

# ginosko literary journal



36

Ginosko Literary Journal #36

Spring 2026

[GinoskoLiteraryJournal.com](http://GinoskoLiteraryJournal.com)

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Est. 2002

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Cover Art:

bought at flea market, Santa Rosa CA  
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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

Adam Moss: *Is there a phase where you encounter a recurring difficulty? Something that trips you up over and over?*

Louise Glück: No, the only recurring thing is that sense of frustration when I have no idea what to do next.

Adam Moss: *What do you do in that moment to help yourself?*

Louise Glück: I just wait. For me, the really hard thing about writing is how much patience you need to have. I mean, you can will things, but whenever I've tried to do that, the poem just goes to hell. Becomes a contrivance. An arrangement made with a mind instead of a discovery that will surprise you, too, you just have to wait.

Adam Moss: *Most people I've talked to describe that dormant period as torture. But you seem more accepting. Is that correct?*

Louise Glück: No, it's not. The discovery of the line is thrilling. The period of waiting is not. I am despondent and tormented. And I feel doomed. It's terrible. But I don't react to those feelings by trying to eliminate them through diligence or intelligence, because what's needed is not diligence or intelligence. What's needed is an intervention of something outside yourself, better than yourself, but with access to yourself.

Adam Moss: *You think of it as otherworldly.*

Louise Glück: I do.

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## C O N T R I B U T O R S

## A Dark Jaguar

Paces in a cage of bones,  
eyes widen, teeth glistening,  
dying to cry out  
a primal sound of origin,  
where the sun  
moon and earth align  
in the early morning.

Full of explosive, lush  
energy, the jaguar longs  
to release  
animal soul within.

The jaguar, a bridge  
to the heavens, where  
all music, poetry,  
and art flow downward  
deeply penetrating the body  
of the earth below.

Where does all this energy go...  
What can it become?

I sit quietly in its presence  
hope for angels  
prayers and scriptures  
to guide me through  
this fertile time.

Unaware of such force  
within, I am stunned  
into a river of laughter,  
cries of loss, and the joy  
of new arrivals  
throughout my body  
and bones.

Listen to the dark jaguar.  
Look into the black stars.  
Fall endlessly into realms  
of humility, praise,  
and wild grace.

## **The Ring of Keys**

Old keys and locks,  
Metal and holes,  
Too many  
Ideas that close.  
I lost a key once,  
Have you?  
Fifteen keys to own just one.  
Only one.  
Diamonds and bracelets,  
Too many stones,  
Only one  
Is enough.

## **The Chain**

Cut the link loose,  
you know, that ring, that circle  
you keep rounding.

Cut it loose, let the two ends  
dangle into beginning.

Open it up, stretch it out,  
make the opening bigger than  
the boundary.

A circle is fine if it gives way  
to another circle  
winder in its reach,  
complete with a beginning,  
a living, and an end.

An end that reaches out  
onto a deeper round—  
birth, death, birth, death.

Death, Life.

Do you know where you are  
on your circle?

If you don't,  
go on home  
and sit silently...

then cut the ring loose  
and fall,  
and fall,  
through the opening.

## The Clouds Are No Longer Strange

Melissa Witcher

It began on a crisp autumn day. About noon. Clouds the shape of cotton candy in the sky. Another day in t-shirt and jeans. Ordinary.

Until.

Cruel strange thoughts arrived without invite or respite.

When my godchild called me to play hide and seek and sat on my lap, I wondered if that was proof that I was an abuser. I glanced out the window and questioned if I was at risk of picking up a rifle (I didn't own) and becoming a soulless sniper. Later, as I washed the serrated edge of a steak knife after dinner and my husband walked into the room, I panicked at my intent.

Each thought was worse than the last and they all insisted on staying. Over and over they rotated on endless loop. I berated myself for my horrible notions, crawled into corners, closed my eyes, and wished away the now constant echo in my brain. My vile potential lurked behind every exhale.

From 9 to 5, I stumbled to my desk and stared at the keyboard with motionless fingers, too afraid to type my symptoms into a search engine and unable to consider anything else. When I timidly approached a friend with the mysterious problem, a weakly worded text asking if they thought I was a danger, they replied "of course not", and went on to tell me about their mundane day, the result of a perfectly boring brain.

I was alone in my fear, except for the voice that only I could hear.

*Stay down stay down stay down. Close your eyes, don't move, not even a breath. I'll keep you safe,* she whispered. *Just do as I say.*

Not even a glance at babies, a moratorium on eating with knives, and no peeking out of windows. Clouds had become a harbinger of doom.

I did it all, to no avail. Thoughts continued to torment.

I'm a firm advocate for therapy, seeking answers for the unknown, and so I went looking. The going was easy for me; staying much harder. I had no idea how easily mental illness can delude and evade.

Over three years, four different therapists provided no diagnosis.

The first therapist said not to worry, all feelings were valid. But I had thoughts, not *feelings*, and thoughts about thoughts, I was certain, were far more dangerous than any feeling. The next one proposed exercises for anxiety and group dance sessions to release tension. I was in no condition to tap dance in public. Then there was a somatic experience practitioner who gagged when I shared my thoughts, confirming what I knew all along. I stank of evil.

My new friend, a mere whisper of warning, was great at avoiding detection. She hid deep in my cortical folds and peered over lenses made of diamonds, rich in my fear, and giggled sweetly as I swatted ineffectively at each thought.

To look at me no one ever imagined that I pulsated with disorder (not even the pros). Neither did I. I went to work every day, smiling with my lips pressed tight, functional in my misery.

Only pregnant, and so profoundly worried I would be more monster than mom, did I claw my way to an explanation for my agony. Finally, a cognitive behavioral therapist gave me the answer in the first fifteen minutes of session one: I exhibited all the classic symptoms of obsessive-compulsive disorder.

OCD wasn't a tiny voice, lovingly warning me of impending doom and selflessly sharing preparations to avoid disaster; she was an explosive chemical elixir that had combusted in my brain.

I never washed my hands repetitively or hoarded; my organization wasn't exemplary. I had no idea that OCD could be anything other than reality T.V. Not a single meme represented me. But I was thrilled to embrace those three little letters. What a relief! I was incredibly unremarkable in my suffering—not a single thought worth thinking twice.

"I have OCD!", I shared with glee. Few could understand why I was so ecstatic to share a diagnosis of a personality disorder but in a world where what we think defines who we are, a name gave me freedom from my thoughts.

Finally, my heart stopped beating double time, my breathing evened out, and my brain became neither friend nor foe, just an organ malfunctioning like any other. After years of only walls and so much pain, I could look out the window and not hate the clouds.

## A Man Can Leave

Matthew Hand

The wheelchair wheels squeak with each slow turn, the sound bouncing down the sterile white corridor. My arms ache, but I keep the baby pressed tight to my chest, his damp breaths warming the cotton of my shirt. Above us, fluorescent lights buzz, harsh and constant. Beneath them, the nurse hums something softer and together, a mismatched lullaby.

The smell of the hospital (bleach, plastic, gauze) begins to thin as we near the exit. Somewhere down the hall, a trace of flowers drifts through: lilies, maybe roses. Another family's joy. It doesn't last long, but it almost cuts through the sting in my nose.

The last thing I saw before the nurse wheeled me away was his smile. Not a big one, just the quick and practical kind, his hand squeezing my shoulder.

*I'll bring the car around*, he said. Like it was nothing. Like the most ordinary promise in the world.

I press my lips into my baby's hair and try to believe in it. In him. In the idea that he'll be waiting just beyond the glass doors. That some promises hold.

A cold draft slips through every time the doors part, slicing across my skin and raising goosebumps on my arms. I shift my baby closer, grateful for his warmth, even as the stitches deep inside me tug and burn. I am not whole yet. A body not yet sealed. A faulty anchor.

He stirs in my arms, half whimper, half sigh, and I whisper nonsense into his ear; sounds that mean nothing but comfort. For both of us. The silence tries to stretch wide, but I won't let it.

*He'll be there*, I tell myself.

*Maybe he forgot where he parked. That's all.*

But the thought has already begun to flicker.

And once it's lit, it won't go out.

The seconds stretch, thin and elastic. Too long.

Maybe he forgot something — the bag, the seatbelt, some small errand.

Maybe.

But the other thought arrives before I can stop it:

*What if he doesn't come back?*

And once it's there, it settles, heavy as breath.

I close my eyes and rock the baby, his weight stirring memories. His hand on my belly at night, whispering nonsense songs like the baby could already understand. The smell of fresh paint when he rolled soft yellow across the nursery walls, grinning as if he'd built the whole world for us with a bucket of color.

But there were other times too. Small fights over nothing. Dirty dishes, overdue bills, words thrown too sharply. Silences stretching across dinner like a second table. Him pushing food around his plate, eyes fixed on the window as if something out there was calling him. Maybe just drifting. Maybe rehearsing.

Because men can leave. I've known it since I was a girl, watching fathers vanish from doorways, hearing the gossip about husbands who didn't come home one night. Women left holding the child, the house, the weight. Always the weight.

Now that knowledge presses against my chest like a stone, heavier than the baby I cradle.

Through the glass doors, cars slide up to the curb. Husbands step out. Some juggling balloons, some clutching coffee gone cold. They fumble with car seats, adjusting straps with the clumsy joy of men eager to get it right. Their wives wait beside me in their own wheelchairs, tired eyes, soft smiles, heads tilted toward the men they *know* will return.

None scan the doors the way I do. None strain for footsteps. They lean back, secure in their waiting, as if the thought of being left has never crossed their minds.

I shift my baby in my arms, his small body anchoring me to the chair, to the tile, to this exact moment. I could never walk away, even if I wanted to. He binds me with a gravity stronger than vows, stronger than any promise whispered at an altar.

I am tethered. He is not.

That truth scares me more than the waiting.

At last, I see him through the glass doors, hurrying across the pavement. His face is flushed, hair slightly mussed, one hand lifted in a wave as proof, perhaps, that he's been running.

"Sorry," he calls, breathless. "Valet was backed up. Some delivery truck... total mess."

He grins down at the baby, as if none of it mattered. As if time had never stretched. His hand finds my shoulder again. His same quick, kind, familiar squeeze.

"Ready to go home?" he asks, like it's the simplest thing in the world.

I nod. I smile. I let him take the diaper bag, then the baby, and watch as he settles our son into the car seat for the very first time. The nurse steadies me as I rise. My body feels strange — heavy, fragile, not quite mine — and I lean gratefully into their hands.

On the surface, everything is as it should be.

But beneath the smile, the thought curls in on itself:

*He came back. This time.*

The fear doesn't dissolve. It lingers, quiet and stubborn, as we pull away from the curb. A shadow that stretches behind us, lengthening with every corner we turn.

I know now: it will never fully leave.

It will live inside me, this question I'll never be able to silence.

*Will he always come back?*

In the car, my husband's hand taps a careless rhythm against the steering wheel. The radio spills out some forgettable tune, and he hums along, light and off-key, like nothing was ever in question.

I turn to the window. The city slides past in gray streaks — rain and light and motion. My reflection stares back, pale and tired, half-ghost in the glass. In the back seat, my child sleeps, peaceful and still, as if the world has never known uncertainty.

Despite the pain, I reach for him, feeling the soft cotton hat, the warmth of his body grounding me in the here, the now, the *must stay*.

My husband's hand keeps time on the wheel.

The baby breathes steady.

And I sit between them, quiet, braced —  
a weight that cannot wander.

33 1/3

forgive me  
for I have sinned I never  
claimed to be perfect  
but it hurts ~~to let me~~  
~~down~~ I wish  
I never was called a jap  
& we are all really free I  
didn't want to hide but  
I was just a kid  
peering through two  
holes of a sheet now I'm  
here ripened into a ghost  
where I'll haunt all  
who wronged us let me choose  
the dream you see tonight  
I promise to be merciful  
just like the cops  
you'll see no clouds only  
an eclipse that burns  
your tongue & hard  
boils your ideas  
ever so slowly you turn  
into a nightmare where your  
eyes are brown your skin  
darker your heart  
compassionate then I'll turn  
into a record that moans  
on & on about the past  
spilling all matters  
of the heart where you finally  
begin to understand  
that we all sound the same  
when we cry

## Cloudwatcher

& on the eighth day  
I was tired of looking down  
knees bruised, dust  
wearing down my words

Rohwer's gloom stained  
my shadow, my first steps  
led me right into  
the middle of my own curse

placed at the bottom  
of a waterless well, the blue  
above filling me up, my soul  
a brushstroke tracing yours

that's all I wanted to be  
now dip me in your colors  
shades of kaki & vermouth  
in a Seattle accent

blanket me in sunshine,  
empathy & spells  
cast in milk flowers  
your air sign breezing them to me

*what do you want* you ask  
between you, my childhood eyes  
& hope, I couldn't decide  
so I'll settle for clouds

because I just need a reason

to look up

## Variations on a cross

you head towards the hill, past  
                  where your father built God  
a home. who decides who is holy  
                  or not? the punk tells me it's the  
government but I saw you walk  
                  on water today. it was only a second  
but enough for me to believe  
                  in good again. the splash from  
your fall made the sound of a word  
                  looking for a lyric to home

quick, play me your favorite song  
                  you feel like a volcano  
as you sing along, slightly off  
                  key, inviting a forgotten season  
of summer - when you were sixteen &  
                  free, a little more brave, misjudging  
words, *sorry* not yet in your vocabulary.  
                  you didn't know how to love  
or how to be loved  
                  an uninvited crash right around the corner

blink your eyes  
                  & we're back in the descent  
gang colors on politicians, all  
                  claiming the lord's work.  
a cross upside down is still a cross  
                  so carry on, we'll look away.  
too many times now & my motion sickness  
                  is kicking in...*I'm sorry*  
*give me a moment,*

## Through the looking glass

I press the button on the Nikon / & pray for forgiveness / I've chanted so many sutras that / my hands only know my hands / how easily we forget / the camps & / confuse a genocide that is happening / right now / so press these images into your eyes / concentrate / while god & the devil tear you left to right / I'll be the other voice in your head / a filthy beast / but one who wants peace to reign / over the world // in a different timeline / I was a surgeon / with hands of an / out of work magician / my name pronounced in Bb / instead of Eb / I would fly to Ukraine / or Gaza / my piano fingers trying to stitch together a broken world / the news cycle constantly refreshing / to trick our eyes / over & over again // c o n c e n t r a t e / can you see it? / a better world / born from remembering / the suffering / do they offend the devil / everytime they take a life? / pluck the fruit from the tree anyway / maybe temporary relief isn't a sin / & while being torn from right to left / a lighthouse emerges / shining through the mud they throw on us / c o n c e n t r a t e // I awake to a flashlight screaming into my eyes / a soldier doubling as an ophthalmologist / a photo of his family hiding beneath his jacket / *I do this all for them*, he whispers / convincing no one / not even his ancestors / & in a final moment, I wonder / *maybe we are all contaminated / these vices have tipped the scales // but I hope we are forgiven // I hope we can be forgiven / as the camera clicks again*

## Look over here

I felt a cold breath on my ear  
when I turned around I saw a yokai with cherry blossom skin  
& accordion arms. it had the face of my cousin

except he was smiling. it's legs look crooked  
but it was only standing on falling tiny bodies  
*which side are you on?* it grinned

I've been on the same side since I can remember  
the past thirty eight years of my life  
have been a slow riot for everyone to be free

the punks were fucking right all along

don't turn away now  
*the worst of it might be over*, you smile  
a white lie can act as brightness too, you know

so I write in the evening yearning  
for that light, but when the sun  
comes up my words are empty

what's a poem worth  
when a hurricane hits my friends  
& bombs fall on children

I lug my pencil to paper anyway  
so many lives disappeared  
but they are not alone

we've been there before  
we've been here before  
look at what the dark did now

by Amanda Niamh Dawson

## **Kiss**

I handed you over to tiny sunbursts

My child

My mind

This slip of time

## Ruth Bancroft Garden

Seabed turned on its head  
Where eucalyptus  
Soar along with cirrus  
And agaves pinpoint light  
Festoons of crimson  
Nimbly grace  
Prickly pears'  
Staunch embrace

Linden leaves fall  
Like sunset parachutes  
Greens of gold  
In forms so old  
Cups of drink  
Within them slink

Dreams in air  
Painted yearnings  
Brushstrokes curving  
Catching cotton  
Swabbing longly  
In shade well-trodden  
Deep in souls  
Not forgotten

## **Kneeling**

A city's chore  
In phantom rest  
Recline at last  
In parody  
We are dutifully  
Blessed

We sigh unseen  
The green comes mean  
Stains in the air  
Burdens of care

To cathedrals we go  
Marching slow  
To tame some flame  
To bend us low

## **Jarring**

The wind up there  
Will it blow  
And breeze through trees?  
Will flowers grow?  
Will streams flow?

Does nature cease  
Where minds increase?  
Do beasts wander stars  
Near and far?

Or is it a jar?  
A terrarium space  
Of samples so dear  
Kept alive for fear  
Of future emptiness  
Here

## BLESSINGS

Richard Jacobs

After supper, Dan kissed Sue and left Jeff and Willie to play pitch and catch in the backyard. He drove out to the Gettier house to install strips of baseboard and door trim in an upstairs bedroom. The afternoon's heat had broken, bringing breezes from the south, so he opened every one of the second-story windows. The fragrances of the flowers teeming in the lot burst into the rooms. He found a country music station on his father's radio and tried to lose himself in his lonesome work—painstaking measurements, compound cuts, the careful striking of finishing nails.

Tried and failed, for he could not stop thinking of last Tuesday morning. Dan had driven down the alley behind his parents' house at 6:15 expecting to stop, drink a thermos cup of coffee with Will, and consult the box scores in the newspaper Will would have purchased uptown at six. It was their good weather custom, one they hadn't broken all summer. But that morning Will, seated behind the steering wheel of his old Ford pickup when Dan pulled in beside him, had waved him on to the work site. Miffed, Dan arrived first and was waiting in the shade of the chimney when his father drove up. "You're sick," Dan declared as Will dragged himself out of the cab and started to string a nail bag around his waist. "No, sir," Dan said, stepping toward him. "Dad, you need to rest."

"We can't afford it," Will grumbled. "We're falling behind schedule."

"One day," Dan insisted. "Come back strong tomorrow and we'll make up the lost time." He'd felt a shiver of astonishment as Will, pouting like a schoolboy who'd been scolded, untied his nail bag, looked at the house, at all the work that needed to be done, and left.

A few hours later, Dan, shingling the roof, saw Will's truck bumping its way up the lane toward the house. It stopped behind Dan's pickup, raising a veil of dust in the courtyard. Can't keep the old guy down, Dan thought. Five seconds crawled by before the driver's door opened with a protesting screech and Harold Hoyer, Will's neighbor's drowsy-eyed son, unhinged his limbs from the cab. He shut the door with the care of a locksmith and dragged his feet toward the house.

"Harold?" Dan called.

The boy ducked his head once and punched his fists into the pockets of his dungarees. "Mr. Mehring," he croaked, gazing up at Dan, "your mother sent me to fetch you. Asks for you to come home." Then Harold pegged his gaze into the shadowed depths of the lower story of the house.

Dan almost forgot that he was standing on a roof. He asked, "Her home, Harold? What's the trouble?"

A wait while Harold scrubbed his forehead with his bare knuckles and hoisted his face again. "I'm sorry to be the one to tell you, sir. It's your dad. He passed away this morning. Took a nap on your mother's sofa and just"—Harold gulped but kept his sights on Dan until he could finish—"went."

Dan stared into the teenager's eyes, unseeing.

Harold asked, "You want me to drive you home? I can."

Dan glanced at the newly laid shingles baking in the sun. *Imagine falling from here.* At first, it seemed that a fresh wave of heat had enveloped him. Then he realized it was sorrow with its swaddling weight. His eyes endured a pounding from within. He bore the weight, sealed his tears. "I know you can," he said. "You go on."

A two-man team, Dan and Will had formed, framed, sided, trimmed, roofed, painted, plastered and papered every house they'd built, rarely working farther apart than their normal voices carried. Will's laughter and jokes, the staccato of his accompanying hammer, his advice in tight spots—tonight Dan still felt the lack of all. He still felt the strangeness of solitary labor. "I'll have to take on a new man," he mused aloud, looking about the room. Fatigue burdened him like a second sadness, but the resinous scent of bare wood, an indelible pleasure of his trade, struck him anew as an emanation from the heart of the earth itself. He knew it would always remind him of his father. Out of long habit, he listened for Will's response to the words he'd spoken. He almost heard it: "Yes, you surely will."

Swear to God, Dan addressed him in his mind, I wouldn't have guessed it would hurt this much.

\*

As Dan drove home under the plum-colored heavens, his mind punished him with the sight of his father's harrowed face on that final morning. He'd been seeing it in his dreams every night since. His heart lurched as he pulled into the driveway behind his property. He parked and sat in the cab with his hands gripped so hard to the wheel that his fingers cramped. The yard sounded with the shrill tidings of the locusts sheltered in its trees. A dog chained somewhere down the alley bawled out its loneliness. If Sue or the boys had been outside to greet him he would have risen above his baleful thoughts, he felt. Anger at their failure struck him, but only for a second. It was he who was failing. He yanked himself out of the truck and headed for the back porch. It was empty, but he could hear calm voices through the screen door. Someone was visiting Sue.

"Don't go in there," he whispered to himself. "You're too upset."

He walked round to the front of the house and looked across the street at St. Eustace Church. It was Sue's church, not his, though he was friendly with the parish priest and attended Mass some Sundays with his family. He and Will had replaced a window in the sacristy once. They'd repaired crippled pew benches and kneelers at other times. A faint light glowed through the colored panes of the church windows. Dan drew a tremulous breath, crossed the street, and hurried through the lawn to the high granite steps of the portal.

His hand tugged the stout door open. He entered the velvet dark, pausing in the narthex to take his bearings, and heard strange music. He pushed past the inner door and stopped by the brass wall font. With intense concentration he dipped the middle fingers of his right hand into the holy water. It felt as cold as a spring at dawn. He started to make the sign of the cross but ceased with his fingers below his heart. His hand spilled to his side. He thought, for the first time, how his father's death had gone unwitnessed—his mother in the backyard hanging up laundry, he at Gettier's. A veiled ending. He felt everything in him give way, felt hope, desire,

and longing give way to his recognition of loss. A sweat broke out across his forehead, and his throat caked dry. He stood bereft of thought or intention, of all but the music that reached him from the sanctuary like high-toned conversation from a neighbor's front porch. He looked, and there was Father Justin Reynolds, dressed in his black daily clothes, at the altar. The light shone from there. His back toward the pews, Father was wiping a vessel in his hands with a cloth. The music, constructed of many voices, issued from the sacristy. Dan stood still and listened: the harmonic phrases washing over him sounded plaintive and otherworldly. He lifted his eyes to the life-size crucifix above the tabernacle. Two lamps imbedded in the angles of the canopy from which the crucifix hung sent beams of stark light upon the ochreous face of Jesus. This was the light in which Father worked. Dan pressed forward over the carpet, past the polished pews and the Stations of the Cross, pulled by the stricken face. The crowned head rested upon a shoulder. The cheeks were drawn in, the bearded chin thrust forward, the tendons in the neck tightly strained. Tangled plaits of hair snaked across the forehead and fell to the clavicles. The eyes—open, thrown downward—welcomed death's imminent shadow. For seconds, the chance that actual tears might flow from them stood real in Dan's mind. Humbled, he stepped out of himself. His heart filled with compassion. But had this man's suffering truly saved anyone? Could it heal another man's pain? Dan's anguished mind refused to consider the ramifications of these questions. As he reached the communion rail, he found himself plunged back into his misery. Yet the music's swarming voices seemed to plead with him: *Ask! Ask!* He held back, then silently beseeched the staring face: *Please take this from me.*

Father Justin had been humming along with the recording in a tuneful manner. Now he turned, a burnished ciborium in his hand, and laughed in pleased surprise. "Dan, your boys left half an hour ago. They're home, I trust?"

"I'm sure they are. I've just returned from work. They were here?"

