mexican study?

The imagination is cruel but  
restless, its hunger unappeased  
by failed hopes and old calendars  
scented with blood and ink. Let  
the living not be silenced by  
the failed nerves of chroniclers,  
by history's echoes and the loyalties  
of witnesses with their lack of words.

## INJURIES OF HEAVEN

In my dream, you were waiting for me in a booth.  
Crinkly paper placemats, the old style ones,  
Put me in mind of road trips with my parents,  
Though we were in Manhattan near West Fourth.  
You told me how she didn't drink like I did,  
So you left, drunk yourself, your plaid shirt stained,  
Saying you were going out for cigarettes.  
You drifted across prairies in a Plymouth Duster  
Matches used up, pack long empty.  
You were always going to leave New York,  
That arcane land of vertical spaces.  
I think of her long hair in the photo I found,  
A thick blonde curtain, light eyes, skin translucent paper.  
My vagrant love, did you still want to talk to me?  
The delicates of long ago have shredded with age.

Your kinetic eyes gleam at midnight  
I put on sweats to make you red cabbage  
To go with dirty beer. I'd hardly make it to work,  
But there we'd sit, curled on the sofa, laughing  
Listening to Peter Gabriel, neighbors knocking.  
As you traced desire around my hips,  
We prayed for steady weather.

We ate sandwiches at the diner, the kind on wispy toast  
Resurrected from fried chicken, ketchup and chopped beef.  
You got one of those foreign beers you never liked.  
I ordered the coffee I had to.  
You set down your feet in gray boots,  
The veil was thin before passing into November  
Didn't know how many conscious days you had left.  
You put your hand over mine.  
You knew there'd never be a miracle.

## MICROWAVE HOROSCOPE AND PALM READING

Never the path of romance, of shooting stars.  
You will wind up alone at home, touching the numbers  
To make hot lunch in April, chicken soup with rice.  
The currency of fate must not be spent on carnivals,  
Or fried chicken with coleslaw in a silver-lined bag.

Tonight's dinner must be irradiated.  
Your palm lines show an acute sense of smell and taste,  
No COVID here. Tea leaves dance in a glass.  
You miss the silver-lined bag you used to bring home.  
It's supermarket delivery now, groceries left at the door.  
Dump out green beans from plastic.  
Add sage to pasta in a blue china plate that will turn  
In light. Tiny portions bode well for long life.

Your horoscope slings the weight of the past directly  
Into a future of sundial cooking instructions.  
You'll be solitary forever in a plague-ridden world  
Thawed chocolate mousse will be eaten by candlelight  
With a dainty spoon, one damask cloth napkin.  
Rune stones turn up blank as you finger them  
Portending not death for you but total change.  
Radiant tarot cards tell the same.  
Your sister's hand showed a short life and hospital stay.  
Did the zodiac design doom on the ones who were gasping?  
Did some vindictive psychic know and not tell all?  
Was it all configured beforehand in the astral world?  
Fate means cooking alone with the hum of the box,  
Means never hefting casseroles for visits home.  
Patterns of love are voided by cruelty of inescapable stars.  
An egg blows up, leaving streaks on the microwave window.

## TRUE CRIME

What you said at 4 AM  
A cone of light on the sheets  
Stacks of unopened envelopes  
You say, a probation officer  
That's what you've got  
Black hair curls over your ears  
In past lives, we married others  
Dreams blow through windows  
That's why you left Houston  
A thump on the door  
A naked startle  
Glasses half full of whiskey  
It's nothing, you say  
It's everything, I tell you  
A rent check forged  
A solid Brooklyn day is coming  
You will or won't go back  
I will twist the lock  
Until it explodes  
I cut out the light  
Until I can't

## UNREASONABLE WEATHER

Rain pounds the windows.  
It is not enough that rent is due,  
That people take off during the night  
Driving through mud to soup kitchens  
No work in months.  
Wind tears chunks from hillsides.  
The yard is flooded, littered with toys  
You are ill, a mother says,  
Adjusting her mask,  
And her child's.  
Can you walk to the door?  
We have to leave.  
A determined cat swims downriver,  
Past steep falls thick with sound.  
A dog cries in the back of an SUV.  
Ambulances swoosh through puddles,  
Sirens on. Inside, breath is stilted.  
The hospitals are full.  
Some house doors are left open,  
Others nailed shut.  
Trees split and fall.  
Love and loss are tidal,  
Basic as the rocks.

## WHITE NOISE

Every room is cold  
Though the radiators clank  
My thoughts streak down white walls  
Like drops of water  
Will they freeze?  
Should I be afraid?  
Time crosses the ceiling in light  
Too fast for Winter  
Too slow for Spring  
Tiny lights dot the night  
The windowpane bleeds heat  
I can tape time shut  
When my thoughts freeze



**something, i forget**

days filled with fear and  
mouth thick with frost

sunlight but  
without meaning and what if  
not everyone has the need for  
your useless bullshit?

what if violence actually is  
the only solution to violence?

listen

we have no city walls anymore and  
our biggest enemy will always  
be the government

i tell you i love you but it  
no longer matters and  
the joke of course  
is that maybe it never did

the joke of course is that  
everyone's story end with their death

we fuck like dogs and we butcher  
the weak and we option the rights to  
turn the pain of others into  
entertainment

end of september and  
nothing but grey skies for  
three straight weeks

my oldest son standing at the  
foot of the bed  
smiling  
offering insincere apologies

says the bleeding isn't that bad

says he feels sorry but  
not for me and  
this is how i know he'll survive

this is why all roads  
are empty promises

drove 3000 miles to the temple of  
st. maria and the doors had  
all been nailed shut  
the windows boarded over

showed her picture to the locals  
and they laughed and  
listen

all saviors are dead saviors

the sun comes back but  
the temperature drops

frost covers the eyes of  
forgotten lovers and it's not the  
threat of war  
    of famine  
    of disease and genocide  
but the certainty

the absolute truth

and it's thirty years too late but i  
still dream myself  
fading into your soft golden glow

## **other forms of zero**

drunk and naked for the camera,  
15 or 16 and a  
tentative smile and  
he tells her she's beautiful

he gives her another pill

                    another slap  
and all days are the same and  
none of them matter and what it  
always comes down is  
the grey and endless space  
between skeletons and ghosts

what we're left with to  
choose between  
are memories and tears

stand still long enough and  
the future is no longer an option

## **after california**

this eighteen year-old boy  
beaten to death then  
set on fire

the sound you make if  
he's your son

these walls we build to keep  
our lovers locked away

these windows  
thick with dust

the way the girl who  
lights the match  
smiles

## **you and i and the jackal king**

heard nothing but shit about  
the holy ghost, his wife, his goddamn  
kids getting stoned in the neighbor's basement

heard a song from my childhood on  
the radio, made me feel like a dead man

got this fucked-up sense of time,  
this idea that i've been 25 years old for  
the past 25 years

got this book of prayers written by  
suicides and junkies and  
it tells me what i need to know

i am not the sun

i am not hope

do you accept these truths?

mother bird in the back yard  
circling the corpses of her babies

dust-colored sky

wasn't sure if was your mind i wanted  
to poison or your body, but knew it  
was your sister i wanted to sleep with

knew the cops didn't need  
reasons to kill

spent my afternoons making up new  
freedoms for each one being  
taken away

remembered a lot of good times spent  
trying to die in the one true city of gold

## **the other truth**

honey loves her burning house says  
she loves her father's fists, says  
the dream doesn't mean anything

tell her the baby's dead, tell her  
her boyfriend's a thief,  
but all she wants to do is sing

all she wants to do is sleep

wake up smiling,  
wipe the ashes from her eyes

## the sound

the song like a river through your  
mind and then the sunlight  
and then the rain

only last for an hour or so and  
then sunlight again, hills wrapped in  
haze all sounds reduced to the  
silences that shape them

young girl found in the  
corner of an empty room too  
late to be saved

note is a blank sheet of paper

rope is tied to her parents'  
fears and to their anger

stand where the river runs dry  
just beneath her feet and  
count backwards from a thousand

sing the song until the  
words lose all meaning

until the sky  
drains of all color

feels like the hopeless end of  
autumn, even with these waves  
of heat breaking all around you

## lucidity

sort of a purplegrey pulse behind the  
eyes that comes with living in the  
age of murdered artists

a stomachful of  
someone else's blood

a punch in the throat

this man with the gun  
says he needs to get high

wants to shoot the ideas out of your head  
and this dog at his feet just  
begging to be kicked

these children's bodies dumped in  
shallow graves because not all wars are  
formally declared

not all victims are remembered

you kill what you fear and then  
you become who you hate

we laugh at the pain of others and  
hope that it makes us holy

## **the bleeding horse admits defeat**

or later in the day when i  
forget how to breathe

pure joy or crushing despair or  
some indeterminate point  
in a bottomless well of despair

a max ernst sky c. 1937 and  
the first bitter edge of autumn

the neverending pain of st maria,  
which i refuse to claim as my own

we're all fucked and forsaken  
when you get right down to it

we're all here and then we're  
all gone and what i do when  
i close my eyes  
is slow down time

when i open them again  
i'm older than i remember

i have no other way to  
explain the truth



## **true faith**

was just staring at the sky in  
the middle of the afternoon

was just laughing at your last letter,  
at the idea of suicide and  
then at the fact,  
but maybe you were too close to the sun

maybe you never understood  
the need for a punchline

that the shadow of god is as  
meaningless  
as the thing itself

## **on the creation of myths**

was digging a hole in the  
living room floor when the rain  
started to fall

was somewhere else  
when the phone rang

didn't want to know about  
my father's death,  
didn't care about kerouac's,  
and i was 23 and  
immortal

was 32 and married

knew that christ had a brother  
and that my lover had a husband,  
and i was tired of counting the  
corpses being pulled from  
the mass graves in bosnia

i was waiting to hear  
some definite news from the  
man who had been given  
the crown of cancer

was thinking  
maybe this hole was for him

## **A Warm Spot**

**James William Gardner**

My Great Uncle Iry and Aunt Delph lived in a two bedroom trailer off of One-Fifty-Eight near Yanceyville. One weekend in January I was sent to stay with them while my Momma and Daddy went to a grocer's convention in Raleigh. I was looking forward to it very much. I was five years old.

Uncle Iry was a great, big, strong man. I remember he had huge hands. He worked building steel bridges. Aunt Delph was small. She fit right underneath Uncle Iry's arm. They were both very happy, contented people and they laughed a lot. In the summer Uncle Iry had a big garden and Aunt Delph made jellies and preserves that she gave as Christmas presents. On summer evenings they would sit together on the front porch and watch the traffic go by.

"Bobby, I'm packing your boots and winter gloves. It's supposed to snow this weekend," Momma told me when we were getting ready to go. That was really exciting. The possibility of playing in the snow with Uncle Iry was going to be loads of fun. I wondered if he had a sled. Surely everybody has a sled, I supposed. Daddy came home from work and he loaded the suitcases momma had packed into the back of the old Dodge. Then, we were off.

"Now Bobby, I expect you to mind Ira and Delph," said Daddy. Of course I would mind them. Why did he even feel he had to tell me that? "Eat your food and don't complain. It ain't polite to complain. Act like you've got some manners." Uncle Iry's driveway was gravel and went up a steep hill. At the top, standing there in his bib overalls was Uncle Iry waving at me. When the car stopped I jumped out and ran up and hugged him. My arms would barely reach around his big stomach enough to hold on.

"How're you big boy?" he said laughing.

"I'm just fine. How're you Uncle Iry?"

"Feels like snow," he told Daddy.

"We done packed his winter things just in case."

"Won't y'all come in?"

"No, we'd better get going." Then Daddy took out a twenty dollar bill and pressed it in the palm of Uncle Iry's hand thinking that I wouldn't see, but I did.

No now, Bob, you don't need to do that," said Uncle Iry winking at me. He knew it made me feel bad, but one wink made it okay. He was a big winker anyway. Sometimes I'd try and wink back like it was just our secret. We stood there in the freezing cold and watched Momma and Daddy drive off. Then Uncle Iry said, "Let's us go in the house. Delphia is fixing pork chops and macaroni and cheese for supper. He held the door for me and I carried in my suitcase.

"Hey Aunt Delph!" I shouted.

"Lordy me, come let me have a hug," she said holding out her hands. I ran over and threw my arms around her. She had flour on her apron and I got some on my cheek. Uncle Iry came in and helped her stir the gravy. It smelled so good in there. I couldn't wait to eat.

Aunt Delph was my grandmother's sister. Like Grandmother, she had rosy pink cheeks and deep blue eyes. She seemed to always be wearing the same thing, one of those simple cotton dresses. On this particular evening she had a sweater over it buttoned half way up and a white apron over that. "You want lots of gravy on your pork chop, don't you Bobby?" she said as she was fixing the plates.

"Yes Ma'am," I said. Aunt Delph's gravy was the best stuff you ever tasted.

"You're like your uncle Iry, he loves gravy too. It pleased me to be like Uncle Iry in any way. She served the plates and we all sat down at the little table in the kitchen. Uncle Iry said the blessing. It was a simple blessing, the kind that Uncle Iry would say and the kind that the Lord must surely like the best. We said Amen and ate.

From where I sat at the end of the table I could see out the window. "Look y'all! It's snowing!" Sure enough, it was. It started as flurries but by the time I'd finished my first pork chop it was really coming down hard. Uncle Iry got up and turned on the outside light so we could see it better. For desert, Aunt Delph had fixed chocolate pie with swirls of meringue on top. Meringue always looked like it would taste good, but it didn't really. Grandmother and them were always putting it on pies.

After that, Uncle Iry fixed coffee. "You drink coffee, Bobby?" he asked me.

"Well Ira, you know he don't! He's way too young for coffee. It'll stunt his growth."

"I drank it when I was his age. It didn't stunt my growth." He laughed. There was no arguing that. Afterward, Aunt Delph did the dishes and we listened to the radio. The snow was coming and it was going to be a big one. The man was calling for eight to ten inches, now. "That's quite a lot of snow," said Uncle Iry. "We might get stuck here a while."

Oh, the thought of it thrilled me, of being stranded for days with Aunt Delph and Uncle Iry in the warm, cozy little trailer sounded like a great adventure. We could sleigh ride down the hill, build a snowman and play checkers all afternoon if we felt like it. Uncle Iry was a wonderful checker player. We could eat pork chops and gravy every day and at night Aunt Delph could tell me stories about when she and my grandmother were young and about their dog Ring. According to Aunt Delph, Ring was the best, smartest dog that ever lived. Once when they were picking blackberries a rattle snake nearly bit Aunt Delph, but Ring saw the snake first and killed it.

When they moved from Kentucky to Dickinson County, they decided to leave old Ring behind. They left on the train and somehow over several months time, Ring found them in Virginia. That was my favorite of all the Ring stories. "I would ask, "How in the world could he have done it?" The only answer Aunt Delph could offer was that Ring was some kind of dog. "I reckon he surely was," I said.

That night, after Mission Impossible, I fell asleep watching the snow falling out my bedroom window. It was quiet and still in the trailer. The room was warm and it felt good under the blankets. I was having a terrific time. I wondered if my Momma and Daddy were having half as much fun over in Raleigh. Then, like always I said my prayers and when it came to the blessing part, I put Aunt Delph and Uncle Iry first, right after Momma and Daddy.

## Waitress

After she railroaded  
the plate hot from the lamp  
down the counter under

the sad, mystical pies  
that shyly avoided  
the law of gravity

by hanging sideways high  
on the wall, though only  
in reflection, she whisked

the dish around as if  
in hope of giving it  
flight, then set it before

the man who even now  
seemed to be engulfing  
the booth. And then she rushed

back to clear up the spot  
where a half-finished cup  
of coffee stewed a swamp-

brown and composting  
butt of a cigarette  
next to an old napkin

with small globs of donut  
jelly on it it. And then  
it was breaktime. And she

stood outside by the sign,  
lighter and pack of smokes  
in hand, and silently

sucked and blew the blue curls  
of smoke toward the neon  
that blots out the star light.



## Radishes

*Paul Revere Junior High School, 1962*

Flames shot orange tatters over the long stone  
bounds of the Santa Monica Mountains  
hanging above us. The heavy clouds  
of smoke from the burning chaparral  
became a nut-brown choke of savory  
fragrances that blurred the world  
for days.

And in other ways  
the world turned on us. Once when rains  
played on the hills for days, washing  
out the ash-grey and fire-stripped slopes,  
we joined in the rescue effort,  
stacking sand bags to protect  
the basketball court of the junior high,  
the long green course of the runners.  
All throughout that first semester in seventh  
grade, before the sun hit the plot,

I took a horticulture class  
first period. I was growing  
radishes on the small hillock  
under the house we knew for its windows.  
They never closed, a sure sign of haunting.  
Mr. Long, the teacher,  
an ex-Marine, was ready to go  
on call with his reserve unit  
as Vietnam heated.

One cold morning I planted the seeds,  
and each day I came to see  
what had grown in the rows  
of my tiny miracle.  
But it being just another semester  
of early mornings for me,  
my slow plot only brought forth  
radishes I would not harvest  
until much later,  
in some sort of sudden flash  
of recollection after so many years.

I find them now, again, and just now  
know to harvest what was begun.

## High School Biology Class, 1965

Mr. Small, in his white lab coat,  
seemed like a stout albino pygmy.

He would watch with beady eyes  
as the girls and the over-wealthy,

swishy guy *eewed!* with disgust  
at the neatly dissected frog,

skin pinned down each way to show  
the lungs, the guts, and the small wad of heart.

All the jocks in class kept guffawing.  
They were clowning about, imitating

the girls and the guy with effeminate swishes,  
prime meat for their aggression.

I meanwhile turned back to the deep,  
descending jungles of gold lichen

shimmering in the petri dish  
under the gilded knobs and tackle

of the stereo microscope.  
I'd twiddle down through the narrow focus

of its walls and canyons with the dials.  
Down there, in the evocative world

of that strange, fantastic realm,  
small accumulations of life

seemed as ardent as the tension  
of the jocks who mocked the girlish.



## Who's to Say

Who's to say

that the archangels are not here, disguised as you or me  
or other wanderers on the sidewalk this instant,  
announcing appointed messages out of silent  
and unmoving lips? In the absolute knowledge they bring,  
all time is removed, the grass becomes wings. The doors  
and petals of flowers open ongoing enjambments  
with emptiness. We keep crossing paths in the wormholes  
of light that could be angelic hair streaming out  
of all that is not remembered, the part that is not returning,  
just as the moments reflect the archangels' saying  
the crossings of perfumes that open these magic passages.  
"We do not remember days. We remember moments,"  
some poet said, an absolute spoken recalling  
wrapping around the tree with snakes of meaning.  
They speak, and are silent in their speaking, and hold us  
the way glass reflects us back into this world.

### **that high note**

this one's a cloud cabaret.  
Rain's in remission and gulls  
galvanize as twilight is twirling  
through tree tops. Here's one  
on climate change and another  
on Joe in the joint due to his  
chronic addiction. I wrote two  
on the topic of partisan politics,  
one on the plight of the under  
achiever, one on the man in the  
bar with his therapy dog and the  
number of beans in an iced  
moccachino..my poems on the  
half shell..an assortment i whore  
to the poet elites, pushing the  
send button hoping i'm hitting  
that high note.

## **i'm batting first today**

a nod and a half smile will  
suffice for the moment..Our  
stories all click with an air of  
the sameness, yet the difference  
is palpable

for some, it's predestined in  
the family history..some from  
a fluke, born to a moon of a  
different god..sense being tossed  
to the roadside

i'm batting first today..i tussle my  
blondes and blot my red lipstick  
ready to share my catastrophe

Joe puts out the coffee.. For most  
it's straight up in the black..i go  
for a swizzle of stevia

but first we join hands and murmur  
a prayer for all people..all of us  
there for the greater good.

## **a six pack of poems**

i gave him two poems and  
a six pack of suds. He tossed  
out the rhymes when he  
realized i fell for him. He  
guzzled the booze and went  
to that dark stone of regret.  
But our flower had withered,  
my field full of verse just  
exclusive for him, now grew  
anemic..my words spitting  
thorns in the soil i once  
tilled for prize roses.

## **eyes..universal**

midnight muses on sky and i  
wish i were her, glowing in gold  
through the trees of the trinity  
pouring prolific through poetic  
epiphanies on the 3am clock  
watch..lighting the path for the  
deer that dart over the highway  
and for those seeking something  
when only a look up towards the  
heavens will bring consolation

i wish i were her..if just for one  
night..a pivotal point for a world  
that is watching, in a faith fest  
of eyes universal.

i wish i were her..  
i wish i were that moon tonight.

## A Flutter at Dawn

Tomorrow will be different you'll see  
A slight tilt to or from the sun  
A touch lighter to see more  
A touch darker to see less  
A toss-up to rise or roll over

It will dawn with clarion  
trumpets and big plans  
or awaken you softly  
like fluttering pages  
of an open book

The pain that won't go away  
will not be the same  
It will taste different  
and will bleed in a color  
for which there is no name

The joy you feel today  
will leave without a kiss goodbye  
and though you'll feel empty  
remember nothing  
stays empty for long

## Eventualities

As he crawled in reverse  
through the hole he had smashed  
in our front door I stared  
down at his sweaty back  
and saw my chance to stop  
the thief with one blow  
from a handy porch chair  
that would surely knock  
him out cold and he would  
lay there so peacefully  
until the police came  
but in that split second  
I saw other eventualities  
as there always are  
playing out side by side  
like the chair coming  
down with insufficient  
force to stop the man  
so I would be forced  
to come up with  
another plan in a hurry  
or with the chair coming  
down like a sledgehammer  
to smash or sever

his spinal cord  
so he would never  
walk or crawl again  
and I would have to  
read about myself in  
the paper next day  
about a homeowner who  
bravely broke a man's  
back as he tried to flee with  
boom box and trinkets

## Shopping Cart Dreams

They dream of the old days  
when a cart's true mettle was  
measured by the number of  
aisles and parking spaces travelled,  
how much it could carry of  
premium thread count linens,  
plush bath towels for soft tushes,  
avocados, chips, and salsa  
for the Super Bowl crowd,  
computers, big screen TVs  
and other Black Friday deals,  
colorful wrapped bundles  
of Christmas joy,

never dreaming of a future  
overflowing with the bedding,  
bags, and boxes that hold a life together,  
wheeling through endless  
streets and alleyways until,  
their toils over,  
they take one last journey  
on worn rubber feet  
into the wash by the underpass,  
their metal skeletons filled  
with the debris of all  
they once carried.