"Jeff likes to help me buff the vessels, a Thursday evening chore. He brought Willie with him. They dusted and vacuumed, which, bless their effort, will annoy the Altar Guild matrons. What will they *do* when they find their godly work accomplished? Jeff showed Willie a few tricks of the altar boy trade. Your Willie's a conscientious one. We swapped some baseball tales. Somehow it got to be nine o'clock and we hadn't quite finished." He set the ciborium on the altar. "Come on up."

"There?"

"Why not?"

Dan furrowed his brow. He stepped through the center space in the cherry communion rail and looked with embarrassment at his sawdust-sprinkled jeans. "You've just cleaned the area and I'm filthy. Besides, I started life a Methodist. This feels . . . forbidden."

"And we Catholics are supposed to be the superstitious Christians."

Dan blushed and cast his eyes to the carpet. He could feel Justin watching him. He raised his face.

Justin said, "You are your father all over again."

Dan gasped. "No, no. I'm not."

"In all his best ways."

"I feel overwhelmed without him."

“I know.”

“I’ve been thinking”—Dan moved to the first step and looked up at Justin—“that I could have prevented his death. That I let him push himself when I should have seen that he was ill, that if I had seen I might have—” He stopped. His throat felt inflamed. Why was he saying this? What could anyone say or do to make him feel better? “I keep wondering if he chose death, if he was so disappointed in . . . oh, the world, or me . . . that he decided not to struggle against it.”

“I doubt it, Dan. It’s possible that he wasn’t surprised. You feel his loss so acutely now, you’re wounded so by sorrow, that your vision is blurred—your mind’s vision. You’ll always feel this yearning for your father. The sharp pain will cease, but the ache won’t. It will testify to the bond you had with him.”

Dan said, “You know how people like to say of a man who dies that it was his time? I don’t feel that way about Dad. He was only fifty-five. I can’t believe it was his time.”

Justin waited. “Think of this as a kind of darkness. When it lifts, the light will seem more precious. You and Will stood in the light in a kind of accord many fathers and sons never achieve. In your acts, not just your intentions, you loved each other. You made him happy. You earned the happiness you’ll surely feel when you can study your memories without the encumbrance of mourning. You saw God in your father, Dan. You let Will be your refuge and your strength, perhaps too much so. That was God working in him. But you stand in the light with Sue and your mother and your sons as well. You can see God in them, and they can see God in you. Think of all you learned from Will that you can pass on to Jeff and Willie—I don’t mean carpentry. See what a chance that gives you to build on to all that you and Will made together.”

Dan could feel Justin’s sentences sounding every depth within him. His body remained still but his hollows vibrated with the sensation of expectancy, a stirring up of a hope he could not name. He found that he was staring at a round shining object that lay near a corner of the altar. Because he could not yet answer Justin, he climbed the next two steps to see the object better. It was a gilded brass pocket compass with an enameled pearl-colored dial divided into quadrants. A blued steel needle, poised on a jeweled pivot, intersected the bold Roman N, a jewel itself in the bracelet of letters that illuminated eight equidistant bearings. He looked at Father Reynolds. “May I?”

Justin nodded.

Dan picked up the compass and held it at different angles to watch the light shimmer on its face. The needle quivered.

“Often a first grader will ask me what God looks like,” said Father. “I usually say, ‘Like you.’ But when I was a young priest and thought I knew everything, I decided that if I were asked to draw a picture of God, I’d draw a circle. I’m not sure I think that now, but it gave me the idea to place this compass there while I’m at work here. It was my father’s.”

Dan returned the luminous instrument to its position. “I’ve always pictured God as some wise but taciturn old grandfather, Santa’s stern uncle. That’s stupid, I know.” He studied Father’s attentive face. The words he spoke next felt like running steps before a great leap. “He’s not a wise old grandfather, is he? He’s barely known.”

“Barely apprehended. There are paths that lead us to God, though. Of that I feel certain. You’re learning now, or perhaps again, that grief is one.”

Dan closed his eyes in agreement. Grief was a form of work, the most strenuous he’d encountered. The music had finished playing, yet it seemed to go on in his head.

Justin spoke. “We ask ourselves why God allows our loved ones to suffer or die young, why cancer exists, why Negroes in our country and others must endure beatings in their quest for justice. Is God cruel? That can’t be; we won’t accept that. The only answer left to us is that God can do nothing about suffering.”

Dan stared at the priest.

Justin said, “Except through us.”

Dan tried to nod.

“God is in us, not in heaven.”

Dan didn’t answer.

“You don’t have to believe every word of that.”

“I know, but I think I do. It must be hard not to shout it out from the pulpit.”

Justin smiled. “I do my best to suggest it. Allow me to confess a conceit of mine. Look to where the compass needle points.”

Dan looked. It fixed on the tall statue of St. Joseph that stood on its ledge over an altar boy’s chair.

“I took it as a kind of divine coincidence that the man we call our Lord’s human father stands directly north of the altar. Joseph was my father’s name, and long ago I chose it as my confirmation name.” He shrugged. “You see the conceit.”

Dan could feel his mind yielding to the stillness in the church. “Thank you, Father,” he said.

“God bless you, Dan. I’ve been concerned about you.”

Dan laughed in relief, his heart filling again, and felt free to speak his curiosity. “And you? How are you?”

Relaxing his frame against the altar, Father weighed his answer. “I’m well, thank you, but our parish school is draining money and students like a sieve and may well close in a year or two. I’m counseling three couples whose marriages are failing. One of our good sisters feels her vocation weakening daily. I must fend off the cockamamie ideas of various committee chairmen and think of ways to scrounge up more and more funds. So, I’m—” He frowned, then chuckled. “Lord, listen to me complain.”

“Complain all you want.”

“Despite everything, I’m sure of my vocation. Every job has its difficulties.”

“Job? You sacrifice so much.”

“And don’t you sacrifice, though you’re happily married?”

Surprised, Dan answered, “No, no. No.”

“We’re told in Ecclesiastes,” Justin said, “‘Live joyfully with the wife whom thou lovest, all thy days, for that is thy portion.’ It’s good advice. But I was called to this life, or at least nudged, just as you were to your life with Sue. May I read something to you?” He walked down to the lectern and drew a compact Bible from a shelf below the reading stand. He turned its

plain-edged pages briskly to a known destination, then stopped to search Dan with a look of solicitude. “You worked this evening and I’m keeping you. You must be exhausted.”

“No, please.”

Bowing his head, Justin ran a finger down the center of a page and read in a low voice,

“You duped me, O Lord, and I let myself be duped;  
    You were too strong for me, and you triumphed.  
All the day I am an object of laughter;  
    everyone mocks me.  
Whenever I speak, I must cry out,  
    violence and outrage is my message;  
The word of the Lord has brought me  
derision and reproach all the day.  
I say to myself, I will not mention him,  
    I will speak in his name no more.  
But then it becomes like fire burning in my heart,  
    imprisoned in my bones.  
I grow weary holding it in,  
    I cannot endure it.”

Justin closed the Bible. “I run to this passage in Jeremiah every other month or so to keep myself sane. It’s not a version we ever read at Mass. I can’t explain how scary and yet seductive those words sounded to me when I discovered them in seminary, when I was beginning to see what I was getting myself into. The fire burns in my heart still, even through doubt. The older I get, the more convinced I become that doubt, though it may be steep and winding, is the surest path to God.” He shook his head. “Nearly any good poem or piece of common sense refutes that text, refutes my life: ‘Birds build—but not I build; no, but strain, / Time’s eunuch, and not breed one work that wakes.’” He tapped his Bible’s black cover with two fingers, smiled, then came back to Dan.

Dan trembled in his body’s effort to stand still, to not touch Justin’s arm. “Thank you, Father,” he said again.

Justin put his hand on Dan’s shoulder and said, “You’re welcome.” He looked around the chancel. “Well, time to close up shop.”

Dan waited while Father replaced the vessels and turned out the lights. “Wasn’t the music we listened to, the *Lamentations* of Thomas Tallis, gorgeous?” Father called from the sacristy. “It is one more thing that helps me know God exists.”

Dan’s eyes fell upon the statue, on the gospel side wall, of the parish namesake. “Who was St. Eustace?” he asked when Justin returned to the altar.

“A Roman general who was converted after seeing a crucifix between the antlers of a stag. An example of pure Christian mythology, one of hundreds. Ah, but who knows for sure?”

Outside, the men shook hands. Dan paced through the churchyard allowing himself to

feel borne up. Swallows sung from the branches above him. The sight of his own lamplit house quickened his step. He skipped up the porch stairs with his sons' voices ringing in his ears. Then, jolted by a guilty conscience, he turned and looked across the street at the rectory. Father Reynolds stood alone in the gloom of his threshold, opening his front door. He entered the pitch-dark building.

Dan whispered what in his desire to be home he'd neglected to speak as they parted: "God bless you, too."

\*

### **Comparative Regency of Sand Dunes**

I drove across Texas and New Mexico  
and Arizona back to California.

It was the rocks and the sky in those other places.  
But back in California, it was the endless beige.

Sometimes the color came from drought,  
other times it was the new construction sites.

Religions share the liturgical vigor of purple  
sashes, fringed yellow pennants, and long gowns.

Out west, the rootlessness drifts across Hwy 90,  
like a divorcee crusading at a hotel pool bar.

Everything beiged out. Even the emboldened wash  
of sun rays cannot relinquish their grasp  
on all that colorlessness.

### **Three Quarter Length, Georgia**

Electric lights dimmed at sunrise,  
televisions switched themselves off.  
The intricate aggression of unpaved  
walkways set to drain naturally.

Man, these sagging power lines owe the  
late hours their deceptive commitment of  
quick agreement, the derelict  
rumble of fainting care.

You had polyester eye shadow and a baby blue  
satin jacket. I had a half pack of Camaros  
and drove the rusted Pall Malls into an  
empty quarry.

## **Medium Quality Spirits Talking at the Grocery Store**

Truth is like a river filled  
with garbage.

And any direction you move, you  
touch more trash.

But you find that some of  
that trash

will be useful. That's what  
the truth is.

## **Good for Something, Texas**

I saw calves and angus and horses,  
water troughs made of fiberglass  
turned over like tumbleweeds.

I saw the perforated cumulus hang down  
like they sifted springs from the universe  
and decided where to deliver them.

I was a train rider. A chocolate candy  
eater in the sparse desert, splitting  
caffeinated atoms into Bergman movies.

So when the cactus plants became  
a flowering brush the color  
of pale Easter skirts, I succumbed.

I was then a barb on the wire, a fenced-in  
cataclysm looking for a place to be  
seeded in night hours.

There were mountains and they roughed  
out folds like suede boots sour on liquid.  
Everything eroded to baptism.

## **90,000 Hours**

You collected rusted train ties  
underneath of your house.  
Commissioned a lyre carved into your  
dining room chairs.

With your yellow shirts  
and cropped brown hair

licking the crown of your skull,  
the last time was a droplet of rain.  
A brook to a stream, white water to a wave.

## **Into the Tall Grass**

Misplaced beside two-lane highways  
are bellies of elk whose blood  
gallops off into  
the tall grass,  
like a metastatic boundary.

The union charmed like a prized  
but forgotten bottle from Alsace-  
the good stuff.  
A tautological exhumation  
of a lamentable collapse.

There were pines  
on the hill there.  
Beneath them  
beds of dried  
titian needles.

Imitation bone handled  
pen knives scratch  
the dome of blackness above  
as a song squirts into the silence  
“Tonight, you’re mine completely...”

## **Municipal Interaction Review Log**

I saw the vents in the heater  
turn into orange children  
or grey flowers  
or something.

And Chinese food containers  
crushed together to become  
Styrofoam beads that floated  
out toward the trash islands.

A roller blading Veteran yelled at  
a burly mustachioed  
cop, pointing from a street sign  
to a small red covered notebook.

All courage streamed into the husks  
that blew down from the coconut palm  
across the way, a symphony  
pulsating in the Don't Walk signal.

## **Bottom of the Hill**

You went to the General Hospital in San Francisco.  
Our careless wrangling was my disregard.  
You found a trial program for the drug that

warmed the fervid self-doubt. We held the packet  
of pills in our hands together. We held the end  
of youthful elasticity by its tail.

The pills worked. At night you needed  
more room on the small futon. Some nights  
you wept into a frozen urn of silence.

I called out to those clattering nights, a  
wordless collage of shrugs and pantomimes,  
ignorant of your childhood dreams.

I rode on a skateboard behind Mark's  
Japanese moto. Slunk into a Fillmore show  
without any cash in my pocket.

You were getting ready to leave. And  
I could filter the distance in those small  
moments of our twilight. I didn't want that.

You were leaving. I was not. Tongues  
softened. Everything Mercurochrome.

## Red Flag Billowing Over Town

On Camera  
off. Buck teeth  
blond.

by the statues  
in someone's  
yard over

in Guilford. Popularity  
amidst platters of  
wintry mollusks.

left at middle  
life. The 12 gauge  
concern

of narcissistic  
disagreement  
left to parkways,

over by the lakes and  
back. Elton John melting  
on the dashboard

cracks, a shrill  
polyphony, awaiting  
a curatorial

embrace of old  
prints no one  
has the guts to

commit to the garbage  
bin. But drink tea,  
be curved. Misremember.

Elongate the pitch  
of devised insouciance.  
Wave a red flag.

## **Pinched Front Futurism**

we sucked in the last of the clear  
moments

before the smoke of fantasy  
settled over the building concern

the particles of combustible  
assumption spread

like corn pollen clasping to  
vast rows.

## A Place In Life

George Zancola

Andrew felt a little rough around the edges. A bleary-eyed condition was usual for him in the morning. Due to a change in his medication he experienced extreme tiredness when getting out of bed. He felt like a train wreck. A clinician told him he took enough pills to kill a horse.

When he entered the dining room of the Sunset Boarding House to have his breakfast Andrew neighed. Everyone laughed but no one knew how to reference his imitation of an equine war mount. A wag by nature he was used to obscurity surrounding his comedic efforts. He had always played tough rooms. Boarding Houses were among the toughest. There wasn't much that was funny in those kinds of venues not to laugh at anyway.

He recalled wearing a school uniform with a crest on the blazer jacket and before departing on a school bus kissing a woman he called 'mother' lightly on the cheek. He used to go to boarding schools now he lived in boarding houses. He was proud of the fact that he could speak French as well as the Russian aristocracy did in the Russian novels he had read during his private school education.

At breakfast he downed a glass of orange drink. The fruity libation was made from powdered crystals procured from a fifty pound bulk bag kept locked in the kitchen cupboard beneath the sink. He now preferred this run of the mill morning pick me up to the freshly squeezed orange juice he had once been accustomed to drinking.

The cook was looking at him curiously. She thought him an odd one even among this bunch. Those who lived with him were wondering about him too. Why was he like that? No one understood him, especially when he spoke French. Who was Raskolnikov anyway?

He had adapted to loss over the years of dignity of respect not to mention the close ties to his family. But he was not tired of his journey unlike the characters he had read about in the literature he had consumed as a younger man. He hadn't yet tired of the present boarding house or of every item of food he longed for being locked up securely. He could never appease his hunger for food or drink but he hadn't soured on being alive.

From time to time he wondered about his place in life. What was it? What was the point of it? Did he matter? Did he have a purpose? And why was he living in the attic room of this boarding house? He began hunting for tobacco, searching the edges of the roadways for spent butts. While he looked down at the ground he followed his thought boldly not shirking from any conclusion deemed true. His thought reached its pinnacle when he deduced that he lived an impoverished life and that he was regarded as a being who was less than others.

This conclusion was obviously empirically deduced by the evidence of his senses. The food he ate for instance. The fare consisted of a diet nominally associated with the 'obscure' poor. The locale he lived in brought to mind the same associations as the food. There was more. The clothes he wore. The women he loved. All of it was 'low rent'.

With certainty he further observed that he was not of importance in the world. Continuing he went on to consider if he despised himself or his lower rung social status. True he was not a man of great accomplishments. After some consideration he could honestly say that he was satisfied with what he had achieved.

Walking along with a couple of spent butts he had found he asked himself what it might be like to be successful in the eyes of the world? How would he feel? He didn't know. What would it be like to be a man of the world instead of a contemplative like himself? He could not put his finger on what made the difference between his story and a tale of success.

His willingness to rise above mediocrity was in place. He was going to exchange his crude failure for real success not only in his own eyes but also in the eyes of the world.

How would he do it this time? He'd gone through this cycle of thought many times before. The thought process repeats identically each time he engages in it always leads him to take action. He now understood that he was not as correct in the actions he had taken in the past. His behavior had changed. He no longer acted out. Without saying a word to anybody he restrained himself from doing anything that came into his mind. He was told to report to the hospital should he ever have an urge to put his thoughts into action again. Also, the meds he was now taking were believed to be able to override any need for Andrew to check into a hospital for this purpose.

He did not want to repeat the unfortunate occurrences he involved himself in the past. He once lit a fire under his brother's ass to see if it would, as proverbially believed, cause him to move. There was more. Much more. The last time he thought about the meaning and purpose of existence, he wound up in a small town outside the city limits. The tie in of his journey there to his contemplation of what life was all about was unclear to him. Everyone else was baffled, too.

He made a friend in that town he still called from time to time. He did connect easily to others. His thinking processes once in a while lead him into trouble. He wasn't allowed to go back to that town. He could only call his friend there. The judge had thought it would be too disturbing to the rest of the townspeople to allow Andrew visits there.

Contemplation led him to try out the dog food they advertised on TV, the kind that made its own gravy. Once, after a particularly heavy stretch of pensiveness, he tried to light a fire under

his brother's ass again. A careful consideration of his actions needed to be in place whenever his thought processes were given free rein. It goes without saying that if precautions had been in effect he would not have attempted to steal an ambulance when it was parked in a nearby driveway with the keys left in the ignition.

With only slight periodic tweakings of his drug intake Andrew was well on his way to inaction. He was required only to be assessed for the effectiveness of the drugs he took to keep him in this state of inertia. Recently one med was raised another lowered a third removed and two new meds were introduced.

"Train wreck," muttered Andrew to himself as he reached the streetcar loop with his two spent cigarettes in his hand. There he was, a failure. It had never occurred to him so powerfully that he was a loser before. And there among the whirring spin of the heavy traffic all around him the solution to being an underachiever came to him. He would begin his journey the same way so many champs did when they set out to accomplish success. He would start on the road to viability by looking like a million bucks. He decided to buy a suit hopefully in powder blue. He'd have to ask for credit of course.

Andrew went directly from the streetcar loop to the Second Chance Boutique with his spent cigarettes and his dreams in hand. The Second Chance Boutique was a used clothing shop near the boarding house run by nuns. The sisters did their best to cater to the obscure poor of the inner city but they were far from home. Both nuns on duty came from overseas. They missed their morning croissants.

Sister Marie-Claire and sister Margarete Louise were very accommodating of Andrew when he entered the shop. He excitedly pointed out that there was a powder blue suit replete with vest in the front window. They let him try on the suit after the sisters fetching it by climbing on a ladder to get to it. The suit fit Andrew well. Unfortunately, the pant legs were about a foot too long. With some concern, the sisters asked if he could take up the pant legs?

"Yes. I have a friend who can probably do it," Andrew answered. He did not say that the friend he was thinking of was the doctor who prescribed his medication. He had an appointment later that day. They didn't like to give credit at the second hand shop but in Andrew's case they felt the policy could be waived. After all he told the nuns that his friend was also good for the money.

"I'll wear the suit home" he said to them. "I don't have far to go."

The sisters waved good-bye to Andrew from the front door of the second hand store. With a bag containing his old clothes and his two spent cigarette butts in hand he moved perilously. The overabundance of fabric enveloped each shoe like thin sandals. The rain forecast for the afternoon had already begun. The waters descended all at once and the pant legs became muddied. He was unconcerned about it. No matter the weather he had changed his M.O.

The morning drift of thought came haltingly to its end and he was soon on his way to see his doctor. He wanted to point out to him that his adventures were becoming less out of the ordinary and far more in tune with reality. Hadn't he bought a suit on credit like a man of the world and hadn't he pinned the pant legs with paper clips he borrowed from the boarding house office. He was getting better. He was sure that one day they would let him use the staplers.

### ***Like Underworld Rivers***

My granddaddy's boots crunching on railroad cinders,  
he died shortly after singing "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot"  
with a black man in the cancer ward bed next to his,  
my blackface grandfather who'd sung from plywood stages in  
Southern minstrel shows Huntsville, rubber bullets, tear gas,  
masked protestors BLM movement like underworld rivers  
that can't be crossed over.

I used to wait on the porch steps in Anniston, Alabama,  
for his ghost to come sauntering, whistling.  
he'd turn in at the gate of my low, peeling picket fence,  
sit down beside me put his hand on my knee and  
set it all straight and perhaps we'd sing that same song  
Anniston bungalow the ceiling fan of my memory spins  
slowly, its blades heavy with dust warily it spins in that  
thick cocktail of air, full of drunken memories, grave,  
gravy, slur, train sob, drawl.

### ***Golden Hinges***

my belly sunken from hunger and Orion tilting drunkenly above the  
plastic shopping bags flapping caught on the  
barbed-wire roof next door and roaches starting from all the  
shadowy corners of my room like  
dreadful secrets.

i'd go walking, some lover waiting for me maybe  
in some sunken doorway, some mannequin with  
scraped face in a cheap fur hat and pantyhose with a  
run in it smoking a scented cigarette and as  
stars fell she'd stroke me with her plastic fingers in that nullifying  
city where in the darkness,  
everything was a door in that city that with its  
carillons had fallen mute into the silt in that city that  
got so dark you couldn't see the golden hinges

## ***Plague***

i turn the a.c. off it's turned cooler there's a featureless gray sky  
i make some coffee and go into the red room the one with the broken  
skylight a sharp pinging and popping comes is it hailing?  
i go to the front room to look at the street i don't have my shirt on  
i hope the girl in the pink shirt in the apartment across the way  
is watching there are no cars on Water Street and for a second  
i think a plague's come.  
i invited the Russian over last night Kazakh actually she said she was sick  
but would come later maybe i picked up the place it looked good last night  
but i've been up for a few hours and it's starting to get  
trashed again.  
i get really tired of hearing other people have sex  
and cockroaches in my TV.

## ***Red BMW***

we lay holding hands in the dark naked  
she had bats in her place and had come over because  
she was afraid slept with a tennis racket  
by her bed.  
she looked like a boy when we made love i remembered a  
Baron Corvo novel  
how vivid it is two adults naked their hands like mini-selves  
a picture of orgy all those fingers like many limbs entwined  
that delicious decadent succumbing feeling of fingers  
sliding between fingers we were naked as Adam and Eve  
the bed made no noises her haircut was David Bowie's  
i was a drinker she wasn't i was a cheater she wasn't  
she was an ex-wife i was a lout she had a red  
BMW she'd let me drive it as if i were  
a man.

## ***Pittsburgh Blues***

the curve of my cane's shined from the polish of my palm  
the dead are waiting patiently in the parlor with their maudlin  
sickly-sweet flowers and their moustaches waxed  
their fruit hats their spats i'm rocking back and forth on the  
bed grasping the chair back to give me a hand up to  
stand up.

the tap of my cane pokes at the pig faces in the woodgrain.  
silver backing of cracked mirrors.

on its black thighs the train rhythmically beats the rails  
clackety-clack like castanets like spoons  
French and Indian Appalachian the smoke of locomotives  
still staining lost skies Sheol caterwaul high whine of feathered  
arrows slap of riverboat paddles sidewheelers  
sternwheelers creosote brick dust a clawfoot bathtub  
scrabbles over ruins screech of a harpy's voice  
as she rakes her nails on an autoharp  
bastions of Abaddon as from deep in the  
breast of darkness night bursts open in a  
swarm of golden leaves.

## Catch You Later

Linda C. Wisniewski

I was hoping you'd be here, he said, his face still familiar after sixty years. How could that be true? Do I look like that sixteen-year-old girl he kissed for the first time? So much to say, we stumbled over words, awkwardly polite. His wife passed away. I was sorry. He read my book. I thanked him. You really struggled, he said, as if he never knew. I didn't want to talk about the parts he was in, so I filled the space between us with questions. His daughter? His grandkids? Still working? Just a few days a week. Catch you later.

The restaurant where our high school reunion took place was full of memories, full of faces we knew and didn't really know. Kids, we were just kids, weren't we? How could we be this old when we knew each other so well, still recognized each other? I wanted to stand there with him for a moment more but he smiled and nodded and walked away. Catch you later.

I was not ready for him at 16 nor even at 18 when I hurt him. I met someone else.

Okay, he said. I know someone too. I think I can make her love me.

They say we all have a life path, a journey toward important lessons. Mine would be a long walk through the fire of crashing loneliness, desperate for love.

Walking is my way of living in this world. Walking is my sport. It's how I get answers to questions I didn't know I had. Walking the streets of my old hometown wrote the map of my childhood. It's the thing I can do when there's nothing more to do.

I took a class in Nordic walking last summer. Bought a pair of hundred-dollar poles to balance the upper body with the lower, another way of walking. People who met us in Central Park thought we were a ski club, practicing for the winter. In my teenage years in my hometown, I walked to get out of the house, a circuit of side streets passing two story flats like Grandma's and singles like Uncle John's. I didn't know our house was tiny until I left for college and came back to the postwar building of clapboard siding. It boxed my mother inside an emotional hell. My father was a yeller. A short boxy man with bitten fingernails and a family of brothers, all yellers. It tried to box me and my sister in. We broke out but a heart thread still tethered us to that little box of horrors, yanking us back for one more hurt.

You had some happy times, didn't you, our aunt asked.

Yes, I said, but we were always afraid.

A desert house.

He was walking me home to the desert house on the warm summer night when he kissed me. In the middle of Lenox Street there were no sidewalks. He placed a thick short arm around my waist and pulled me close. We walked like that, arms around each other, to the spot between streetlights, a private spot for two postwar teenagers, a spot where something new was born. The nearness of his body was my safety. The world was contained, for a moment, within our space, the stars and moon above for extra, outside of time. He stepped in front of me, blocking my steps. I reached out for a hug. He chuckled and shook his head No. I froze, unclear as he moved his head toward me and pressed his soft lips on mine. What was this? Of course, I knew. How dumb I was not to know what he meant. I didn't say this. Of course I didn't. I knew how to kiss. Well, now I did.

That spring he had arrived at the door of my little white box house, a cellophane boxed corsage in hand. His dark suit, white shirt and tie, down to his shiny black dress shoes offset his dark good looks. Stocky Italian, center on the football team, I didn't know he was short. I was the shy Polish blond majorette who greeted him at the door in the powder blue gown my mother made, the one she told me not to say didn't come from a store downtown. His mother stood smiling beside him, holding an Instamatic with a line of flashcubes.

I know you, she said to my mother. City Hospital, October 1946. Well, hi, how are you? We could have met in the nursery, since our mothers stayed in the hospital for nine days. It's a wonder they could stand up and walk after that. Maybe that's why I like to walk. Walk away from the white box house, away from the yelling inside, away from who I should be and who I should be with. Eyetalian was a big stretch, but okay, he seems nice. And we know his parents. I have your ring, he said at the high school reunion. His curly black hair was almost white. I was surprised at how short he was. My current husband is much taller and I am used to reaching up for a kiss, not across.

What ring? Why would I give him a ring? From St. Stan's, the one with a yellow cross?

Yes, he said. I'll look in my wife's jewelry box, I know it's there.

Are you sure, why would I give you a ring?

A token of love? His voice held a question.

I shrugged. I wish I hadn't. Of course, I might have given him a token of love at sixteen. At the end of the lunch reunion, since many of us no longer drive at night, I found him to say goodbye. Let's keep in touch. Do you have a card?

He fumbled in his wallet, through worn-edged grocery cards, credit cards, who knows what cards and said he knew they were there but he couldn't put his finger on one.

That's okay. They have our contact information, I said.

We hugged again, but it was such a bustling crowd and flurry I forgot to take it in.

Be well, I said. Be well.

## Going Negative

## Roberto Ontiveros

I don't know if my dad was in remission but we were treating him like he was, scheduling all these family trips, and planning for a big road trip. My mom was even eyeing an RV, and budgeting her purse money for every little road trip purchase Dad requested, all manner of overpriced ephemera: maps to places Dad wanted to visit, postcards to movies he liked as a kid, matching T-shirts for him and all his kin, like we were supposed to recall this time by treating Wimberly Pie Co. apparel to a very gentle wash cycle whenever we got together for family pics.

My wife and I were not going to make it, and it was very soon going to be Amber and one-year-old Mikey on their own in our place, and me going hotel to hotel, and eventually upscaling into an Extended Stay.

I was drinking more than ever and really getting the shakes now if I did not quell it right away. And so my morning walk was right away to the Stop-N-Go and then two cans of those cheap Natural Lite singles that get pulled from six-packs and sit in ice machine ice. I would stuff one in the front pocket of my slacks, and if I had the tenacity I might even pour the beer into a Styrofoam cup and drink behind the store. If not, then I was walking into the hospital next door to drink in a bathroom stall. I was thirty-seven and at that level of abuse, but it was also minimal enough, I knew, that if I made beer my breakfast I could be okay, and maybe even okay until noon, and if noon was doable, you know, I have skipped whole afternoons of debauchery by stalling this way.

But I was not going to chance it on this trip to Fredericksburg. So I tucked whatever cans of Hamm's or Lonestar I had into the travel bag with my sweaters and jeans and then all those white sheets of paper like I would be working on some major project, when the project was to go on this trip, the meet with my dad, mom and sister, and my sister's husband, doing whatever anyone wanted to do, whether that be walking up that Enchanted Rock, or in and out of any pretzel place or ice cream parlor; there was a VW Bug convention happening, so we were going to hit that, and all I had to do was not get plastered and not argue with Amber. It was kind of a one or the other situation. So I planned to meet both situations by hiding from them as much as I could, which – with my dad around and in better spirits – meant I could sort of spend time with him while I marshaled my moods.

The ride over was fine in that Mikey always slept through *any* ride, and I kept looking back to smile at the sweet sleeper as we drove, thinking maybe Amber and I could joke about shows or maybe kid ourselves into talking out a future. Our real and genuine silence in the car meant we saw no way to kid ourselves about where we were. I looked for music, and when I found a song I like by The Cars I smiled and was about to ask Amber what she thought of that video with the bar of soap and the periscope, but she asked me to turn it off. Not down, off.

I did, and exhaled in what was a blue-black night at 8 p.m. When the orange gas light came on, Amber cursed and I said, "There is a Valero coming up. Do you have to pee?"

My wife shook her head and I said, "I do. I will put down twenty, take a leak, then pump the gas."

She did not respond, but looked at me as if I was going to rob a bank.

"I'll pay," she said. "I need to stretch my legs. You watch Mikey." I nodded.

If her fear was that I would use the gas station as a way to down some quick booze she was perfectly right in thinking that, but very wrong to have underestimated my preparation for the trip. As soon as I saw Amber make that turn to the toilet I unzipped my carryall and cracked open a cool-to-the-touch can of Hamm's, and feeling that foam crack around my thumb, brought the can to my mouth and gunned it in what might have been twenty seconds. I closed my eyes in calm and crunched the can into an aluminum hour glass, slid it back into my bag under the white sheets of paper that were supposed to be a novel about a cat burglar who liked to leave clues in the lockers of his old high school, zipped it closed, wincing plenty at the sword-slicing-air sound of the sealing zipper teeth, and looked at my son. Little Mikey still very asleep and we would wake him to say hi to my dad and mom and sisters when they got to the motorlodge. Mikey was also a way for us to get away from people. Amber and I still slept in the same bed, with our baby between us. I smiled at my sleeping son, and, remembering the cologne in the glove compartment, sprayed once over my fingers and heard my wife pumping the gas.

We made eye contact and I mouthed that I had to pee. She looked back over at Mikey, and made that glad mamma smile of *O Christ, how did this angel come to us? What did we do to deserve this angel right here on earth and in a car seat now?* Then she remembered what we had done, and, eyes still smiling, elected to speak to me while looking at our sleeping son. "Don't take forever," she said and I very carefully exited the vehicle, closing the car door like a guy trying to sneak into a vault in some heist comedy.

The comforting lights of the puce-purple white fluorescence that hits me like a cotton candy dream are ten percent of why I love convenience stores, if they are done right and generic-looking and all about styrofoam coffee and war paint-colored snacks. I grabbed one of those plastic foldout maps to the city we were ten minutes from, a bag of sunflower seeds that Amber started chewing when she quit smoking, and slid a 15 oz. cardboard box of wine into my sleeve, walking up to the cash register deflecting the items in my grip by leaning to my right looking for a restroom, and said "Hey, ahh, do you have a – oh, I see it" and left the items on the counter as I walked into the stall, humming a deflecting noise like false comfort opening credits music for a movie wherein a placid town will soon be menaced by birds or bees but never a single psycho killer, just the organized emulsion of everything the town ever believed.

I flushed the toilet, snapped open the plastic cap and gripped the cardboard container so the wine went down my throat like lemonade on a thirsty day. I flushed again and counted to ten, then just sipped the rest of my drink in the time machine that is a convenience store bathroom stall, wherein five minutes registers as a half hour TV show with piss breaks, even.

I found myself before the register wondering about my face. There was no mirror in the stall, and when I steal I feel like the sin is a true compulsion, which only ever happens with booze. I pushed the items together in a little cupped pile and pulled out a twenty for the guy at the register, who was looking at my wife as she made *love you, baby* faces to Mikey. Pushing the buttons that would give me back six bucks and change, the guy looked up at me and said, "Did anyone ever tell you your wife looks like that actress with the red hair ...which movie am I thinking ... the one where the lawyer is in trouble."

I nodded. "Yeah. *She* told me. She was the first one to *ever* tell me that, like two weeks after we met almost ten years ago. She got that actress a lot. We were holding hands on a bench and I could have sworn I knew her from somewhere and it was no longer anything that sounded like a line if I said so. She told me how much she got that famous person."

The cashier nodded and told me I was a very lucky man.

I nodded back. When he would play the tape back to look at my wife he might keep watching in order to study the man she married and see my slight of hand with the grenade shaped cardboard wine, which the cashier would only find evidence of if he really went all fists into the mouth of the trash by the sink, and I had covered that area with paper towels and a Penny Saver someone had left size nine sneaker prints on.

As I sat in the passenger side seat, I placed the folded map in the glove compartment and on instinct touched the blue bottle of cologne, then pulled out the bag of sunflower seeds, and a bottle of three dollar Icelandic water, placed both items in the drink holds, and poured my change, along with the loose bills, into the space.

Amber pulled out and merged onto the traffic that led into the tourist town.

"Where did you get your money?" She asked because she knew every cent I spent, and we always used debit cards.

"You didn't have any money yesterday. Where did you get cash?"

I opened the glove compartment to pull out and unfold the map I had just placed in there and had spent five dollars on, the most expensive thing I had purchased. The wine I stole and drank in the stall was on sale for \$3.99.

"Yesterday, after that fight we had about how we were going to afford the trip to see Dad and also be able to make rent. Yesterday morning, like at eleven when you thought I was going to drive off and get plastered."

"You *did* drive off."

"Yeah."

"And you *did* get plastered."

"Sure, but before that I went to the bank."

Amber drove and slowed to space herself behind a white van that kept stopping like there was engine trouble, and finally veered off the road so we were the first ones at the red light.

"I thought maybe I had like seventeen bucks in savings, and when I pulled out that plus the four dollars and thirty-two cents I had in checking, the wonderful lady who worked at the IBC asked me what was up and when I told her about the trip she suggested I go negative."

The light went green, and I could hear my wife exhale in something like relief. I turned on the radio and as soon as I heard Whitney Houston confess to wanting to dance with someone who loved her, I turned the music off.

**by Celia A. Sorhaindo**



## when you're strange

*After Jim Morrison (James Douglas Morrison)*

like me, you'll call jim up for a chat on his birthday, december 8th, every single year, dead  
on one minute past midnight, i've never missed a year yet and i call him  
up now, even though i'm a bit down and not real  
in the mood for talking much, the help centre has been super  
busy, many of our callers frightened, caught dead  
surprised, tonight the line to jim is clear, sometimes there's a loud crackle,  
of course, i don't wish him happy birthday, that would be below the belt,  
although i know jim can take a light joke all right, i do say, *how's life, oops, i mean afterlife,*  
makes me chuckle and jim always acts like it's the first  
time i'm saying that, jim's cool like that, he's wise too, open minded, freefired spirit  
like me, i can talk to him about what ever, whatever's on my mind, mind you,  
just between you and me,  
he's a typical sagittarian, doesn't mince his words, shoots  
his arrows straight, direct, so i always have to brace myself, turn  
my sensitivity dial way way down, don't take anything  
personal, don't read between any of his short to the point lines, or fill in what i feel  
into his sometimes long pauses, or misread his no-body-language, but jim and i are tight,  
we go way way back, jim's the one who first called me actually, it was his 1st and last time  
dying and he wanted to check if to follow the light, i said, *well jim, it's an open door right,*  
*you're mr curious cat, just remember,* god knows why they called him lizard king, funny  
how things turned around, i was supposed to be the transitioning helpline for people  
crossing over, now jim's my dead lifeline,  
*what's new,* he asks, there's no way i can summarize 2020 for him  
and i've never learnt exactly how much news he gets on the other side,  
instead i say, *i just read earth is heading straight towards a black  
hole in the middle  
of the milky way called sagittarius a\*,  
i chuckle, can you believe they  
named a super-massive black hole at the center of the galaxy, sagittarius a-star,*  
he laughs long and hard, *yah dam right, we already know the world revolves around us,*  
he laughs louder, cracking himself up, already he's lifted my spirits and i can't help  
but laugh too, *ain't that the truth,* i say, we are silent for a while, neither of us uncomfortable  
with it, then i say, *25800 spaced out light-years before earth is swallowed up,*  
i say, *154800 trillion tense miles away, the way things are going, i wonder which species  
will survive or which space we'll be orbiting by then  
or perhaps it's a future that's already behind us in tachyonic time,*  
a long light pause  
then we both start singing at the exact same time  
*this is the end  
beautiful friend  
this is the end  
my only friend*  
and we laugh like soft mad children

## **I M Here**

...they say, mid-life is the turning point  
and turning 50, turned out to be my time  
to give up drinking—for good. I awoke  
in the feral forest, mouth raki dry, the dark  
tail of my dream flicked out with daylight.  
I just followed the crowd, all searching for  
something—or someone. Added the dot of my  
body to the line tracking through the linden  
trees. Trampling the mushrooms. I wanted to  
be of use for a change. Twelve or thirteen steps  
later I stopped, still. I heard Her call my name. So  
answered. They turned around. The kuruş dropped—  
all this time, I Mr. M, had been searching for my self.

## **im.balance**

so few things are—balanced  
i'm beginning to accept—it's  
naturally ordered that way

i lean to the left—you right  
even this breath i take in—was  
through a dominant nostril

## **line / breaks / for / freedom**

I wish I had known you  
were a diamond-headed snake  
charmer. Right now my mood is blue  
bright, but delicate as a hibiscus  
open and wanting in full full sun. Look me at edge

of not knowing the difference in a lie  
made true or truth made to lie low. The sky all orange  
shimmer and me shaken  
up and down like a tropical cocktail I  
would not even drink — unless to lighten-up — be free.

## You Always Try To ( ) The Gaps

as soon as you ( ) your ( )  
 or make any hand ( ) or shake your ( )  
 move your ( ) you know someone ( )  
 recreate your intended ( ) or read in-( ) your gaping ( )  
 and fill in whatever they believe to be ( )  
 more than ( ) you have been ( ) you give strangers way too ( )  
 time and ( ) you make the on-the-edge ones ( ) too tight and want more than was  
 ( )  
 what ( ) of engagement did you forgot to ( )  
 what significant ( ) did you fail to clearly ( )  
 damaging mis-( ) are always your ( )  
 all your ( ) if they drag ( )  
 into a ( ) and lock the door or behind a ( )  
 force their mis-( ) on you without first ( )  
 put their ( ) over your aghast ( )  
 they say ( ) god's ( ) what did ( ) think would ( )  
 you ask which one of us is not a ( ) of broken mirror hoping to reflect a little ( )  
 trying to be ( ) together by an understanding ( )  
 you try to make wholesome ( ) of fragmented bits and ( )  
 you try to ( ) the broken back ( )  
 you think—if you had not been ( ) you could not have filled the missing (w)hole ( )

bridge

gesture      open mouth  
                  head  
                  body might  
 meaning between silence  
                  missing  
                  once told much  
 attention      cling   offered  
 rules                   clarify  
                  detail                   spell-out  
                  understandings                   fault  
                  fault                   you  
                  room                   bush  
                  interpretations                   asking  
                  hand   mouth  
 for sake you                   happen  
 shard                   light  
                  held                   someone  
 sense                   pieces  
                  bind                   together  
 shattered                   inside

## Falling Atoms

Michael Egan

2 February

Yesterday (the day before?) I read an epigraph attributed to Virginia Woolf. I can't recall its contents, but now I feel it was similar in spirit to Margaret Mead's claim that only small groups of people can change the world. But maybe not. And, certainly, it was more subtle. But now I can't find it. I have spent the last three hours flicking through the books I was reading, or could have dipped into, over the past few days, but no luck. This diary was supposed to eliminate this all-too-common frustration.

There is probably some lesson here, some argument for reading less. My eclecticism is driven by the intimate intellectual pleasure derived from it, and it is happily incoherent. I am learning now, though, that too much of that reading is a function of its instant gratification, and that too much of what I am reading is lost quickly to some darker corners of my mind, where it will never be seen again, or maybe only in the last addled roars or whispers of age and dementia. (Though perhaps seeing out my days by reciting the complete works of Shakespeare, locked and preserved in those inner recesses, would be a nice way to go...) Of course, having a couple of novels, a collection of short stories, or letters, or poems all on the go at the same time invites making connections across literatures, and reading is more about association than about comprehension. Nothing is read in a vacuum. And that makes the possibility of rereading a happier likelihood: to make new associations.

Alternatively, and I've been thinking about this a bit today, Virginia Woolf could have written less—or written less memorably. Vague online searches yield nothing. I am looking for a needle in a haystack among millions of Woolf references and quotations. I want to believe I saw the epigraph in Alia Trabucco Zerán or Valeria Luiselli (whose books I bought in Oxford and read in my hotel room and on the flight home), so I flick through each of them stubbornly and repeatedly, expecting the epigraph to materialize on the sixth or seventh scan. Woolf features in *The Story of My Teeth*, which ensures I will surely go back to it this evening for another pass.

5 February

(I still haven't found that Virginia Woolf epigraph—not for lack of trying.) One of the nicer features of attending my grandmother's funeral last week was acting as pall bearer with my brother. Under the coffin, we linked elbows after we had hoisted it onto our shoulders. There are practical reasons for this: to synchronize our strides, and make sure that we don't tilt away

from each other and drop the coffin between us. That might have ruined the funeral's decorum. So: good sense. In the moment, though, I rather liked the fraternal solidarity as we walked down the aisle to say goodbye to her.

8 February

I give up. I won't find that Virginia Woolf quotation. And I'm not sure I'm even all that bothered anymore. I don't remember why it piqued my curiosity in the first place, what associations it provoked or what two other points it brought closer together for me.

Leafing through this diary to concede defeat, I noticed that I had left the previous two pages blank. They must have been stuck together when I looked for the first free page to make the previous entry. Going back to that empty space, which seems such an aberration in a diary (this is a space for thoughts not for emptinesses: there are plenty of those everywhere else!), I wrote the following: "It is not entirely clear to me why these pages were left blank. An oversight. Pages stuck together. Insufficient care. I suppose one could make some retroactive justification of blank pages being a salve for the busy mind, just as blank spots on a map serve as the magical interstices between places in which we enforced meaning. Some peace in the cacophony. Except, of course, now I have scarred these pages, too."

11 February

"Let us not take it for granted that life exists more fully in what is commonly thought big than in what is commonly thought small." The Virginia Woolf epigraph was in *Schott's Miscellany*. I found it late last night—purely by accident. It, the quotation, is from an essay titled "Modern Fiction," which was included in *The Common Reader*. It is preceded by the following imperative (though not in *Schott's Miscellany*): "Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness." I started reading Iman Mersal's *Traces of Enayat* this morning.

**Asphalt Dreams**

silver-haired protestor  
hand-made sign  
fellow walkers  
before, beside  
naked man to her right  
she's marched before  
fighting for an end  
to back street abortions  
death by hanger  
sepsis, rot, black blood  
she's hungry, thirsty  
feet sore in old tennis shoes  
*I'm tired*, she thinks  
but still she walks  
tall buildings lining  
city streets  
thirteen stories  
twenty-two  
thirty-five  
too dizzying to look up  
best to focus  
one foot  
then the next  
the path of most resistance  
is always  
the way forward

## TV Dinners

We sit in the living room, behind TV trays while Mom is in the kitchen getting admonished. Grandmother's voice carries over the laugh track of the television while we slop up the leftover gravy at the bottom of our tin trays of TV dinners, siblings, cousins and I focused on the pictures on the television.

Maureen, the youngest, opens a bottle of red nail polish on the side table next to the couch. Grandma has bottles and bottles of colors, sparkling in the late-day sun coming through the window. Maureen paints her thumbnail, her pointer finger, smearing the red glaze across her hand.

Mom enters the room, tears on her cheeks. We don't pay much attention because this happens every visit. Instead, we focus on the cigarettes in the ashtray next to the green recliner, put the butts to our mouths, pretend we are after-dinner smokers with grown-up breath.

When it's time to go, Grandmother squeezes us to her chest in cologne-scented hugs, tells us she loves us. Mom presses her sorrow, her anger into her purse, closes the clasp with a loud *snap*, and hugs no one.

The car ride is quiet, full of sameness. At home, in the foyer, Mom opens her purse and lets her sorrow and rage escape like a sick genie with octopus arms that expand, wrap about us like snakes, tighter and tighter, until we are choking and can barely stand.

## The Collector

rummages through trash  
at The Quick Stop.  
Bottles, cans held up  
like prizes.  
Emptied.  
Tucked into a black trash bag.  
His bag is full,  
his body slight.  
I wave behind the passenger glass  
while Johnny pumps the gas.  
The collector waves back.

They chat,  
the unlikely pair,  
Johnny coiffed and polished,  
the collector faded along the edges.  
*You haul that on your bike?* I hear Johnny ask.  
    *Yep,* the collector smiles, teeth missing.  
*What do you get for a bag like that?*  
    *Thirty two bucks if I'm lucky.*

Enough for a day?  
A week?  
I fish in my wallet.  
Two five dollar bills, one torn.  
I smooth them out,  
roll down the window.  
*Add this to your take,* I say, hand extended.  
    *God bless you,* our fingers touch.  
He's blessing me?  
    *Take care of yourself,* I tell him.  
He points to me,  
points to his heart,  
    *Little bits of stars,* he says. *We're just little bits of stars.*

## Long Player

Robert McGill

They were bookends, he and his grandfather. Back to back they held up nothing but space on an empty shelf. The old man's life faced one direction, Daniel's the other, and between them lay the collected dust of a world that once was, and would never be again.

It was thirty-two years ago that Gramma Emma stopped coming to the breakfast table. Yet in all the time she'd been gone the old man had clung to hopes of her return. She'd run off with a petroleum engineer named Ed Worley in a blue convertible—as flashy a Dear John letter as was ever delivered—but as the old man explained to Daniel, it was only a setback, and setbacks were a part of life.

Granddad wasn't what you'd call the most reliable judge of horseflesh, except when it came to horses. Even so, he never shied from making misguided proclamations about people and their private doings. Nor did his embarrassing optimism ever flag or falter.

"She'll be back before long," he said, putting on a sunny smile. "You wait and see."

Daniel was ten when Gramma Emma ran away from home. He didn't know about lost love then, or faithlessness, nor would he come to understand the heartbreak of such things until years later when his own marriage ran dry.

"Where did she go off to?" he'd asked the old man, pulling out his chair.