## **The Uses of Fists**

Shape my fist  
like Señor Wences  
and make it speak.

Fist bump hello  
to my neighbor  
or shake it in anger  
at the jerk who  
cut me off.

Shadowbox with  
myself in the mirror  
and imagine winning.

Feel my fingers  
slowly clench  
at imminent  
attack.

Throw a fist  
into your back  
to knead your  
tense flesh  
until the pain  
is bearable.

## Sonnet: The Poem I Would Never Write

The day you fell, I did not dream I'd find  
new ways of making love to you as I  
discovered and washed the places of you  
I hardly knew and wiped your precious ass.

I brushed the hair behind your ears and shaped  
the back to a point, looked deep within your eyes  
and thrust my fingers in your trusting mouth  
to gently brush and floss each tooth and gum.

Your bandaged arms extending forward like  
two broken wings, I took the lead and held  
you tight behind your belt as we performed  
our waltz walk *con amore* through the streets.

But that would be a kind of poem I  
despise and swore that I would never write.

## **Sonnet: Can It Carry a Tune?**

Does it skip along the lines with a back beat  
you can't lose and lift you to stratospheric  
places where the muses live, recording  
LP contrail tracks across your untamed  
psychic skies to play and play until it  
cuts a groove so deep you'll hear it even  
in the dark when all seems lost and none can  
save you but the beating heart of this poem?  
Does it make you clap your hands together?  
Can you hum it on your way to Hartford?  
Will they sing it in the supermarket?  
Will they chant it marching off to battle?  
Will its words sing *sotto voce* one more  
time an elegy for your last journey?

## Essentials

What do you carry when you don't know where you're going and there's only so much room in one heart?

There's a knock on the door. You must leave at once. What do you grab?

Will it all fit in a bag so light you can use it as a flotation device in case of emergency?

Will you wear it to prove it's really you or to hide incognito?

Will it brighten your days and keep you warm when all goes dark and the inner light fades?

Will you look at it ten years from now and wonder what you were thinking?

Will it match your life's new decor?

## Imagining Mom Young

Why dwell in it when there is this evening—the forsythia blooming, the breeze blowing, and a bajillion things to be excited about?

We are well-off. Those things were all so long ago, and it is never as you believe it would be were it you.

## Night Drive

Our headlights slouched over the road and into the trees like drunk hands reaching for a doorknob; she was talking (again) about going to grad school (that idea's really with her now) and the money—whether that could work—and the time—where that would go; and as she spun the wheel I sat without a word under the weight of all that future, finding myself muddled: a little jealous, maybe, or a little left behind. There was nothing to say but to agree: it is complicated. Everything is complicated. And as the trees hugged our light close, letting none of it back, I watched out the window knowing whatever I would say or do next mattered to her only as much as the tenth-of-a-mile markers flying past us did.

## Chatting

You'd think that people used  
to stop and chat in doorways,  
at bus stops, on stoops, street corners,  
in line at Trader Joe's—

that in the times of Yore,  
you'd meet the "love of your life"  
entirely by accident.  
It's so different now:

when the class finishes  
the projector sighs off, notebooks shut,  
the professor adjusts  
her spectacles, and people depart

each to their own music,  
no friendly phatic words exchanged,  
some glances at best—honestly,  
Society is done for, isn't it?

But please, do consider it from another angle:  
folks have always been jerks,  
and while we know they talked  
once in doorways and at bus stops,

we cannot say for sure if anybody  
listened to what was said;  
or if they did, if what was said  
was worth the saying

Ah, phooey—I forgot  
what I wanted  
to prove to you

## Just Enough Light to Read By

wood stove's bass orange light  
generator vibrating the house  
temporarily abandoned by the grid  
such intimacy without media

when there's no outlet what happens  
concentric laminations variously linked  
not silence but broader spaces between  
her book and my book both somber

aftermath of near disaster  
unexpected leanness and restriction  
what that I couldn't have this week will I decide I don't need  
addition by subtraction

you can focus on motion when you're moving  
but little else  
get so slow the floor of habit could collapse  
with accumulated stillness

almost enough days in outage  
to stop flicking light switches  
& reach for my head lamp's on button

a pendulum of return  
a yearning for discomfort  
one night soon I'll turn off the furnace  
and every light, listen for what's now here

## Colors Scheme and Orchestrate

i wonder if the colors i see out my window—  
orange green grass, damp asphalt, silver cars  
that seldom move—are the colors inside me  
which immediately change when flesh is opened,  
air admitted, any light stronger than what  
skin can filter, the blood in its vacuum sluices,  
nerves aspark like distant lightning in a sky  
worn through in spots we usually call stars  
when they're scars or abrasions, preventative thickening  
as i'm constantly between blunt objects and gravity

in the other half of my house who is someone else  
lights come on before eyes open, water is released  
before anything comes in, can take hours for breakfast  
to reveal itself, alert for the chance of protein  
and other species, the pong of the pre-dawn sweat  
of unwanted visitors, unwanted instructions i could follow  
without realizing, cause habit almost never jumps the tracks  
just sometimes takes a siding it's passed thousands of times

a different day every 3 to 5 hours, minimum daily requirements  
of inertia, repair, behavioral cul-de-sacs, spoonfuls of  
invention and light, a pinch of dried future, a breath  
as long as a pop song with no time for anyone to solo,  
stretch my fingers, tap my toes, i'm an asteroid  
of corduroy and wool, 2 meters that was never prairie  
or woods, this water not from the sky or plumbing  
but my own distillation, steamed by the sun and  
anything inside me ready to burn today



**“A tree is not a woman”**

**—mark sargent**

a tree is not a woman  
a woman is not a car  
a car is not breakfast but can bring some  
breakfast can happen anytime, anywhere

clocks never stop, the gps always has a number  
even if it's just pulling it out of the oosphere  
no numbers or letters in the sky, no shopping there  
no need for cash or card  
you can make so many things with what the sky holds

like this drawer i haven't opened for months  
i pull a fresh t-shirt over my head  
and all i can see is sky  
those aren't clouds they're trees  
not wind but unfocussed intention

some places there's just one tree, too small to see  
most people's cars are their feet, with pockets instead of a trunk  
after emptying all my pockets i need to refill them

some days i'm incapable of being naked  
i get so still a tree tries to climb me  
clouds want to release all the sky stuck inside me

why not a census of trees  
why not police drones tracking squirrels  
hug enough trees you'll grow bark inside your clothes  
this patch of soil has such perfect exposure and drainage

## Some of my Winters

“the coldest winter/ in almost 14 years/ could never, never change my mind”  
(Rod Stewart, Mandolin Wind)

black rubber galoshes with those strange clasps  
keeping the sled out of the sewer  
hitch-hiking through Vermont in January  
the day we got a foot and a half of snow overnight and college closed, for one day  
heavy wool, light olive, Italian army surplus coat that reached past my knees,  
gift from a shorter friend  
my first winter away from everyone. never cried on Christmas before.  
first time I saw freezing rain, brilliant ice coating wires branches cars  
four days camping in the Olympics in February, only rained once  
winter carrying mail: you had to work, no matter the snow and ice,  
but if you had an accident you'd be suspended for 3 days, without pay  
my son's first new year's the pipes froze  
how few Portland winters there's enough snow to make a snow man;  
how many times Portland schools have closed for not more than an inch  
several years we held bounteous winter solstice parties, Melba cooking over a week  
November in Nepal; November in Ecuador  
waiting for a winter when the power's out, stores can't open, will our pipes freeze  
or the whole system shut down

“and now it's winter/ winter in America/ and all the healers/  
done been killed/ or sent away”  
(Gil Scott Heron, Winter in America)

“I was lying in a burned out basement  
with the full moon in my eyes”  
*Neil Young, After the Gold Rush*

another moon up  
eaten through the clouds  
like a Jupiter of milk  
a moon too large to be that far from the horizon

worldwide auditions to be the official moon of the 20's  
a moon that will never be full  
always hungry, not used to these shoes,  
how just enough of the sidewalk holds a grudge  
holding its breath like a balloon i didn't expect to pop  
inside my refrigerator or a vein in my leg--  
plumbing wiring circulation trade  
systems matching salts

woe betide any ambivalence, it's turn or stop,  
been down this road more times than the road's been me  
bits of meat wobbling plates compost in reverse  
a planet of gas with rock solid atmosphere

once we have enough people in orbit  
where will the satellites go  
once so many have turned their backs on the earth  
maybe Australia will be ripped into space like the first moon was

i call, a moon answers, nothing changes  
i slowly pull my hands apart and reveal  
a scroll i pretend to translate  
a spit so fine, ink so ready to run

since the clouds own almost all the moons  
i don't have enough light to qualify as bait,  
my reflection melting into static, into amoeba clouds  
that may be picking up mountains and positioning them like  
multi-armed speed-chess, as we do all the simultaneous moves  
needed to jump start a city with no more skeleton than a bee

venus reflected in the street, constellations  
in the freshly mown field, water too small to be wet,  
a planet-load of s'posed-tos, the hill i live on is now a cloud

my diet's been deficient in mystery too long  
once i leave i won't change til i get back or somewhere,  
no landmarks just construction, nothing in the sky i can trust  
a confusion of rotation and perspective with one eye  
above the surface & the other below i'm extrapolating  
survival as another species while the developing  
lobes of the world seethe and spread around me

Today's Day is Only 9 Seconds Shorter than Yesterday's

Time doesn't stand, stand for, understand  
you can stand up to time but you'll back down, turn over,  
at whatever moment: i didn't move but now face the other way  
down to the clouds, up to the earth  
straining my arms against the wind, the rotation  
not enough appendages or web fluid to contain my own atmosphere

Sudden stops, speed without acceleration, every line bending  
if not fraying a bit, curling toward the past or is this dust from the future,  
from fingertip to tongue, believing my nose speaks a dead language  
coz a tiny bit of everything that passed through is still there  
like a hat check, a year old raffle, 25 blocks becoming a bingo card—  
when the numbers called the buildings there vanish, dustless, silently  
as if no one ever lived on G-49 and free space never locks its gates

Repetition always leads to mutation, a sentence becomes a song,  
the skin of a horse can never be exhausted as a jacket or bound book,  
can't resist the urge to gallop, whether on a shelf, against traffic,  
trying to hold down a square mile cotton sheet gaining weight  
with commuting pollinators and other hungers--if all their wings  
could pull together, shared pressure strengthening gossamer,  
as unharvested seeds find other ways to grow in or on

When the interstate wind misses its exit and can't contain its anger  
of grit & humidity sketching a town that might have been,  
lights never change on this accidental equator  
where lives so balanced, symmetrical, captured in pixels or ink,  
thinking of wind and rain as digital, pressure fronts of  
knowledge, accumulation and ennui caught in the split breath  
of one cell replacing another, walls breaking down as fresh ones arise  
who knows where or when

How many people find their escape in the middle of the middle,  
where the edge mirrors everything behind it, encoded in crumbs,  
a recipe from the planet that became the asteroid belt,  
asteroid food trucks colliding with gravity's appetites  
i never breathe when there's food in my mouth  
teeth trying to influence jaw muscles  
eyes conjuring the perfect roast skin  
wings that fold like pocket knives

My hunger is spring loaded and no judge of distance or time,  
hunger ignored is reduced perception, eat before you think,  
swim before dark, find the chicken who lays eggs only when asleep,  
scratching the ground to find the roof beneath, the worm sky,  
pebbles of petrified rain the dissipated wishes of stars so far away  
they haven't happened yet

## What We Didn't Know

We didn't know  
the infinite reach of our words.  
We both pledged *until death*  
*do us part* and meant it,  
pure promises from virgin lips.

We didn't know  
death would come that very night,  
it's greedy tendrils knotted  
and tangled in our consummation,  
or that we would awaken reincarnated.

We didn't know  
we were binding each other  
outside of time, that our vows  
meant every night would be a funeral,  
each morning its own matrimony.

## Mornings

A layer of pencil shavings  
carpets the floor  
by the fireplace, mused  
to flame by pages  
crumpled into dense pellets.

The sun rises. Light reaches  
through the blinds. A child  
calls out from her bed:  
*come lie down next to me*  
*and I will tell you my dreams.*

## **New Years**

In that peculiar way  
a stranger  
becomes a lover  
in the fog  
of a dream,  
this road escapes  
the low cloud  
and finds morning  
kiss of sun,  
spread of blue sky.  
You know this can't last,  
that the road  
rises and drops  
like tired bodies  
in church pews,  
but for this moment,  
this sliver of clarity,  
it can be enough  
to drive  
just a little further.

## Learning to Write

*“When you publish something, you better thank me for driving you to writing camp in second grade” – my mother*

In a break between lessons,  
we went to play football in the field,  
me and the older students.

I caught a pass and started running.  
When a bigger kid started charging,  
his face flush with adrenaline and fury,  
I threw the ball over my head –  
six points giftwrapped in cowardice.

My teammates sensed weakness  
and circled around me like jackals,  
demanding an explanation.

Another boy, a prepubescent angel  
of mercy, offered his hand  
and helped me to my feet.  
He defused the mob:  
*I saw the whole thing.*  
*It was an accident.*

Break over, we returned  
to class, to learn to archive  
the things weighing heavy inside us,  
to document what others cannot see.

Thank you, mom.  
Thank you for driving me  
to writing camp.



## **Circles**

To trace a rainbow over the earth's curve  
and follow it as it bends back on itself  
is the curse placed on the ambitious hand.

You warned me once that treasure hunters  
only ever find bones, and, if they're lucky,  
dusty clay bowls that used to hold water

to the lips of a young woman, who drank  
as she looked up at the stars and shaped  
them into storybooks with her finger.

## **Telephone**

Stop and sit. Breathe.

The past is elusive because time  
has elongated memories into dreams,

clouded their voices with static,  
bent their light around the spinning earth.  
A thousand days gone and a thousand

former occupants whispering deathbed secrets  
to their successors, hushed words garbled  
by decaying mouths. Stop and sit. Breathe.

Pick out the parts you understand,  
and repeat them out loud like a mantra  
before today's form fades into dust.

## **Submerged**

Like a tadpole,  
you make a home  
in this fiefdom  
of murky water,  
this swaddling current,  
your vision so clouded  
that tugging fingers  
wrapped up in your hair  
seem like leeches  
sucking at the scalp.

## **Des Moines**

There are only geese on this path,  
which rounds the placid lake and follows  
the river upstream, to downtown,  
where darkened towers of mirrors  
reflect scenes of cloudless skies,  
leaves piling undisturbed on streets.  
We walk through a tunnel, sneaking  
under a road that barely whispers,  
and wonder how a city can speak  
with these walls white as clamshells.

## **Call Me AI**

Paul Simon is playing in the car  
and I am really going for it,  
my voice filling the space like a noxious gas  
and crackling like static when I hit  
the high notes of his assumed name.

The kids have stopped fighting  
and the wife has stopped counting telephone  
poles along this lonely country road,  
all eyes now enlarged and focused  
on me, an empty-airwave man  
suddenly dialed to a frequency,  
as I squeeze every drop  
of song from my rusted vocal cords.

But Paul is right, isn't he? Sometimes  
it's fun to pretend that we are more  
than the disintegrating man who stares  
back at us in the mirror, each of us  
looking past the other, silent, lost.

## The Poet

I am  
the entire civilization of birds  
that exists in the trees. I am  
the furtively flittering jay. I am  
the menacingly perched raptor. I am  
the expansive empire of trees  
that houses the birds. I am  
the branches that rise and fall. I am  
the trunk bulged with age. I am  
the textured bed of landscape  
to which the trees are anchored. I am  
the plains at peace in stillness. I am  
the mountains imposed as ice. I am  
the collective of clouds patrolling  
and watching over the land. I am  
the puffed and shaped cumuli. I am  
the descending haze of fog. I am  
the notebook and the pen, and I am  
the ink and the words. I am  
the solipsistic center of all things  
posed at the mirror and writing  
the monologues of reflection.

***Words whisper in the dark***  
**Sharon Lopez Mooney**

*6 am Meteor showers*

The single note of beauty, that flash point of coming and going, when night leaves its hold turning it over to the nearing sun. Not a hand over where fingers suggestively touch, more a graceful retiring dark, the subtle courtesan elegantly backing out leaving only scent on the open air.

Summer in this coastal pueblo brings heat and humidity so fervent even rocks and trees, windows and railings sweat to its sultry pace of months as July steps into the cooker of August and melts into the simmer of September then roils into the final boil of October when the burner is finally turned off just before it spills over, and, we slowly cool, soon after in the count of three days autumn pulls up along side winter's edge, bringing winds that could cut a slice of mountain if were made of dough.

But at 5 am this morning a meteor shower, flying fast and furious against the growing light, seemed resistant to stepping off center stage as sunbeams with their cartwheel colors stole the spectacle displaying their hunger for audience. I think their face-off woke me. Instantly awake and alert as if I'd never slept, I snuck from bed out to the moving sky that was holding its breath between dark and morning.

Remind me, please, to say thank you tonight when the earth's theatre lights dim and the show begins.

*Caught on razor's edge of my life*

I was born on Algonquian land in a white man's Chicago hospital three hundred years after my European ancestors began their pirating at thirteen I chose a beautiful boarding school built on *The land where Great Spirit dwells* in Mesquakie's story and set at the foot of the prehistoric "Mound", built by an people in 100 AD we named the Mound Builders before Europeans devoured land

*no one should claim to own,  
but we never speak of that.*

Much like early pioneers running for freedom to California  
I finally fled from the noise of urban chaos  
arriving on land cared for by Miwok, a whole people nearly erased,  
to nature choked by asphalt and lies that didn't speak  
the language of the land won from Mexico,  
who could no longer fight our hunger  
for the gold and green and ocean  
*that no one should dare to say is theirs,  
but we never put that in our history books.*

Now I live on land taken by Mexico from Seri and Yaqui peoples,  
each day I sit at the foot of their sacred mountain  
where once their warriors went to rebuild their fire  
to fight another battle for their homeland from greedy Europeans  
only to be run off later by Mexican powers with plans to develop  
and rename as tourist attraction the land and sea  
*that only fools would say they own,  
but we do not tell those tales either.*

How can I be grateful and ashamed at the same time?  
How can I live in this house built with Mexican sweat and cement?  
How can I pay so little in gringo dollars for Yaqui made hot tamales  
standing in line right behind my neighbor who pays many pesos?  
How can I speak without shame as I turn to the ancestors to say  
*On this Thanksgiving Day I give thanks for the all the riches my people took?*  
And yet my gratitude for this place lives and pumps in my blood,  
sings in the array of flavors that feed my body and my poems.  
I wear my shame for my people who keep taking other people's land  
*that no one has the right to own,  
when will we, white victors, rectify this deep and shameful truth?*

*Bahía summer sits on my writing  
South of the Border*

July soaks my writing in symbols  
humidity burdens my stanzas  
until breezes cool the lethargic engine  
and it revs up for a few false starts

The weight of August heat squeezes  
words like limes, seeping sharp tangy  
juice that shrinks lines, presses on the rush  
to finish something not yet said

By September high sea fevers  
drench my words, make them sloppy, sluggish  
with lots of esses, slipings and slitherings,  
then slides into the nothing of October

Finally November blusters gulf breezes in  
rushing the veranda, trying to blow  
my words off the paper  
slamming hows into whats, swirling all

Into pileups of rear enders along my bannisters  
but inside lingering confinement stretches  
the lines and squelches slow motion poetics  
no place to go makes stanzas long, incurable,

Demanding an unknown from readers  
Even the elongated cool hides musicality behind  
the poems, erases loveliness of lyrical lines  
All is Well, but nothing is consummated

### *Emergency! 911*

I am terrified you, love, are leaving,  
focused on their words frantic around me,  
I listen, stand frozen, then yell  
    *He's not breathing anymore!*  
I know my way thru rules of acute help  
but it doesn't keep me from seeing  
    I am beginning my solo  
    I don't display my shock  
    pretend to be calm

My gestures belie my terror  
when I look, really look, I see  
reluctant knowing in your eyes  
watch time sever your life  
you rise, smoke  
into a beautiful untamed thing  
from behind an exhale of release  
    I am taken over  
    by grief that tastes the color of your skin  
    smells the edginess of your humor

I step further from your passage  
I know what's happening,  
we didn't say goodbye, we didn't know,  
terror to terror, eye to eye, not touching,  
this the finale breaking of our contract  
you are finishing your life right here, I understand,  
I laugh and call myself a liar! pretending understand...  
    One male puzzle piece is ripped  
    out of the female  
    harmony destroyed  
    a new picture must take shape

*I'm too big to fit*

I want to type tiny words so little they would crowd  
together as a frightened animals words leaning on  
each other huddled against some-thing unseen  
unknown they would take turns whispering animal  
sounds loosing them out into the wild unafraid to see  
where they will go words watching each other for  
signs of danger or else only trusting the one closest  
touching only the sound with its heart so tiny so  
crushed together there would be no room to feel  
alone to notice the ground under them changing  
holding each other needing no line or paper to sustain  
them they could be trusted and would build an  
indestructible nest curling cradling and hiding the  
immenseness of my feelings



## SILENT NIGHT

After Uncle Al brings a paper bag  
with the gift of dented trumpet for Gerry,  
after showing him quick the fingering,  
after the rosy-cheeked kitchen laughter,  
the shots of Canadian Club rye,  
after playing Santa, after the guests are gone,  
when night is a dark, hushed hospital,  
then comes the bargaining with God.