"She got a mind to spend some time in California," Granddad said, bending over the fry pan, doing his best not to burn their bacon and eggs again.

Daniel rubbed the sleep from his eyes, taking note of Gramma Emma's empty place at the table. "Why's she spendin time in California?" The question was innocent enough. He'd developed an unnatural fixation with vanishing relatives after his folks (along with his crazy Uncle Ned, and Uncle Ned's girl, Delilah), had met their end in a car crash in the mountains outside of Taos two winters earlier while on a ski trip to Angel Fire. Keeping track of who was left was just something he did.

"She's takin time off," the old man said.

"Time off? From what?"

Granddad set down the spatula, and plucked the cigarette from his lips. "Well—" He lowered his eyes and put some genuine thought into producing an answer. But when the effort fell flat, he said, "I'm not sure I know, Danny." He scraped a strand of tobacco from his tongue and flicked it away with his finger. "Maybe that's somethin you can ask her yourself when she gets back."

"When will she get back?"

"When she's ready."

Daniel never did get the chance to pose his question to Gramma Emma. Granddad kept promising the old woman's return, but it didn't happen. Would never happen, the boy suspected, not even if The Good Shepherd Himself came down the mountain leading her by the hand.

“You sure she knows the way?”

“The way?”

“Home,” Daniel said. “What if she doesn’t remember the way home?”

“Oh, don’t you worry, son,” the old man assured him. “She knows. Gramma Emma’s like an old plow horse. She could find her way back to the barn in a blizzard.”

§

Daniel felt awful about the way the old man continued to delude himself through the years. But there was nothing to be done about it. Granddad believed what he believed, and there was no setting him straight. It could’ve been worse, Daniel supposed. The old man could’ve taken to the bottle, or gone down to the barn and flung a rope over a rafter and hung himself, either of which would’ve been far worse than watching him sink into lunacy over a woman. But every tragedy comes with a sideshow, and this one had its own drolleries.

He studied Granddad now, sitting stiffly in his chair. Staring out the window with his cloudy blue eyes, forefinger of his right hand twitching ever so slightly as it rested on his leg. He’d turned a hard corner, healthwise, the year before, and ‘forgetful’ didn’t begin to describe all the troubles that ailed him.

“See anything out there?” Daniel asked, glancing at the window.

“Nope,” Granddad replied, poking around his shirt pocket for his cigarettes. “But don’t worry. She’ll be along anytime.”

Daniel rose and went to the sideboard to rinse their breakfast dishes. The metal click of Granddad’s Zippo got his attention, and he turned, edgewise, and looked on as the old man lit up. He didn’t like leaving Granddad alone in the house anymore. There was too much trouble to be had—knives, stairs, loose rugs, they were all hazards to be reckoned with these days.

Even the toilet presented its own special horrors. Still, the threat of fire was the most fearful. You could slip and cut yourself, or fall and break your hip, and it wouldn’t be the end of the world. But a loose flame in a hundred-year-old clapboard house? That could cost them the whole ranch, and the ranch was all they had left.

Daniel had tried on numerous occasions to get the old man to give up the smoking habit. But Granddad wasn’t about to quit. So to save the furniture that didn’t already bear the coal-black scars of his forgetfulness, Daniel escorted the old man by the arm out the back door after breakfast each morning, and sat him in a rocking chair on the porch, surrounding him with enamelware pie plates filled with dishwater.

“You got everything you need?” he said, holding open the screen door as the old man tottered out into the morning air.

Granddad nodded.

“Good.”

The old man’s rocking chair faced west, allowing for an unobstructed view of the prairie and foothills, and the mountains beyond.

“Got us a pretty day,” Daniel said, as the old man bent his knees and gripped the chair’s wooden arm rails. “Should warm up real nice here in a bit.” He glanced at his wristwatch. A foursome from Kansas had booked an early afternoon trail ride, and Daniel was to meet them down at the stables after he’d tended to his other chores, the most tedious of which was

getting the old man settled.

“There now,” he said, steadying the rocker as Granddad eased himself onto the seat cushion. “You sit tight. I’ll be right back with your coffee.”

Daniel went into the house, and returned with a wool blanket and a cup of instant doctored with evaporated milk. “Here now.” He spread the heavy throw over the old man’s rickety legs. “Let’s get you good and fixed.”

Granddad rested the cup on his lap and clutched it with both hands.

“I’ll be ridin out at noon with them four from Garden City,” Daniel said. “I’ll be gone a few hours, but back in time to make dinner. There’s a plate of cold cuts in the fridge if you get hungry. “But no smokin in the house, understand?”

The old man mumbled without turning his head, then shooed Daniel away with the back of his hand.

Daniel patted the old man’s shoulder, bent and placed an affectionate kiss on his stubbled cheek. “All right then,” he said. “You’re on your own. Holler if you need anything, all right?”

The old man nodded.

§

Daniel didn’t give much thought to his ex, Gracie, anymore. Or so he liked to tell himself. Unlike the old man, he had no interest in his wife’s return, and would have felt obligated—at least in a small way—to shoot the bitch if she ever set foot on the ranch again. Not that she wouldn’t have had it coming. She would, after they way she’d humiliated him, running off with that snake-oil banker’s son, Earl Post. He’d lived wifeless for twenty years now, and learned to do for himself without complaint. But some things were built to last, and grudges were one of them. He’d learned to let go of plenty when Gracie walked out of his life, but he’d never looked for, or found a way, to forgive her for what she’d done. He’d been wronged, wronged bad, and he clung to his hurt as if it were a child born of their union, sickly and squalid and his to care for, forever.

He gave his balls a jog, and tugged his leather work-gloves from the back pocket of his jeans and pulled down the brim of his hat. The day was warm already, breezeless and dusty, and the more he thought about Gracie and her greasy bolo-tie lover the less enthused he was about a long hot trail ride with a bunch of Howdy Doodies from out of town.

He remembered the day Gracie first set foot on the ranch. How she and her friends came wandering up to the stables arm in arm, giggling like little girls. They were all pretty, every last one of them. That was the first thing he’d noticed. He’d taken a lot of nice-looking ladies on trail rides before, but none as fancy as these. These were university women, tan and well dressed with glossy lips and expensive smiles. They’d heard about the stables from a clerk in an outfitter’s shop in Boulder, and driven down here to the Spanish Peaks on a lark. It was the first time riding for all of them.

“Well, aren’t you the pretty one,” Gracie said, when he walked her horse out of the stable into the corral. Her girlfriends laughed. He didn’t know if they were talking about him, or the horse, but it was him who blushed, not the big buckskin, and that made them giggle all the more.

*Nothing like sixteen hands between your legs.*

She teased him when he made a stirrup of his laced fingers and helped her into the saddle. “Easy there, Pony Boy. Shouldn’t I be the nervous one?” She gripped the horn, playfully, in one hand and leaned across the pommel. Tapped the brim of his hat with her polished nail, and said, “I’m guessing the idea here is to stay on top and have fun. Yes?”

He took them out as a group that afternoon, and the following weekend she came back by herself, alone and smiling like before. She told him she was looking for a private riding lesson, so he obliged, leading her up to the loft in the barn where he stood before the open hay door, silhouetted by the sun. Dust motes dancing in the air.

*Come here,* she said.

He did.

*Take off your clothes.*

They might have sneaked off to his bedroom that day and no one would’ve been the wiser, given Granddad had driven into town just after sunup. But Gracie possessed too big an imagination for something as mundane as a fast fuck in the messy bed of a seventeen-year-old shitkicker. It was making love on a horse blanket in an old sun-slatted barn that her heart was set on, and nothing less would do. So he stood and watched her undress, wide-eyed, marveling at the easy way she shed her clothes. The pretty way her skin glowed in the dappled light.

When they came together the ponies whinnied and kicked in the stalls below. But Daniel didn’t hear them, caught up as he was in own bucking and snorting. He didn’t know it then, but he’d fallen into the arms of an impossible dream. One he would cling to with all he had, but that would throw him just the same, stomping out his guts before it broke loose and galloped away.

Gracie rolled onto her hip and expelled a long languorous breath. She told him she’d always wanted to bed a man who wore a Stetson hat and cowboy boots. Real cowboy boots, and a real Stetson hat. *I bet you can sing, too,* she nickered with a coy little smile, swinging her thigh across his belly and mounting him like a barrel-racer on her way to a blue ribbon. *You got a guitar? You know any Frankie Laine?* She hummed the first verse of “Do Not Forsake Me, Oh My Darlin” hoping to get him started. But he shook his head and told her he couldn’t carry a tune to save his life. *I don’t know nothin about music,* he said. *Never have.*

Daniel hadn’t understood what she was after that day—beyond the obvious—but he’d been more than willing to find out. And as a reward for the time and curiosity he put into the endeavor, she led him to places he’d never seen or been before. Afterward, when she was tugging up her jeans and sweeping the straw from her hair, he told her he loved her. She laughed and called him ‘kid’. “Sure, kid,” she said. “I love you, too.”

§

He stood outside the corral now, hands on his hips. John B. Stetson pulled low on his forehead, shading his eyes from the blistering sun. The group from Garden City who’d booked the trail ride had just texted. They were running late. They’d had a blowout on the highway outside of Cañon, the message said, and for some inexplicable reason they’d been caught short without a jack or spare. A man from Buddy Ray’s Auto Care was supposed to swing out with a new tire, but he hadn’t arrived yet, reasons unknown, and they weren’t certain when to

expect him.

Shit.

Gracie'd left a note explaining why she dumped him for Earl Post. Daniel had opened it, but found he couldn't read it. Anyway, what was the point? One reason, or even a hundred, was no reason at all. Reasons had a way of blending together like tears, first one, then another. On and on until you couldn't make head or tail of which was which, much less which one hurt the most. But that was the way it was with heartbreak, wasn't it? It was an all or nothing proposition.

Daniel had only one clear memory of Gramma Emma anymore. It was the afternoon she pulled an LP from the Granddad's record collection and went to play it on the old man's custom-built stereo. She was feeling sentimental that day, Daniel guessed, judging from the mist in her eyes. Sentimental, or sad—the way Granddad sometimes looked when he was working on his old Hobart welder with its fickle voltage regulator—searching for a jolt of happiness that couldn't be found in any other place.

The record was a Patsy Cline 'Best of' with a picture of the singer on the dust jacket. She was reclining on a fresh white pillow, poised, it seemed, for a good long cry. But before her singing had a chance to begin, before the ache that was killing her could be wrung from her broken heart, Granddad wandered in from the machine shed, wiping his hands on a greasy rag.

The comedy routine that followed was unintended. But when the old man saw the LP clamped between Gramma Emma's fingers like a china saucer in the grasp of a clumsy toddler, he panicked, and immediately leaped forward to save it.

"Whoa!" he exclaimed, tossing aside the greasy rag. "Easy there! Easy!"

With a clever bit of soft-shoe, he slid between Gramma Emma and the stereo and, flashing a nervous smile, eased the record from her fingers.

"Here we go," he crooned, fitting the vinyl disc on the spindle with no one's help but his own. "There. That's better."

Daniel hadn't known it until then, but it turned out the old man was what you'd call *finicky* about his record collection. He knew every detail of every album on the shelf, right down to the how and why and when he'd collected it. He knew what he paid for it. What he was doing the first time he'd listened to it. What it was worth on the open market to a savvy investor.

Granddad had owned this fabulous collection of LPs (every last one of them in mint condition) since high school, and he'd never played a single one without first cleaning it and inspecting it for lint, dust, scratches, fingerprints....

It was a strict, if mostly unspoken rule, that no one in the house was allowed to touch those vinyl beauties. No one. Not even Gramma Emma.

"Look there, Daniel," the old man joked, hoping to smooth over the panic he'd stirred

"See that?" He spritzed the vinyl with cleaning solvent and ran a velvet brush over the glossy black surface. Then he nodded at the empty dust jacket laying on the coffee table. "Cellophane's still on the cover," he said, proudly. "Price tag, too, from when I bought it."

Daniel looked, but remained silent.

Gramma Emma's cheeks began to burn.

The old man lowered the stylus with its diamond needle onto the freshly-attended LP and released it with a theatrical flourish of his thumb and forefinger. Static announced itself in the walnut speakers as the needle found the grooves.

"When I die," Granddad said over the music, "they're all yours, son. You can take em straight to auction. Sell em off and get rich." He turned Gramma Emma's way, solicitous. "Ain't that right, honey?"

Gramma Emma didn't answer. She wasn't even looking at the old man anymore. Her eyes had drifted so far away she could've been staring at a crater on the far side of the moon.

Granddad chuckled. He was embarrassed, but not for himself. "Oh, don't mind her," he said. "She'll be all right." Gramma Emma stood there, face burning, holding her bruised ego in the cup of her small white hands. "She hates hearin' it," Granddad said, "but she don't hold em right. Do you Emma? You leave prints all over em."

Gramma Emma looked up, only to turn and leave the room. The music played on, but the house went silent.

It was a full year before Gramma Emma packed her grip and deserted them. But when she did, she did it in style, whisked away under the arm of a fancy oilman driving a shiny blue convertible with chrome hubcaps, fuzzy dice, and a pretty little hula girl in a grass skirt swiveling on the dash.

§

The Kansans texted Daniel again. The tire repair was going slower than hoped, and they asked if they could reschedule their trail ride for another time. Daniel texted back—*sure, fine, just lemme know when*—and slipped the phone into his pocket and started up the gravel path to the house, mumbling.

The old man, clueless as he was, had touched a sore spot with Gramma Emma the day they fussed over the record player. A spot that had been touched one too many times before, each time out of some wrongheaded desire to fix what didn't need fixing. Granddad couldn't see it then, and still didn't understand it today, all these years later, but he'd punched Gramma Emma's ticket to a new life that afternoon, and all but held her hand as she stepped into Ed Worley's Cadillac.

Daniel could only imagine the number of small, stupid, unintended, yet outrageous slights the old man had uttered during the course of his long marriage to Gramma Emma, and he would always feel pity for him, knowing Granddad had paved the way for his own unhappiness.

Daniel recalled his own bad luck with Gracie, and had no trouble imagining the unsparing words Gramma Emma might have had for the old man before she left. *Hold em wrong? Did I hear that right? Well, guess what, Emmett? You know what Ed Worley says? Ed Worely says I hold em just fine.*

When Daniel arrived back at the house and walked around to the porch, Granddad was nowhere to be seen. The wooden rocker sat on its runners, still as the noonday air, and the old man's empty cup sat on the floorboards beside it. In one of the pie tins, a half burnt Lucky Strike floated in the soapy water.

Daniel wandered into the house, the screen door clattering shut behind him. The kitchen was empty so he walked down the hall to the bedroom. But Granddad wasn't there either. After a little more poking around, Daniel found the old man in the study. The wool blanket was draped around his shoulders, and he was standing before the bookshelf with one of the record-albums in his hands. He was too old and deaf to appreciate music anymore, but there he stood, holding the LP up to the sunlight coming in through the windowpane.

The album cover was on the coffee table. Patsy Cline, tragically preserved in her cellophane beauty.

The old man tilted the record this way and that under the light. He seemed to be searching the shiny black vinyl for fingerprints. Studying the grooves for clues to the heartbreak he'd been dealt. The mystifying reason, or reasons, his errant wife had never returned home.

**by Glen Delpit**

### **my third dream**

my third dream is a church  
located somewhere in spain  
where i'm standing in the shoes  
of an immigrant sailor bent double  
by life and my hands and arms are  
the true ocean i sail in the storm. i keep  
my heart in a fist and i measure the silence  
of the priest's blank stare as he sells cheap  
ideology in the form of a postcard  
of st. nicholas the wonderworker  
(holding a candle poised for salvation).

but i cross my fingers instead of my chest  
and i leave my hat on and don't bother  
kneeling (you won't fathom the reason)  
and now my hat is a discarded bible  
and the priest's ideology is just smoke  
from the myrrh.

and my dream is a ship  
with a candle  
poised for salvation  
and a postcard of st. nicholas  
upon the true ocean.

## **my fifth dream**

(from a restless night)

in my fifth dream i'm a small town  
near the mexican border where the  
tiny footsteps of certain sparrows  
plague the rooftops of the unfortunate.  
their secret gazes and tangled nests  
question the wisdom of the local authorities.

a yellow rain brought autumn too early  
and with it a sad queer harvest,  
so i speak to the sparrows  
in an orphan's tongue.

the authorities call for prayer  
and prostrate themselves twice a day  
while the sparrows gather underneath  
the eaves in a nervous sleep.

with the poor, the wise and the lost  
sleepless mothers i come to pay respect  
to this shadow church, but the wise  
line their pockets with cake and kneel  
for the rosary while the authorities unleash  
a confetti explosion of tears from the past.

when the sparrows depart for the  
portuguese winter the lost sleepless  
mothers dress all in black and confront  
the authorities with 100 communions.

## **the sky turned irenic**

my second dream  
(or it may have been my first)  
is a small green boat  
paint peeling from its sides.

i'm standing on the prow,  
my hat is the wind  
and the lake is made of sand  
from some saharan desert and  
the waves are just dunes as far  
as you can see.

and somewhere in my memory  
one of the local grey prophets  
is walking naked on the shore  
calling me by name.  
(even though we've never met)  
and i'm sailing towards him  
but the ship has turned reluctant  
(and leaking besides)

then the sky turned irenic  
and coruscant all at once  
and the prophet was a wave  
with the undertow in hand  
bringing solace and strange twilight.

and my hat was the wind  
and my dream was made of sand.

**in my 55<sup>th</sup> dream**

i was the fire that consumed you  
when you were young and  
burned as you grew older,  
as you burned others around you.  
no one could touch you.  
how could they.  
you were, as they say, too hot  
to handle.  
over the years the flames  
receded and you became  
warm to the touch and  
almost approachable  
(but not quite).  
but time has a way of  
extinguishing the flames  
of every inferno  
(except maybe dante's)  
and that fire that burned,  
it's just ashes now.

## **my 72<sup>nd</sup> dream**

some of this is true and most of it is real.

in my 72<sup>nd</sup> dream i was a small cottage  
painted blue off the coast of france where

i invoked the raw spirit of the ocean while  
the locals searched for ammonite during the  
war years and italian sailors were wrongfully  
detained by the local priests for having  
forbidden rosaries made of stolen thoughts.

you on the other hand were a refined english  
gentleman, (though some would say a filipino  
houseboy) who kept my house in perfect order  
during the most trying times.

that is to say, when poseidon was still angry and  
bitter over losing to athena. you also kept a famous  
sketchbook in pencil of the local flora and fauna.

later, after the war was over i became an important  
opera house in the 4<sup>th</sup> arrondissement of paris  
where you nervously sang the part of rudolfo in  
la boheme.

## **Beaver Creek**

## Nancy Smith Harris

Except for Jack Brewer leaning into his glass like a supplicant, and two farmers gripping beers at a table in the darkest corner, Polly's was empty and Bonnie was battling the fatigue of a 20 hour drive from school in Houston.

The air outside was gravy-thick and parched crabgrass, brittle from a broiling sun, lay crisp along Route 39. The warped air—heat haze, they call it—turned everything blurry. How many times had she and Jack chased swallowtails and cabbage whites through that kind of air, impervious to the heat?

“Stay away from the road,” her mom or dad would cry out the window.

When the door springs whined, she turned to see a kid she didn't know emerge from the shadows: red and yellow plaid shirt, tight jeans, and feet swimming in a pair of shit-kickers he must have borrowed from some adult.

“Halloween? Already?” she murmured as she watched him clomp across the floor and hoist himself on to a stool next to poor Jack Brewer—that's what Bonnie's mother called Jack—who slowly pivoted away a few degrees and hovered more closely over his empty glass, nodding at Bonnie for a refill. The Cutty bottle Bonnie tipped into Jack's glass caught the kid's eye.

“I'll take one of those,” came out in a voice not quite that of a grown man.

“ID?”

Bonnie squinted at the license which told the lie the kid was 21.

More whining door springs announced the arrival of three more farmers. All three cast eyes on the boy next to Jack for a beat before making their way to a table, whispers trailing them.

Bonnie, shaking off another yawn, made her way to their corner. Others arrived in two's and three's, each party giving the boy a double take before either parking at the bar or grabbing a table. Soon Bonnie had her hands full.

It wasn't until the kid in the cowboy getup took a swipe at his glass and missed as Jack listed sideways before jerking himself to attention that Bonnie knew she'd taken her eye off them for too long.

“Can I get you boys some coffee? How about a couple of Pepsi's?”

Jack looked at her as if she was speaking a foreign language.

He'd been roused from bed earlier than he would have liked, called out to I-81 where a Chevy Blazer had slammed into a concrete bridge abutment. There were two adults, five kids, a lot of blood, and what looked like a mess of deer entrails but was not. After waiting around for hours in overburdened air, Jack got the go ahead from the state cops and hooked up the mangled car, parking his rig roadside before he finished spraying down the paving.

He towed the wreck to Ritchie's garage and was on his way back to bed when a stalled pickup got in his way and Jack was obliged to hook that one up too.

“You back already?” Ritchie laughed.

“Can't get enough of you man,” Jack deadpanned and that's when he decided to give up all hope of a nap and just power through the rest of the day at Polly's.

To say the dude next to him at the bar was chatty didn't touch it.

“See this?”

The kid in the cowboy getup slid a diamond-studded ring from his finger, offering it to Jack, “it’s a Mason’s ring. Freemasons—those symbols? The builder’s square and compass. Freemasons built the cathedrals of Europe. Notre Dame de Paris, Canterbury Cathedral, Saint Peter’s Basilica.”

Jack nodded, keeping his fingers wrapped around his high ball glass and the boy slipped the ring back on his finger.

“Hey Bonnie—”

But Bonnie was slammed, shuffling pitchers to a half dozen tables.

“Let me get that,” the dude offered, popping up and stretching across the bar to grab the Cutty, releasing a whiff of soap, putting Jack’s mind back on the road where he’d slathered the paving with scented foam after sweeping remnants of death into trash bags and spraying the dissolvable bits into the gutter.

The Chevy, dangling from his wrecker like some brutalized fish, drew long stares from passersby.

“Rough day?”

Jack watched the dude fill their glasses.

There was a time when he’d have gone home and thrown up after a scene like the one on 81. With time, those tragedies began to feel like a film he was watching of a man with a tow truck waiting for the first responders to bag what was left of unfortunate souls so he could hook the vehicle and clean up. He’d had the same strange sense of turning into an observer during those times with his dad.

It was called disassociation—that’s what the social worker had told him. It was how Jack weathered those times, she said, a coping mechanism.

He started to tell the dude about the five dead kids, but by then the bar was spinning and Bonnie was saying something about coffee or Pepsi. Jack tossed some bills on the bar and bolted for the door, the dude on his heels. From the window facing the road, Bonnie watched to see Jack get across 39 safely, but she was called by the farmers for more beer before she could catch sight of him.

The broad crest of the Blue Ridge shouldered a thin pink line of retreating sunlight and the air had cooled to a mild 85 degrees or so when Jack teetered and swooned over the stairs to the parking lot. The dude steadied him with a hand to Jack’s shoulder. In that instant, an old hatred Jack hadn’t felt since the last time with his dad surged to life. Jack looked at the hand on his shoulder, at the ring on the dude’s finger catching the last shards of daylight, and the recollected kindness the little cowboy had shone him went up against that recollected loathing of years before. When their eyes met, the loathing won out.

At closing time, a waning Gibbous veined and cracked like white marble, tipped in a sky so dark it absorbed the distant mountains. Were it not for the solitary street light peering down on an Alfa Romeo, Bonnie might have overlooked the coupe completely. Across the road, Jack’s lights were out and his wrecker sat in the driveway.

“It’s at the tail end of town,” was how her father had described the bar’s location—and he was right. It was well beyond the respectable part, the part that held the historic Eagle Hotel and

Tavern, Hoover's palatial funeral home, and St. Thomas United Church of Christ—a place of worship predating the country's founding.

She hadn't thought too much about that, growing up. It was only after she'd been away at school, returning for the summers now, that she saw the place for what it was. The tail end of town was where the power company erected its unsightly substation. It was where cars pulled over to toss unwanted pets out the door before returning with haste to the road. It was where married people took their dates, creeping down any one of the many dirt lanes that intersected Route 39. There was a sense of menace, even danger, there, especially on dark nights. It was where people committed unspoken acts.

But as a kid, to Bonnie—and probably to Jack, too—this place was merely the backdrop of childhood where they played for hours while Bonnie's folks poured draft beers, shots, and the occasional mixed cocktail. There was no end of ways to explore that terrain. One of their favorite pastimes was to run down the path that led to Piketown and across Beaver Creek. There they caught glittery minnows in styrofoam cups, watching them swim aimlessly, eventually releasing the tiny fish back into the cold, clear shallow water. And there were toads, dozens of them in the cool crevices beneath fallen trees on the fringe of the water. She and Jack held those babies in their outstretched palms, stroking their backs before gently dropping them back into their shadowy dwellings.

"Poor Jack Brewer was in," she told her mother from the doorway to Polly's bedroom.

"Night, Mom."

Sleep finally settled over Bonnie until a hot blanket of sun blazed through the thin curtains of her room and every Sunday morning waking sound she could remember invaded: the plastic blinds grumbling with the closing of the front door, the car engine roaring to life, and the tires spitting gravel in driveway. Ten minutes later, church bells sounded a warning, an invitation, or a provocation of guilt—the last of the three working on Bonnie whose thoughts took her back to the little blue Alfa in the parking lot and the dark loneliness of Jack's place, the cinderblock garage across the road.

When Jack first appeared in first grade, the other boys were cruel. Afraid they'd start in on her if she went to the teacher, Bonnie watched from the fringe of the blacktop by the merry-go-round, digging her nails into her palms.

They shoved Jack off the swing, tripped him, laughed when he fell on his face. It would be almost ten years before they all learned that Jack had been barely four years of age back then, two full years younger than most of them. His father had lied about Jack's age to get him into school as there was no one at home to look after the kid once his mother had vanished.

There'd been no tears, no running to the teacher with a snot-nosed sob and perhaps that's why they kept at him as they did, eventually turning their wrath on a new target—Bobby M., an immigrant from the nearby town of Palmyra. Bobby M. had vegetable matter plastered to his gapped teeth and wore greasy, thick glasses.

When Bonnie pulled in to Polly's that morning, the Alfa, like an abandoned robin's egg, was still there. Inside the bar, she went about arranging fans and rolling up windows. Soon, the elders and deacons would converge after church, relieved of their suit jackets and ties, dark quarter moons staining their white shirts.

A glance through the window caught Jack's wrecker still in the driveway across 39.

Barney showed up early in the afternoon with a nod toward the door.

"Whose little Italian job is that?"

"Not sure."

"Should I call it in?"

"Up to you."

By the time Bonnie pulled on to 39, Jack's truck was gone from his driveway. Five minutes later, she spotted the wrecker in the parking lot at the Eagle. A slight figure in blue jeans clambering up the stairs toward the front door caught her eye and she pulled in beside the truck.

"Excuse me."

She was on the verge of tapping the kid's shoulder. It was a teenage girl with wide brown eyes.

"Sorry. I thought you were someone else."

When Bonnie got home, her mother greeted her in the driveway and draped her arms over her daughter's shoulders.

"First time I've gotten a chance to say more than two words to you, hon. You finish up okay at school?"

"Mom, smoking again?"

"Just one in the morning with my coffee. Why'd you stay away after the semester was done?"

Polly Matthews' face, a pale mask of folds and creases, was that of a woman who'd worked long hours over decades. Her voice, scratched and deep from tobacco, had carried off-key nursery songs to Bonnie in a faraway childhood. Bonnie'd been born to parents who'd gone gray by their daughter's sixth birthday and were often mistaken for grandparents on Back to School night. A wave of guilt, reminder of the shame she'd felt sometimes, passed through her.

"I stuck around to help write grants."

"Oh that's right. How 'bout some bacon and eggs?"

"Mom, I don't eat bacon and eggs."

"Oh that's right."

"It's okay, I'll get my own food."

Bonnie had become attracted to vegetarianism in seventh grade, the same year the class took a field trip to a local chicken processing plant. It was also the year Jack showed up on the first day of school tall and strong. Jack Brewer had grown. He'd grown so much Bonnie wondered if he might seek retribution for the bad treatment back in grade school.

But Jack was silent. He had a new, harder look to his face. In the mornings, his eyes were often swollen, red, like they'd been stung by bees.

One day after the end of junior high, Jack's father shot himself in the head and Jack disappeared into foster care that summer, reappearing after graduating from the VoTech school in Hershey to claim his birthright—the garage with the upstairs apartment.

Monday morning found Bonnie working on the leaky faucet in her mother's kitchen when the phone rang and Polly picked it up.

"Well I'll be...yes, yes of course. We'll be here."

They'd towed the Alfa that morning. The boy was named Matthew, he was 17, and a freshman at Penn State. He hadn't been seen since leaving the bar.

The officer sat at the kitchen table, a glass of Polly's ice tea in front of him.

"And you didn't see him leave with anybody?"

"No"

"Did he talk with anyone in the bar?"

"Not sure. We got pretty busy right after he showed up."

"Can you identify any of the other customers who were there that night?"

"Can't say I remember."

"But honey, you said Jack Brewer was in that night."

"Oh, him. Yes, he was there."

"He didn't speak with Matthew?"

"Not sure."

In the spring of seventh grade, Mr. Polk partnered Bonnie with Jack to consider a Robert Frost poem. She remembered that she was suddenly self-conscious, aware at 13 of the implications of pairing and its oddness to her that year, when her friends were matching up for something like dating and she was not. It was strange to sit so close to Jack, so intimate and awkward. Only now that she was an adult, now that she knew he'd only been 11 years old, she realized he'd not been particularly bothered by their working together alone like that because he was still a little boy in the way the others in the class were not.

"What are we supposed to do?"

"I think we're supposed to say what the poem means."

They each stared at the words in front of them. Bonnie could only think about how tall Jack had become, how strong he looked.

"It's a poem about nature," he said.

"Yeah. But I think Mr. Polk wants us to really think about it."

Jack looked at the words again.

"Nothing stays good for long. I mean even when we're okay, not sad, it doesn't last. Something bad always happens to make us sad again."

"Something bad?"

"Yeah. See where it says 'Eden sank to grief?' Like the garden of Eden. The snake."

"Grief. I see what you mean."

She remembered his eyes weren't red and swollen that day, but a look of misery beyond his years was in his face. She felt like putting her hand on his to make him feel better but didn't want him to think she was trying to make him her boyfriend.

Before they moved their chairs apart, his misery was hers too and she wondered where it had started. What was at the beginning of Jack's misery? His mother had left him when he was four years old. Four was old enough to remember. Bonnie remembered four. Maybe a mother who runs away is something you never get over.

When she got to Polly's, the day's swelter was still in full force and the buzzing fans offered little relief. Jack was in his usual spot and, after pouring a round of Yuengling drafts for some card players, Bonnie went over to him.

"You remember that kid who was in here Saturday night? The two of you left at the same time."

"Yeah, odd little dude. What about him."

“The police towed his car today. He’s missing.”

“Anybody see anything?”

“I don’t know. He left the same time you did.”

“You said that already. What are you getting at?”

“Nothing, just thought you might remember something.”

“You finished with college?”

“One more year.”

“What are you doing there again?”

“Architecture school.”

“Oh yeah. Bonnie, that’s great. Good luck.”

Each waited for the other to make a move, Bonnie thinking if she’d scared him, he’d flee, and Jack hoping maybe she’d talk to him a little more.

“Hey Bonnie,” someone called out from the other end of the bar.

Jack stuck around, watching the Phillies lose to the Cardinals before taking off an hour later.

The moon that night, a shard of its former self, lay low in the sky as Bonnie locked the door.

Even the cold-blooded cicadas had turned in and Route 39 had emptied itself of travelers.

Across the road, Jack’s windows were dark. Neither one of them made many friends in school.

She wondered if it was this place, this landscape inches from the town limits, that had made

them loners who clung to each other. How different would they have been if they’d grown up

playing with the other kids in town?

Jack lay in bed looking out the window, watching Bonnie pull out on 39. Thin moonlight spread

itself across the bar’s roof. He was thinking how in junior high, everything changed. Boys and

girls held hands, passed notes to each other in class. There was no more just being friends. If

you tried to talk to a girl like a friend, boys got on your case, goading you, asking if you’d felt

her up yet. There was no more chasing butterflies or skipping stones across Beaver Creek.

His mind drifted to the little dude in the bar on Saturday. Bonnie’d asked if he remembered

anything. He turned away from the window and closed his eyes.

In the morning, Bonnie scanned the paper for any news of the boy.

“What’s this?”

“Tofu.”

Polly wrinkled her nose and placed a container back in the fridge.

“They still haven’t found that boy. Matthew something.”

“I know.”

“Creepy.”

“Yes, Mom. Creepy.”

“Some of the guys who were in the bar Saturday said he talked to Jack Brewer for some time.”

“Yes, he did.”

“But you told the police you didn’t remember if he spoke to anyone.”

Bonnie swilled her water.

“I don’t know, Mom. Forgot, I guess. I was pretty beat.”

“Poor Jack Brewer.”

“I know, Mom. His mother left him. His father blew his brains out.”

“That’s not the worst of it.”

“Come sit down, Mom.”

As she listened, Bonnie felt the brief serenity and enduring heartache that always came with answers to dangerous questions. She sat in silence with a new burden, getting to know its heft, probing the raised edges of its scars.

The police station was a converted church with a mix of styles, reflecting the peculiarities of each of the congregations that had worshipped in that building over the centuries. The cross was missing from the face of the steeple, she realized, and the guilt she felt on Sunday mornings resurfaced. Would things have been different, she wondered, if she’d spoken up way back in first grade?

Inside, Bonnie spoke to the officer who’d come to her mother’s house that day. When she was through, the officer looked at her for a moment before telling her they’d found Matthew’s body. That afternoon, there was a squad car in Jack’s driveway when Bonnie pulled into the bar’s parking lot.

Barney greeted her at the door, mopping his forehead with a bar towel.

“What’s going on over there?”

“No clue,” she shrugged, stepping past him, up the stairs, and into the bar where she poured herself a shot and downed it.

“First time I’ve ever seen you take a drink,” Barney marveled from the doorway.

The whole crowd was watching the Phillies upset the Padres in torturous extra innings, and when that had been accomplished there were several rounds of celebratory pitchers. It wasn’t until after midnight that the fans had taken off; before clearing the bar of glassware, Bonnie clicked away from the sports station.

At home, Polly was working a crossword puzzle at the kitchen table.

“Couldn’t sleep,” she said, “they found that boy.”

He was by Beaver Creek in Piketown.

“Aren’t you gonna eat anything, Bonnie?”

“Not hungry.”

“Okay then. ‘Night.”

She sat alone in front of the dark screen of the tv, thinking about all the times after hours of play, he would stay there with her, sprawled across the grass in the meadow next to Polly’s, finally crossing 39 when his old man got home. Even then, he wouldn’t leave immediately. He’d sit up and try to start a game with her as they watched his father’s pickup approach.

“Let’s count the number of red cars that go by until we get to a hundred.”

“That would take all night.”

“Okay, then. ‘Til we get to twenty.”

Finally, his old man would step out of the truck and stand there waiting.

“Your dad’s looking for you.”

That’s when Jack would drag himself to his feet and cross the road.

He didn’t come into the bar on Wednesday or Thursday. His truck wasn’t in his driveway and she’d not seen it at the Eagle.

When she spied the truck on Friday, she walked across 39 and knocked on the door. Through

the glass pane, she watched his feet come down the stairs. He paused when he spotted her; then, he opened the door.

“Hadn’t seen you around for a couple of days,” she said, “thought I’d check in.”

“I guess you’re gonna tell me that cop showing up here had nothing to do with you,” he observed, smiling.

Bonnie felt her face heating up. She told him she’d forgotten to tell the police some things when they came to her mother’s house.

“Like that the dude and I were talking? Like that we left at the same time?”

“Yeah,” she said, staring at her feet.

“You think I killed him?”

“No”

“All right then. Thanks for stopping by,” he said, slowly closing the door.

She started back across 39 knowing that she’d made an awful leap, a terrible, misguided leap from what her mother told her to something else. She’d never seen any sign of violence in him. Sinister acts had been committed but none of them, she knew, would have turned him into a murderer.

At home that night, Bonnie told her mother to stop calling him poor Jack Brewer.

“He survived. Somehow, he healed. He’s all grown up. He doesn’t need your pity.”

“He’ll always have my prayers.”

“Prayers he can probably use...’Night mom.”

“Nighty night.”

By Saturday, raging air conditioners battling August’s heat finally overburdened the grid and power shortages rippled through the town. At Polly’s, the lights were still on when Bonnie arrived.

“We should think about getting some air-conditioning in here,” Barney observed when he greeted her at the door.

“...and a backup generator maybe? Barney, half the town has no power—what good is air conditioning without power?”

“You’ve got a point,” he said, scratching his head, “...College girl.”

Sunday brought more of the same with transformers in the nearby substation blowing one by one, cracking like gun shots. With each pop, startled silence overtook the bar and everyone except Jack, who remained motionless over his glass, jumped a little.

Monday afternoon, as Bonnie was changing out a keg of Lowenbrau, gloom settled over the sky and the cooled air blustered. Lightening splintered across the Blue Ridge, and rain began to fall, ushering in the heatwave’s demise.

On the tv over the bar, police announced the end of their investigation into Matthew S.’s death. His blood alcohol had been high enough to kill him on its own. His skull had been fractured. He was shoeless and had been bitten on his left ankle by a rattlesnake—one of the many nocturnal creatures avoiding the worst of the August heat by coming alive in the cooler night time air.

In trying to walk off his stupor, it was conjectured, Matthew got in the snake’s way, tumbled into the creek, hit his head, and fell into a coma. The official cause of death was given as snakebite

venoming.

That night, Jack watched the news before flipping to a National Geographic story on the great cathedrals of Europe. Cameras ascended the Corinthian columns of St. Peter's Basilica. He took a swig of beer and glanced out the window at the sheeted rain. Across 39, he saw Bonnie in the window pouring a shot.

They were both alone in junior high. She was pretty, sure, but by the seventh grade, she always had her head in a book. She was very serious—not a lot of laughs like most of the other kids. Maybe they looked down on her because her folks ran a bar, the same way they looked down on him because he lived in a garage.

She moved away from the window, disappearing from view.

He hadn't told her.

He'd not mentioned that when the dude grabbed his shoulder and looked into his eyes, Jack had shoved him down the stairs so hard the kid lay in a heap, remaining so still for so long Jack leaped down the steps with a thudding heart and turned him face up.

Matthew's eyes fluttered open; he blinked a couple of times before struggling to his feet, staggering to the Piketown path, and turning to Jack before moving on.

"Sorry," he'd said, "my mistake."

**by Allison Collins**

## **Split Skins**

We say, okay, what are our topics?  
in a lip-smacking way,  
like applying fresh gloss or a good snap of gum,  
each of us combing memory  
for whatever we've earmarked:  
checkcheckcheck.

We pick them up, put them down,  
worry and pet and rearrange our topics  
like girls at a dresser full of knick-knacks.

We call them morning chats  
but know, both of us, these are rescue lines

tossed out, again and again,

morsels squirreled in brain-pockets  
and our notes app –  
bulleted words that mean nothing,  
everything

The big ones–  
our obsession with men who can't love us,  
our dead dads,  
how hard it is to love our mothers  
and why they will never really know us,  
how unhappy I've become  
and what escape might look like –  
we call snake-meal:

Must be metabolized slowly,  
wincingly but unafraid,  
much chewing and mulling and chewing.

I bought her a candle that said:  
Smells like my deepest darkest secrets –

I share these, most days,  
while I soap the breakfast dishes,  
sweep dog fur from the floor boards,  
boil the last of summer's tomatoes into sauce –  
their skins split,  
the fruit grown too big for its bounds.

## **Folegandros**

Impossible to do justice  
to this land, older than all  
our insignificances.

No way to write an uncaging.

But together we watched the sun linger,  
yawn itself down –  
fat and satisfied,  
job well done –

We held its last light in a swell of glass,  
clinking orange wine.  
On the bottle: a grape-eating fox, in boots and vest.  
Butch fox, you said.  
They all thought we were lovers, anyway.

We laughed, more –  
at this at us at the absurdity of such luxury,  
and toasted what we came for,  
what we could finally taste,  
there at the edge of the earth:  
freedom.

It was a return to girlhood.  
It felt like getting away with something.

Maybe you can only look across that gulf  
and know your sweet, shrinking, younger self –

light of another kind, finding its horizon –

from this distance.

Maybe it takes a dogged quest for reclamation  
to know what got lost along the way.

Later, we scampered across the stone lobby –  
cool and beige, curated for stillness  
and people quieter, less drunk, than us.

Behind us: regret, Karelia smoke, road dust,  
a billow of gold-threaded skirt.

## Moldering

From bathwater too hot,  
menthol-scented,  
patterns divine in the mold-pepper  
freckling the ceiling.

Browning plaster curls  
pull from a center,  
the damp erosion  
exposing brittle fretwork.

So much scouring, anointing  
to realize some filth  
I will never reach,  
never expunge.

In the steam-blurred glass:  
constellated fingerprints,  
that old ghost-presence.

I have been thinking lately, again,  
of seam-ripping myself,  
forcing open a false pocket –

the persistent lie of *together* –

to reveal the shoddy craftsmanship,  
let the glossy gut-roll spill,  
recolor the bath mat.

## After,

I poach myself two eggs,  
give the water a good glug of vinegar, to stabilize,  
watch the tissue whites curl in on themselves, elegant

Wonder, if I boiled myself, my children  
in a vinegar bath, would we be more stable?

It was Halloween and the woman who opened the school door was dressed as a nun  
because of course she was  
I forgot to pass my child's backpack or sign her in, but laughed:  
*Whew, it's been a bad morning!*

(I did not mention how I found the young one hiding in the corner,  
the way Daddy dragged her sibling from his bed,  
how that child, animal-eyed, sought refuge in the dry bathtub,  
how the oldest said something with her hug,  
or how the lab barked, frantic, so confused about whom to protect)

I shrugged the backpack on to small shoulders, over the Halloween hairdo  
She went as Sailor Moon, though a better costume might have been  
Tiny Keeper of Family Secrets

The nun, obliging, said, *Oh, that's going around! Just wait until tomorrow*  
I quipped about kids and candy hangovers and we laughed  
She couldn't know the effort it took

The car radio played my wedding song, because of course it did  
I switched over to one with a man singing about New England, drunk boys, a high sun  
He keened, *If I could leave, I would've already left*

I plate the eggs, press white flesh  
to bleed gold yolk  
I bring food to mouth, food to mouth  
I suds the plate I sweep the floor  
I tell myself, just sweep the floor

by Swetha Amit

## **The Stolen Doll**

My daughter is inconsolable when her doll is stolen at the park. One minute, she left it on the bench and turned to watch a hummingbird circling. The next minute it's gone. It's her best friend, she wails. She momentarily forgets her elementary school friends, even after four years of birthday parties, playdates, sleepovers, and Halloween trick-or-treating. I contemplate buying her another doll. But I know it can never replicate the one she had—curly, brown braided hair, a dainty nose, red lips, and a thick fringe—the one that's probably in the hands of some rogue who was sick enough to steal a harmless toy from a nine-year-old girl when she wasn't looking. It was a souvenir from our trip to Germany on her fifth birthday, four years ago, where we basked in the glory of the dense green canopy of trees and feasted on black forest gateau.

My daughter remembers carrying her everywhere throughout the vacation. She now looks at the vacation pictures with her doll every morning. There is wistfulness in her eyes when she stares at those photos- especially the one where she is feeding the doll with some cake. I offer to buy her another doll. But she resists and sulks, saying nothing will be as good as Sweetie- the name of her stolen doll. It was the only one who understood her when she talked about that bad math test grade or that time when one of the popular girls left her out of a birthday party invite. Or when one of her friends moved from California to Idaho. I wonder if it is a good idea to argue with my daughter about a doll. Her grief seems incurable for something that didn't have a voice or feelings, something I thought she would outgrow with time. Maybe it was my guilt for being unable to conceive again and have another child. Maybe a sibling would have kept her company while I was juggling between my tech job and spending time with her as a single parent after her father suddenly decided I wasn't good enough for him last year. Perhaps I didn't realize how hurt she'd be. I consoled myself by saying this was an opportunity to teach her about heartbreaks. That not everything would stay or last forever. That emotional attachments come with their share of joy, sadness, and tears. That everything would eventually change with time.

## **The Swim**

A sheet of ghostly white fog cascades over the waves at Cowell Beach. The water looks gray. The white buoys look like specks bobbing on the swell. You feel a lightness as the water circles your feet, then your waist, until it embraces your pink-and-gray wetsuit. It feels like someone has dumped ice cubes down your back. You gasp at first, then adjust to the cold water. The salty smell tickles your nose. On the wet sand, you see chunks of clam and shells. It pricks your feet, much like the ache of your husband's recent alcoholism that lingers in your mind. No amount of therapy helps. The water is up to your neck now. Soon you'll submerge your head, letting the currents carry you through this fluid space.

Sometimes you kick, sometimes you float. You may even drift. The fog might dissipate or linger. You aren't sure. You swim freestyle toward the buoy. This is the style you've been most comfortable with since you learned to swim. You breathe every stroke to your right, spotting the swaying palm trees and the black rocks. Behind you is the white hotel where you are staying for this long weekend by yourself—a getaway from the city's chaos and your life. Santa Cruz was where you spent your summer vacations at your grandparents' house on Westcliff Drive until they died, and their house was sold a few years ago.

You remember watching the seagulls, building sandcastles, and swimming along the shore with your grandfather, a surfer. You remember how swimming always calmed your nerves—the time your parents had a temporary separation, the time you lost your purpose, and the year you took off after school to figure out what you wanted to do.

The water is cold, dark, and murky. You can't see anything below. Your goggles fog. Your brain feels numb. The way you have begun to feel lately when you hear your husband's accusations about your deficiencies. Sometimes his condition weighs you down. You now feel weightless, cruising among the waves. You are flat on the water, your head submerged in darkness. There is some comfort in not being able to see anything. Your husband never understood your love for the water. He is a man bound by the confines of the four walls, dim lights, loud music, and many glasses of whiskey or beer.

Here you are immersed in a salty sea of waves, pondering the irony of how he finds solace in an intoxicated mass of liquid. You spot a gray sea lion bobbing up and down. Once, he told you a sea lion bit him while swimming in the ocean. He hated swimming ever since. You wonder if he cussed at it, too. You wonder whether it would attack you or be curious about what an alien-looking creature is doing in its domain. Or, probably, it's used to humans by now.

You can see the sea lion better now. It's swimming with its young one, wrapped in its own

salty world of bliss.

You wonder whether your husband lied to you about the sea lion, the way he lied about his recent work conference supposedly in Colorado, while you spotted a receipt from a Las Vegas hotel on his desk. You wonder what else he has been lying about.

You spot a few other swimmers, their orange buoys trailing behind them. They soon drift away. You wonder whether you both drifted apart after that incident of losing a life growing inside you two years ago. You wonder whether that was why he began to find solace in his beer. On your first date five years ago, you were impressed by his recommendation of red wine at a bistro in the city. You admired his passion for his banking job, his taste in music, and movies.

You loved the way he always held doors open for you and tucked your long brown hair behind your ear on those long walks after dinner. After a year of dating, you both got married in a grand wedding with family, friends, wine, cake, and music. A sudden swell of the waves sends seawater into your mouth. You choke and splutter. You look around. The sea lions are gone. The fog is closing in. You find yourself all alone. You decide to turn back and head to the shore. You take a deep breath as you spot that big white hotel near the beach. It reminds you of your office where you work as a marketing publicist. At first, the long taxing hours bothered you because you were not able to spend quality time with him. Now you are glad to hide behind the long hours, to escape the toxicity that has crept into your marriage.