I hear a carol to Bacchus sung  
by the Choir Alcoholic behind the jail  
under a yellow rind of moon.  
The acid in their throats yearns  
despite the surrender in their voices.

Snowplows scraping ice makes me  
twist in my sheets. Something in me  
rises to the ceiling. I hear a thought saying,  
*Nothing more lovely comes from the sky.*  
And more. *If I hadn't begged*  
*my mother not to leave me at Wilhelmina's,*  
*she wouldn't have quit her job. If she hadn't quit her job,*  
*my father wouldn't have gotten hi-jacked,*  
*blackjacked, left for dead.*

The knot that's tied inside me makes no sense.  
I've made a leap I shouldn't make.  
So much depends on what is missing.

the hole in frosted glass a candle burns.  
Why was I born without the gift of wisdom?  
If Hell is wicked cold, despite the nuns,  
would I panic, run barefoot up the street,  
leaving prints in drifts shallow as a bird's?  
If it snowed in Hell would it be Paradise?

All I know is there's no way  
I'm not mixed up in my family mystery.  
The me in bed is thinking what to do.  
He'll save his money from his paper route,  
buy two crucifixes for next Christmas:  
one for his father hanged between luck and no luck,  
one for his mother torn like daisy petals  
between he loves me, he loves me not.

He prays, Dear God, though You be  
silent as the snow, give me the strength I need  
to turn this river of darkness into holy light,  
though I must look in places I'm afraid to go.

It's not so much what he does—  
he calls it "tickling," but it's not ribs he fingers  
like a jeweler—it's what he says.  
"You're my little queer."  
I've been baptized already and get up to leave.  
He says he'll tell everyone I am what he calls me.  
He foresees my life will end when the mob stones me.

I stoop out, walk around the garden to the alley  
to the street. Out of the sky a spear-head  
rips me in two jagged metal chunks—one that feels,  
one that doesn't trust feeling anymore.  
Look what it got me into.

2.

The power of words:  
for three years, I live in blue misery  
watching how people treat me—harshly sometimes.

I see his flag-draped corpse float  
downriver on a catafalque to Long Island Sound  
with sunlit sparkles as torches.  
His mummy disappears under the bridge.

The river is a night of stars.  
The air smells of grass steeped in August.  
I grow a blue eye that sees death by stoning is  
his nightmare, not mine. I don't have to live in his terror.  
Sadness pours out of me as I remember him.  
I spend more time with the river.  
His remains beach on Montauk Point,  
resting in peace as small waves lift and lower him.

## THE OUTWARD MANIFESTATION

1.

A million balalaikas strum in the river  
like God's hands make billions of things occur at once.  
Some like stars are set with cosmic tickers.  
They get born, grow, expand, explode in violets  
that sway on stems in May like Russian  
gypsy puppets in mid-leap.

Birches are streaked with black  
unreadable letters, their leaves quake suggestively.  
His is the hand that pushes the air that hollows  
the land into valley, the holy spirit at the velocity of the visible.

2.

My mother reads *Raggedy Anne and Andy*  
*and the Camel with the Wrinkled Knees* to me in the parlor.  
Anne has a heart made of Valentine candy.  
Andy has no heart. If it weren't for Anne  
Andy would slump in the toy box alone forever.

Father backs his truck to the loading dock  
in Jersey City with tons of coiled industrial wire.  
Anne asks Andy to make what she wants to happen  
happen. The Camel is strong and can last  
without water carrying what Anne needs on his hump.  
A chorus of stars sings *Away, away, away, away*.  
The camel lifts off into the Milky way  
with rhinestone eyes, which is like my father  
when the luminous racetrack lights up inside him.

3.

I pull out a paring knife from the kitchen pantry,  
cut a patch of bark from the thickest birch  
to make a model canoe.

God rustles its leaves to say hello.

It's so startling the knife slips through.

No. God makes the knife slip through and slice  
my left middle finger, a one-inch cut to the bone.

I bleed for my sin against the birch tree  
that goes on swaying its limbs, conducting a breeze  
that makes trees sound a long, astonished intake of breath  
so lovely it makes the tree frogs creek.

I knock on a stranger's door.

When it opens I see an angel in a house dress  
who sticks my bleeding hand under the faucet.

She winds stanching gauze on my finger.

She commands me to get stitches  
in a doctor's office paneled in birch. *Away, away, away, away,*  
drops of myself dapples the forest floor with red ink  
with which I take notes on how God does it.

## AUTUMN SHADOW

Skies are robin's egg blue in October.

But this day clouds so thick there's not enough light  
for shadows. I trip through bramble,  
skirting sumac with fruit red as a cardinal.

A black flick of tail catches my eye, a squirrel,  
both cheeks full of acorns, pounces over step-stones.

Above a hawk makes a pale flicker  
above the squirrel's jagged line.

It shifts me from camera to plotting the squirrel's path.

Now I can pick my way across the impassable.

It's like finding my words, as my mother urges me  
in the kitchen when the cruelty I witness in school—  
so many knuckles rose-red from so many beatings with a ruler  
leaves me steaming and tongue-tied by the wall clock.

Sr. Monica's cowl curved over her face, half hiding her scowl.

"Who can conjugate the ver 'bring' properly?"

I feel silent panic in the classroom.

It's like the panic my father hides so well.

I feel I can carry my father's shadow. It will be easy.

How much can a shadow weigh?

## **Alone**

### **Rob DiLillo**

After 32 years of teaching high school English and Culinary Arts, he retired. On his last day, the Monday after graduation, he finished his grades, did a final cleaning of his classroom, and turned in his keys. He walked out of the office for the last time, past his classroom door, locked forever to him now. It was a beautiful day with a cool breeze and a perfectly blue sky.

On the last day of school, teachers usually feel a melange of relief, joy, liberation, hope, and fatigue, all tinted with regret for things that did not go well. But this was not just the end of the year but the end of his career. A wave of emotion hit him. Maybe because of meditation or therapy he paused to experience it. He felt some sadness, but mostly, the feeling was, to his surprise, gratitude. So, he stood alone at the top of the steps and counted his blessings.

At his retirement party, his best friend said, "There were some very nice people here." He agreed. He had been surrounded for 32 years by wonderful people.

So many people had helped him - paved the way for his successes, consoled him in his failures, and comforted him through the trials of life and work. So many people had cared about him.

Joe, a student in culinary arts, stayed after school every day until the dish room was clean and then came back to class, put chairs on desks, and thanked him profusely. In the fall when his trees were laden with apples, he picked and brought in boxes of apples. They made apple bread, apple pie, German apple pancakes, applesauce, and apple turnovers, pork with an apple, sage cream sauce.

Juan showed up for every catering gig the third year class did that year. Whenever there was a problem to be solved, he would say, "Hey Juan, take a couple of guys and get it done." And without fail, that young man would avert each crisis.

He remembered Lana, who called him at 2:30 PM on the Friday before school started, and asked, "Are you still looking for a job?" She would become his wise, blunt, always questioning mentor, a provider of prospective. When she found out he was a writer, she said, "You can paint me mean, you can paint me sarcastic and you can paint me conniving, as long as you paint me beautiful." When he knew Lana, her body was ruined by cigarettes and alcohol and the sedentary life it is easy to fall into as an English teacher with a constant stack of papers to grade. When she passed, at her memorial, they had a picture of her when she was young. She had been a stunning beauty.

Another Joe, quiet, calm, centered, who understood that in the education game, all players needed to be educated, even the teacher. In the first years of culinary class, Joe had the courage and wisdom to set Norman straight. He would begin his lessons, "Well you know, Mr. D..." He taught Norman about his students and about himself, how he came off, how his communications worked or didn't, how he could do better next time.

He remembered Don who had pedaled to school with him two or three mornings a week for a few years, meeting in the dark and riding through fog and then sunrise along the creek trail, sweating it home in the afternoon.

He remembered Chuck, a truly great teacher and a thoughtful man, who was an example whenever Norman doubted his course.

He remembered all those girls, different ones every couple of years who brought their best friends and sat in his room at lunch and fixed their make-up and talked about their lives, their ambitions, their decisions and their fears, who backed him up in class, who smoothed things over, who understood that even temporary relationships can be close.

He remembered Thalia, whose last name translated to Marvelous, who came into his class every day, looked him in the eye and asked, "Are you happy? A transforming question.

He was grateful that his job allowed him to do good in the world, to help people.

He was grateful that his job never asked him to compromise his fundamental beliefs.

He was grateful that his job had given him tremendous autonomy, allowed him to pursue learning in areas about which he was passionate, allowed him to be creative and thoughtful, encouraged him to grow as a professional and as a human being.

He was grateful for those brilliant, inspiring students who worked so hard to do what he asked, who had faith in him, who asked challenging questions, who responded creatively, and who made his class function and at times soar.

He was grateful for those kids who taught harder lessons, the challenging kids, the non-conformists and misfits who taught him the most important lessons of all, that most work is, at heart, about people; that everyone is your teacher, that none of us are born with equal opportunities, that people can overcome amazing hardships and some can even do it with joy. They taught him to plumb the depths of his heart and compassion; that luck counts for more than we want to believe. They taught him about resilience.

He was grateful that the job was hard enough to inspire him to be his best.

He stood for a long time on those steps remembering people who had helped him, who had enriched his life and work, who collaborated and shared their wisdom and their time. Names and faces whose names he had forgotten. Deeds people had done. As he drove home, he remembered more. As he worked about his apartment, he remembered still more. With each memory, gratitude passed through him, sometimes making him smile, or laugh, or shake his head, sometimes bringing him sadness or regret or tears.

Finally he decided to go to a heart meditation at The Center for Spiritual Living. The instructions were simple. Close your eyes. Breathe in around your heart, letting the breath open and energize. Hold one person or idea in your heart and breathe some more.

He held gratitude. And the memories and gratitudes just kept coming. Of course there was Emma, his wife for 25 of those years and the best teacher of anything he



has ever seen. There were people from his life before teaching who had helped him, teachers and professors, friends like Debi and Gail and Renee and three Jims and Gary, bosses like Joe and Tim. There were books and movies, writers and ideas. There was Lil, who talked him through the last three difficult years with compassion, insight, and a steady moral compass.

So, every working day for 32 years he stood in front of his classes, and imagined that he faced the work alone, but at that moment, on the stairs, he understood that he never had been alone. A legion of people had been behind him.

# THE GREAT BETRAYAL

Clive Aaron Gill

*“Never shall I forget that smoke. Never shall I forget the little faces of the children, whose bodies I saw turned into wreaths of smoke beneath a silent blue sky. Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my faith forever. Never.”*

Elie Wiesel, Night.

## Chapter 1

Mother and I sat facing each other in our compact San Francisco kitchen after I had returned from my day at high school.

“Rebecca,” she said, reaching across the table to hold my hands, her voice strained, “we took your grandpa to the doctor. He told us the test results show your grandpa has terminal cancer.”

“It’s terminal?”

“Yes. That’s why he doesn’t have an appetite and sleeps a lot.”

My chest tightened. “When did Opa get cancer?”

“We don’t know. I’m so sorry, sweetheart.”

I stared at my mother’s tense face and tearful eyes. “There must be something the doctors can do.”

“I wish there was.” Mama sighed. “He’s resting in his bedroom. I’m sure he’d like to see you.”

Opa was my favorite family member. He was always interested in what I did and how I felt. He encouraged me to do well in school, and he loved to hear me play the piano. I entered his darkened, antiseptic-smelling room. Seeing his gaunt face as he sat in bed, eyes closed, propped by pillows, I shivered and thought about the fragility of life. I was shocked and scared that my beloved Opa would soon leave me. Not knowing when he would pass, I wanted to stay at his bedside.

“Opa,” I whispered.

He opened his eyes. “Who is it?”

“It’s me, Rebecca.”

“Thank God you are here,” he said in his German accent. “I do not like being alone.”

“I’ll stay with you.”

“You are a sweetie.”

“Do you need anything, Opa?”

“No.” He coughed and grimaced. “Rebecca, you are seventeen now?”

“Yes.”

“You are a lovely girl. I always loved your ginger hair.”

“Thank you.” His compliments made me feel good about myself.

“So ... what’s new in the world?”

“Great news. Nelson Mandela was elected President of South Africa.”

“He is a good man.”

“Yes, he is. Do you remember when he and former President de Klerk were jointly awarded the Nobel Peace Prize last year?”

“Yes,” he coughed again. “Those two deserved the prize.” He slid to a lying position. “I want to show you something. Look under my bed for a small box.”

I kneeled on the floor and pulled out a brown shoe box. “Here it is.”

“Good. Open it. What do you see?”

“A silver pocket watch.”

“Ja. I bought that after I got my first paycheck in America.”

“Oh, what’s this?” I held up a string of pearls. “It’s beautiful.”

“Oma fell in love with that necklace when we saw it in a shop window.”

“And you bought it?”

“Not on that day. I told her it was too expensive. The next day I went back to the jeweler’s store to buy it. On her birthday, I gave her the pearl necklace wrapped in tissue paper inside a nice box. When she saw the necklace, she said, ‘But we cannot afford it.’ I answered, ‘They are for my queen.’”

“Opa, how romantic.” I pressed my hand to his warm cheek.

“Ja. Now sweetheart, look for a letter to Anna Nomborg.”

“Okay.” I shuffled through a small stack of frayed envelopes. “I don’t see it. Wait, wait. Here’s one with a stamp that says, *Deutsches Reich*. The writing is faded. It’s addressed to Anna.”

“Take the letter out of the envelope and give it to me.”

He held the brownish paper in his trembling hands. “I wrote this letter in German when I was eighteen. My aunt kept it for me. I will translate.”

Weilheim, Germany, 26th April 1936

Dear Aunt Anna,

I am Jacob, Mandel Roth’s son. I am sorry to tell you that my father died last week after a long illness. He often talked about you, his sister. My mother died three years ago. I am worried about what will happen now that Adolf Hitler is in power. I would like to leave Europe as soon as possible and come to America. Can you help me? If not, I will go to Palestine.

I am very much looking forward to receive your reply.

Your nephew,

Jacob Roth

“I didn’t know both your parents had died at that time. That must have been hard for you. Did you have brothers or sisters?”

“I had three older sisters and one older brother. They all had jobs, and they thought Hitler was so extreme he would not remain in power. But I saw signs of a catastrophe for our people.”

“What happened to your brother and sisters?”

“A Christian neighbor wrote to me in 1942 from Weilheim saying the Germans forced my sisters and brother out of our family home. They probably died in a concentration camp.”

I gasped, feeling a chill. “That’s terrible.”

“Ja.” He tightened his jaw. “I think about them every day.”

“Did your aunt reply to your letter?”

“Ja. She invited me to come here. And she sent money for my passage on a ship. I entered the United States through Ellis Island when I was nineteen.”

“How long did you stay in New York?”

“One day and one night. I rode on a train for four days to get to San Francisco. Excuse me. I ... I’m so tired.”

“Opa, you should rest.”

“You are right. Leave me for a while and take the box. Everything in it is yours to keep.”

“But ... I can’t.”

“I have no need for possessions now. You are my treasure.”

## Chapter 2

After school the next day, I took a bus to 24<sup>th</sup> Street. I ambled home on the sidewalk, past a familiar mix of Victorian houses and modern buildings while traffic hummed on the road. The warm spring sun filtered through the canopy of ficus leaves.

I put my schoolbooks on the bed in my narrow bedroom and looked in a mirror. People said I was pretty, but I knew I had a plain face. I overheard my mother say that to her friend.

In the kitchen, I drank a glass of milk. Then I went to see my grandfather, who was sitting against his bed pillows.

“Hi Opa. How are you feeling today?”

“My legs are stiff.”

“Do you want me to get you something?”

“Just rub my calves, please. With that nice smelling oil. Maybe that will help.”

I lifted the sheet and massaged Opa’s thin calves.

“Ah ... that is good.” He sighed. “Now bring a chair to the side of the bed.”

I brought a straight-backed chair and sat near him.

He pinched the bridge of his nose, as he often did when he was thinking. “I never told you much about Oma Olga, your grandmother. If you are interested, I can tell you a little story about her and me.”

“I’d love to hear it. I saw a photo of her. She had a kind face.”

“So kind,” he said in a soft tone. “She died when you were a baby. We used to go to concerts, you know.”

“I remember you told me she loved music. Where was she born?”

“Ukraine. Her father had immigrated to America and lived in New York. He sent her money in 1938 for a ticket on a boat. She was nineteen when she joined him and did not speak English. She and her father came to San Francisco by train.”

“What about her family?”

“Her mother had died, and her two sisters did not want to leave the place where they were born. The Germans murdered them. And many others.”

“That’s so sad.” Tears blurred my vision.

“A tragedy. A few months after she arrived in San Francisco, her father wanted her to marry. He chose a man to be her husband, but she did not like him. She begged her father to choose someone else. He agreed and chose me.”

“Was it love at first sight?”

“It was. We married in 1939. Her father and Aunt Anna were our only guests. I was twenty-one and Oma was twenty. We lived with her father in a small apartment.” His smile showed a dimple.

“You have such a nice smile. Were you both happy?”

“Very happy.”

He closed his eyes and soon fell asleep.

### Chapter 3

The next morning, after the fog cleared, I attended a Sabbath service at our temple. On my return, I peeked into Opa’s room and saw him sleeping. In the kitchen, I enjoyed challah and chicken soup with matzah balls, then returned to Opa’s darkened room.

“Good to see you, sweetie,” he said, his deep blue eyes bright. He gestured to the chair at the side of his bed. “Did you enjoy the *Shabbos* service?”

“Yes, Opa.” I had especially enjoyed talking with my friends after the service.

“And you had a good lunch, my pretty Rebecca?”

“Yes. I was so hungry. Now I can’t eat another bite.”

He laughed a staccato burst. “That reminds me of my Aunt Anna. She would say in Yiddish, ‘*Ess, ess, mein kind.*’ It means eat, eat, my child. She worried that I did not eat enough.”

“Did you?”

“I had enough. Simple food, but enough.”

“What kind of food?”

“Bagel and lox, brisket, *latkes*.”

“I love potato pancakes.”

“Me, too. You are looking out the window. You seem distracted.”

“I’m not.”

“Did you meet someone new today?”

“No.”

“Are you perhaps thinking about your friends? A boy?”

My cheeks felt hot. I had been thinking of a tall, good-looking boy I saw in the temple.

“I can tell when you are not really listening,” he said. “Now, will you go to the living room and play the piano for me? I will listen from here before I take a nap. Chopin is my favorite composer, you know.”

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The chill of twilight promised a cold evening.

“Many years ago,” Opa said when I returned to his room, “I belonged to a group called The New Life Literary Club. The members were people who had lived in Europe when Hitler was in power. We told our stories about what we lived through. They were hard to tell and hard to listen to.”

“You never told me those stories.”

“I did not want to tell you about the terrible hardships we faced.”

I straightened my shoulders. “I’m not a child anymore.”

“Believe me, those stories about cruelty and suffering would give you nightmares.”

“What story can you tell me?”

He scratched his bald head. “Maybe one from during the war?”

“You decide.”

“Let me think. Um ... would you like to hear how I earned a living in America?”

“Yes, Opa.”

“In my first job, I worked long hours in a sweatshop making men’s clothes. Competition for jobs was fierce, and wages were low.” He squeezed his lips together. “On my day off, I studied English so I could get a better job.” He winced. “Uh ... after .... After the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, many men went to fight against the Japanese. Also, they fought the Germans and Italians. I was not drafted because ....” He breathed with a rattling sound in his chest. “Because I failed the fitness test.”

“Why?”

“Maybe because I worked hard for five years in a cramped place where the ventilation was poor. I had bad headaches and shortness of breath. Then I heard IBM was looking for workers. I passed their aptitude test, and I was hired in 1942.”

“You worked for IBM?”

“Ja. For two years. My boss sent me to IBM School in Endicott, New York. For technical training. I remember the five top steps before the front door of the school. They were engraved with the words, ‘Read, Listen, Discuss, Observe, Think.’”

“What did those words have to do with work?”

“IBM believed they were the five steps to knowledge while studying and working.”

“What was it like to work there?”

“Formal. I had to wear a dark suit, a white shirt and a tie every day. No mustaches or beards were allowed. I shaved my mustache before my job interview. I did well at IBM. And the pay was good. But something a co-worker said bothered me. So much so, I could not get a good night’s sleep.”

“What did he say?”

“My friend said IBM’s President, Mr. Watson, met Hitler in Berlin in 1937.”

“Did he? For real?”

“Ja. And he received a medal for service to the *Reich*.”

“A medal? From Hitler? Are you sure?”

“You do not believe me?” he asked in an annoyed tone.

“I’m sorry.”

“Okay,” he said, his voice lower. “It was hard for me to believe when I first heard it.”

“What did Mr. Watson do to get the medal?”

“He sold a punch card sorting system that identified people by race and religion. That made it easier for the Nazis to arrest millions of Jews. Those Jews were later murdered.”

“That’s horrific.”

“Ja. But three years later, Watson returned the medal.”

“Why?”

“People were outraged about the medal during the bombing of Paris. And the FBI began investigating IBM’s Nazi connections.”

“What did the FBI do?”

“I never found out. Anyway, I said to myself, ‘Maybe Watson admitted his mistake in doing business with Hitler.’ And I continued to work there.”

“But only for two years, you said.”

“Ja. In 1943, I heard rumors at work that IBM was continuing to do business with the Nazi government. During that time, the Germans were torpedoing our ships and shooting down our planes.” He leaned against his pillows and closed his eyes momentarily. “For a year, I made discreet investigations and inquiries. I confirmed that the reports were true.”

“Oh, my gosh.”

“I asked myself, was it to make money? Or to help the Nazis? Or both?”