You wonder if it's time to break away, even though your family has coaxed you to give this relationship another chance. The waves are gentler now. You don't kick much—suddenly tired. You are content to float like a log and let the waves cradle you. When you feel the sand with your hands, you stand. Your teeth are chattering. At this moment, you welcome the cloak of cold. There is a strange, soothing warmth to this chill. The waves retreat. The fog seems to be lifting. You catch a faint glimpse of the sea lion's head—a gray dot in the mass of waves. Then it disappears. You turn and walk toward the white hotel. This time, you carefully avoid stepping on the sharp shells and clams. You are dripping wet, and the cold breeze caresses your face. You hear the murmur of the waves behind you. Above you, a seagull suddenly squawks. You take a deep breath and watch the seagull soar far into the distance until it becomes a blurry white speck.

**by Lenore Weiss**

### **Bird Flight in Summer**

She stood on a beach which smelled of suntan lotion, watched a man, his head in a handkerchief, open a cooler filled with banana leaves stuffed with spices. He shouted, pasteles, pasteles! A lifeguard's whistle bulletted the air. In her mouth, she tasted the sting of salt water and heard the sound of breaking waves mixed with laughter and mothers calling to their children to be careful. Everything merged into one sound and sigh as she stood opposite her father. "Always stand up straight," he said, and began counting slowly—one, two, three. At each step, she moved closer toward him until the moment she leaped into his hands on her hips lifting her up, up, up—his arms stretched long above his head muscular and into the clouds. Flying. She was a bird flapping her wings. Above and below the whirling world. Sky and pinwheels of beach umbrellas stretched out along the shore as people turned their heads. Eyes pointed at her, her father, so strong and steady. Her feet nearly reached the rocky cliffs, pointed and toes stretched. But once again, she heard the lifeguard's shrieking whistle. Landed back down. Sand between her toes, legs trembling on the newfound earth.

### **Water Molecules on the Loose**

Outside my window there are New Zealand flaxes, climbing yellow aloes, and canna lilies. I watch hummingbirds disappear inside the tall stalks of these flowers, beaks pointed downward until they resurface almost as if they've been baptized by pollen. But there are so many things I'm unable to observe, a metabolic process that continues without any intervention. Goings-on initiated by the first electron excited by a photon that's been carried away on a pool table called photosynthesis. *When a body meets a body comin' through the rye.* The same line from a poem by Robert Burns that Holden Caulfield tried to remember. Nature does not pretend to be innocent, something Holden had to discover. The harvesting of light by proteins attached to the chlorophyll's thylakoid membranes, possibly evolving from ancestral algae that floated in the first soup of oceans. Not wanting the chlorophyll molecule to be left without a missing electron, something must be done. There's a search for a replacement electron that kicks off stage two. We use what we have. Photolysis, lysis in Latin meaning loosening—Light energy is used to split water molecules releasing the needed replacement electron. And we breathe in a sigh (oxygen) of relief.

## **First Steps**

Suddenly sprouting from dry backyards one or two, even three in late summer, pink as cotton candy or pink as face powder naked ladies along sidewalks we're driving past brown pelicans floating in an airy solution, the waves on the shoreline like crashing cymbals that make us look, look up higher, more sunburned as mermaid fairies on a beach littered with sand crab skeletons and whips of kelp before the rays recruit our blankets shiny as a puff flower ready to blow away in the wind

I watch my granddaughter's graceful alliance of muscles as she takes first steps rising on all fours, a sort of down dog but without a stretchy ache, a limber salamander, all those months at ground level doing her own joyous crabbing, but for one moment, she stands on two legs balanced along the curved ripple marks of sand, a mountain range she wants to cross, no metronome of fear with the glossy ocean volcanic rock spectators cheering her from the background, and in one quick move, she arrives at the sand's gelatinous valley, inches forward sees the next hill as a band of pelicans curve toward her and write a note in the sky.

## **The Wounds of the Nation Go Unbound**

I'd finished watching a movie about the military in Argentina, the dirty wars of 1976 to 1983 where nearly thirty thousand people were arrested and shoved into cars. Disappeared. Mothers marched down streets with pictures of the missing planted on their chests. *Madres*. But wait a minute. Isn't that what's happening in the United States, our president lassoing clouds with rolls of masking tape for his magalogue cover-up of the sun? Sing a sad song of six pence. The King is in his counting house counting all his money. Dinna feel like a shadowy cold and dark horizon surrounding our country? Men and women patrolling our cities in camouflage with eyes focused to the ground? All along the watchtower, the wounds of our nation are infected. They go unbound. Festering pustules with every new news headline shared across social media platforms. But everywhere people keep climbing the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, visiting the Jefferson Library, reading Martin's words, and leaving yellowed photographs and small flags for Vietnam veterans. The last time I remember counting the names of the dead was on the walls of a Prague synagogue. Cicadas and sirens sing to each other across the National Mall.

## **& To be Continued**

Neighbors flooded MacArthur Avenue, streets closed to cars and forget about finding parking, but we finally did; there's our darling little girl, roly-poly flesh competing with the waist-band of her scooter shorts, jacaranda-colored caftans, a party where everyone handed over an orange ticket for a second pouring standing in line with a glass mug; guys with hair fades swooping over the shoreline of double-digit pierced ears, carrying kids on shoulders, infants in strollers, exchanging high-fives with names of restaurants and all just causes printed on the front and back of T-shirts, pink unicorns walking hand-in-hand on two feet, soap bubbles blowing from an elephant's trunk and jars of shea butter, skin-to-skin a flash of gold necklaces riding around necks like all-weather chains; really not one hand holding a cell phone, or a single mention of bombing or deaths or troops in cities because we were dancing and boom-boxing and hip-hopping rolling on the curb and in the center of the street, and when the amplifier gave out with a pop and hiss of white light, the DJ laughed *let's keep going* as we bounced to the smell of grilled hot dogs and tacos as though nothing bad would ever happen.

**Dear Valentina**

**John Picard**

Your letter was waiting for me when I got home yesterday, the familiar canary yellow envelope a welcome sight among the usual stack of bills and junk mail. In this age of e-mail and texting a handwritten letter is a rare and precious thing. I have always treasured our correspondence is what I'm trying to say. You write that you're up to 70 pounds, thanks to all the food you've been receiving from the Foundation. I'm so glad. A word of advice, though: save anything non-perishable that's left over. You never know when a little stash might come in handy for emergencies and what not. Have you heard anything about returning to school? I can't tell you how angry it makes me every time I think of what those soldiers did to your teacher, poor woman. Let's hope some brave individual volunteers to take her place before you fall too far behind in your studies. The big news, of course, is that the cast has finally come off your foot. How wonderful that you don't have to use those horrible crutches anymore, that you can once again run and play with the other children in the orphanage. They do good work at that clinic the Foundation sent you to, apparently. It's not your fault the rebels are digging trenches you can't see in the dark, but from now on I hope you'll be more careful when you're out and about. I most humbly accept your thanks for my part in your treatment and recovery. But you give me too much credit. I feel embarrassed when I think of you taping my picture over your bed. I don't deserve such an honor. After all, if it wasn't me helping you out, it would be some other member of the Foundation. What I mean is, I'm not the saint you've made me out to be. As you can already tell, this letter is different from the others. I'm using words and phrases that may have you scratching your head and leafing through that dog-eared, Spanish-English dictionary of yours. That's because I have something important to tell you, something that requires a range of expression unavailable in simpler language. I am sacrificing clarity for understanding, if that makes any sense.

I've been doing a lot better myself. I have a new perspective (distance) on that relationship with the woman I proposed to. I did come on pretty strong. After all, we'd only known each other a month. But at 40 one becomes very concerned about one's future. And something positive did come out of the experience. It made me take a good hard look at myself. I mean that literally. And what I saw, Valentina, I didn't like: a man who had let himself go, a man who had thickened through the middle and elsewhere. Not exactly *gordo* (I believe that's your word for it), but getting there. What woman wants a husband so neglectful of his personal welfare? Not long after this realization I had a complete physical and learned that my cholesterol was 265, my blood pressure 140 over 90. These are not encouraging numbers. The doctor said that in addition to losing weight I needed to do something about my cardiovascular system or risk shortening my life. I needed to take action before it was too late. I want to have a wife and children one day. The bachelor life isn't all it's cracked up to be, especially after a certain age. My point is, I'm never going to change my single status, not to mention live to a ripe old age,

unless I get into better shape. Physical appearance is important whether we want to admit it or not.

It occurs to me that in the year and a half we've been corresponding I've never told you how I became your sponsor. I was in my doctor's office with a sore throat. To pass the time, I opened a magazine and began flipping through it until I came to an article that interested me. My eyes were drawn to a photograph on the opposite page of a little girl with the biggest, saddest eyes you've ever seen. The writing underneath the picture said she was hungry and had nothing to eat. It urged the reader to become a sponsor for the Rescue The Children Foundation. \$37 a month would provide a child with nutritious food and regular medical care. As soon as I got home, I wrote out my first check for \$37. I'll never forget how excited I was three weeks later when my sponsor kit arrived, complete with your picture and personal history and your letter, the first of many.

The collapse of your economic system, the destruction of your cities, the breakdown of your electrical grid, the hourly skirmishes among the warring factions--this has been life for you in your tragic country. But I know from your touching letters that before these catastrophes, before you were separated forever from your family, you did all the things common to girls your age. You once wrote me that one of your fondest memories was saving up your coins and going to the market. You would buy sweets, mostly chocolates, and maybe some trinket. If your dear *mamacita* was with you, she would sometimes buy you a scarf or a hair band or, best of all, a dress. Why did she do this? Because you looked so pretty in it, naturally. But also because everyone deserves to get something really nice once in a while.

When I was your age what I craved more than anything in the world was an Indiana Jones jacket, a brown leather jacket modeled after the one Harrison Ford wore in the movie. I cried and pleaded with my parents. To their credit, they gave in. Valentina, I wore that jacket until it was in tatters. Do you remember how it felt the first time you put on a new dress? How it made you feel more sure of yourself, more attractive? And wasn't it nice how those good feelings revived (came back) every time you put it on? That's how my Indiana Jones jacket made me feel. And that's how I feel about BioFlex.

Recently I turned on my TV and found myself watching a commercial for something called The BioFlex Conditioning System, which, it turned out, was nothing but a fancy name for an exercise machine. The narrator of the commercial had a honeyed voice that made you want to keep watching. It was all a slick come-on, in other words. I knew I was getting the soft sell. I didn't care. Before the commercial was over I'd jotted down the toll-free number.

Four days later there was a loud knock at my front door. It was the UPS man with a huge cardboard box from BioFlex. I had the parts out of the box and assembled in no time. I keep my exercise machine right here in the den, where I'm writing this letter. I wish you could see it, Valentina. It's quite an impressive piece of machinery, though somewhat difficult to describe. On either side of you, as well as over head, are lots of pulleys and cables. These are attached to handles and grips that you can either pull or push, depending on what muscle group you're working on. The whole thing stands six feet high. Upon entering the room you are immediately

struck by "...its gleaming chromium steel, its elegant architecture." (I am quoting from the preface to the training manual.) "There is nothing 'random' about the design of BioFlex. Function dictates design, and functions demanded by a perfect system of exercise dictate the design of the BioFlex System."

Now the hard part. I'll give it to you straight, Valentina: I don't think I can afford both my sponsorship and my exercise machine. I owe the manufacturers \$1,789 plus taxes, to be paid in monthly installments of \$75.50 over a 24 month period. My sponsorship costs me \$37 a month, which may not sound like a lot in comparison, but with everything else--bills, rent, utilities--it adds up. Even minus my sponsorship I'm going to feel the pinch. If it makes you feel better, I am also letting slide some of the other charities and organizations I donate to: Urban Ministry, Amnesty International, PBS, The Firefighters Association. You see, I am not an ungenerous person. I would dip into my savings if I had any. \$88.12. That's it!

I suppose I could have joined a health club where there are exercise machines galore. But they are all too specialized. None of them provides a full-body workout at one compact station. And having one in your own home greatly increases the chances you'll exercise.

Of course, I could have taken up jogging, which for shoes and running clothes would only cost me a hundred dollars or so. Or I could have spent the same amount on a tennis racket and gotten up matches at the local courts three or four times a week. But to return to the preface: "Over a period of thirty years, while slowly refining the BioFlex System, we gradually became aware of the requirements for a perfect form of exercise. These requirements are:

- Full-range resistance
- Direct resistance
- Balanced resistance
- Omni-variable resistance
- Rotary-form resistance
- Automatically-variable resistance
- Negative-work resistance

Conventional exercises provide only one of these absolute requirements (negative-work resistance) and thus are NOT full-range exercises, are NOT proper exercises."

I realize that compared to you I live in splendor. My apartment is probably as big as the entire orphanage, which, you say, accommodates (holds) over fifty children. I have my own bed. I have all the hot water I want. Only a block from where I live there is a store stocked with delicious foods of all kinds, including the sweets you're so fond of. And yet, by the standards of my own country I am not a rich man. Most men my age earn twice and three times what I do. The assistant manager of a book store isn't exactly a lucrative occupation. Don't misunderstand me. I made my choices. I could have gone to law school, I could have gotten my MBA, I could have made something of myself, financially speaking. But I didn't care about that. I've always been somewhat idealistic (dreamy), valuing the spiritual aspects of life over the materialistic, refusing to allow money to dictate my choices. Many of my generation have done just that, piled up possessions and money-market funds like there was no tomorrow,

while I have contented myself with used cars, second-hand furniture, and a six-year-old PC. I have splurged on the occasional luxury. I make a trip to the beach every two or three summers. But there have been no European vacations, no extravagant purchases. More than an hour has passed since I wrote the last paragraph. I have just had a most unsettling conversation with the woman at the Rescue The Children Foundation. She demanded to know why I wanted to terminate my sponsorship. I said it was due to a financial burden. She asked the nature of that burden. I didn't feel that was any of her business and told her so. She asked whether this burden predated my sponsorship or was recently incurred. She needed to know, she said, for her records. I admitted to the latter and was treated to a long silence. That's when I told her I intended to resume sponsorship in precisely two years time, when I expect to have more savings.

"In that regard," I said, "would it be possible for another member of the Foundation to assume my sponsorship until I'm able to make payments again?"

Unfortunately, the woman said, I was part of a growing trend. Cancellation of sponsorships was on the increase. New sponsorships had been falling off for the last few years. An arrangement such as I was suggesting was not feasible. Besides, she went on, these days new sponsors were being urged to give to countries with more pressing needs. Things were particularly bad in Western Asia and Central Africa just now.

"Worse," I said, "than half the population without food and water? Worse than a civil war? Worse than murdered school teachers?"

"Yes, sir. Much worse."

"What about a grace period? A couple of months free of charge to ease her back into her old way of--do you see what I'm saying?"

"Aid is terminated immediately upon notice of cancellation," the woman said.

"But she's just getting back on her feet. Quite literally, in fact."

"Would you like to reconsider?"

"It's only two years."

"Until then, sir?"

I hung up.

It might help you to understand my position if you knew all the benefits I derive from the BioFlex System. While I'm exercising I enter a state of almost unconscious physicality (a floating sensation). Afterwards, I enjoy an extended period of total peace and relaxation. Also, I have a new confidence about my body that has translated into a sense of well-being previously unknown to me. I have yet to start dating again, but I'll be in a better frame of mind when I do. No more desperate proposals of marriage.

Twenty-four months, Valentina, then the money will begin flowing again. Do you think you can hold out that long? How do all the other children get by? Do you hate me? It's not asking too much, is it, that I be permitted this one indulgence, after a lifetime of self-denial? Considering my life as a whole (low paying job, crummy apartment, social isolation), I think I deserve what amounts to a gift to myself. In more ways than one, it is a move toward health.

It has been several days since I wrote anything here. I didn't mention it before but there's a woman who comes into the store pretty regularly. Today, for the first time, I found the confidence to talk to her, the confidence I didn't have before Bioflex. I joined her in the mystery aisle and asked if she needed help. She didn't, but I succeeded in getting her to open up about her favorite mystery authors. So agreeable was our chat that I invited her out for coffee. She said she had a boyfriend, so that was that. But I think it's a good sign, don't you? You probably don't understand everything I've written here, Valentina, but I think you grasp the important parts. I know that two years sounds like a long time, especially at your age and in your circumstances, and perhaps it is, of course it is. But here's hoping they pass quickly and safely. Please believe me when I say I wish you the very best.

Sincere regards,

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p.s.: Write soon.

### **Another Mystery**

My father slipped out of the city to Eastern Washington.  
The gray finally got to him. He likes light, big sky vistas,  
and driving. He drives all over: small county roads,  
forest service roads, off road with his big truck.  
He wants to see what's on the other side of that hill,  
that river. He goes and goes, and that's how I see him,  
now, driving, absorbing, from Methow to Pateros,  
hawk high soaring, bear coming down from the ridge,  
out there, always on the other side of gray, on the other side  
of a Leonid shower, deer wandering up to the edge of the field,  
seeing something I catch a glimpse of as I drive West  
with that big sun full over that open road that goes forever.

## **Pale as a Ghost**

We light out for the territories  
but end up with jobs in the hospital.  
Pay in silver or go home,  
you're buzzing, golden,  
dandelion-headed friend says.

Drift from set to set,  
slow close up on the departing spirit.  
We roam night caverns,  
and at a certain point all  
philosophy ends up a footnote to 0.

On the tip of your tongue  
a great idea,  
enough to float through a lifetime on,  
your home upside down in the sky,  
stars between your toes.

Echo of the war whisper saying,  
now the meaning of the bones,  
lucky dancing sticks with beating hearts,  
fireflies in the mix.

Ohh we burn with such enthusiasm,  
resurrect intentions as religion,  
borrow the crow's eyes of oblivion  
and head toward light of inspiration.

## Only North

Canadian geese slide by overhead  
going where the light goes—sunset—  
one man walking along the railroad tracks  
through the desert with empty water jug  
and a buzzard following like a shadow.

It's in my blood now, I say,  
I'm inoculated through the eyes,  
river going north and light coming east  
and fade, the gray man on the march,  
along these roads with no sidewalks,  
homes built for fighters and the war dead.

Ghosts behind their curtains watch,  
children vibrate with new music and old traumas,  
old men in coveralls filling their nail jars,  
tying flies, and listening to radio voices,  
flashback hit parades and ballroom tunes  
from the homecoming dance under sea.

North goes the creek from the Japanese garden,  
a maple seed lifeboat full of dreams,  
north go to the clouds on storm Saturday,  
and north slants the rain across your eyes  
gazing north at the cold shore there  
and ring of magnetic fury at the farthest pole.

North whispers come from your hideout,  
across the canyon as I travel the edge,  
Talmage Terrace full of urge and clouds  
and the dark sparking with thunder,  
north whispering something in my ear—

North like a snow globe full of memories,  
shake your head and resolve one after another,  
scenes of hook rug room, window crack,  
farmhouse with trapper shack full of chains,  
vials of wolfsbane, kids walking home in rain.

See what else appears as we go north  
from the guttural wash at the birth of sound,  
flying high like a flag, stones and birds and trees  
and a town materializing out of the distance,  
the word that appears on every tongue as home.

North as the blue sea takes that red drop sun  
that was everything you used to get through  
San Diego in one piece, rising from a Murphy bed,  
inventing your movie version of the resident,  
smoking on the back steps in the cool, quiet  
sound of a saxophone and light from the alleyway.

## **The Mystery Express**

As we race through a town so small  
you can count the graves in a moment,  
as I look away from your eyes and out  
the window, framed, I see three people  
in black, carrying a coffin down Main Street.  
We race through lives equally unseen—  
blink and you might miss your time as a janitor,  
bricklayer or the appliance repair shop owner,  
there, who for a moment sees me seeing him.

## Energy in the Double Flower

I don't know who gave me the address,  
this handwriting doesn't look familiar.  
I've never seen this street before.  
These houses look decked out for Halloween,  
with fake tombstones and hands coming out of the lawns.  
Did I pass through a spider web?  
What did it take from me? I'm bare bones now,  
I'm barely a whisper behind the scenes.

They come back, hauntings, things of your past—  
like movie posters, props and stage furniture,  
flimsy architecture of self, not seeing it in continuum —  
you have one job and one job only—  
face forward for what's coming, heading through  
the black block of nothing.

We are constantly arriving on the other side of something—  
kindergarten, death rock, apartments you look back on  
no rat would live in, yet there you are with a sweating beer  
watching mountain smoke slide down the city street.  
The breakfast— that's what he called it— the breakfast —  
like a communion, a Last Supper, a death row meal—  
brings you to life, after one bite, that's all it takes,  
and next thing you know you're a freshly beating heart.

In the garden, smiling water, warm fire and the vines—  
we are content in change and the hum under the surface,  
the all energy flowing over the rooftops,  
as we do nothing but gaze, silent but observant  
from the cave of your worried mind.

## Somewhere in Texas

Marilyn Davie

"I am walking with the monks" Shawna said to her daughter.

The two women were moving slowly down the hallway outside Shawna's apartment. Her daughter had brought her a new walker and they were testing it out in the long corridor, going down and back, then down and back again.

"The monks are walking for world peace," Shawna said.

Her daughter stopped and watched her mother from behind, bent at the waist, her shoulders hunched, as she stepped forward.

"I thought we agreed not to talk about politics," her daughter said, joining her mother's pace again.

"World peace is not politics," Shawna said.

Her daughter wanted to say, "It is when *you* talk about it," but she knew better than to object. You can take the activist out of the protest, but you can't take the protest out of the activist.

"They're walking from Texas to Washington DC," Shawna said.

"Well, there you go," her daughter said. "How much more political can you get than *that* destination?"

One of the wheels of the walker began to squeak as it rolled, making a high-pitched refrain. The daughter thought she should probably go back to the store for a replacement or at least to have the wheel greased.

"It's not without a cost," Shawna said, lifting a hand off one of the handles and closing her fingers into a fist. "One of the monks was hit by a car and had to have his leg amputated."

Her daughter winced, reminded of her mother's frailty.

"But he returned to the procession in a wheelchair," Shawna said. "That's devotion. That's service." She took a slow, deep breath. It lifted her.

The squeak was getting louder, and now another wheel had joined in with a rhythmic chirp. A chorus echoed around the women as they moved.

The daughter asked if the handles on the walker were comfortable. Shawna was no longer leaning on them heavily. She was more upright now and taking longer strides.

"They're fine," she said, pulling ahead. She had focused her gaze beyond the paisley carpet and the yellow walls and the repeating doors.

She was somewhere in Texas, striving onward, accompanied by the sound of singing birds.

## Burning Doesn't Matter

Órfhlaith Foyle

The machines were unplugged and the bed sheets rolled up. Someone asked the family what was happening with the hospital bed, and could they buy it for their mother with Alzheimer's? They were told, fine take it. It's heavy so mind your backs.

Nora the daughter made scones and soup for visitors, and there was whiskey to be had, Club Orange, water, red and white wine, mince pies, chicken vol-au-vents, coleslaw, and that odd stuff cous cous with scallion and red pepper bits. People munched and chomped their way through the food then wandered back and forth to the dead body in the coffin. They licked their coleslaw fingers, muttered their non-surprise at the silk red tie the corpse was wearing since he had been fond of shiny red. His sports car, a waistcoat here and there, even his women except for his ex-wife who was now an ex-nun with blonde hair and high heels.

The daughter Nora had greeted everyone at the front door and told them to go and see her father in his coffin. He looks asleep but he's not rested, she said. Not a tear stain on her face but a small smell of drink on her breath. The family were known for the drink, now known more for recent scandal and sin. Nora had good legs in patent black court shoes. Her dress fitted a wake, black with embossed roses, snug on the waist. No tights or stockings, pale blue veined hairless skin and every so often she plucked away bits of scone, vol-au-vent, tomatoes and parsley from her father's face and suit.

The undertakers had done a fine job by all accounts since the man had been skin and bone, curled up like a baby in the end, settling down for death. Irene his ex-wife, the ex-nun she had been overheard in the Mill and Roses Café a few days ago telling Nora not to cause problems, that everything was working out as God intended and your father will be dead soon. Nora realized someone was watching, glanced hard at the table across from her where Liz Byrne sat overhearing everything then later told everyone she couldn't help it so close are the tables in that café. But it was the look, full of something, Liz Byrne reported. Sadness, I suppose but brazen with it.

So how did he die was the question everyone had in their head, but no one asked it straight because this family had a terrible share of misfortune, a sin bred into them from God knows how far back, and there had always been stories but nothing to see except how useless a family they were for each other. Yet he had been alive two days ago with at least one or two weeks more of living, just lying there in the room off the main lounge area of this vast Georgian house. His son Gerard usually met visitors at the door to the room, with the latest dictate from the medical consultant. A tube in the neck is no good. The man's organs are dying anyway. If he calls for food, tell him it's coming. And there's the morphine. It does wonders.

Six months ago, Gerard, had raged into McMahon's pub and drank ten whiskies one after the other then squared up to the Friday night crowd and said which one of you fucking lousy bastards wants to say it to my face? Silence for seconds not out of shock because a few were smiling until Bryan Sweeney stood up and yelled, your old man raped little boys good-oh!

Gerard stood as tall as he could manage. Say that right into my face.

Bryan Sweeney approached Gerard nose to nose and said,

Your old man raped boys good-oh.

Gerard swayed then said, well he never touched me.

You're the lucky one so, Bryan said.

Gerard began to hiccup then cry in loud gulps. He metamorphosed into a grown toddler while his fingers tried to stop his eyes and his nose leaked down onto his lips.

Ah come on now, someone said but Gerard's cries turned into screams.

Why didn't he love me? I was good! No, don't touch me. Stop laughing, all of you!

Bryan said take yourself off home like a good man. He pushed Gerard through the pub door, shut then braced one foot against it as well as one arm. He laughed at Gerard's attempts to push the door open.

Why didn't he love me? What was wrong with me?

The guards were called and they took him home.

He was slumped now in a green armchair across from the head of his father's coffin puffing on a strawberry flavor vape, his legs splayed. His mother told everyone that her son was taking everything to heart, that his soul was tortured and he was nervous about giving a eulogy at the funeral. And it doesn't help that I was expelled from the Convent, she told anyone who would listen. But it was my rage you see. God was utterly driven mad with me.

Liz Byrne mentioned to her best friend Flora McGee that the woman was mad and the two of them had wandered about the house, into the kitchen to spy on the hired catering staff and to sniff the steam off the boiling lobsters for tomorrow's funeral afters. They examined the downstairs bathroom, but it was empty of tablets, potions and moisturizers. A cheap soap dispenser placed between the hot and cold tap, a rough towel and the half-used tube of hand moisturizer lay on top of the toilet cistern.

They would have explored upstairs but every room was locked but they did discover a cherry red Aran cardigan lying on an orange velvet pouffe underneath the window at the far end of the landing. Liz Byrne held the cardigan up to her chest. Belongs to Nora, she said. It's too small for me.

Flora McGee stared at the huge space between the locked doors and the landing. Imagine being in bed and hearing him call out for food all the time. You'd not get any sleep.

Visitors studied the corpse in the coffin. Its face was full of pores especially the nose. There were hardly any lips, and the undertaker had left two visible catgut like knots in each corner of the dead man's mouth. His fingernails were varnished to a shine. His eyelashes were long and most people could remember the green of his eyes. Pond scum green, one on looker remembered. Goose shit green, another said. Imagine those fingers on you, Liz Byrne said and everyone in earshot imagined.

The catering staff carried in another vat of vegetable soup and another tray of scones. Bryan Sweeney stepped up, bit into a scone, wandered over to Nora.

Nice to see you here.

Cool and quick she replied Hello Bryan.  
What are you up to now these days?  
Teaching.  
Right. The art stuff.  
Hmm.  
How's your millionaire brother today?

Nora walked away from him towards the red wine but was sidelined by Liz Byrne who proffered her the cherry red Aran cardigan. Keep the heat in you, Nora and it's a fabulous colour against your green eyes.

The room was full of people, some stood too close to the coffin for Nora's liking, and she told them to be respectful. People's smiles slid towards her and over her face. Respectful? Jim Higgins said. Respectful of that?

The dead man's nose glinted up at Nora until she realized that his face had been spat upon despite her watch over him. She grabbed a napkin, wiped away spit and some make-up so that her father's skin showed through, ivory yellow with a blue green tinge in its nasolabial folds.

Irene tinkled a tiny spoon on a glass until she had everyone's attention and proclaimed that since there were so many visitors that some of tomorrows' food for after the funeral was going to be brought out...so cut slices of lamb with salad and potato gratin will be served in a few minutes... please grab a plate and thank you so much for coming. Gerard, Nora and I appreciate it with all our hearts.

Everyone filled their plate, their glass and their mouths. Liz Byrne caught Irene's elbow and whispered how exactly did that Our Lady's Convent kick you out. Flora McGee and a small group of people also wanted to know and Irene the ex-wife and ex-nun turned a calm face to them all.

Oh, it was so simply done. The Mother told me I was disturbing the Convent's ethos and atmosphere. I don't blame her. Offer up your rage, she had advised me, but that didn't do me any good. I love God but he just doesn't listen, does he? So, I threw boiling water at the Confessional screen. The poor priest's face is still pockmarked with blisters.

You must be relieved he is dead then, Flora McGee said.

Who? The priest's alive sure.

Your husband.

Oh yes of course. Nora has her doubts but Gerard and I are certain that things couldn't be better now.

Doubts? inquired Jim Higgins.

Mam, Nora said.

Hmm? Her mother asked and everyone watched the look the daughter and mother gave each other, but no one saw anything. It was a plain look, yet when Liz Byrne repeated 'What doubts, Nora?' to Nora's face and stood there expecting a reply, Nora said nothing but merely gave the impression of staring right through Mrs. Byrne's tiny skull.

Several on lookers knew that Nora was the quiet one in that family and never made

much of her life. An art teacher who almost successfully killed herself about five years ago during a nervous breakdown while Gerard her brother was a millionaire now, renting out his three hotels and so many houses as IPAS centers.

What doubts, Nora? Tell us, Bryan Sweeney said as he hollowed out a cold vol-au-vent with his fingers, so everyone sensed something was going to happen. Bryan had an unpredictable side. He was grand to drink with in the pub, just certain things you didn't touch on in conversation. Not a man for a woman or a man; so, he often struck people as an odd fish or wolf really. Loping on the sidelines, laughing every so often until a woman or sex is mentioned and he disappears off back to his house with his own mother inside it.

Irene answered him. Nora doubted that her father deserved to die, Bryan.

Gerard laughed, struggled out of his chair and carried a full glass of whiskey to his father's coffin. He smiled at Nora and said have this. She took it and drank a little.

Gerard addressed everyone...We committed a *really* bad sin.

Out of kindness, his mother interjected. He would not stop screaming for food. She opened her mouth and made a long sound from the back of her throat. Like that.

That would drive anyone demented, Liz Byrne remarked.

Nora drank to the end of her glass. They suffocated him.

Was it a mercy killing by chance, Jim Higgins asked.

Gerard clicked his tongue. We voted two to one, Jim.

Nora laughed a lost sound.

Irene declared: It was a mercy killing and I needed to kill that rage inside of me.

But is that not murder? Liz Byrne asked.

It is, Nora answered her. They murdered Dad.

Gerard said: He wasn't living really but his screaming did my head in.

Nora stared at her father's dead face. They shoved a pillow onto his face, kept it down and I didn't do anything... because I wanted them to be the killers. He was my dad

Gerard said: You were his favorite. Yes Dad, No Dad, Anything I can do for you Daddy?

Bryan laughed. Jesus God.

Nora touched her father's cheek. You should burn him Gerard.

But he has a funeral in the morning, Irene cried.

Burn him, Gerard. He deserves burning don't you think?

Why don't you ask Bryan while you're at it?

Irene shouted, we are not burning your father. We are putting a lid on his bloody coffin right now and everyone is going home.

Well, if you are going to burn him, Jim said.

And I want to watch, someone said from the crowd. Faces looked at him, realized he was just a blow-in, a nobody for now but he said what everyone wanted and someone else called out.

Why don't you ask Bryan, Nora?

Everyone swiveled their head towards Nora.

Daddy's little girl, Gerard said.

Nora braced her fingers against her forehead.

Come on Nora, someone sing songed at her.

Bryan, she said. Bryan.

I'm sorry, Bryan said.

Nora laughed in pain. Oh right, yes. You're sorry. It's just my head is full of black razors and knives, and you deserve to have them embedded in you. I've wanted to gut you from your throat to penis for years.

Stop being melodramatic, Nora. Jesus, Gerard said.

She laughed at him. Oh, he never touched me. He never loved me then.

Gerard grabbed at her but fell across his father's coffin instead.

Poor Bryan, Nora said. First my father raped you then you tried to bury you little thirteen-year-old willy in me. I didn't know what was happening, Nora addressed the guests, but Gerard was laughing go on Bryan. Stick it in her, Bryan.

The room turned stone silent.

I blame myself, Irene said.

That's good Mum, Nora told her and I think you and Gerard should burn Dad now.

Maybe we should all go home. Jim Higgins suggested but Flora McGee announced No! I am staying, and Nora, you are right. We should burn your father. I mean, it's not a recognizable crime is it? He's dead already.

Liz Byrne said What will the Guards say?

It doesn't matter, Nora said. They know what he did, and she stepped out of her shoes, rubbed her hands along the side lengths of her dress...

Nora...her mother began.

Mum you voted to murder him. Burning doesn't matter.

Liz Byrne cried out, But Irene you were a nun!

Irene said, I had hated him for years. God didn't do one damn thing for me.

Well let's get on with it so, Gerard laughed and put his strength into wheeling the coffin towards the patio doors. People parted, and patted Gerard's shoulder and Bryan also put his strength into maneuvering the coffin trolley wheels through the patio doors.

The night outside was crisp, and several mobile phones lit up the patio steps and the mown grass lawn. Nora sat on the steps while her mother stood close to one of the rose bushes planted not too far from the head of the coffin while Gerard ran off to the shed for some paraffin and Bryan was left in charge of the scene, shifting his hands from his pockets to the rim of the coffin and back again. He glanced across to Nora who continued to watch the waiting crowd as if watching a simple picnic and she had no wish to eat.

Gerard returned with the paraffin in a tin can and sloshed the liquid all over the open casket, finishing the last drops onto his father's face. He glanced happy at no one, not even his sister; lit one match for himself then offered the box to Bryan, who lit his own.

One, two, three. They threw in their matches.

The flames leaped and billowed. Flora McGee clapped her hands at the height of the fire. Oh my God, he's burning!

Liz moved closer to smell burning skin blister, bubble then pop. Like the Sunday roast dinner, she declared. Somebody began vomiting so real was the tantalizing whiff of pig skin

crackling. Jim Higgins approached the flames, his mobile phone aimed high to catch the flaming coffin. The dead man was recognizable for only seconds more until his face disappeared in blue and red fire.

Bryan turned away from the burning. He halted in front of Irene who tried to touch his hand, but he recoiled. She smiled and said, I've wasted myself, haven't I?

He walked past a few others for whom the heat and sparkle were a bit too much and who said how are you Bryan, take care of yourself Bryan. They observed him stop in front of Nora then crouch down so that his face was level before hers. Her shoulders pulled her back, and he didn't strive to touch her, but the burning coffin licked flames onto her the side of her face and the back of his head.

Their faces remained still, except for their lips which moved now and again and their eyes, and it was left to anyone's imagination to wonder how much horror Nora and Bryan nursed between them but wasn't that the case in all of Ireland. And sure, let's go home now after burning the body, and turn into our own beds.

by Martina Reisz Newberry

### THINKING OF WOUWERMAN'S *THE WHITE HORSE* \*

The sky is an infinite confusion. Clouds appear  
to be shoving their way through to Somewhere.  
Nearby birds avoid the bullying  
and fly clear of it.

Someone in a hat watches the pair;  
he is hidden by a small rise and a little scrub grass.  
The sea is in the distance, hints at places  
neither the man nor his pale friend will ever go.

The trail ends where they stand—  
horse and man. One hand holds the reins  
near the horse's mouth, the other hand is folded  
onto his middle, holding back—what?—

Fear? Curiosity? A painful dream?  
The horse is an icon of patience as is  
the small black dog, barely seen in the shadows.  
What remnants of trees those are,

I'll never know. Blown, broken, bare, skeletons.  
They might be frightening in the dark,  
but here, in the overcast daylight,  
they struggle to mean anything except,

perhaps, that all things broken inevitably  
passage into something entirely *else*.  
The red saddle outlines itself in the way blood does,  
as if it is flowing over the white horse's back

and down its sides.  
It is the afternoon before a storm. Tomorrow,  
the young man will bury his older brother,  
Phillip, who was thrown by a horse.

\*Phillips Wouwerman, 1650-1660?, (Dutch)

This painting may be viewed here: : <https://www.1st-art-gallery.com/Philips-Wouwerman/The-White-Horse.html>

## AT THE MONASTERY OF INAPPROPRIATE BEHAVIOR

*Poetry can change the world! The poet says  
What's for dinner? Poetry asks*

~Seb Doubinsky, "Mountains"

If it's all about creation or creativity  
there comes a point when the only "there"  
that's there  
are pages and some words  
somebody abandoned at the trash chute  
where you slide your plastic bag down  
to meet its twins.

You lived  
and live  
what is written  
on those pages and you'll leave  
all of it at some point  
which is an appropriate  
finish considering your  
bad behavior in this world's  
morbid monastery.

You'll hope that  
one of two little somethings you wrote  
will hang in the air or in the mind of  
a clever soul who recognizes genius  
when he—or she—reads it.  
But, other than that slim hope,  
most of what you said  
will slide down the trash chute  
with the orange peels and the  
leftover tuna casserole.

What the trash chute has joined  
let no man put asunder.

## **APPROPRIATE OCCASIONS**

3 a.m.

Another promise sits  
on the precipice of  
being broken. So why purchase  
them—all those promises, I mean?

Fire sale

Yard Sale

Inventory Sale

Going-out-of-business Sale

As-Is Sale

Estate Sale

What

does it

matter how cheap

the promises are? We

continue to purchase them, wrap

them in beautiful paper and ribbon,

give as gifts on the appropriate occasions.



## **MANUS DULCE (HANDS OF SWEETNESS)**

What if it not been an apple?  
What if Eve had picked (instead  
a peach—tempted, not by a snake,  
but by the soft fur of peach skin and  
its soft spring colors?

I see her now, that first beautiful bite,  
juice filling (first  
her mouth, then leaking down her lower lip,  
spilling from the fruit itself onto her hand  
and down her wrist.

Still somewhat undefined,  
Eve might have wondered at her  
maker's warnings. The sweetness,  
the fibrous, muscle-y chew of it.  
How could it be wrong?

I see her hurrying through the orchards  
and grasses that made up Home.  
She would have run to find Adam, to present  
the second peach to him—  
her mouth, her hands, her arms sticky with love.

## Black Birds

Vartan Koumrouyan

I've never been attentive to the people I crossed on the street on my way to the TomTip café on the corner, or the customers at the bakery or the baker himself, Abdalla", literally meaning "Slave of God", which, in the Middle East is a common name. He always smiles when he sees me, for the fact that I speak Arabic with him.

Or the other people in the bar who meet at the counter every morning. They talk for long moments about whatever they have in common. One of them is the owner of the garage down the street where broken cars are parked under the trees. The others are his mechanics or maybe just his neighbours.

The garbage collectors also come in, wearing fluorescent yellow clothes. They drink coffee, eat croissants and talk in loud voices and wait in turn to use the toilet before they resume their work.

I did not care about life and the expression it took in this city. I never thought I belonged. I knew from the start that I didn't want to be responsible or have any affection for the Parisian myth and what it represented for earlier writers who lived here. It's not the same epoch.

I was aware from the beginning of the repetition of things, every day, noon and night, every week, month and year, as if one was in a rut. It has no purpose. It doesn't contain any artistic expression, beauty, appeal or finesse. This is the new world order, as they advertise it, with its shortcomings. A men's world. It used to be different from what I have read.

It occurred to me they, the people I saw every morning, all of them, repeated by rote what they had learned to do and what was bequeathed to them by the new culture, negating any imaginary purpose that might add a colour to the mundane to make it less of a burden.

I was only interested in the things I saw that captured my interest, en passant, on my way to take my son, Voskian, to school.

The static things, the leftovers, the dirty plastic garbage on a corner. The empty bottle. The squashed cigarette stubs. The dawning sky quarter to eight. "Look at the sky, I'd say to Voskian. There's a subtle new luminosity. The days are getting longer, there's a white ivory tint, a spring morning, coming from the east, like a bowl in the sky, where soon birds begin to migrate."

"Wait here and look at the birds", I'd tell him. The crows I was feeding behind the bus stop, the way they smudged the skeleton of the trees like spots of black ink on the slender twigs denuded of its leaves.

The way these birds acknowledged my presence as soon as I walked onto the paved recess near the back door of the sports hall of the school.

I found in the combination of these inanimate things and the wild birds something akin to freedom, a change, a transition from one state to another to stymie stagnation.

Feeding the birds to give them the freedom they craved that I didn't have, as I watched how they fly atop the tall building in the windy current up the Seine river, how they drew abstract lines in the cold wind, naturally happy and light hearted.

I'd cut in half a plastic bottle with the knife to make a container of it where I'd ladle the remaining of the rice, of bread, of crumbs and spaghetti tomatoes sauce with all the butter broth my mother had prepared, the leftover, to let it soak and take next morning to the crows as I accompany my son to school.

Wait at the bus stop to see how they would let themselves drop from the branches, spread their wings at the last instant in a choreography sweep to suddenly dip onto the feed I emptied at the trunk of a sapling, in a sort of a haiku movement.

I have counted on this tree between the wall and the garbage containers fifteen birds. There are more, certainly, a whole bunch of them I see everywhere on the trees along the street because there's a sandwich snack, the "Maxin Chicken" where sometimes customers throw French fries or chicken wing bones on purpose, excited to observe this element of wild life blend in the routine of the suburbs, the way they swoop between their feet and the passing cars.

These nonconformities attracted me more than the traffic of the buses or the kids going to school, in the dark and cold and wet sidewalk.

The gloom of the night still lingered until eight and the rush hour moment. There's nothing to lend some colour to these insipid warehouse walls. Only the crows shatter the woeful routine and all the effort people expend towards one end, one outcome.

"Study well" I tell my boy when we part ways after the bus stop.

"I'll wait here until I see you cross the street". He nods and I stand in the traffic to look as he slowly walks away. A whole life ahead of him, uncertain of what awaits, alone with many questions in his mind.

How to explain the prose-poem of those cold morning walks to school? The sky, the snow, the dawn and the change happening at each stage. The Chinese call it "sekki", the 24 seasonal divisions, I learned later.

How will he remember and what will it make of him?

He turns around and tells me "Papa, give the woman some money" and nods towards the crouched woman at the door of the grocery, begging.

"I've already given her last week"

"Give her again" he says.

I will try to explain.

"You're not Christian" he tells me in an accusatory tone.

Turn the other cheek. Nietzsche didn't agree with this, I think to myself. His God was Dionysus, and he thought Christ made men weak. Perhaps he didn't know about the religious wars in Europe, the Conquistadors and the Inquisitions.

How to make Voskian notice a presence, the cold draft breeze, the crows falling from the trees like spilled ink in the orb of the light to squabble and bicker to satisfy their hunger, to notice their shining beaks and feathers, to take his mind off this oppressive culture of efficiency towards which he walks.

"I'm going to the other café, I'll pick you up at noon". He just nods, and I nod back as a sign of acknowledgement that we agreed and I walk towards Le Bergerac, owned by a

Cambodian family, for my coffee. It's still early. Later the horse race will start and the gamblers will sit in the lobby and give their attention to the screen on the wall.

I walk into the reality of the morning step by step. It takes three minutes to reach the bistro. The pavements are so hard, they send back reverberations off the ground as if it was frozen. It's 8.05 am.

Against the white dawning sky, festooned Xmas lights along the bay window of the Bergerac café, electric blue freckles wink in succession like snow floes slipping on the smudged glass pane.

The frequent visitors stand outside and with every pull at the stub a plume of exhaled smoke wafts in the draft of passing cars. The interior smells a little more polite since they have banned smoking. No stale beer on sawdust on the floor. In old bistros I knew on Saint André Des Arts in the Latin Quarter of Paris, it always smelled red wine soaked sawdust along the counter, especially when it rained. Janot the waiter didn't sweep out the floor when the bar closed and left it to fester all night, which gave the bar its peculiar identification.

These are the gamblers who assemble here every morning as soon as the bar opens at 7. They have no where else to go. There's another bar down the street, Le Barbu, but that one is for all night card games. The men here are anchored in reality, they understand the horses better than number combinations. They want to see the horses, the effort, the crowd shouting on the last furlong. I have been watching them and I blend in this anti-social mood perfectly. No one cares when I scribble some words, they think I'm a gambler too.

They sit in the lobby as pupils in a classroom. Some study the numbers and the pedigree of the horses in the papers, as they wait for the races to start. Some just stare blankly outside, for want of a better vista, to daydream. Some young African boys read the odds directly on their phone apps and by the same medium place their bets without physically going to the counter.

On a pillar separating the sala from the counter, the owner had installed a small knee high platform dedicated to his Asian deity, a small Buddha statue in front of incense sticks, a thimble full of alcohol with two saucers of fruits, apples and oranges, and two red paper lanterns, the size of cherries, as on a pagoda entrance. It forms a nook a world apart, detached from our deafening noise.

## Capsule Biography Number 44 - Demetrio Crespo Tamariz

Ben Guterson

Demetrio Crespo Tamariz, an astronomer at the Quito Astronomical Observatory in Ecuador, provides occasional midnight telescope viewings to the curious, though it's doubtful any of his insomniac guests recognize they are in the presence of a devotee of Pythagorean harmonics. Tamariz is renowned for his research on asteroseismology, a recondite corner of scientific endeavor that relies on determining the frequencies of sound waves as they travel through stars. This intersection of the technical and the resonant summarizes Tamariz's interests: as a professional scientist he is rigorous, as a casual if gifted pianist he is lyrical, and as an amateur metaphysician he is anachronistic, unwavering in his certainty that all celestial bodies produce a type of sound as they move.

Tamariz works within half an hour of his birthplace in Quito and near the *Mitad del Mundo* or "Middle of the World," with its imposing and recently constructed monument marking the midpoint of the globe. He recalls the first time his father, an embalmer at a Quito funeral home, explained to him the miraculous alignment of the heavens that allows for the twice-yearly phenomenon of a shadowless noon. "I felt a connection to the sky from my earliest years," Tamariz explained in a 1978 *Sky & Telescope* article. "I sometimes felt we lived on the roof of the world."

The Quito Observatory, where Tamariz has been employed since his graduation from the ancient Central University of Ecuador, was founded just over a hundred years ago and sits almost exactly along the equator. The building resembles a collection of lighthouses gathered into a storybook manor. The central observatory, in which resides a refracting telescope constructed in Munich in 1875, dominates, though Tamariz passes few hours within: his investigations depend only infrequently on direct observation. His contributions to journals reference "variable subdwarf B stars," "Cepheid variables," and "Kappa-mechanism." The fundamental conceit is that the compositions of stars can be determined through an analysis of their vibrations.

Tamariz began receiving piano lessons from Ines Jijon, one of Ecuador's most acclaimed pianists, in 1952 when he was five years old. He was a talented and devoted student and might have followed a career in music had he not been distracted, at age 11, by an inscription from Pythagoras Jijon displayed in her study: "There is geometry in the humming of the strings. There is music in the spacing of the spheres."

This notion—that celestial bodies create sound—arrested and then transfixed Tamariz, particularly after he encountered a passage in Aristotle's *On the Heavens* in which the philosopher posits we cannot perceive the music of the planets because we have been hearing it since birth and thus are unable to distinguish it from silence. The study of physics steadily overtook Tamariz's love of Chopin as he eventually settled on a career in astronomy.