I put my hand over my mouth.

“I decided I could not continue to work for IBM. When I handed in my letter of resignation, my boss told me he did not want to accept it because I was his best employee. I said, ‘I can’t work for a company that does business with the Nazis.’ And I walked out the door.”

“I’m proud of you for doing that, Opa.”

“Thank you, my dear. Promise me something.”

I leaned forward. “Promise what?”

“Do whatever you can to resist evil.”

“I will.”

“Never forget the murder of millions of our people.”

“I won’t.”

“I believe you, my sweet Rebecca. Why did God create a Hitler? A Stalin? I’ll never understand that.” His eyelids drooped, and he yawned.

“It’s late, Opa. I’ll come back tomorrow.”

## Chapter 4

The next morning, the sun's rays filtered through my curtains. My mother came into my room after I had dressed and sat beside me on my bed.

"My dear," she said, "I'm sorry to tell you grandfather passed away during the night."

"No." Sadness crept upon me like a chill. "No."

Numb and jittery, I lost my appetite for breakfast. How would I get through each day if I couldn't visit Opa and listen to his stories?

Three days later, seventy people attended his graveside funeral at the Home of Peace Cemetery. After the rabbi's brief service and Opa's burial, we stopped our normal routines. Relatives and friends visited us for seven days during the traditional Jewish mourning period, taking part in prayer services and trying to comfort us. They brought lentils, hard-boiled eggs, fruit, nuts, bread, and milk. We shared our grief and our loving recollections of Opa.

In sadness and loneliness, I mourned for him daily.

On the first anniversary of his death, Mother, following custom, lit a thick, white candle that burned for twenty-four hours. Orchestral music and the sweet fragrance of blooming jasmine that Opa and I loved, triggered fond memories of him. Playing Chopin's compositions and listening to the music of Liszt and Beethoven gave me solace.

## Chapter 5

The year after Opa died, I graduated from high school. Then, at San Francisco State University, I earned a Communications degree. I rented a narrow room in the apartment of a college friend, and most Friday evenings, I ate Sabbath dinner with my parents, enjoying their company but missing Opa.

My jobs at several companies in public relations, marketing and advertising for eight years paved the way for my position as Events Manager at Save the Children Foundation. The goal of the Foundation was to give kids around the world a healthy start in life and the opportunity to learn in a safe environment. During meetings with several wealthy donors over the next six years, I learned about their personal lives and business activities.

On my thirty-seventh birthday, I welcomed people at the gala event at the Intercontinental San Francisco Hotel.

Greg Davis, a respected business executive in his mid-fifties whom I found attractive, approached me at the welcome table. He limped as a result of a car accident. He lived alone in a house in Billionaire Row in Noe Valley that his family had owned for decades. His wife of thirty years had died three years prior.

"Good evening, Mr. Davis," I said. "It's good to see you again."

"Thank you, Rebecca. How are you?"



“Great. I’m excited about tonight’s event. After dinner and entertainment, we’ll announce the Foundation’s achievements during the last twelve months, thanks to you and other generous supporters.”

“Glad to help.”

“We appreciate that. The evening’s highlight will be an auction of fine art.”

“Interesting.”

“It sure will be. Let me show you to your table.”

I led him to a round, cloth-covered table at the front of the hall where he recognized his friends, most of them large donors. Each donor’s daily expenses were probably greater than my monthly salary.

The donors’ competitive bidding at the auction resulted in excellent funding for the Foundation, and I thanked everyone who attended. When Greg Davis and I shook hands at the exit, he said, “Rebecca, will you join me for dinner on Friday night?”

“I’d love to, Mr. Davis.”

“Call me, Greg. I’ll be in touch.”

## Chapter 6

On Friday evening, Greg arrived at my home in his chauffeur-driven limo. I wore a black pencil skirt with a new white silk blouse, red lipstick, and a silver brooch decorated with gemstones. Greg, wearing a tailored gray wool suit, opened the door for me.

“You look beautiful,” he said.

“Thank you.” I slid onto the wide, leather seat and breathed deeply, trying to calm myself.

The driver took us to the Bohemian Club at Post and Taylor. The club’s members, rich and important men, admitted ladies as guests once a month.

In the dimly lit dining room, linen tablecloths covered the widely spaced tables. I sipped a strawberry daiquiri and ordered sturgeon caviar and asparagus hors d’oeuvres from the attentive server. Greg drank scotch and decided on smoked black cod with pickled onions.

We talked about organic food and the weather, then I changed the topic. “What did you enjoy doing as a child?” I asked.

He leaned forward, his elbows on the table. “Building sandcastles on the beach.”

“I love the beach. Do you swim in the ocean?”

“I do.”

“And where do you like to travel?”

“To Annecy in the French Alps.” He rubbed his hands together as if thinking about pleasant memories. “I have a few friends who live there.”

“I’ve never heard of Annecy. What’s it known for?”

“The large lake and the mountains are gorgeous. My late wife loved Annecy Castle and the beautiful old town with a canal running through it. It’s called the Venice of the Alps.”

“Sounds like a marvelous place to visit.”

“It is.” He pinched the bridge of his nose just like Opa would do. “My wife ... she suffered from medical conditions in the years before she passed.”

“That must have been so difficult.”

“Yes. Also, my parents didn’t approve of her Irish blood.”

“Oh.” I crumpled the linen napkin on my lap, recalling the aversion I had experienced because of my heritage. “Are you aware I’m Jewish?”

He tightened his lips and squinted at me with his almond-shaped green eyes. “You’re Jewish?”

I nodded. “I am, although I’m not a temple member.”

“I’m not affiliated with any faith. My grandparents were Mormons, and my parents were Lutherans.”

“How would your family respond if you told them you were dining with a Jewish woman?”

“It doesn’t matter what they think. How would your family respond?”

“They would say, ‘It’s not right.’”

“Yes.” He tapped the table. “Besides my late wife’s Irish blood, my family knew she didn’t have good connections.”

“Good connections?”

“With influential people, you know. They also complained she slouched, frowned when she concentrated, and her voice was too shrill.”

“That must have been hard for you.” Wanting to change the subject again, I said, “I understand you were in Asia to start a business venture.”

“Where did you find out about the Asian business?”

“I did my research.”

His lips stretched into an amused smile. “That project is doing well. And a new product we introduced increased last quarter’s earnings.”

Our server brought our two-bite hors d’oeuvres. I relished the buttery creaminess and light nutty flavor of the sturgeon caviar.

When the server returned to hand us the main menu, I decided on grilled lamb and ginger cabbage. Greg, without looking at the menu, ordered barbeque duck with spicy peanuts.

My stomach tightening, I broke the beginning of a strained silence. “What do you think about real estate prices in San Francisco?”

“Outrageous.”

“I don’t understand how young people can afford to live here.”

“Well,” he said, “some families help their children.”

“Oh, yeah.” I pushed a lock of hair behind my ear. “Did you see the game last night?”

“Yes. It was thrilling. But you don’t strike me as a baseball fan.”

I looked down, my cheeks warm. I had to be careful about what I said if I was to see him again. “Honestly, I just wanted to keep the conversation going.”

“Thank you for being upfront with me.”

My face relaxed into a smile.

“What do you enjoy doing, Rebecca?”

“Playing the piano. It’s a great way to relieve my stress. I often played for my late grandfather. He loved Chopin.”

“One of my favorites. I admire people who play a musical instrument.”

When our dessert order arrived, I breathed in the musky aroma of Périgord truffle with dark chocolate ganache and loved the garlic taste. Greg gave me a piece of his golden cake with fig, apricot and pear, soaked in rum. I relished the delicate flavor.

“Besides playing the piano, what do you do to relieve stress?” Greg asked while we drank tea.

“I work out at the gym three times a week.”

“That’s more than I do.” He raked his fingers through his gray hair.

“Would you like to join me at my gym sometime?”

He raised his eyebrows as if surprised. “Does it have a pool?”

“Two. One for laps, the other for classes. How about next week?”

“Okay.”

“Can I ask you a question about your family?”

“Go ahead,” he said.

“Do you have children?”

“None that I know of.” He grinned. “Do you?”

“No. And I’m sure about that.”

After dinner, his chauffeur drove us to my home. We arranged to meet at my gym the next Thursday.

“Thank you for a pleasant evening,” I said.

“You’re welcome.”

I shook his offered hand before leaving the limo, pleased that he hadn’t kissed me on our first date.

## Chapter 7

Greg and I swam in the lap pool at my gym, where I admired his taut body. He invited me again to dinner at his club, and our evening ended with only a handshake. I thanked him and told him I enjoyed his company, wondering if I should have kissed his cheek.

On our third dinner date, I relaxed. After our meal, I accepted his invitation to join him for a late-night drink in his home. Sitting on a love seat in his spacious living room, we sipped martinis.

“I heard a joke on the radio,” Greg said.

“What is it?”

“Why do men like smart women?”

I grinned. “Tell me.”

“Opposites attract.”

I laughed a hearty laugh, then hiccupped. “I’m smart. But you are too.”

“I’m lucky I met you,” he said, his tone sincere. “You’re a good listener.”

“Especially when I’m with someone interesting.”

We exchanged a long, bold stare, and he slid his warm hand over mine. Leaning toward him, I touched his thigh. He hesitated, then his quivering lips brushed my cheek. Running his long fingers through my hair, he brought his lips to mine.

He stood, held my hand and led me to his bedroom. My breath quickened, and I felt a thrilling, radiating heat. He unzipped my dress and unclasped my bra. His suit, shirt and underwear dropped onto the carpet. He fondled my breasts and slid down my black lace panties, my back damp with perspiration. I made slow designs with my fingertip on his wide chest, stroked his back and firm butt, and lightly bit his shoulder.

“Yes,” I whispered, “yes.”

## Chapter 8

I awoke early and stared at the vaulted ceiling. I listened to the steady rain and occasional gusts of wind, imagining the quiet street below Greg’s home and people lying in their warm beds. When I grasped Greg’s hand, he pulled me to him. We made love again. Later, I showered, chuckling with the thought of spending more time with him.

The thick dawn mist hung low while we sat at the kitchen table drinking coffee and eating the mushroom and spinach omelet and buttered ciabatta Greg had ordered from a nearby bakery.

“You know, Rebecca, it’s good to share breakfast with you.”

“I’m enjoying it, too.”

His cheek twitched in nervousness. “I’m ... I’m lonely a lot.”

“Me too.”

“After my wife died, I felt I’d never want to be close to another woman. I’ve been thinking about asking you something ... something important.”

“What?” I asked, nervous but also savoring the moment of excitement.

He crossed and uncrossed his legs. “I need the love of someone special.”

“And?”

“And you’re that special person.” He stroked his ear. “Will you move in with me?”

“Greg, I really like you. And I have a wonderful time when we’re together.”

He narrowed his eyes.

“But,” I said, “I’m not ready to live with anyone.”

“Disappointing, but I understand.” His shoulders sagged. “I won’t pressure you. Would you consider going with me on vacation?”

“Where to?” I hadn’t traveled much, and the opportunity intrigued me.

“How about Fiji, the British Virgin Islands, Bora Bora?”

“Sounds wonderful. I’ve never been to any of those places.”

“I’d love to share the sights with you, my beautiful lady.”

Leaning forward, I kissed his cheek. “You flatter me.”

“It’s a well-deserved compliment, darling.”

## Chapter 9

I grew to love Greg soon after our first intimacies. He said he loved me during our frequent dates, and I believed him. I always told him I loved him dearly. When I was with him, I felt a sense of belonging, a completeness, a safety.

In Fiji, we took a seven-night cruise to Yasawa and Mamanuca islands, where we snorkeled. At the British Virgin Islands, we waded through the turquoise water in the coves. And in Bora Bora, we rode in a glass-bottomed boat, viewing wildlife in the clear water. Our shared experiences brought us closer.

In the summer of 2016, Greg gave me a three-strand, white pearl necklace that had belonged to his grandmother. The gift reminded me of the pearl necklace Opa gave me. Thrilled that Greg had given me a sentimental family item, I enjoyed wearing it when we attended the San Francisco Symphony’s opening night gala, a black-tie event.

A month later, after a candlelight dinner at Greg’s home, he said to me, “I’m going to France for a month to investigate business opportunities. Then to Charleston for a week.”

He had never told me where he traveled alone or what he did. “What are you going to Charleston for?”

“To spend time with friends and attend an IBM Annual Meeting of Stockholders.”

“IBM?”

“Yes.” He rubbed his cheek. “I’m on the Board of Directors.”

I stiffened. “When I was seventeen, my grandfather told me he had worked for IBM. He resigned after two years.”

“Why?”

“He said the IBM President, Mr. Watson, met Hitler in Berlin in 1937.”

Greg arched an eyebrow.

“And Hitler gave him a medal,” I said.

He frowned. “Three years later, Watson returned the medal.”

“So, you’re familiar with this?”

“I am.”

“But after Pearl Harbor, IBM continued to do business with the Nazi government.”

“That was a long time ago.”

“I know. But I’d like to research and learn about those events.”

“Sure,” he said.

The look in his eyes, the turn of his head, showed me he disapproved.

\*

Greg returned from France and Charleston and invited me to the busy Mandalay Restaurant on California Street. We met there and ordered tea leaf salad and noodle

soup with mushrooms and bean curd.

"I miss you when you go on business trips," I said, delaying telling him the results of my research.

"I'm glad to be back and especially to be having dinner with you."

"You know I love you."

He chuckled. "You've only told me a million times."

"How was Charleston?" I asked.

"The board meeting was effective. And I enjoyed seeing old friends."

"Good."

The food arrived, but feeling as if I had a lump in my chest from nervousness, I could only eat a few spoons of soup.

"I researched the history of IBM and other companies during World War II," I said.

"Is that right?" he asked, a hint of irritation in his voice.

"Yes. The truth stunned and horrified me. Did you know IBM equipment made it easier for the Nazis to identify and arrest millions of Jews?"

He stuck out his chin. "IBM provided a punch card sorting system."

"That system identified people by race and religion," I said in an unsteady voice. "That explains how the Germans killed so many Jews during the war years."

"What?" He stopped eating, his face rigid.

"It's the truth. In or near every large concentration camp, IBM helped maintain a customer site known as the Hollerith Department." I took a notepad from my purse.

"The Auschwitz code on IBM equipment was 001, Buchenwald 002, Dachau 003. The code used to identify Jews was 8 and 12 was for Gypsies."

He banged the table, and his face reddened. People stopped eating and stared at him.

"Rebecca, why blame IBM for something done with their products? I don't need to hear this."

My hands shook. "I won't tell you anything more about my research. But I would like to ask a couple of questions."

Greg sighed. "Go ahead."

"While IBM was doing business with the Nazis during the Second World War, did the Germans wound and kill members of the Allied armed services?" I balled my hands into fists under the table. "Did they torpedo our ships and shoot down our planes?"

"Rebecca, what's done is done." His green eyes darted with impatience. "Let's just enjoy our food."

"People need to know and be reminded of what happened," I said, my voice rising.

"There's something else. I discovered that other American companies transacted business with the Nazis."

He leaned back and watched two men enter the restaurant. "Which companies?"

"Ford manufactured a third of Germany's trucks during the war." I pressed my elbows into the arms of my chair. "Did anyone talk or write about that?"

"Some people did."

"International Telephone and Telegraph improved the Nazi communication systems."

And other companies—”

He stopped me with a wave of his finger. “Enough, Rebecca. Those companies didn’t know about mass murders.”

“Maybe they didn’t want to know.”

“I can’t stomach any more of this subject. We’ll talk tomorrow.”

He paid the check. We left the restaurant, then walked in opposite directions.

That night, I paced in my room. Should I continue my relationship with Greg? Did he understand my anguish? My head pounded. I felt as if I was struggling in a raging storm. For hours, I rehearsed what I would tell him the next day.

In the early morning stillness, I fell asleep, dreaming I heard the agonized howls and screams of children, women and men. I awoke, perspiring, to the wail of a siren.

## Chapter 10

Greg arrived at nine that morning. We sat in the living room, drinking tea and eating biscotti. Foghorns blared in the bay.

“Greg,” I said, my head throbbing, “I’ve loved being a part of your life. I’ve enjoyed our times together.”

He stroked my fingers. “Loving you has made me a better person.”

“Thank you for telling me that.” I swallowed hard. “But ... do you want me to ignore the fact that you’re on the IBM Board?” I asked in a quivering voice.

He turned sideways, crossed his legs and pressed against the back of the hardwood chair.

I drew in a long breath. “Do you think I’m okay with you assisting a business that provided equipment to identify millions of my people who were murdered? Also prolonging World War II?”

His face stiffened. “No.”

“God knows I’m haunted by what the damn Germans did.” I clenched my hands. “What are your responsibilities as a Board member?”

“Corporate management.” He cracked his knuckles. “We watch the bottom line.”

“That means,” I said, my words thick with anger, “during World War II the Board knew the company provided a service to the Nazis.”

“They probably didn’t understand the consequences.” He rubbed his chin and scowled.

“Listen. IBM develops products that have enormous technology benefits. For example, they developed an air defense system for the American government.” Speaking faster, his voice grew louder. “I can’t change what Watson and the Board did decades ago. But today, with my business experience, I can contribute to IBM’s success while growing my investments. And I enjoy the company of like-minded people.” He glared at me, his cheeks flushing pink.

If he had lived during World War II, he would have supported the business dealings between IBM and the Nazis even if he knew about mass murders. That thought

exploded in my head and revolted me.

“What don’t I know about your other business activities?”

He pounded his fist into his palm. “Why are you asking?” he said, his voice icy.

“I’m just curious.”

“Are you saying I work with unethical companies?” His hand shook in anger.

“I shouldn’t have asked.”

“I’ve nothing to hide. Ask all you want.” He twisted his cufflink. “Tell me what you’ve been thinking ... but not saying.”

“I ... I’m uncomfortable. I don’t know what to do.”

“About what?”

“I wish I could get over this hurdle.”

“Rebecca, if you can’t, I’ll miss you.”

“And I would be lonely without you.” I squeezed my hands.

“Most people see me as a rich man with social status. They don’t care about me,” he said, his voice firm. “You do care, and you respect my need to be alone at times. You allow me to concentrate on my work.”

“I would like to continue doing that. But my grandfather would have hated me to be in a relationship with an IBM Board member. My parents and my other family members would be dismayed. I never told you that the Germans murdered grandfather’s three sisters and brother. They also murdered my grandmother’s two sisters.”

“That’s heartbreaking.”

“Yes. I can’t suppress my obsession to discover everything about companies that conducted business with the Nazi government.”

“Rebecca, will you consider that IBM is a different company today than it was during the Second World War?”

“I can’t separate them. I just can’t do that.”

“Well ... for me, getting and keeping wealth takes a never-give-up attitude. I must focus on my financial objectives.”

“I don’t do that.”

“I know.” He kept his voice low. “Not having children of my own, I get pleasure from my donations that give kids a healthy start in life. A chance to learn. I also enjoy taking you to excellent restaurants and exotic resorts.”

“Thank you for all that.” I rubbed my knuckles. “I’ve thought a lot about the mass killing of people. What do you think motivates genocide?”

“There could be many reasons.”

“For example?”

“Revenge, power struggles, economic reasons.”

“Or because they believe their victims are a threat?”

“I don’t know.” He examined me as if seeing a stranger, the blue veins in his neck pulsating. “Perhaps we should take a break from each other.”

“Yes.” My breath stuttered, and I tried to hide my disappointment with a tight face.

He stood and hurried away, limping, and closed the door behind him. I felt the sting of betrayal, alone in disappointed silence.



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For the next four years, Greg attended Save the Children Foundation's gala events. A young, black-haired woman always accompanied him, clinging to his arm. I couldn't help feeling jealous, and sad and angry. I missed his smile, his touch. Sometimes I imagined we would date again, but I soon pushed that thought out of my mind. I met other men through the Foundation events. They asked me to join them for a meal or a show, and I kept the dates casual. In 2020, at age forty-three, I accepted another job offer at a non-profit foundation and didn't see Greg again.

## Epilog

As a child, I often heard the term "Nazi beast" during my parents' conversations. I asked about the beast, and the answer was, "Some things a child should not know." I realized later my father and mother wanted to protect my innocence. A part of me preferred to ignore the horrors caused by the Nazi authority and the companies who conducted business with them before and during World War II. But I felt duty-bound to document how they prolonged the war, which resulted in more human suffering and deaths. My investigations into business dealings with the Nazis tapped my critical, creative and emotional capabilities and often brought tears. To learn that companies like the Aluminum Company of America (Alcoa), Ford, General Motors and Standard Oil had business transactions with the Nazi government, haunted me. Stories I listened to and read, described the terrors and trauma of war. An old Russian war veteran, his eyes moist, told me, "Every day I wake up thinking about the enemy soldiers I killed. And I grieve for my comrades who were wounded, went missing or died. Including my best friend." My parents taught me to believe in a compassionate, loving God. But how could I believe in a God who allowed millions of my people to be murdered? In my nightmares, I screamed, seeing myself as a skeletal woman, diseased and starving in a concentration camp. On awakening, my legs often trembled.

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To relax on one weekend, I strolled in Golden Gate Park and the San Francisco Botanical Gardens. The sun's warming rays caressed the Blue Gum eucalyptus and Monterey cypress trees. Clusters of moss grew in the shade and the jasmine blossoms offered their sweet fragrance. Clouds hung across the dome of deep blue. In the still air, a red-tailed hawk soared, swung and drifted. Dragonflies twisted and circled in a dance. Three weeks later, a moaning wind tore leaves from the trees. Foghorns wailed, reminding me of the death, sadness and pain caused by Nazi tyranny.

# Joni Mitchell: Poet Laureate of Her Generation

John C. Krieg

This is a story about a beautiful woman with beautiful words. This is a story about a beautiful woman who became an angry woman with angry words. This is a story about a beautiful angry woman who grew old, wise, and accepting. This is a story about how beauty is often fleeting in life, so fleeting in fact, that by necessity this story will be short.

She was born Roberta Joan Anderson on November 11<sup>th</sup>, 1943 in Fort McLeod, Alberta, Canada. Fort McLeod was a dilapidated depression era town that was not likely to be renovated anytime soon because of Canada's involvement in World War Two that began in September of 1939. Her father served as a lieutenant in the Royal Canadian Air Force while her mother worked as a bank clerk. At the end of the war in August of 1945 they moved to Maidstone, Saskatchewan. There was no running water in that tiny town and there were only two stores, and of the two, her father was the manager of the general store. Her early childhood years were marred by sicknesses. Her appendix burst when she was three and she later contracted both German and red measles. Undeterred, she had an artistic bent very early on and was particularly drawn to color ahead of all else.

They moved to Saskatoon, Saskatchewan when Joni was six, and her childhood was apparently idyllic until disaster struck at age 10 when she fell victim to a polio epidemic sweeping across Canada which was a country that wouldn't get the Salk Vaccine for another two years. Fellow Canadian and future friend, famed musician Neil Young, would also suffer the same fate. She was hospitalized in isolation for a period of three months only being visited once by her mother and not at all by her father. In fairness to her parents, it should be noted that polio is a contagious disease until it is in remission, and adults can and did catch it. However, anyone who has been hospitalized for any period of time, even for as little as a week, will tell you that they will always remember who did and who didn't come to visit them while they were there. Hospitals are intimidating lonely places and this near abandonment would leave a deep impression upon her and explains some of the underlying resentments that led to her ongoing rocky relationship with her parents. While in isolation she vowed to herself that she would walk again and refused to give up on that goal during her year-long convalescence at home. Doggedly determined, she refused all walking aids, or to utilize a wheelchair. Her father had been a tennis champion, and Joni may have also been equally as athletically gifted save for this childhood affliction. She did walk again, but would not be able to achieve her earlier athletic promise; polio had taken that from her, so she poured her physical frustrations into dancing. Saskatoon was and is the largest city in Saskatchewan and had a population of 50,000 in the early fifties. To young Joni Mitchell it seemed a thriving metropolis, especially in comparison to Fort McLeod or Maidstone. Her father continued working for the same grocery store chain,

and her mother became a schoolteacher. They were not particularly outgoing or sociable people, but their daughter most definitely was. Between ages 12 to 16 Joni Mitchell lived to dance and was so dedicated to that endeavor that waiting for weekend dances was unbearable for her, so she attended Wednesday night church sponsored teen dances. American folk-rock and rock-n'-roll music along with the angst of American teen culture began to draw her in. She was a big fan of the Everly Brothers and Elvis Presley and was most likely despondent at the death of James Dean in 1955. School became of secondary importance to her and she was known to hang out in the run-down seedy downtown area of Saskatoon where she found the disenfranchised indigenous peoples and Ukrainian immigrants to be more real and more liberated dancers. She was to later say that she found that the music in what were always viewed as rough urban areas to always be decidedly better.

She was good-looking enough to receive some modeling assignments from department stores which kept her in pocket money, and with her store discounts for clothing, she became well-dressed enough to stand out from the crowd and be considered fashionable. She could also purchase cigarettes which she started smoking in her preteens and was never able to stop doing during her entire adult life.

With her disposable income she also bought a ukulele and with the aid of a Pete Seeger songbook became proficient at playing the four-string instrument by ear. Her playing of all string instruments would always be viewed as unorthodox due to weakness in her left hand as the aftermath of polio. She would basically use one finger moving quickly around the neck of the instrument while her right hand did the bulk of the work. Even at that, she would improve to become a master musician. She was so dedicated to her ukulele that friends threatened to break it if she wouldn't stop playing it in their presence. By her own account, Joni was content with her teen years; and polio and the other typical hardships of adolescence in general, seemed to be behind her, but fate would soon intervene. At age 19 she was singing as a solo act in some Saskatoon coffee houses and was good enough to also appear at venues in Calgary, Regina, and Edmonton. Her indifference to schooling caused her to be written off as an aspirant to a "real career" and after high school she was subsequently exiled to art school at the Alberta University of the Arts in Calgary where she met handsome Brad McMath and became pregnant when having her first sexual experience with him at age 21. 1964 was just too close to the repressive fifties, and a woman having a child out of wedlock was considered scandalous. Joan Anderson never seemed to hold McMath in any form of contempt for initially moving in with her in an attempt to do the right thing, but then disappearing shortly thereafter when the enormity of the commitment sank in. Not wanting her parents to know of her pregnancy, she moved to Toronto, Ontario, and lived an austere existence. Somehow acquiring a mini guitar, she started performing on street corners and in some underground clubs doing folk covers and even a few of her own efforts. When the baby girl named Kelly Dale Anderson was born on February 19<sup>th</sup>, 1965 she was immediately entered into foster care, although her mother fully intended to get her life together and come for the child.

It was at this tumultuous point in her life that she met Chuck Mitchell, a folk singer active in Toronto's hip Yorktown District. She was so destitute that she quickly entered into this relationship and shortly thereafter became married in June of 1965 primarily because Mitchell possessed a \$149.00 musician's union card which gave them access into the better clubs and coffee houses down south across the border in Detroit as a singing duo. Both being physically attractive, many folk music fans considered them a, "golden couple." Folk musicians of the day frequently stayed at each other's residences when performing away from their home cities, and the Mitchell's were considered entertaining and gracious hosts for such folk luminaries as Gordon Lightfoot, Jesse Colin Young, Tom Rush, Rambling Jack Elliot, and others. When not keeping up appearances for their houseguests, Chuck Mitchell proved to be arrogant on the basis of his bachelor's degree in English Literature. He belittled and berated her as uneducated, unread, and for not being what he considered his intellectual equal. For her part, she was always suspicious of academics, held a contempt for rote learning, and basically heard the beat of a different drummer. However, as the entire world would soon come to find out, she was far from ignorant, and most definitely not unintelligent. Chuck Mitchell fell under the spell that afflicts a lot of academics, that being that they fail to notice the difference between memorization/regimentation and true creativity. This, and that academia always protects its own. Even though his wife was writing the songs and had the far better vocal range that contributed to their rising popularity, Mitchell consider himself the star, and her the second banana of the duo. She possessed other talents that were also being repressed, and one has to wonder how much she resented it internally. Although she identifies as painter first and foremost in, "A Case of You," on 1971's *Blue* album, her aspirations as an artist were apparently on put hold during her marriage as the duo tried to become a popular money making act. She correctly began to see that he was holding her back and unwittingly sabotaging her growth. This caused her to book solo performances on a regular basis, and late in 1966 when at the 2nd Fret Club in Philadelphia, she met a folk singer named Michael who was from Colorado and who was appearing at another Philadelphia club. They had a brief romantic entanglement and this tryst would eventually produce the song, "Michael From the Mountains." Not-too-surprisingly, this dalliance, along with her basically disbanding their act, was not well-received by Chuck Mitchell, and the marriage shortly thereafter disintegrated. Perhaps the strain of the relationship reached the tipping point towards dissolution when on a trip from Detroit back to Canada the couple stopped at the foster home where her daughter was living. They both held the baby, although the experience most likely didn't have the same impact on him that it did on her. Realizing the futility of it all, she then signed the surrender papers, and amongst the, "Non-Identifying Background Information," she revealed that the father was tall and that the mother had suffered from polio, and left these revealing words: "Mother left Canada for U.S. to pursue career as folksinger." Chuck Mitchell was next. While they honored their commitments for appearances together, by early 1967, their marriage was effectively over, and they last appeared as a duo in May of that year. In fairness to her first husband, she does intimate that there

was love initially, and she did keep his name; whether this was in homage to him, or because she didn't want to start over on the name recognition that she had struggled to build up is not known. Shortly thereafter she moved to New York City to pursue her solo career.

While performing solo in Toronto during November of '66 at the Riverboat Coffeehouse in Yorkville Village a young singer named Malka Marom would walk in on Joni's act and excitedly introduce herself to Mitchell who was well-aware of who she was. The Canadian Broadcasting Company, the official voice of English-speaking Canada, aired a show entitled, *A World of Music* that immediately followed the Saturday night hockey game, and as a result received a large viewership coast-to-coast. The starring act was "Malka and Josko" two immigrants who sang beautifully together, even if they didn't pronounce some English words very well, especially Josko. He was Italian and she was Israeli, and the show's producers were constantly on them to westernize their act which meant to be more decidedly Canadian and less "foreign." Josko tried to conform, and Malka feels she tried to be reasonable, but the producers saw her as arrogant, and the act was doomed to failure. The two performers were arguing earlier in the evening about their artistic integrity the night that Malka met Joni. Marom inquired if Mitchell had written the songs that she had just performed, and when informed that she had, Marom gushed, "You did? My God, what an enormous talent you are! Immense! And what a range, your voice, four octaves, even five – huge range! And the poetry! What a poet you are, as wonderful as Dylan and Leonard Cohen!" Marom tried to promote Mitchell to executives at her record company and even dragged one of them to hear her perform, but he quickly grew weary of her many time consuming open tunings and walked out in the middle of a set. That night Joni Mitchell wrote down three of her songs for Malka Marom to sing, and to her credit, Marom always credited Mitchell every time she did. It appeared that they went their separate ways, but the two were joined by destiny and also were kindred spirits in that both were beautiful, both were soon to dissolve their faltering marriages, and both would not accept failure in their careers. Marom moved into broadcast journalism and was to live interview Mitchell in 1973, 1979, and 2012; a four-decade arc of Joni's diverse career. The resulting book entitled: *Joni Mitchell: In Her Own Words* (2014) is beautifully produced and contains a great many of Mitchell's song lyrics and art works, in fact, more than any other reference, in total. This book seems the most real of the many written about Mitchell, because, well...a lot of it is in her own words.

Notoriety may have been slow in coming but it was steadily building. In August of 1967 Judy Collins introduced her to The Newport, Rhode Island Folk Festival audience and she sang a monumental, short set, including "Michael From the Mountains," "Chelsea Morning," and "The Circle Game." The crowd, sensing that they had just witnessed greatness, gave her a prolonged standing ovation. It was at this event where she met and was courted by songwriting great and novelist Leonard Cohen, ten years her senior, and more appropriately somewhat of her intellectual equal who had a profound impact upon her insightful song writing. Joni Mitchell was now on her way.

In October of '67 while back in New York and performing at the Café Au Go Go Elliot Roberts, acting on a tip from Buffy Sainte Marie, introduced himself to Joni as an up and coming young manager that would kill to represent her. Mitchell invited him out on the road with her on his own nickel for over a month, and when it was over, she signed with him.

Now on the up-swinging pendulum towards musical immortality things began to happen fast. While singing at a coffeehouse in Coconut Grove, Florida David Crosby of Byrds fame walked in and was thoroughly blown away. Crosby who had recently been drummed out of the Byrds was in Florida looking to buy a sailboat on which to mellow out and figure things out. A man known for his gargantuan ego and a hedonistic flair for living, perhaps he was at his most vulnerable period of his entire life, and Mitchell apparently found that attractive enough to engage in a brief affair that was basically over by the time he brought her to Los Angeles, California, and let her briefly live with him at his home in famed Laurel Canyon. Their stories vary concerning how much he helped her in her career. He did have contacts in the music industry that he introduced her to, but for her part, Mitchell sometimes felt that Crosby was parading her around and passing her off as his “find.” Joni Mitchell is nothing if not a fiercely independent woman, and this was cause for some deep-seated resentment.

Roberts orchestrated a contract between Mitchell and Mo Ostin of Reprise Records that was considered quite good for a woman considering the standards of the time. Roberts also allowed Crosby to produce her first album entitled: *Joni Mitchell*, or sometimes referred to as *Song to a Seagull* (1968), and again, opinions differ as to just how useful he really was. Crosby credited himself for allowing her to be basically unfiltered saying that he just wanted to get her on tape without a lot of “other junk” on top of it. Mitchell felt that the album was poorly produced primarily due to Crosby’s lack of technical ability at the sound mixing board. The friendship would survive for a few more years, but from then on out, Mitchell held Crosby at arm’s length. Mitchell grew contemptuous of record producers in general feeling that they did little beyond mucking up the waters. For her second album *Clouds* (1969), and for the majority of her remaining career, she forged a friendship/partnership with sound engineer Henry Lewy and rarely gave any producing credits on her album covers which all featured her personal artwork or photos of her.

I feel a kinship with Mitchell’s stance concerning record producers because I was stifled in my personal design career to the point of feeling literally handcuffed by owners, design review committees, contractors, city planning staffs, and any other Tom, Dick, or Harry who either consistently sacrificed anything that whiffed of greatness upon the altar of greed or ego gone awry, or who had an opinion that I could have gone my entire lifetime without hearing. But hear them I did, and I came to the realization as to why they felt that I should hear them – they didn’t respect my talent because they didn’t feel I was quite talented enough to escape their “help.” Joni Mitchell has a bedrock belief in her abilities and nobody; not Chuck Mitchell, not David Crosby, not anyone else through the ensuing years, was going to tell her what to do or

how to do it. All I can say about this trait is that it must be nice – and lonely. There is only room for one at the mountain top and very few have the talent to make the climb, much less to stay up there for very long. They will call you arrogant. They will call you difficult to work with. They will call you impossible, on occasion. But, when you have her kind of talent, what they can't call you is wrong. It must be nice.

Mitchell herself said that she was late to the rapidly changing and fast dwindling folk scene; and change in the sixties was happening at warp speed. The British invasion, now two years down the road from its inception, was now offering more socially conscious music such as The Kinks "Well Respected Man," (1965), and The Who's, "My Generation," (1965). Opposition to the Vietnam War birthed protest music that was more full-throated and definitely louder than the usual folk music fare; most notably Buffalo Springfield's, "For What It's Worth," released in December of 1966. The telling refrain pretty much alerted an awakening generation to the fact that the old white men running America were pretty much untouchable and in it for themselves:

*It's time we stop  
Hey, what's that sound?  
Everybody look what's going down?*

Joni Mitchell was to write and eventually sing her ultimate peace and love song of the sixties – "Woodstock" – and for my generation, that was our anthem, and that was the song that changed everything.

Off the impending success of her first album, she was able to purchase her very own Laurel Canyon home at 8217 Lookout Mountain in the spring of 1968, and from this base of operations she quickly ascended to the status of hippy-princess-goddess, at least until the decade ended. Although she would eventually be moving on up to a swanker Bel Air address, she never sold her Laurel Canyon residence. Laurel Canyon was the epicenter of the Southern California music scene. It was home to the Byrds, the Turtles, Buffalo Springfield, Frank Zappa, the Mama's and Papa's, Alice Cooper, Love, the Doors, and the Monkees in the mid-to-late-sixties during a first wave of popularity, and then boasted Linda Ronstadt, Jackson Browne, Little Feat, Bonnie Raitt, and the Eagles in its second popular wave of the early seventies. An enclave of creativity and good will, the Laurel Canyon scene was an inspired and visionary moment in time set against the backdrop of the Vietnam War, Nixon's Watergate scandal, and the economic emergence of the baby boom generation. Why wouldn't there be peace and love amongst a group of artistic people living out their dreams and doing exactly what they wanted to do? The Charles Manson murders of August 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup>, 1969 punctured a gaping hole in this age of innocence. Hippiedom took a severe hit and needed to be righted, and it briefly was just six days later, because *then came Woodstock*.

The fairy-tale-like romance between Joni Mitchell and Graham Nash of the English folk-rock group The Hollies (so named in honor of deceased Buddy Holly) is well documented, especially by Nash himself. In his memoir entitled: *Wild Tales: A Rock & Roll Life* (2013) Nash states that his membership in the Hollies was personally wearing thin because he wanted to expand their musical repertoire and his bandmates were perfectly happy regurgitating the three-minute Top-40 pop radio hit. Nash had been introduced to the Laurel Canyon scene back in '67 when Mama Cass Elliott of the Mama's and Papa's took him there after being introduced to him at one of her group's recording sessions. Elliott was a gregarious woman, who loved being a match-making maven. She had a huge circle of friends and was known for introducing visiting English band members to American band members. That day Nash met David Crosby for the first-time and had his first introduction to very potent marijuana. They developed a friendship with each other over the next year, but things in Nash's life would take a seismic shift in March of 1968 when while touring with the Hollies in Ottawa, Canada he met Joni Mitchell at a party thrown by their record company. That sealed the deal for Nash who already had one foot out of England with the other one soon to follow. She seemed to have that effect on men, and better yet for Nash, she was there that night because she was on the prowl for him. He went home, spent a few month's settling his affairs and tying up loose ends before he hopped on a plane headed for Los Angeles, California that August. Writes Nash:

*How's this for starters: I was contemplating leaving my country, my marriage, my bank account, and my band – all at once! Any one of those would have been enough to put a grown man in the hole, but I was close to running the table (p. 1)...*

*There was no point stopping for baggage. I had my guitar. That was it. That was all I had come with. Nothing else mattered. I was in America. I was going to see my new girlfriend, to be with Joni (p. 3).*

Upon entering Mitchell's Laurel Canyon home, he was reacquainted with David Crosby who was accompanied by Stephan Stills. Both, for different reasons, had recently left their bands; the Byrds, and Buffalo Springfield, respectfully. They were contemplating doing something together, and according to legend, upon singing one of Stills' songs twice, Nash who possessed a great ear and who was a quick study requested that they sing it a third time, whereupon he laid on the highest pitched and third harmony, and Crosby, Stills, and Nash (CSN) was born. He had run the table alright, and came up with the golden girl, the golden band, and the golden state on his very first roll. Indeed, how was that for starters? In short, those Laurel Canyon Days were magical – pure unadulterated magic.

Mitchell seemed content with this relationship and entered a prolific writing period penning most of *Ladies of the Canyon* (1970) and some of *Blue* (1971) while they were together. And, of course, there was Woodstock, that festival of peace and music down at Max Yasgur's dairy farm in New York state. Crosby, Stills and Nash had added Neil Yong to the group (CSNY) and now had the largest selling album in America, so of



course, they were invited, Mitchell was also invited and desperately wanted to perform on the last night which was Sunday August 17<sup>th</sup>, but she was scheduled to appear on the *Dick Cavett Show* the next morning, Monday August 18<sup>th</sup>. Her manager Elliott Roberts had joined forces with David Geffen known for his frankness, and Geffen advised her to stay in New York City and not risk a helicopter crash or any other calamity that could cause her to miss the widely popular television show. Elliott Roberts and CSNY chartered two helicopters out to the event. This was only CSNY's second live performance, late at night between 3:00 and 4:15 a.m., technically Monday morning, and they killed it. Neil Young, for reasons that only made sense to Neil Young, refused to be filmed but played admirably. Incredibly Crosby, Stills and her boyfriend Nash made it back to New York in time to crash the show and basically steal Joni's thunder. She had dejectedly watched the event from her hotel room in the city and had written the words to the post-event's trademark song "Woodstock" before the Monday morning television appearance. In his marvelous biography on Mitchell entitled: *Reckless Daughter: A Portrait of Joni Mitchell* (2017) David Yaffe recalls her stating:

*The deprivation of not being able to go provided me with an intense angle on Woodstock. Woodstock, for some reason, impressed me as being a modern miracle, like a modern-day fishes-and-loaves story. For a herd of people so large to cooperate so well, it was pretty remarkable, and there was tremendous optimism. So I wrote the song 'Woodstock' out of these feelings, and the first three times I performed it in public, I burst into tears, because it brought back the intensity of the experience and was so moving* (p. 108).

Nash intimates that their all-of-one-year relationship was already having problems and showed a tone-deaf sensitivity towards her feelings about missing out on the most epic event of hippiedom by being rhapsodic about the festival on the *Dick Cavett Show*. She kept her cool, performed four songs, but over time everyone would come to know that she never quite got over missing the concert. She wasn't alone. The Doors cancelled at the last minute. Led Zeppelin, Simon & Garfunkel, Spirit, and a host of other bands underestimated the enormity of the event and declined invitations, as did Roy Rodgers who was asked, for nostalgic purposes, to sing "Happy Trails" at the close. Wouldn't Roy and Jimi Hendrix sharing the same stage have been just a kick in the butt? Incredulously, Bob Dylan never entered into serious negotiations with concert promoters, and he lived in Woodstock! Joni let all who cared to notice that some had missed out on a lesson:

*Well maybe it is just the time of year  
Or maybe it's the time of man  
I don't know who I am  
But you know life is for learning*

Joni included it on 1970's *Ladies of the Canyon*, and later that year CSNY turned "Woodstock" into a romping stomping barroom anthem on their *Deja Vu* album. As usual, Joni's version was more heartfelt and nuanced - more totally her. States Yaffe:

*But Joni wasn't kidding when she compared the event to a funeral. Her version of the song is a modal dirge... "Woodstock" would have fit in as a brooding ballad. Joni lets out a wordless tribal moan. This is not only "song and celebration." It is purgation. It is an omen that something very, very bad will happen when the mud dries and the hippies go home. The garden they had to get back to - it was an illusion. It must have been lonely for Joni. She was the only one who could see it (p. 111).*

That something "very, very bad" manifested itself at Altamont, Kent State, and with the ongoing abomination of Nixon. Any one of them could have been the death kneel to peace and love, but all three at one time was a nuclear holocaust. Unfortunately, we all got to see and live it.

Her romance with Graham Nash sputtered along into the new year, and both have their own version of what finally ended it. He says he couldn't commit like he felt she wanted him to, and that he felt that she felt he was going to insist she be a housewife, which he insists he had no intention of doing. She says, that after the Chuck Mitchell letdown, that she was guarded and deep down inside didn't feel ready for a marital commitment. I say they both had their issues, not the least of which was plenty of new-found money and a sea of other attractive people to experience. Indecision leads to conflict, conflict leads to bruised feelings, and bruised feelings leads to Splitsville. The romance fizzled and they drifted apart. They remained friends, but Mitchell was maturing in ways that the boys in the band simply weren't. In short, the ongoing story of CSN/CSNY borders on the willfully stupid.

Nash's book goes on ad nauseum about the dysfunction of CSN and CSNY. What could destroy the biggest American band that bridged the decades of the sixties and the seventies? A massive ballooning of overinflated egos, and copious amounts of cocaine. David Crosby was an insufferable hedonist and Neil Young was a band killer par excellence. Not that Stills and Nash didn't do plenty of white powdery lines, but they had the professionalism to show up on time and perform up to their own high standards. When David Crosby let his girlfriend take the rap for his suitcase packed with coke in 1984, I had had enough, as had most of all but their most diehard fans. They were the supergroup that only really cut two notable albums. Brilliant at their inception, they underperformed, and for that reason, are overrated in my book. Mitchell had her own bouts with coke and the cigarettes would eventually destroy her exceptional voice. The celebrity and success led to utter self-absorption that viciously turned to self-destruction under the intense glare of the spotlight of fame. Ego can be masked, even hidden behind a wall of false modesty, but it never really leaves the psyche of the gifted and the adored while cocaine is a hard habit to kick when you can afford it. Both linger for years as a kind of diabetes of the soul slowly eroding the overall health of the organism. It's tough to watch and even tougher to live with,

especially when you have to live with yourself.

In early 1970 Mitchell left for an extended vacation in Europe and in Greece. Many of her experiences there found their way onto the tracks on *Blue*. She sent a kiss-off telegram to Graham Nash and shortly after her return to the states became involved with up and coming James Taylor. The first song on *Blue* entitled, "All I Want," is fun and flirty and seems to indicate that she was certainly up for a new romance:

*I want to be strong, I want to laugh along  
I want to belong to the living  
Alive, alive, I want to get up and jive  
I want to wreck my stockings in some jukebox dive  
Do you want, do you want, do you want to dance with me baby?  
Do you want to take a chance  
On maybe finding some sweet romance with me, baby?  
Well come on*

I can't think of too many men who were contemporary to this period that she would have had to ask twice. Well come on? Come on, indeed. I'm glad that I really didn't delve into *Blue* until my late thirties. There was a lot of love lost, a lot of rejection, a lot of disillusionment by then. It was a period of wishing that I had known back in my younger more attractive years what I came to know at the doorstep to middle age; with the sad realization that that was an impossibility. *Blue* reeked with nostalgia, even the nostalgia of a woman that was only 28 years old when it was released in '71. Mitchell had survived polio, giving up a child to adoption, a doomed marriage, being mugged in New York three times, numerous romantic advances for all the wrong reasons, the first blush of stratospheric success, and was still young and desirable with her most nuanced written work ahead of her. That had to inspire a certain amount of self-confidence. Confident enough to wonder aloud what life would be like for her daughter who would now be six years old. It was here that Mitchell began sending messages to her lost daughter. "Little Green" is a haunting song that also manages to be joyful and hopeful. Haunted by the loss and hopeful of the reunion. The most telling lines being:

*Just a little green  
Like the color when the spring is born  
There'll be crocuses to bring to school tomorrow*

Crocuses are the first flowers of spring, frequently pushing up through the snow in cold winter areas. *Crocus vernus*, the Dutch Crocus is the most commonly planted variety, and deep blue is its most common color. To a girl living through the hard winters of the cold Canadian plains these low growing cupped-shaped flowers were a symbol that better days were ahead, and its plausible that this is what Mitchell most wanted for her daughter. Though a very sad story, there were some rays of light. The child was alive and genetically endowed to most likely grow up beautiful, and life can

be easier for the beautiful – not always, but more likely than not. So, there was hope, and for Mitchell, there was a certain freedom, because I don't think that she would have benefitted during her early creative growth period by being a stay-at-home mother. There's something about the innocence of children that softens you, that sands down the edges, that takes away life's crispness. Life is more satisfying with children, and satisfaction often leads to complacency and boredom. It's conceivable that she may not have evolved into the writer or musician that she did if there wasn't that hunger, or that loss. Loss often leads to an insatiable desire for some form of redemption to fill that void.

Bob Dylan is on record as stating that he wrote his masterpiece song "Tangled Up and Blue," after listening to the entirety of Joni's *Blue* album over and over again one weekend. For both of them, the emphasis was on the word "blue."

So, what is it that makes Joni Mitchell such an exceptional song writer? Why does she stand head and shoulders above the crowd? She certainly has the power of observation. She has empathy and insight, but so do a host of lesser song writers. What she possesses, like a sixth sense, is *intuition*, and it is truly a gift. Intuition is the inherent ability to understand something immediately without the aid of conscious reasoning. In a sense, it is the knack to read a person or read a room and instinctively zero in on their vibe. She oftentimes seemed to know what people were thinking before they themselves were aware of what they were thinking. Graham Nash said she would go into an almost trance-like zone and block all outside distractions out. Those were her intuitive moments and those moments ultimately made her great.

*Rolling Stone Magazine* poked fun at her as, "The Queen of EL Lay," complete with a map-like graphic depicting her romantic liaisons in a 1971 issue touching off a decades long feud that led to her snubbing her induction into The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1997. The idea for the Hall was conceived by *Rolling Stone Magazine* owner and Chief Editor Jann Wenner, and Ahmet Ertegun the founder of Atlantic Records. Inductions started in 1986 with ceremonies occurring at various venues. The Hall found a permanent home in Cleveland Ohio in 1995, housed in a 150,000 square foot shining jewel of a structure that plunges into Lake Erie that was designed by renowned architect I. M. Pei. The city of Cleveland pledged \$65,000,000.00 for construction and made the point that it was the home of Radio Station WJW where in-house disc jockey Alan Freed originally coined the words "rock-and-roll." Seems fair enough to me. While the hall did contribute mightily to the popularity of rock music and has done wonders to record its history, it has not been without its feuds through the years. Artist are only nominated 25 years after the release of their first album and selected by a 500 to 1,000-person committee of rock aficionados – or so they claim. Allegations of favoritism and politics have often surfaced, but this is rock-n'-roll, after all, and it has always been controversial. Differences in opinions abound, and many worthy recording artists remain on the outside looking in; lest you doubt, I have two words for you - Alvin Lee. Needless to say, Mitchell did not like Wenner, and when the Hall refused to cover her and her parent's expenses, she boycotted the ceremony. But when you're in, you're in, and she stands shoulder-to-shoulder with the greats, some

feeling (like I) that perhaps she stands as one of the greatest.

Her next album, released in 1972, entitled: *For the Roses*, for reasons to be enumerated on below, fell through the cracks for a lot of the boomer generation. Perhaps people had to digest *Blue* a little longer. The album had something to do with roses alright, but not in a conventional sense. There were no pretty roses on the cover; just a picture of Joni on her land in British Columbia where she had a spartan cabin built that she liked to go to in order to decompress. The roses metaphor related to prize thoroughbred racehorses being bedecked with a wreath of roses when they were in the winner's circle, and when they were no longer winners, they were oftentimes taken out and shot. It wasn't lost on her that in the competitive music industry, you were treated well so long as you made money for your handlers, and when you weren't making them money...well. She got a taste of some more commercial success that had eluded her since "Big Yellow Taxi," on *Ladies of the Canyon* with this tongue-in-cheek country number: "You Turn Me On, I'm a Radio," – I love that friggin' tune. It's included in my five-song playlist for my funeral. Those four immortal lines:

*You don't like weak women  
You get bored so quick  
And you don't like strong women  
Because they're hip to your tricks*

That was just a year before the time that she was going on conjoined dates with both Jack Nicholson and Warren Beatty and was holding both these notorious womanizers at bay...toying with them, really. And then came those four lines for the ages:

*If your heart says, "Forget it."  
But your heart's still smoking  
Call me at the station  
The lines are open*

Oh yeah, I'd been there, baby! And you knew that the only path to a resolution, either way, was to accept the fact that you were going to pay with some more heartache. This was the coyest of the coy chicks giving you the ultimate come on. She was not too dumb and not too smart (yeah, sure) but perhaps just right. Oh God, that song always got my motor running. You just knew that this was a woman who could hold your interest in the sack. That song also unnerved me, exposed me, called me on my bullshit, because not only had she figured men like me out, she also made it readily apparent that she was more worldly, more experienced, and definitely smarter.

All of her released music, up until now, was basically acoustic, with an occasional electric guitar riff, and some drumming by Russ Kunkel who was a selfless man who

had adopted Mama Cass Elliot's young daughter after she died, and who sensed the free-wheeling direction that Joni was being drawn to and advised, "You need to play with jazz musicians." She heeded the advice and joined forces with Tom Scott's L.A. Express. The group's accomplished drummer John Guerin, a good-looking guy, was to become her next love interest after a brief stint with Jackson Browne. The jazz influence, and some well-rounded and maturing emotive writing produced the most successful and widely known album of her entire career. Joni Mitchell caught lightning in bottle with 1974's *Court & Spark*. It was truly a monumental work. Those brilliant lines – I loved them all; but these four lines from, "Down to You," saved me in the fall of 1974.

*Just when you're thinking  
That you've finally got it made  
Bad news comes knocking  
At your garden gate*

How many times through the years when I was down and out would these lines return to me? What did I expect? Joni Mitchell had warned me early in my career. How much more real could it get? At that time, I was living in dirty gritty downtown Buffalo, working at my first dead end architectural job, and drinking a river of whiskey to numb myself to that reality. My low-rent rundown ramshackle hotel room was on the fifth floor, and the elevator was always broken. You could expect to run into anyone and anything on the stairs. One day coming through the lobby, I was passed by a stretcher containing the body of a resident who had been stabbed to death. The perpetrator was still unknown and still at large. He/she could well have been my next-door neighbor. Needless to say, I always wedged the back of a chair against my door handle. Listening to "Court and Spark," got me through many seemingly endless sleepless nights. Somehow those songs let me know that everything would be okay, that I hadn't hit bottom, that there was hope.

There wasn't much counter cultural magazine material for reading outside of *Rolling Stone* and they never featured any poetry making me wonder where were all the great poets of the Twentieth Century? They were the song writers jotting down their lyrics on nightclub napkins or across the back of unopened envelopes containing unpaid bills. They weren't submitting to stodgily stiff book publishers or arrogant New York City book agents who have forever been whining that poetry just doesn't sell. Fucking idiots, it was selling all the time, and they just weren't astute or attuned enough to even notice it. The song writers recorded their songs and then took their acts out on the road to promote their albums in the higher court of fan adoration. These modern-day troubadours replaced the old-school poets, because one advantage that the song writer has over the on-paper poet is not only a wider range for their voice inflections, but also musical inflections. Even poets good at readings and poetry slams don't have the power of the music to set and reinforce their mood. Joni Mitchell was right – if you had the talent, who the hell needed a producer?

I believe that fans have a tendency to adopt the works of recording artists during those periods of their personal lives when they are most receptive to the artist's message; and receptiveness to new or uplifting messages most frequently occurs when they are young, idealistic, and free. Look through most record or compact disc collections and there will frequently be a "sweet spot" when the holder of that collection was "into" those artists. I came to admire the work of the Rolling Stones after the Brian Jones era, most specifically starting with *Let it Bleed*, and progressing to *Sticky Fingers*, and then on to *Exile on Main Street*. I would not trade away or give away these three works for any amount or under the forces of any form of coercion, and they were immediately replaced if lost, damaged, or stolen. Those albums were the audio touchstones of my life, and although the Rolling Stones were to go on to record many more albums over the arc of their career, the arc of my career stagnated to the point that by my mid-forties, I was rarely listening to much of my preferred music at all.

With Joni Mitchell, my sweet spot was *Blue*, *Court and Spark*, and *The Hissing of Summer Lawns*. I somehow skipped over *For the Roses* save for the aforementioned, "You Turn Me On, I'm a Radio," most likely because this was the most abrupt period of change in my life. I started smoking pot, I was adventurous enough to drop acid, and I was drinking and rocking hard. In 1972 I was arrested by two undercover Narc's for selling weed, ordered by the presiding District Attorney to get out of my home state, and struggling mightily to fit in after leaving the hippy-dippy confines of a New York State Community College and enrolling in a conservative backward university in the far west.

I wasn't too enamored with the folk music of that time because my reality was not at all folksy or peaceful. The Eagles appeared in 1972 and quickly took over the American rock scene. My final two years of college were an unhappy, disillusioned, and sobering time. I needed a pulse-pounding driving beat to let me know that I was alive and moving forward towards a career that I thought I wanted. I was bad with money, simply horrible. The Kingston Trio's "Greenback Dollar" could well have been written by me. I always expected to hit it big someday, and then money would be no object. Of course, I never did.

For those smarter, more fortunate, or more talented than I, there was marriage, a family, an unfulfilling career, and the bondage of a thirty-year mortgage before the disillusion set in with the realization that their youth had evaporated and that the second half of their lifetimes couldn't possibly hold a candle to the first. 1975's, "The Hissing of Summer Lawns," is a great album for someone about 35 years old and teetering on the cusp of a premature mid-life crisis. The songs melt into one another so quickly that you hardly notice they change. The album is one long narrative; the words and the music changes, but the vibe is very consistent. It is a warning to get out while there's still time for redemption or stick around and get sucked into the vileness of consumption, greed, and cynicism – all the hallmarks of suburbia. It is especially satirical towards women who were no longer viewed as opportunistic "gold diggers" but who had ascended to the status of something to be won; thus, "trophy wives." It's a collection of songs that portends the darkness of selling out, yet it also is empathic to

those who do. It is, in other words, wise beyond its years, like Mitchell was herself. “Harry’s House / Centerpiece,” summed up her sarcastic take on the futility of the so-called “rat-race,” especially from the stay-at-home wife’s perspective:

*...Battalions of paper-minded males  
Talking commodities and sales  
While at home their paper wives  
And paper kids  
Paper the walls to keep their gut reactions hid...*

*Shining hair and shining skin  
Shining as she reeled him in  
To tell him like she did today  
Just what he could do with Harry’s house  
And Harry’s take home pay*

Rock star Prince stated that *Hissing* had a profound impact on him. He loved that it took the chances that it did, and in retrospect, was there ever any recording artist willing to take more chances than Prince?

Mitchell’s cover was tribal in more ways than one: five black tribesman carrying a huge snake in the foreground, then the cracker box houses of suburbia further back, overlooked by the unknown tribes that exist within the urban high-rises in the far background. Green lawn is the base of the painting until the high-rises appear, and thus: the hissing of summer lawns due to the constantly running sprinkler systems necessary to keep the grass thriving, especially in Southern California. It is my favorite album cover of Mitchell’s because it depicts who we actually are here in this diverse crazy state. The centerfold picture of her swimming at night in her Bel Air pool alludes to her embracing of the rewards of capitalism. Economically, she has arrived, but the songs indicate that this arrival has come with a price. *Hissing* is hip, sophisticated, and somewhat sad, because it’s readily apparent that Joni Mitchell had evolved from hippie-girl goddess to slick uptown woman. Not all of her fans were happy about that.

Joni Mitchell would journey deeper and deeper into traditional jazz while cutting another nine albums of original material between the years 1975 and 1994, an average of one record every two years, so she stayed busy and relevant for a quarter century. Only 1985’s *Dog Eat Dog* would remotely return to any recognizable form of rock-n’-roll. Almost everything after 1994 were compilations of previous material, the audio equivalent to television sitcoms calling in ensemble casts of so-called all-star actors for cameo appearances in a last-ditch effort at avoiding being inevitably cancelled.

Jazz great Charles Mingus, a well-respected double bassist, pianist, and composer, upon learning that he was dying of ALS, solicited her to work with him on an album that would contain his name *Mingus* that was released in 1979 after his death at the age of 54 on January 5<sup>th</sup> of that year. They collaborated on the music for all 11 songs and Joni wrote the lyrics to seven songs and cowrote four songs with Mingus.



This gained her mad respect in the traditional jazz community, with luminaries such as Herbie Hancock calling her the greatest living jazz singer. The album cover was a Mitchell freeform painting, but her more traditional painting of him facing away in a wheelchair entitled: “Mingus Down in Mexico 1978,” contains a genuine element of the sadness of a fast approaching goodbye. In her second round of interviews with Malka Marom, which occurred later in 1979, after the album had been released, when questioned on how she dealt with the situation, Joni told her:

*Charles had been stereotyped into a violent person. This is what the public and most people, they would say, “Oh he’s such an angry guy ... he’s such a hostile man. He’s a racist,” they would say to me. And I had been stereotyped, you know, into a tragic figure, because I dealt with a lot of sorrow on my records, a lot of my humor would be missed in my music, a lot of my satire seemed to just go unnoticed, They wouldn’t see that there was some saving grace to all this business. So we seemed odd to onlookers. I mean, nobody really thought the project would come to anything.*

*A lot of times I thought I couldn’t do it – that I was really the wrong person for the job. And if I could have thought of the right person to turn it over to, I would have. But overall, I felt that it was meant to be, in that for the last four years I’ve been sticking my big toe into the lake of jazz, metaphorically, and Charles pushed me right in. It was a great education, a great opportunity to study with a great teacher. Very challenging (p. 134).*

I personally lost contact with her work after *Hissing*, not because I dislike jazz, but because I am not musically astute enough to understand it. Aside from Miles Davis’s *Jack Johnson*, Donald Byrd’s *Black Byrd*, Joe Farrell’s *Night Dancing*, Weather Report’s *Sweetnighter*, Ronnie Law’s *Always There*, Gato Barbieri’s *Tropico*, and I suppose, Carlos Santana’s *Caravanserai*, I knew nothing about jazz and feel it’s poor form to pretend that I do here. So, I’m an old white boomer dinosaur who oftentimes feels that this generation will have to die off before the younger generation(s) who are now about to inherit the earth will be able to shape it in their own image and likeness. Mitchell was always ahead of this curve, always evolving as an enlightened person, and can’t correctly be labeled a boomer. But, she holds no illusions as to who she is, telling Marom in 2012:

*...I’m a thinking female, and I’m not a feminist. So what am I then? A real freak, right? I’m a person outside every box there is, pretty much (p. 251).*

The problem with us boomers was, and still is, our adherence to white privilege, and it needs to die before America can really be the melting pot that the liberals like to pontificate that we are. Consider that 30% of America’s overall population is comprised of white males, yet this population segment occupies 62% of all the political positions held in our nation. This is a disproportionate and unfair representation and know that these old white politicians will do *anything* to hold on to their power before going extinct. The most pressing problem is that the rest of humanity is in a race against time, and the question is who will die first – them, or planet Earth? The earth is in

perilous danger of suffering irrevocable damage at the hands of their greed, their entitlement, their stupidity, their out-of-control white privilege manifested in their belief in their omnipotent exceptionalism with the sad irony being that there is very little that is exceptional at all about the majority of them at. In other words, we need to harken back to 1970 and Joni Mitchell's environmental anthem, "Big Yellow Taxi," all over again, which was something that Counting Crows did with their remade tribute to this classic in 2002. It doesn't feel particularly good to know that my generation needs to step aside and allow the kids their day in the sun. We had our chance and we blew it. We didn't become the agents of social change that we thought we would be back when we rolled around in the mud at Woodstock over a half-century ago. Mitchell was right to view her famous tune as a funeral dirge, and our collective funerals will soon be upon us.

Her boyfriend's mothers were always warning her about their sons. This was disingenuous perhaps, because there may have been the underlying motive that they didn't want their fragile boys to wind up with her. Too bad that conga player Don Alias' mother didn't weigh in, because he beat her up badly two times and would have for a third if she hadn't seen it coming and got away from him. Who can explain all of the reasons that cause domestic violence? All I can say is that one dynamic of it always holds true, and that is that once it starts, it doesn't stop. It's a mystery as to why any woman puts up with it, especially a woman of Joni Mitchell's intellectual capacity.

Then came the eighties, which in America were an intellectual and cultural wasteland, the reason for why easily summed up with two words – Ronald Reagan. About the only significant musical event that occurred for her during the entire decade was when she performed with Pink Floyd in '88 at the Berlin Wall before it came down.

After the dysfunctional Alias relationship ended in 1980, she was to marry bassist Larry Klein, 13 years her junior in 1982, and stay married to him for the next 11 years. They jointly received her Grammy for the Album of the Year entitled: *Turbulent Indigo* in 1994 after being recently divorced and they were gracious to each other on stage. Although she would later refer to Klein as insecure and controlling and even more disparagingly on occasion, for his part Klein, at least when being quoted, was always measured and mature when referring to her, and proved to be man enough to come to her aid after she suffered her brain aneurism and was found in her kitchen on March 31<sup>st</sup>, 2015 after lying there for three days. He also showed some real class in a News Hub interview conducted on June 28<sup>th</sup>, 2016, when asked about his current feelings concerning Mitchell by saying:

*I'm very grateful that I can do whatever I possibly can to help her and let her know how much I love her. I am grateful that I can tell her how important a teacher and force she has always been in my life.*

It has been quite a life that Joni Mitchell has lived. Jimmy Page is on record as saying that she is one of his idols, and rock rumor has it that Led Zeppelin's "Going to California," (1971) was written as a love song to her:

*...Going to California with an achin' in my heart  
Someone told me there's a girl out there  
With love in her eyes and flowers in her hair...*

*To find a queen without a king;  
They say she plays guitars and cries and sings*

Between the years 1975 and 2016 Joni Mitchell had won 12 individual Grammy Awards. Joni had also received Billboard's "Century Award" in 1995. In 1996 she received the National Academy of Song Writer's "Lifetime Achievement Award," and she was inducted into the Songwriter's Hall of Fame in 1997. Probably the "Canadian Governor's General's Performing Arts Award" meant the most to her, if not 2007's "Canadian Song Writers Hall of Fame Award." Throw in Sweden's "Polar Music Prize," in 1996 with its \$120,000.00 (U.S.) honorarium, and there's no need to mention that Rock and Roll Hall of Fame business again.

1996 proved to be an exceptional year for her as she was reacquainted with her daughter after 33 years of separation. Kelly Dale Anderson's adoptive parents had changed her name to Kilauren Gibb. Kilauren had read an April 1995 article in *Vogue Magazine* where Joni had admitted to giving up a daughter to adoption early in her career. A runway model for the Elite Agency based in Toronto, Canada, she had often heard that she looked like a young Joni Mitchell, so it wasn't hard for her to put two and two together. She contacted a Mitchell fan website, and an in-person introduction was arranged for 1997. At 54 Joni was an instant mother and grandmother to her four-year-old grandson Miles. Like most honeymoon periods, the first two weeks went smoothly enough, then the resentments on Kilauren's part, centering around being given up for adoption, crept into the picture, and the relationship has been strained but ongoing ever since.

I'm hardly the first person to consider Joni Mitchell a poet on a par with all the great poets. She's included in Camille Paglia's *Break, Blow, Burn: Camille Paglia Reads Forty-Three of the World's Best Poems* (2006) which was highly regarded by many book critics and poetry buffs alike. Paglia chose "Woodstock" not only for its lyrical merit but also for its wide-spreading social impact. Poetry purists are forever splitting hairs about what they feel is actual poetry, and there is an element of intellectual snobbishness among a lot of them; not unlike the condensation that highbrow academics cast upon their underlings. When Paglia first spoke to Mitchell over the phone for *Interview Magazine* she made the faux pas of stating: "You could have been a poet, you know." Mitchell said she had approached Random House about compiling a book of poems from select songs but the publishing house turned her down unless she wanted to call her selections, "rock lyrics," in lieu of poetry, because they said (what they always say), that poetry doesn't sell. In Malka Marom's 2012 third and final round of interviews with her, Joni elaborated about her feelings towards this kind of nitpicking:

*So there. I'm a rock lyricist and not a poet. In the pigeonholing of it all, I'm outside. You know what I mean? It's not like any other rock lyrics. It's poetry.*

*I then decided, "Okay, this has gotten ridiculous this exclusion has become absurd." So, before I sing this song, I'm going to send it to the New Yorker and have it printed. I sent them "Bad Dreams Are Good," and they were almost not gonna print it because I was academically incorrect. I said, "Well are you gonna take out Bob Dylan's 'aint' and put in 'isn't.?' This is my poem. Take it or leave it." So they did print it and they put "poet-rock lyricist" (p. 213).*

A great many writers consider the *New Yorker* to be the gold standard of American literary magazines, and many (myself included) spend years trying unsuccessfully to gain acceptances onto its pages. That Joni Mitchell could stand up to their editors speaks volumes about her greatness and her belief in her abilities. Two-time Pulitzer Prize winning (for poetry) Carl Sandburg, the beloved "Poet of the people," struggled under the same type of haughtiness, and he wasn't included in Paglia's book, or in many other books about the "masters." Both he and Mitchell share a thread of commonality, that being that the average Jane or Joe, the woman or man in the street, can understand what the hell they are saying. I get a little tired of it; I really do. What is this thing called "poetry," anyway? Paraphrasing Kim Addonizio in *Ordinary Genius: A Guide for the Poet Within* (2009) there are a lot of people who think that they are poets and they like to write poetry, but they don't like to read the poetry of anyone else. Well, believe me, I've tried, boy have I tried, and it can be a frustrating and unfulfilling penance. Mitchell told Charles Mingus, who originally wanted to fete the work of T. S. Elliot, that she wasn't impressed with Elliot's work and was unwilling to pursue that project idea. I have to agree with her that I'm mystified by all this, "lyricism of the language," bullshit, because either you're moved by the words, or you're not – it's that simple. The critics, the snobs, the experts be damned. Who would slap their hard-earned money down on something they couldn't understand, and more importantly, enjoy? Sometimes it only takes an audience of one. We would never have heard of Bukowski if it hadn't been for John Martin at Black Sparrow Press. And sometimes it takes a much larger audience, and Joni Mitchell's poetry set to music has been revered by *millions*.

Everybody has a top ten list of their favorite artist's tunes, so for the record, here's mine:

- Down to You
- You Turn Me On, I'm a Radio
- Woodstock
- Raised on Robbery
- River
- Harry's House / Centerpiece

- California
- Big Yellow Taxi
- All I Want
- Help Me

No less a conflicted person than *The Great Gatsby* (1925) author F. Scott Fitzgerald had said, “There are no second acts in American life,” so it’s a good thing that Joni Mitchell is still a Canadian citizen. Entertainers are forced by changing societal tastes and their mounds of debt to keep working and keep earning. In order to do this, they have to continually reinvent themselves. They have to change with the times, and they have to do what’s necessary to hold people’s interest. Madonna is an absolute master at this. Mitchell was always shedding her old skin and regenerating a new one by continuing to push the boundaries of her music, by insisting on adapting, by changing her act and her genre earlier rather than later. The only question that remains is: can she do it again? Can she come back one more time? Is there one more fight left in her at 77 years of age? I, for one, certainly hope so, because these times we are living in are like 1968 all over again. The Mad King is an even more dangerous version of Nixon, the environment is crying out for a savior, our righteous youth are marching in the streets for racial and social justice, and the bible thumpers and the squares are rolling out that tired old “moral majority” drivel again. All of this chaos smack-dab in the middle of a grossly mishandled global health pandemic. What fertile ground for Joni Mitchell to cultivate, and it would be terrific if she did.

David Yaffe’s book ends in 2017 where Joni had recovered enough from her 2015 brain aneurism to be at the Catalina Bar and Grill conversing with Herbie Hancock and Chick Corea after a Corea performance. She was seated in the wheelchair that she had evaded for over six decades. It may have finally caught up with her, but her mental faculties were still sharp, and she was looking forward to seeing more shows, looking forward to looking forward again. As of September 6<sup>th</sup>, 2020 Joni Mitchell is still alive and living in Los Angeles, California. Fans have been wondering if she will ever write or sing again? In February of 2020 James Taylor confirmed that she was writing new material and had attended one of his concerts at the Hollywood Bowl. One down, with one to go, and I would advise that nobody count her out.

This was a story about a beautiful woman with beautiful words. This was a story about the great Joni Mitchell who was, and quite possibly still is, the poet laureate of her generation.

## **My Advent Menorah: A Lutheran Pastor Reflects On His First Hanukkah**

**Rev. Jeff P. Crim**

I'm no stranger to the holidays and holy days celebrated in other religions and cultures. As a student, I was required to attend and observe the celebrations of others. As a professor I required my students to do the same. As a hospital chaplain, I take responsibility for ensuring that the observances of minority faith groups are acknowledged in the hospital's communal life. However, as a Christian clergyman, I am only accustomed to joining such celebrations as a guest. I'm very suspicious, if not critical, of my colleagues who include Seders in their church's Maundy Thursday rites.

When it comes to Hanukkah, one of my closest friends in adolescence was Jewish and I've been closer friends and colleagues with some rabbis over the years than with some pastors. I can tell you the story of the oil. I know how to play dreidel, and I love a good latke. I've been to Hanukkah parties, public candle lightings at synagogues, and I've used Hanukkah reflections written by others to open meetings at work, but I've never "observed" Hanukkah, until now.

Last year, my wife and I chose to move our son from a Lutheran preschool that was not meeting his needs to one operated by the Jewish Federation in our city. It came highly recommended. We knew this would mean changes. Lunches would be vegetarian; an early Shabbat candle lighting would happen on Fridays; and a belated Havdalah would be observed on Monday. Jewish Holidays like Hanukkah and Purim would be celebrated and they would be closed on some others. So, when my son came home on the eve of the first night with a Hanukkah gift, I wasn't shocked. When we unwrapped it and discovered it to be a menorah, candles, a dreidel, gelt, and a donut I was bemused. Every child, among whom our son was not the only Gentile, was given a set like this.

My son, age 4, immediately began instructing me in setting up the Menorah:

"First you put in the helper daddy. Then another one on the end."

"OK, we're doing this, apparently. Hanukkah 2020 at the Crim house." I thought. Hebrew is a required course in most Christian seminaries, but I've not read any in roughly 20 years. That night I intoned the blessings for the first night in halting stuttering Hebrew:

"Baruch ata, Adonai...."

"That's our blessing from school" my son shrieked with a glee he has never exhibited for any of our family's Christian devotions.

One could make a case for Christian Hanukkah being appropriate. The celebration is based on the account of the Maccabean revolt in which Jews reclaimed the Temple from foreign occupiers. The books containing these stories are not actually scripture of Jews and since the Reformation they are not for Protestant Christians either. However for 1500 years, they were Christian Scripture and remain so for Roman Catholic and Eastern Christians. Jesus even seems to have gone to the Temple for the festival in his

day. Indeed one might expect there to be a Christian Hanukkah tradition, there is not.

Christian reflection over the past 2000 years on the Maccabean story doesn't emphasize the victory over oppression or the miracle of the oil. It almost exclusively focuses on the deaths of a mother and her sons who chose martyrdom over idolatry. Noble examples of faith to be sure. These "Maccabean Martyrs" or "Maccabean Children" are commemorated on the calendars of many Christian churches, but one cannot imagine frying latkes and donuts for a party in their memory.

Judaism doesn't ignore these stories, but also doesn't make them the central focus. Hanukkah doesn't ignore the atrocities of the Seleucid occupation, but it celebrates the victory from it. The miracle of Hanukkah isn't just that a day's worth of oil lasted eight days. The miracle is the visible sign of God's presence with God's people during the occupation and God's role in the victory of the Maccabean underdogs over the power of an empire.

That Our Hanukkah celebration was occurring as we observed the more solemn season of Advent and as I, a Christian pastor, prepared for the celebration of Christmas was not lost on me. Traditional Christian understandings of our relationship to Judaism are overly simplistic. Jesus we believe was the anticipated Messiah. Therefore Christians frequently assume that Christianity possesses things that Judaism lacks.

For Christians Jesus is God incarnate. We celebrate Christmas because his birth as a literal baby affirms his literal humanity. That God became physically present via a humble birth and lived a human life is important. One of Jesus' appellations commonly seen and heard at Christmas time is "Emanuel", derived from Greek and meaning "God is with us". As much as my own faith is inextricably intertwined with this belief in incarnation, Hanukkah began to teach me that the idea that "God is with us" was not new to the world.

Wanting our Hanukkah to be more than just practicing my Hebrew and lighting candles, I looked for Hanukkah videos and stories to add to each evening. Some were just fun: "Puppy for Hanukkah" became a staple tune in our house. Others were odd at first like "Herschel and the Hanukkah Goblins". I began to realize that something very much like "God is With Us!" might well have been a rallying cry for Maccabean troops. As the light grew on my Menorah nightly, I began to see that the miracle it recalled was also a sort of incarnation. Flames lit by human hands were in some sense the fire and light of God in creation. Emanuel was part of Judaism centuries before Jesus' birth.

Christianity openly seeks new adherents. Judaism in contrast accepts, but generally doesn't seek, converts. Perhaps some of the "Good News" or Gospel, of Christianity can be found in Judaism. Christian popular thought paints Judaism as inwardly focused while "our" message and call is to the world.

The first night, our Menorah sat on low child sized table in our living room. It's my son's table and his menorah, it seemed right, then I began to learn about placing it in windows or doorways. Lighting the menorah it seemed was not just an act of familial piety. Ideally one "publishes the miracle" to the world. Throughout the Jewish diaspora, Hanukkah Menorahs proclaim the real and active presence of God in the world without assistance from Christianity's "Great Commission".

The most insidious of Christian juxtapositions really includes the others I've mentioned. Known as Supersessionism, it has been a dominant force in Christian theology for 2000 years. If Jesus was the awaited Messiah, it posits, then Judaism is merely an inconsequential relic or even some sort of perverse rebellion against God. This notion has justified centuries of anti-Semitic rhetoric and violence. Somewhat less repugnantly, in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century supersessionism has given rise to Christians believing that Jewish rituals and observances belong to them. This is most extremely expressed in the Christian sect calling itself "Messianic Judaism". Indeed, I'm not sure my observance of Hanukkah doesn't fall in to this trap.

20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Century theologians have attempted to formulate alternative answers to explain the relationship between Christianity and Judaism, but none of them do so very well. Any attempt to explain how we are related in history must, first of all, involve a confession of sin on the part of Christianity. However, that confession ought to be made for its own sake, not as a step in a theological endeavor. Perhaps we should also confess that our sin within the mutual history of our two faiths clouds our view. Perhaps we should not even try to explain our historical relationship and focus on relating in our present.

Judaism and Christianity are related in origin that cannot be denied. Even when discussing Hanukkah, Jesus observed the festival in his day as attested by the Gospel of John. That said, Jesus likely never lit a Hanukkah Menorah and he certainly never spun a dreidel or ate a latke. In observing Hanukkah as it exists in contemporary Judaism, I learned a lot about God. I was caused to notice the presence of God in the world, and I was encouraged to share that with others. While I am not the best Christian, if Judaism's present can teach me about God inside of Christianity's present it cannot be a relic of the past. If normative Judaism can teach a mediocre Christian about God, we cannot have superseded or replaced it in any way. There also was no need to make it a "messianic" Hanukkah as one of my friends suggested.

None of this challenges my Christianity. A few days after we lit the eighth candle, we celebrated Christmas. Mary's *Magnificat* still stirred my soul. Jesus born in a manger still brought Joy to my heart and I still sang hymns praising Emanuel, God with us. As a Christian, I'm used to ambiguity in my faith. I affirm the Trinity even if every rational explanation fails in some detail. I believe that Eucharistic bread and wine are the body and blood of Jesus, even if I don't agree with Thomas Aquinas on how they are. Can I not believe that there is only one God, and that Jews, Christians, and perhaps even Muslims, know and have a relationship with that one God? If I can affirm and celebrate mystery within my own religion can I not affirm and celebrate mystery in our interrelation with others?

Next year, my son will move on to Kindergarten at a public school. It is likely that when our Menorah emerges next year he will have little interest. For now, it remains packed with our Christmas tree. I don't know if we'll observe Hanukkah in 2021 at home, though I'm sure we'll visit a friend's synagogue for something one night. Honestly, I'm not even sure it was a good idea this year. Thankfully, God can use even bad ideas. As the light on our Menorah grew, I became increasingly aware of God's



presence in my home and our world. I became increasingly aware of my gratitude and love for our neighbors. It wasn't a puppy, but I got a gift for Hanukkah. This one Hanukkah may teach me lessons for years to come.

The eyes of my soul were opened, and I beheld the plenitude of God, wherein I did comprehend the whole world, both here and beyond the sea, and the abyss and ocean and all things. In all these things I beheld naught save the divine power, in a manner assuredly indescribable; so that through excess of marveling the soul cried with a loud voice, saying, “This whole world is full of God!” Wherefore I now comprehended how small a thing is the whole world, that is to say both here and beyond the seas, the abyss, the ocean, and all things; and that the Power of God exceeds and fills all. Then he said unto me: “I have shown thee something of my Power,” and I understood, that after this I should better understand the rest. He then said, “Behold now my humility.” Then I was given an insight into the deep humility of God toward man. And comprehending that unspeakable power and beholding that deep humility, my soul marveled greatly, and did esteem itself to be nothing at all.

-Angela of Foligno



## CONTRIBUTORS

**Denis Bell** is a maker of mathematical formulas and small fictions, which he believes, weirdly, that he draws from a common font. His writing has been published in *Grub Street*, *The Maine Review*, *Flash: The International Short-Short Story Magazine*, *Journal of Microliterature*, *Literary Orphans* and many other print and online literary magazines and journals. A collection of his short fiction titled *A Box of Dreams* was published by Spartan Press in 2020.

**Brucie Jacobs** has published short stories and essays in numerous literary journals and magazines, as well as a memoir, *Secret Girl* (St. Martin's Press 2006) and a collection of short stories, *Small Burials*. She writes and paints in Santa Fe, New Mexico. [www.bruciejacobs.com](http://www.bruciejacobs.com)

**Wilson Koewing** is a writer from South Carolina. His work has recently appeared in *Pembroke Magazine*, *Ghost Parachute*, *New World Writing*, *Maudlin House*, *Trampset* and *The Journal of Compressed Creative Arts*.

**Susannah Sheffer's** chapbook *This Kind of Knowing* was published by Cooper Dillon Books in 2013, and her full-length collection *Break and Enter* will be published by Kelsay Books in 2021. Her poems have appeared in *The Threepenny Review*, *Copper Nickel*, *Poet Lore*, and other journals. She is a clinical mental health counselor who works frequently with people who have experienced trauma, and her book *Fighting for Their Lives: Inside the Experience of Capital Defense Attorneys* was published by Vanderbilt University Press in 2013. She lives in Western Massachusetts.

**Andrew Leggett** is an Australian author and editor of poetry, fiction, interdisciplinary academic papers and songs. His two published collections of poetry *Old Time Religion and Other Poems* (1998) and *Dark Husk of Beauty* (2006) were put out by Interactive Press. The manuscript of his third collection *Losing Touch* has been accepted for publication by Ginnenderra Press later in 2021. In addition to medical degrees and postgraduate qualifications in psychiatry and psychotherapy, he holds a research masters degree in creative writing from University of Queensland and a PhD in creative writing from Griffith University. He was the editor of *Australasian Journal of Psychotherapy* from 2006-2011. He is the current prose editor of *StylusLit*.

**Genevieve Jaser** is currently a Senior studying English: Creative Writing and Communications at Southern Connecticut State University. Her poetry has been published in literary magazines such as *Fresh Ink*, and she plans on publishing a collection of poems after graduating. She is currently the editor-in-chief of *Folio Art and Literary Magazine*, and believes everyone has within them their own truths, boiling to get out. Through art and poetry, her work often challenges the complexity and bizarre nature of human behavior and emotions. She believes that when we notice our own

strangeness, we may embrace it and help others to embrace theirs, too. After all, no one is normal, and that's kind-of cool.

**David Sapp**, writer, artist and professor, lives along the southern shore of Lake Erie in North America. A *Pushcart* nominee, he was awarded an Ohio Arts Council Individual Excellence grant and an Akron Soul Train fellowship for poetry. His poems appear widely in the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom. His publications include articles in the *Journal of Creative Behavior*; chapbooks Close to Home and Two Buddha; and a novel, Flying Over Erie.

**Jamie Brown's** poetry has been published in: *American Literary*, *Bay to Ocean: The Year's Best Writing from the Eastern Shore*, *Beltway Poetry Quarterly*, *Café Review*, *California Quarterly*, *Connecticut River Review*, *Delmarva Quarterly*, *The Delmarva Review*, *Delaware Beach Life*, *Delaware Poetry Review*, *Galley Sail Review*, *Gargoyle*, *Ginosko*, *Handbook for Mortals* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), *Howling Dog*, *Kipple*, *Maintenant*, *Midwest Poetry Review*, *Minimus*, *Musings*, *Nebo*, *Negative Capability*, *Parnassus Literary Journal*, *Phase & Cycle*, *Poet Lore*, *Poetry Motel*, *Potomac Review*, *Prints* (Second Saturday Poets Anthology), *Rat's Ass Review*, *The San Fernando Poetry Journal*, *So It Goes: the Literary Journal of the Kurt Vonnegut Museum and Library*, *Sons & Daughters Literary Journal*, *The Sulphur River Literary Review*, *Tekintet* (Budapest, Hungary), *Voices International*, *Winners*, (an anthology of the Wordworks Washington Prize), *The Wooster Review*, *Wordwrights!* and many others.

He is the Founder, and was the first Publisher and Editor, of *The Broadkill Review*, Founder of the Annual John Milton Memorial Celebration of Poets and Poetry (now defunct), and first Director of the Dogfish Head Poetry Prize competition. He has taught at George Washington University, Georgetown University, Wesley College, and University of Delaware, and taught the first Creative Writing Course to be offered at the Smithsonian Institution. He was Poetry Critic for *The Washington Times*. He was a member of the Poetry Committee of the Folger Shakespeare Library. He was Fiction Editor of *The Washington Review of the Arts*, Associate Editor with the *Sulphur River Literary Review*, and Contributing Editor at *Wordwrights* Magazine.

Five of his plays have been produced in the DC small-theater scene; one swept the four major awards when reprised in the 2007 One-Act Play Competition in Milton, Delaware.

He holds the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing from the American University, where he worked on his poetry with Henry Taylor (Pulitzer Prize in Poetry), Myra Sklarew, Linda Pastan, and others, and on his fiction with Frank Conroy, Terry MacMillan, James Alan McPherson (Pulitzer Prize in Fiction), Joyce Kornblatt, and Kermit Moyer.

**Kate Brandt** My work has appeared in *Tricycle*, *the Buddhist Review*, *Talking Writing*, and *Literary Mama*.

**Erika Loh** is a fiction writer who is currently studying at Yale-NUS College, Singapore. She is a Literature major, with a minor in Global Antiquity. Her work is published on *Entropy*, *Quarterly Literary Review Singapore* and elsewhere.

**Zach Murphy** is a Hawaii-born writer with a background in cinema. His stories appear in *Adelaide Literary Magazine*, *Mystery Tribune*, *Ghost City Review*, *Spelk Fiction*, *Door = Jar*, *Levitate*, *Yellow Medicine Review*, *The Bitchin' Kitsch*, *Crêpe & Penn*, *Ellipsis Zine*, *Wilderness House Literary Review*, *Drunk Monkeys*, and *Flash: The International Short-Short Story Magazine*. He lives with his wonderful wife Kelly in St. Paul, Minnesota.

**Olivia Hajioff** My first published story, at age nine, was televised as a children's ballet for the British television show, 'Freetime'. I was a finalist in the Cadbury's Short Story Competition at age ten. Since then I have written for the British Fulbright magazine, HIV Now project, and various musical magazines My poetry also appears on author William B. Irvine's website. I was the Grand Choice Winner in the Laura Riding Jackson poetry competition, 2020. I received a Fulbright Scholarship in 1994 to study for my doctoral degree in violin performance and pedagogy. By profession, I am a concert violinist, teacher and member of the Marcolivia Duo.

**Peggy Hammond's** poetry is featured or forthcoming in *The Lyricist*, *Oberon Poetry*, *High Shelf Press*, *San Antonio Review*, *Inklette*, *West Trade Review*, and *Rogue Agent*. Her full-length stage play *A Little Bit of Destiny* was produced by OdysseyStage Theatre in Durham, North Carolina.

**Sochukwu Ivey** is a linguistic stylistician, a rhythmist and a distinctive metrist. A final-year student of English Language and Literature, he is particularly interested in English Language (as opposed to English Literature) topics. His epic, "The Great Cold", published in issue 25 of *Ginosko Literary Journal*, is the longest metrical poem by an African. Sochukwu hails from Isseke, an ancient Igbo town in Eastern Nigeria.

**Ashley Pearson** I am a rookie Korean-American fiction writer.

**Kevin Brown** has had Fiction, Non-fiction and Poetry published in over 100 Literary Journals, Magazines and Anthologies. Brown has won numerous writing competitions and fellowships, and was nominated for multiple prizes and awards, including three Pushcart Prizes. He co-wrote the film "Living Dark: The Story of Ted the Caver" that recently sold to New Films International, and collaborated on a television pilot with Linda Bloodworth (creator of *Designing Women*).

**Grace Parsons** is currently a student at California State University, Stanislaus. She expects to receive her Bachelor of Arts degree in Political Science in the spring of 2023. She is currently working on a fantasy novella involving the love story of a human,

a half-demon, and their fight to reform the underworld. When not writing, she enjoys drawing, playing music, and LGBTQ+ activism.

**Christopher Parent** is a writer and intellectual property attorney currently living in Zurich, Switzerland with his wife and two daughters. He moved to Zurich after serving as in-house counsel for Nintendo and in private practice in Denver. His work has appeared in law reviews as well as in *The Good Men Project*, *Memoirist*, *Points in Case*, *Public House Magazine*, and *The Haven*. You can find his work here: [www.chrisparent.net](http://www.chrisparent.net).

**Jeremy Szuder** is a chef by night and creator of poetry and illustration work by day. His past track record in the arts includes; 15 years as a musician in various bands (drums, vocals), graphic design work for clothing/skateboard companies, 25 plus years of self published Zines, showings of fine art in the underground art scene, a 10 year plus stint spinning vinyl at various events all across the city, and at present time continues to have both illustrations and poems published by over a dozen fine art and literary publications all across the U.S.A. as well as Canada. Jeremy Szuder continues to call Los Angeles California via Glendale his home at present.

**Emily Black** Author of *The Life Chronicles*, a creative writing column for *RAZZ Magazine*, Emily's work has appeared in *Enigma Journal*, *The Founder* and *The Orbital*. She assisted in the publication of *The Riptide Journal* Vol.12. From the South of England, Emily is currently studying an MA in Creative Writing in Bloomsbury, London, whilst redrafting her debut novel. She has a particular interest in the gritty undercurrent of the everyday, the relationships between people, and how our most unfathomable desires manifest in the pauses before we speak.

**Declan Geraghty** I'm a poet and short story writer from Dublin Ireland, and I'm currently studying creative writing and cultural studies.

**M.C. Zendejas** is an educator who studies for a fiction MFA at UMass Amherst. He is an inaugural recipient of the Hong Kim Czuprynski Fellowship as well as a fellow in the inaugural cohort of the Emerging Writers Fellowship given by Writers in the Schools (WITS). His work is featured in: *Five2One Magazine*, *Liberation News*, *Acentos Review* and elsewhere. You may find him on Twitter [@mikeaff](https://twitter.com/mikeaff).

**Georgette Unis** I am the author of *Tremors*, a chapbook of my poems published by Finishing Line Press in 2018. Several literary journals have also published my poetry, most recently *Naugatuck River Review*, *San Pedro River Review* and *Southwestern American Literature*. In addition to my work as a poet, I also have an MFA in mixed media painting and have exhibited my art in many solo and group exhibitions, some of which presented broadsides of my poems.

**David E. Poston** is the author of three poetry collections, most recently Slow of Study. He has work forthcoming in *The MacGuffin*, *Amethyst Review*, *Pembroke Magazine*, and *North Carolina Literary Review*, among others. He is a co-editor of *Kakalak*.

**David K. Slay** After retiring from full-time work, David K. Slay studied and participated for two years in the UCLA Writers' Program. His short fiction can be found in a group of diverse literary journals, including *Gold Man Review*, *Calliope*, *Wards*, *ImageOutWrite*, *Toho Journal Online*, and others. Nonfiction craft articles are in *CRAFT Literary* and *Submittable's Content for Creatives*. He currently is a fiction submissions reader for *CRAFT*, and has served as a Guest Editor for *Vestal Review*.

**Timothy Robbins** has been teaching English as a Second Language for 28 years. He has been a regular contributor to *Hanging Loose* since 1980 and his poems have appeared in many other literary journals. He has published five volumes of poetry: Three New Poets (Hanging Loose Press), Denny's Arbor Vitae (Adelaide Books), Carrying Bodies (Main Street Rag Press) Mother Wheel (Cholla Needles Press) and This Night I Sup in Your House ([Cyberwit.net](http://Cyberwit.net)). He lives in Wisconsin with his husband of 22 years.

**Susan Terris'** recent books are *FAMILIAR TENSE* (Marsh Hawk) 2019; *TAKE TWO: FILM STUDIES* (Omnidawn) 2017, *MEMOS* (Omnidawn) 2015; and *GHOST OF YESTERDAY: NEW & SELECTED POEMS* (Marsh Hawk) 2012. She's the author of 7 books of poetry, 3 artist's books, and one play. Journals include *The Southern Review*, *Georgia Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Ginosko*, and *Ploughshares*. A poem of hers appeared in Pushcart Prize XXXI. A poem from *MEMOS* was in Best American Poetry 2015. Her newest book is *DREAM FRAGMENTS*, which won the 2019 Swan Scythe Press Award. Ms. Terris is editor emerita of *Spillway Magazine* and a poetry editor at *Pedestal*. [www.susanterris.com](http://www.susanterris.com)

**Ken Wetherington** lives in Durham, North Carolina with his wife and two dogs. His stories have appeared in *The Fable Online*, *Borrowed Solace: A Journal of Literary Ramblings*, *The Remington Review*, *Waymark Literary Magazine*, and others. His story "Black Bear Lake" appeared in the Spring 2017 issue of *Ginosko Literary Journal*. His first collection, Santa Abella and Other Stories, was awarded the B.R.A.G. Medallion from the Book Readers Appreciation Group in the literary fiction category. When not writing, he is an avid film buff and teaches film courses for the OLLI program at Duke University. He may be reached through his website: [kenwetherington.com](http://kenwetherington.com)

**Marcia Arrieta** lives on the canyon near the sky & mountains in Pasadena, California. Her recent poetry collections include perimeter homespun (BlazeVOX) & vestiges (Dancing Girl). Recent poems can be found in *Eratio*, *Otoliths*, *South Dakota Review*, *Hole in the Head*, *Claw & Blossom*, *Bee House*, *Otis Nebula*,



*Word For/Word, Cloudbank, & Anastamos.*

She edits and publishes *Indefinite Space*, a poetry/art journal.

**Frederick Pollack** Author of two book-length narrative poems, *THE ADVENTURE* and *HAPPINESS*, both published by Story Line Press; the former to be reissued by Red Hen Press. A collection of shorter poems, *A POVERTY OF WORDS*, 2015 from Prolific Press. Another collection, *LANDSCAPE WITH MUTANT*, 2018 from Smokestack Books (UK). Has appeared in *Hudson Review*, *Salmagundi*, *Poetry Salzburg Review*, *The Fish Anthology* (Ireland), *Magma* (UK), *Iota* (UK), *Orbis* (UK), *Neon* (UK), *Bateau*, *Main Street Rag*, *Manhattan Review*, *Prick of the Spindle*, etc. Online, poems have appeared in *Off Course*, *Brickplight*, *Allegro*, *BlazeVox*, *Mudlark*, *Occupoetry*, *Faircloth Review*, *Triggerfish*, *Thunderdome*, *Neglected Ratio*, *Big Pond Rumours* (Canada), *Ginosko* (Issue 22), etc.

**Kelly Jean White** I have had work widely published in journals including *Exquisite Corpse*, *Poet Lore*, *Rattle*, and have been honored to be included previously in *Ginosko Literary Journal* (near the time of its founding). I have published a number of chapbooks and full-length collections, most recently 'Lotus Feet', (Finishing Line Press), and *TWO BIRDS IN FLAME* (Beech River Books). I have received a number of honors including a 2008 grant for poetry from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts and have been nominated 17 times for a Pushcart Prize. I was privileged to have work included in two anthologies of work by physician writers, *BODY LANGUAGE: POEMS OF THE MEDICAL TRAINING EXPERIENCE*, from Boa Editions, and *PRIMARY CARE*, from the University of Iowa Press. I have recently been honored by being designated as Poet in Residence at Drexel Medical School. 'Pandora,' a poem related to my medical student experiences, was read on *The Writers' Almanac* by Garrison Keillor. I welcome your comments and am grateful for your time and care. Stay safe and well. Sincerely, Kelley White [kellywhitemd@yahoo.com](mailto:kellywhitemd@yahoo.com). Brief bio note: Pediatrician Kelley White has worked in inner city Philadelphia and rural New Hampshire. Her poems have appeared in *Exquisite Corpse*, *Rattle* and *JAMA*. Her recent books are *TOXIC ENVIRONMENT* (Boston Poet Press) and *TWO BIRDS IN FLAME* (Beech River Books.) She received a 2008 Pennsylvania Council on the Arts grant.

**Paul Smith** is a civil engineer who has worked in the construction racket for many years. He has traveled all over the place and met lots of people. Some have enriched his life. Others made him wish he or they were all dead. He likes writing poetry and fiction. He also likes Newcastle Brown Ale. If you see him, buy him one. His poetry and fiction have been published in *Convergence*, *Missouri Review*, *Literary Orphans* and other lit mags.

**Joel Savishinsky** is a retired anthropologist, gerontologist, recovering academic and unrepentant activist. A researcher in the Canadian Arctic, India, the US, England and the Caribbean, his [Breaking The Watch: Retirement in America](#) won the Gerontology

Society's annual book prize. His poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *Atlanta Review*, *The Avocet*, *Blood and Thunder*, *Cirque*, *From Whispers to Roars*, *The New York Times*, *The Penwood Review*, *Poetry Quarterly*, *Right Hand Pointing*, *Soul-Lit*, *Starfish*, *The Third Eye*, and *Windfall*. He lives in Seattle, helping to raise five grandchildren and the climate of opinion about social justice. [savishin@hotmail.com](mailto:savishin@hotmail.com)

**Elizabeth Morse** is a poet who lives in New York's East Village. Her work has been published in literary magazines such as *Blue Mesa Review*, *Hazmat Review*, *Mudfish*, *Lynx Eye*, *Home Planet News*, and *Freezer Burn* and anthologies such as Crimes of the Beats and The Unbearables Big Book of Sex. Her book of poems, The Future Is Now, was published by Linear Arts Press. She has her MFA from Brooklyn College and supports her poetry with a job in information technology.

**John Sweet** sends greetings from the rural wastelands of upstate NY. He is a firm believer in writing as catharsis, and in the continuous search for an unattainable and constantly evolving absolute truth. His latest poetry collections include *A FLAG ON FIRE IS A SONG OF HOPE* (2019 Scars Publications) and *A DEAD MAN, EITHER WAY* (2020 Kung Fu Treachery Press).

**James William Gardner** writes extensively about the contemporary American south. The writer explores aspects of southern culture often overlooked: the downtrodden, the impoverished and those marginalized by society. His work has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize. **His work has appeared in** *The Bookends Review*, *Fiction Southeast*, *Deep South Magazine*, *Silk Road Review*, *Newfound Journal*, *Gathering Storm Magazine*, *Burningword Literary Journal*, *The Virginia Literary Journal*, *Streetlight Magazine*, *Soundings East Literary Journal*, *The Mulberry Fork Review*, *Linden Avenue Literary Journal*, *Straylight Literary Magazine*, *Ginosko Literary Journal*, *The Fredericksburg Literary Review*, *Wilderness House Literary Review*, *Map Literary*, *Scholars & Rogues Literary Journal*, *Constellations Journal of Poetry and Fiction Anthology*, *Foliate Oak Literary Magazine*, *Crack the Spine Literary Magazine*, *Huesoloco Journal*, *Edify Fiction Magazine*, *Sincerely Magazine*, *Torrid Literature Journal*, *From Sac Literary Magazine*, *Map Literary Magazine*

**Allan Johnston** has been publishing poetry for over 30 years, and has had work appear in *Poetry*, *Poetry East*, *Rattle*, *Rhino*, *Weber Studies*, and more than forty other journals. Among other awards, he has received an Illinois Arts Council fellowship, Pushcart Prize Nominations, and First Prize in Poetry in the 2010 Outrider Press Literary Anthology contest. He has published two books of poetry, Tasks of Survival (1996) and In a Window (2018). He has also published three chapbooks, Northport (2010), Departures (2013), and Contingencies (2015). Besides writing poetry, he has written on American literature and other topics, is past president of the Society for the Philosophical Study of Education, and teaches writing and literature at Columbia College and at DePaul University, both in Chicago. He co-edits *Journal for the Philosophical Study of Education* and serves as an outside poetry reader for poetry

journals and for the Illinois Emerging Poets Competition. His other occupations have included being a forest fire fighter and an East Indian cook. Regarding his collection Northport, the poet Alan Williamson said “These are beautifully-made poems of the Pacific Northwest, in Gary Snyder's tradition of close attention to the world, the moment, and the heft of words. It's a pleasure to see them in print,” while Richard Jones commented, “In Northport, the poet guides the reader through the wonder and waste of the past, and to travel with him is to suffer with him; yet it is also a transcendent chance to recover valuable old territory, to make it new again, and to claim as one's own ‘all the beauty dancing there’.” Gary Snyder said of Tasks of Survival, “Strong, controlled, finished, some excellent turns.” Regarding Departures, he said “Johnston's intimate knowledge of Pacific Coast L. A. suburb lifeways comes alive anew in an old language—dry and elegant literary English—even as the ever-present ocean washes over it all. ‘We children’ troop through the bedrooms and classrooms of the past. These poems chart how we left that (personal) past behind. A strange and moving gathering of poems.”

**Emalisa Rose** is a poet, crafts artist, dollmaker. She is an animal rescue volunteer. Living by a beach town provides much of the inspiration weaving into her art. Her poems have appeared in the *Big Wondow Review*, *Ariel Chart* and *October Hill*.

**Gene Twaronite** is a Tucson poet, essayist, and children’s fiction writer. His first poetry collection *Trash Picker on Mars* (Kelsay Books) was the winner of the 2017 New Mexico-Arizona Book Award for Arizona poetry. Other poetry collections include *The Museum of Unwearable Shoes* and *What the Gargoyle Sees*. Follow more of Gene’s writing at his website: [thetwaronitezone.com](http://thetwaronitezone.com).

**Dan Walker** These poems are all casual chatter. In the past, my writing has appeared in *Wilder Voice*, *THAT Literary Review*, and *BlendTW*. Online work includes the web art collaboration [wordways.us](http://wordways.us) and a meme page that never gathered any momentum.

**Dan Raphael** feels most fortunate to have had two poetry collections published in 2020: Moving with Every came out from Flowstone Press in June, while Starting Small was published by Alien Buddha Press in October. More recent poems appear in *eratio*, *Phantom Drift*, *Former People*, *Synchronized Chaos* and *Otoliths*.

**Matthew J. Andrews** is a private investigator and writer who lives in Modesto, California. His poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *Orange Blossom Review*, *Funicular Magazine*, *Red Rock Review*, *Sojourners*, *Amethyst Review*, *Kissing Dynamite*, and *Deep Wild Journal*, among others. He can be contacted at [matthewjandrews.com](http://matthewjandrews.com).

**Sharon Lopez Mooney** Is a retired Interfaith Minister who worked in the death and dying field, now living in Mexico. Mooney received a 1978 California Arts Council Grant

for a rural poetry series. She co-published a regional arts journal; owned a used bookstore and an alternative literature service; and produced poetry readings. Her poems have been/or will soon be published in several journals and anthologies, and two international publications.

**BILL TREMBLAY** is a poet and novelist. His work has appeared in nine full-length volumes including *Crying in the Cheap Seats* [University of Massachusetts Press. 1971], *The Anarchist Heart* [New Rivers Press, 1977], *Home Front* [Lynx House Press], *Second Sun: New & Selected Poems* [L'Eperiver Press. 1985], *Duhamel: Ideas of Order in Little Canada* [BOA Editions Ltd., 1986], *Rainstorm Over the Alphabet* [Lynx House Press, 1999], *Shooting Script: Door of Fire* [Eastern Washington University Press. 2002] which won the Colorado Book Award 2003), as well as *Magician's Hat: Poems on the Life and Art of David Alfaro Siqueiros* [Lynx House Press. 2006] and most recently *Walks Along the Ditch: Poems* [Lynx House Press] 2016. His tenth book is entitled *The Luminous Race Track*, which is forthcoming. Poems from that book have been published in *Resonance*, *Worester Review*, *Re-Dactions*, *Cimarron Reivew*, *LummoX*, *Hamilton Stone Review*, *Caesura et al.* He has received fellowships and awards from the NEA, the NEH, the Fulbright Commission, and the Corporation at Yaddo. His work has been featured in many anthologies including Pushcart Prize, *Best American Poetry*, and *Poets of the New American West*, *The Jazz Anthology*.

**Rob DiLillo** has an English credential from UC Berkeley and has recently retired after teaching for 32 years. He is a devotee of the Centrum writing community and the author of *Just Say Yes, (Be My Heroin?)*, a novel about addiction and poison and *Night People*, a noir mystery, both of which are set in Portland, Oregon.

**Clive Aaron Gill** Fifty of his stories have appeared in literary journals and in *People of Few Words Anthology*. He tells his stories at public and private gatherings. Born in Zimbabwe, Clive has lived and worked in Southern Africa, North America and Europe. He received a degree in Economics from the University of California, Los Angeles and lives in San Diego.

**John C. Krieg** is a retired landscape architect and land planner who formerly practiced in Arizona, California, and Nevada. He is also retired as an International Society of Arboriculture (ISA) certified arborist and currently holds seven active categories of California state contracting licenses, including the highest category of Class A General Engineering. He has written a college textbook entitled *Desert Landscape Architecture* (1999, CRC Press). John has had pieces published in *A Gathering of the Tribes*, *Alternating Current*, *Blue Mountain Review*, *Clark Street Review*, *Conceit*, *Homestead Review*, *Line Rider Press*, *Lucky Jefferson*, *Oddball Magazine*, *Palm Springs Life*, *Pegasus*, *Pen and Pendulum*, *Saint Ann's Review*, *The Courtship of Winds*, *The Mindful Word*, *The Writing Disorder*, and *Wilderness House Literary Review*. In conjunction with filmmaker/photographer Charles Sappington, Mr. Krieg has completed a two-part documentary film entitled *Landscape Architecture: The Next Generation*

(2010). In some underground circles John is considered a master grower of marijuana and holds as a lifelong goal the desire to see marijuana federally legalized. Nothing else will do. To that end he has two books coming out this year being published by Ribbonwood Press entitled: Marijuana Tales and More Marijuana Tales.

**Jeff Crim** is a Lutheran (ELCA) pastor living with wife Danielle and son Leo in Chattanooga, TN. He currently serves as pastor of Ascension Lutheran Church and Staff Chaplain at CHI Memorial Hospital. Previously he has served as a Chaplain to the United States Coast Guard, Seamen's Church Institute of NY & NJ, The Virginia Department of Military Affairs, and the Wayne County, IN jail. Jeff holds degrees from Guilford College, The University of Tennessee, and The School of Religion at Earlham College. He has held faculty positions at Ball State University and Chattanooga State Community College. Jeff is always eager to hear from people who wish to discuss his writing and may be contacted at [jpcrim1974@gmail.com](mailto:jpcrim1974@gmail.com)



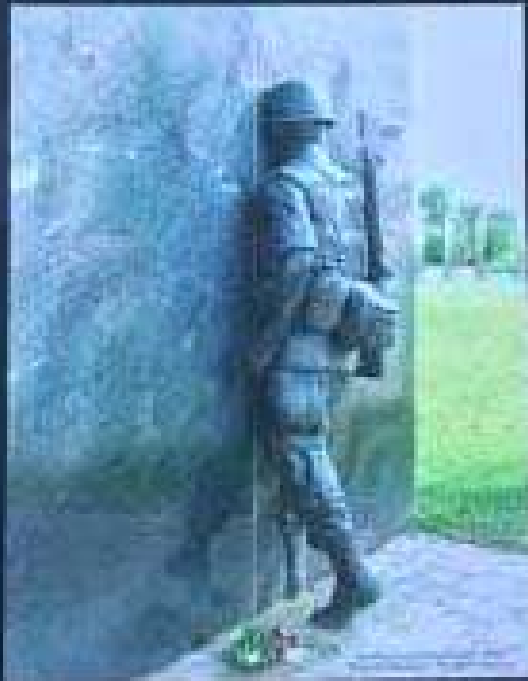
# THE FLOATING DOOR

POEMS BY

M.E. SILVERMAN

**AGENT ORANGE  
ROUNDUP**

*Living with a Foot  
In Two Worlds*



LT. SCULL & CPL. MAC  
VETERANS OF THE VIETNAM WAR