Tamariz ascribes to a theory of "musica universalis" he derived from Johannes Kepler, itself an elaboration of Pythagoreanism: stars, planets, and moons move in a sort of proportionate harmony perceptible not to the ear but to something akin to the soul. While Tamariz, along with

Kepler, rejects the notion that celestial bodies in motion emit any actual noise detectible by the senses, he is persuaded that our consciousness is pervaded by ineffable “cosmic tones” of which we remain largely unaware and that are governed by nearly immeasurable variations in gravitational influence. This belief, which Tamariz concedes is an article of faith, was solidified by an exposure to Seidranism, the Theosophy-adjacent spiritualism popular in the first half of the century, during his university years.

“There is a compatibility between my personal convictions and the pursuit of science,” Tamariz has said. “They are not in conflict. In fact, they bolster and affirm each other.”

Tamariz’s wife, the daughter of a Jewish couple who arrived in 1939 on the German ship *Koenigstein* (Ecuador famously accepted the boat’s 165 emigrees after a handful of other South American countries refused them entry), erected a featureless wooden pillar—36-feet tall and roughly as thick as a flagpole—a decade ago in a field behind the home she and Tamariz share with their five children. The Tamarizes host an informal ceremony each March and September to mark the so-called Day Without a Shadow, welcoming as many as a dozen members of the Lisbon Circle (Tamariz has been a member of the group since 1974) to each celebration. The gatherings are private, though Tamariz has suggested that during those minutes when the pillar casts no shadow, he—and, presumably, others—experiences a subtle vibration not available to description in words.

*Sembla Intelligencer* – December 3, 1988

## Capsule Biography Number 8 – George Sherring

Ben Guterson

The most significant and ironic achievement of George Sherring's long career as a cognitive psychologist—and, most saliently, as a devotee of radical skepticism—was that he achieved anything at all.

The youngest son of Mellis Sherring, an Australian diplomat who served as high commissioner to Belgium and Nepal after World War I, Sherring studied economics as an undergraduate at the University of Adelaide beginning in 1935 before dropping out to pursue a career handicapping horse races. From his autobiography, *Judgment Suspended—A Life in the Balance*: “My method for determining winners was thus: I would speak aloud the names of the mounts in a given race, and a certain tremor—an inner vibration I find impossible to describe—would overtake me when I uttered the name of the eventual victor. Or so it seemed on a majority of occasions. I had a nice run of success, but the gift abandoned me after a few months.”

Upon returning to school, Sherring's chance encounter with *Incoherence of the Philosophers*, a work by the 11th-century Persian philosopher Al-Ghazali, altered the trajectory of his studies. “The notion that there might not be solid, rational proofs for metaphysical or even physical questions,” Sherring has said, “shook me to my core. That there is nothing more at play than emotion or habit when we make decisions was a proposition I found terrifying, and I have spent my life attempting to find a way out of that cul-de-sac. The effort has been arduous because I disavow free will, which is partly why I have been called an Averroist. I welcome the label.”

Sherring's research has been focused on “risk tolerance and ambiguity aversion.” Several of his more well-known experiments—including “Prepubescent Russian Roulette,” “Frayed Parachute,” and “Freezer-Locker Claustrophobia”—would be considered unethical today, a fact Sherring has conceded. He was a lecturer at the University of Adelaide before rising to full professor in 1948 and eventually taking over the directorship of the university's Research Center for Cognitive Neuroscience.

From spring of 1954 through autumn of 1955, Sherring was bed-ridden in what a physician later described as “a state of self-induced catatonia. The subject seemed to have reached a point of being incapable of making any decisions, even those most essential for self-preservation.”

For decades, accusations of polygamy have dogged Sherring, who married a one-time court stenographer he met while acting as an expert witness in the notorious case of the so-called “Willunga Embalmer.” Two of his wife's sisters lived with the couple for lengthy stretches, and it's said Sherring once informed a group of students that he'd been unable to decide which of the three he liked best after so many years together. Sherring later claimed his anecdote had been misinterpreted.

Sherring's mother, about whom he declines to speak, seems to have early influenced her son's nihilistic skepticism. "Our mother used to play a game with George that she felt was amusing but that, in hindsight, seems cruel," Sherring's sister explained in a 1966 article about the family in *The Advertiser*. "She would place one cookie on a plate to his left, and then another precisely the same distance off to his right and ask him to choose which cookie he wanted. My poor brother would break into tears over the whole thing, but he wouldn't move a muscle to take one of those cookies. He would appear paralyzed by sadness in those moments."

Sherring's 1963 book, *A Skeptic's Faith*, structured as a defense of the Pyrrhonist philosopher Agrippa's five modes, was initially ignored but became unexpectedly influential a decade later as an unconventional business management manual.

Though Sherring declines to identify the Lisbon Circle by name, a cautious accounting in his autobiography makes clear the group extended him membership sometime in the late-1960s. "I received a letter in which were detailed three puzzles. I was invited to solve them, with enrollment in a shadowy secret society the prize for a successful completion. It took me several weeks of vacillation to decide on the matter. I have sometimes thought I was being subjected to a test across many dimensions. Would I join the group? How would I proceed? And by what criteria would I make my decision? I sometimes felt I was playing a game for which I had not chosen my participation."

*Sembla Intelligencer*, March 27, 1988

## When You Pass Through Water

Robert Vivian

*When you pass through the water, I will be with you; and  
When you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you.  
Isaiah 43:2 NIV*

So there's another fish that eludes you whose scales shimmer somewhere in the depths where the sky manages to isobar down here and there in holy braids of trembling sunlight in dark moving water and you know the fish is there like you know your own breathing in the night and some days, some days you don't even want to catch him only feel his presence like a poem that's not yet been written but is still somewhere inscribed in the ventricles of your own beating heart and more deeply felt besides, your life in water made of water coming to rest in late middle age as you probe with a full sinking line run after run in full tactile awareness and reverence at the healing sound of cold rushing water and a back eddy or two that never fails to tug at you like the memory of loved ones long dead and gone into the ground but also present in the most intimate and miraculous way and not "Why didn't I spend more time with them?"—but just how they are guiding you even now with utmost tenderness tipping over into stunned and gobsmacked wonder.

And when you pass through water, when you feel it carrying you your entire spendthrift life.

And how many summers ago would you wake up each day around 4:00 a.m. to drive up north to the South Branch of the Au Sable an hour and a half away to fish a wet skunk pounding every ripple and seam as if you were the first one on the river at the beginning of the world and it was and must have been each blessed time before sunrise, wading and fishing as if your life depended on it and it still does though there's no way to explain it or put it into any kind of reasonable framework let alone glove compartment, for it's a bona fide and radiant fact that you can't get enough natural beauty as it overflows all your sensoria in ways that restore your whole existence to a clumsy and foolish grace but it's grace after all and you'll take it every time and you know what runoff is because here you go again, to quote White Snake from the 80s—and how foam is home and all the other fishing cliches and how you will remember to the day you die how you caught a fat healthy brook trout around the first bend near Smith Bridge as it leapt into the air just as dawn was slipping over the eastern ridge and everything shrouded in mist coming off the water, and why this particular brookie you'll never know for it was no bigger than a hot dog, but maybe it was the wide open morning in early June and that same mist rising off the river and how all the woods on both sides of it seemed to be leaning in and listening as if they were gathering some kind of mystical information and hope even as they were slowly filling up with a soft glowing light and the imminent arrival of every raiment under heaven, one morning somehow set aside from all the blessed others for you to contemplate in your own way that tips over into sacred not-knowing.

So when you pass through water, you'll know the holiness is not something you can talk about, let alone explain, though it teeters over into a kind of Keith Jarrett groaning at the

keyboard.

Or the time fishing this same stretch in February you saw two bobcats on the upper right bank and how frisky and eager they looked and utterly suited to their frigid environment and every single snow flake, and how you said out loud to no one because no one was there, “I want to move like that through the woods”—and then you remember one afternoon when you were a boy running all day through Fontenelle Forest in Omaha and how the light was stippling through the trees and how to this day you’re convinced you ran for hours and never once got tired, which has to be inaccurate though the true thrumming feel of it will stay with you forever. And you remember how your mother said to someone, “This is my wild son whom no one and nothing can tame”—which weren’t even close to her actual words only the full tilting brunt of them you inferred in your own racing blood that have finally been harvested after all these years later as you close in on 60, wheels and spangles of green-filling light as you came to realize once and for always the meaning of shimmer and swaying and every manner of swooning, one of Milosz’s sacramental moments writ forever in the eternal book of awe, a hundred, a thousand flowing streams somehow coming together in the impossibly wild book of moving water whose pages turn and tumble like a blizzard of water.

And when you pass through water, when it holds you even as you are about to get carried away.

But the big fish is there, no question, 27” or more, as remote and elusive as a unicorn or some other mythical creature yet to be identified or named: you feel him down there in the water column even as you hear your own breathing after a puff from your inhaler. Your need for contact with wild things is growing quietly but exponentially, or maybe it’s just being laid bare fully for the first time and you’re not about to apologize over it and there’s not even a speck of pride or guilt or any form of logic. You agree utterly with Gaston Bachelard’s notion that “the germ of every poem is an excess of childhood”—for you still remember Cousin Ellen’s cabin in Oscoda as you stared for hours when you were eight years old knee-deep near the mouth of the Au Sable into the minnow cages just off her dock in water clear as gin, the tiny fish shining and darting back and forth in bright little flashes that threw open the windows of wonder in your soul from that day forward, vowing then without even knowing it that you would marry and consecrate your life after to moving water, though it would take half a century to realize it.

And when you pass through water, when your whole life becomes a tear drop or a rain drop or a tiny trembling brook trout in your wet hand, when the water heals and protects you even as it threatens your very life for the power and majesty of its very sweeping cadence that is a chant that never seems to stop.

“A moment was the most you could ever expect from perfection,” as Chuck Palahniuk writes in *Fight Club*, even if the big fish will never be caught by anyone, including yourself. He’s down there sure enough with his gnarled kype like a beat-up heavyweight and you believe it all the way down to your gonads. One day maybe he’ll flash after a streamer and you’ll set too soon, like that cold, rainy day up in Mio years ago on that float with Donnie when you were freezing and miserable but as fully alive as any human being has a right to be. You blew the set and knew it the second you missed that fish, a good guess-timate of 26” or more, maybe even bigger.

When you pass through water you'll know what I mean—you'll know it in your lungs and in the balls of your feet, your shoulders especially and your cramping left hamstring and the chill so deep it almost feels righteous somehow, a form of perfect justice. You did everything right up to that final moment, but that fish was gone in a heartbeat, the flash of that giant brown every last color of sundown or the vibrant afterglow of a thunderstorm fading in the distance with occasional bolts of lightning lighting up Emily's sheets of place, his sheer bursting power like an all-pro running back hitting a hole, but how at that earlier time of your fishing life you just couldn't wait to set the hook so you pulled it out of his mouth before he took it and turned like a semi or Cadillac turning a corner and not a Ford escort or Subaru. In England anglers say, "God save the Queen" at least twice before they set on a big fish, but like everything else in your life, you have to learn the hard way with an aching heart soon to follow that always seems to come in moments of loss and failure, which is the most familiar pattern you know burned into the muscle memory of your body. You did everything right up to that crucial moment, but that doesn't mean squat: you blew it and you knew it, just as you know it now with an aftermath of burning yearning that's like a hollowed-out cave falling apart in your chest and all the glowing embers.

And when you're passing through water or maybe it's moving somehow some way inside of you, so many rippling tendons of current moving all around like the slow, certain breathing of Mother Earth herself.

You know with blind instinct way reason or voodoo or any shred of concrete evidence that the big fish is down there, and you *feel him* down just as know when a poem is about to end and complete itself in imperfect abandon, like the grains of an hour glass trickling away and you gotta be there to witness it, to help it get born on the page, which is a secret agony you keep mostly to yourself, though you sometimes blurt it out nonsensically to your beautiful Tina after a long day of teaching and a drink or two. That huge brown is down there wherever there happens to be, which is always a river up north at least an hour's drive or day dream away, and it's one of the greatest private obsessions of your life, and you spend certain moments of almost every day scheming and planning on how you'll at least get near him with that sinking line snaking through the guides of your 11'6" Dually switchrod after a roll cast, which is just an extension of this same ineffable yearning that has been buoyed by so much moving water until the day you die or you can't do it anymore, which is a grim possibility you have to contemplate because it's the truth after all and you will have to pass through it one of these days.

But not today; today on a cool rainy day in early April, you can feel him even now finning down there in the dark curling depths, holding until hunger makes him reckless enough to move on something flashy and fishy, something he mistakes for a baitfish or sculpin or overgrown minnow. And you know with a magnetic certain that in a few hours or so after paying some bills and meeting with students that you'll drive up there to try again to lure him out of his hold no matter the outcome, and no matter what it takes in your thirsty life just to pass through some more sacred moving water one more time.

## Abdul

### Samina Hadi-Tabassum

The old wooden desk next to my father's king-size bed had six main drawers. The top left drawer had two boxes of white envelopes, a complete sleeve of stamps with the flowers of the month, three working staplers, one roll of scotch tape still in the box, and a written list of all our birthdays, anniversaries, dates and addresses on a lengthy piece of card stock from his favorite stationary store. The middle-left drawer was full of old eyeglasses still in their leathery pouches. His photo IDs from the Cook County office were still in their plastic lanyards (he's not smiling in any of them) in this same drawer as well as the tarnished Metra train passes and maps from when we lived in the suburbs decades ago. The bottom left drawer had two alarm clocks that I recognized from our childhood home (I can't believe he kept them for so long) that had AM and FM dials (one alarm still in the box and the other open with the electrical cord bound tight), and a small pocket hair dryer that I remember using when we went on our road trips to visit my mom's cousins in Canada. The top right-hand drawer had all the keepsakes that I fought over with my younger sister: the triangular 3D ruler when he drew lines on the crinkly blueprints, the yellow marking pencils where you slowly pulled the string to unravel its flesh toned spirals, the mound of metal compasses that swung open like ballerinas, and the sharp drafting pencils that I snuck from his briefcase as a child and used them at night to poke at my younger sister in the twin bed we shared.

The middle right drawer was stuffed with pamphlets and brochures for his newly acquired retired life: information for the free public bus for senior citizens that he took everywhere in his first months of retirement and meals served for free at the village hall every single day minus Christmas and New Years. There was also paraphernalia on the many different nursing homes within a twenty-mile radius he was looking into in case he could no longer stay in his apartment on the first floor of our building. Lists of nurses who came to your home, physical therapists and even nutritionists who cooked meals for you, most likely bland nutritious American food and not the spicy Indian food he loved—were all there. A large post stuck to the drawer reminding him to call his wife every morning between 10 am to noon. The bottom right drawer was the one that should not have surprised me with its lists of places and numbers where he can get Viagra and a mountain of rainbow-colored condoms that he picked up over the decades of surreptitiously going to the pride parades by himself. One summer, my younger brother saw him at the parade, glaring from the corner sidewalk with arms crossed, and soon left before they could see each other and did not have to talk about why they were each there. On top of the desk, there were bottles and bottles of medication---diabetes, heart disease, blood pressure, kidney failure, gout, ulcers, an inhaler, and added doses of Vitamin D—all stacked in neat rows.

Immediately, I started to sort out what to keep and what to throw away. I made sure my younger sister came down and saw the “keep pile” before we gave the entire desk away to our local charity shop, along with the king-size bed and leather recliners. The closet was the next big task, and I wanted to sort out the clothes by the end of the week and empty out the bedroom, where my father’s unctuous odor still lingered for months. I opened the windows when I worked in his apartment over the next few weeks and made sure to lock them before leaving since it was on the first floor of the building we shared as a family: my father on the first floor; my mother and sister on the second floor; and my family of five on the third floor. We no longer used the security alarm since my father’s memory started to deteriorate within the last two years, and he couldn’t remember the numerical code when he came home from work. Yet, there were other things he could remember like the numbers of the files stored in the Cook County highway department office where he worked for over forty years. During COVID, his boss sent out an email asking for specific file names and where information was stored, and it was my octogenarian father who could rattle off the exact numbers of the files and where they were kept in the office and in which filing cabinet.

In one of the middle desk drawers, I also found sheets of paper stapled together in which my father wrote down the exact date, time and words from the voicemails that his boss sent him during the pandemic. He then marked off each item completed in bright red ink and sent the list back to his boss in the mail, a behavior he most likely learned as a child in India and its British colonial school system. In the closet, the sentinel display of pin striped suits from the Marshall Field department store marked my father as an immigrant who came to this country in the 1970s when a suit became sartorial armor against xenophobia and racism. The dark suits were neatly ironed and pressed and looked like lifeless bodies hanging in midair from hangers. My father stopped wearing them in the last decade as the whole country adopted casual wear and so did my father. The steel rack of brightly colored ties shimmered in the corner and my eyes stood over the ones I gave him for his birthday. The hamper had a mound of recently washed khaki pants and T-shirts and white undershirts. It was only recently that he started doing his own laundry since my mother took care of it when he was working, and she was at home for most of her adult life, cooking and cleaning even though none of us stayed long enough at home after college. My mother had worked in a perfume factory during the night shift when I was in middle school, and I remember constantly doing rounds of laundry for the whole family after school instead of hanging out in the graffitied park and smoking cigarettes like everyone else from our housing complex. My older brother escaped all chores by riding his dirt bike around the neighborhood for hours on end and only came home after my father returned exhausted from work.

I found a ball of tightly bound clothes in a dark corner of my father’s bedroom closet. They were just sitting there and not in any bag. When I opened the ball, I could smell the strong stench of dried urine in the two pairs of polyester pants and underwear. My father must have had an accident at night and decided to bury his dirty clothes instead of washing them right away in the basement washing machine. I imagined him getting up and changing his clothes in the dark, not calling anyone for help and not mentioning it to any of us, who slept above him in

our own apartments with our own children. Maybe if he had called on us in the middle of the night, we would have been better off as a family (or maybe it was time). Maybe he would not have fallen so many times and gotten sick from COVID and sepsis on that January morning when I called the paramedics to help lift him off the floor. Maybe he would still be sleeping in his king-size bed now, wrapped in a bright blue comforter covered in large flowers like an O'Keefe painting. The alarm would be ringing on his desk, and he would reach for his cane at bedside before getting up to shut it off. The digital thermometer that I bought for the holidays would tell him how cold of a morning it was in Chicago. The calendar on the wall would tell him what day it was but there was nothing marked on the small squares since he was retired now and there was nothing for him to do besides laundry. He would call his wife at 10 am and then wait outside for the Pace bus to take him to the senior citizen center in village hall where he would have a bland American lunch and compare the status of his metallic walker with the other old men.

There must be a mathematical formula for death, when it starts and how it ends, with equal signs, plus and minus, small case letters and at least one infinity symbol. Some call it the final count down, a ticking time bomb, a downward motion toward eternal rest. For my eighty-five-year-old father, it started on January 13<sup>th</sup>, a Monday, when I got a phone call from my mother about how he had fallen twice that morning and now she could not lift him up onto the bed. I had just dropped the kids to school and was in the public library checking out books since I left my college dean post and was taking time off to think about what I wanted to do next in life. I quickly drove back home where the back door to the apartment building was wide open. When I walked into his apartment, which smelled unusually pungent even though it was frigid outside, there was my stout mother in her slippers, wearing a face mask and winter coat. She was trying to lift my father up off the floor and was pulling his arms and screaming commands in Urdu. My father, coiled in a fetal position, kept saying that he just wanted to sleep on the bed, heaving and breathless, wanting to cover himself in his big flowery comforter. I looked down at my father lying in a pool of piss on the floor, his pants down to his knees, the leather belt slithering out. His backside looked like a small animal, writhing and panting.

"You lift him on that side, and I will pull him up on this end," I commanded my mother.

"Let me clean the piss off first. Don't step in it," howled my mother.

"I won't step in it. Let's just get him on the bed first and then we can clean up."

We huffed and puffed but could not lift him up after trying different angles and pivots while avoiding the pool of piss. His rotund belly was a ballast that anchored him to the floor, and I joked to my mother that I wanted to pull him by the woolly hairline that started at his paunch and wound its way up to his dark nipples. She was not laughing. We eventually called the paramedics who came right away to the open back door, but my father did not want to go to the hospital. We cajoled him. We shamed and reprimanded him. We threatened him. But my father only cried like an infant and wanted the two young men to thrust him back to the

king-size bed. “We cannot take him if he does not want to go,” said Matt with his iPad in hand, waiting for my father to scribble his initials into the machine. I crawled down to the floor and begged my father:

“Babajian Babajian...you have to go, or you will die.”

My father took pity on me sitting in his urine and signed the digital documents after many more attempts.

In the next two weeks, my father recovered from his COVID and sepsis infections in the hospital and was moved to a rehabilitation center in the city so he could learn to walk again. When I went to see him at St. Joe’s, his hair had become white and shaggy, his eyes emaciated, his skin gray and ashen and his fingernails looked like cracked walnuts. He pointed his scaly finger at me and screamed, “You did this to me! You sent me to the hospital! You bitch (he said this in Hindi and used the word “kuthi” which is an ancient cognate to “canine”)!” The social worker walked me out of the room with a gentle hand on my shoulder, since I was shaking and crying, but she assured me that my father is under stress and does not know what he is saying—he’s delirious, she bolstered. Soon my father was back in the hospital again after a week at St. Joe’s and now needed a catheter to urinate and was dependent on nurses to empty his bedpans. Under duress, I spent my mornings on the phone calling urologists across Chicagoland for emergency appointments, and knew his birth date, social security number, and mother’s maiden name by memory. “It’s “Mohammad” with an /a/,” I kept saying over and over on the phone, “June 7th, 1939, Hyderabad, India, Razia Beghum.”

I dragged my father to four doctors who had four different opinions, all deduced within minutes of meeting my father in his wheelchair and hearing my plot-driven back story. One said it was his enlarged prostate, and it needed to be snipped and then he would pee again normally and be back home. Another said that his bladder has given up due to old age and my father’s meds no longer worked effectively so we needed new medication. The third one said we needed to take him home and stick a rod up his penis three times a day to release his urine, carefully and slowly and only after washing our hands. Both my sister and I, startled at that quotidian task as Muslim women, shook our heads and muttered “tauba tauba.” My sister had a visceral reaction as the contentious male doctor kept citing efficacious results from self-catheterization. She got up from her chair and pulled the drape between her and the doctor. She balked at this onerous task and looked like she was going to kill the doctor right then and there (I thought that I could probably do this rodding twice a day since I was premed at one point in college and she was an attorney, and I had already seen my father’s penis by now). We were dead set against this doctor and left his office without making a future appointment. That night at home, in the privacy of our back bedroom, I watched tutorial videos on this self-catherization method and heard nurses repeat that the catheter should not be used for pleasure. The final doctor, an old convivial Italian man, took no more than five minutes to recommend the suprapubic cystostomy method, which required a two hour out-patient procedure in which a plastic bag would be permanently attached to my father’s bladder and no rodding of my father’s flaccid

penis was needed. I kept saying “suprapubic” over and over in my mind, imagining myself as Mary Poppins coming down from the sky into the doctor’s office singing “Suprapubiccalifragilisticexpialidocious.”

In two weeks’ time, my father was preparing for his procedure but kept calling me every afternoon from the rehabilitation center:

“Daughter, I think I am dying. Please help me. I want to talk to my wife.”

“You will be alright Babajian. God willing. Just stay strong until March 7<sup>th</sup> for the operation and then you can come back home. The doctor is wonderful. We’re going to help you walk again.” Then I passed the phone over to my mother who exhorted him to take his meds on time and listen to the nurses.

To get approved for the suprapubic catheter, I had to take my father to see Dr. Ryan at the main city hospital who was going to check his vitals. When I went to St. Joe’s for his pickup, he was not in his room. I found him in the dining hall at a corner table with his comatose comrades, just staring out in front of him, sullen and quiet. When he saw me, he did not smile and seemed lost in his thoughts. Inside the MediCab, he started to vomit, and we pulled over to a gas station to get a plastic bag. I held the bag the whole way to the hospital since his hands were enshrouded in hospital blankets. The Black couple who owned the MediCab, and knew us well after multiple doctor visits, capitulated to my father’s ways and made sure the cab was warm enough for him since he lost so much weight in the last few weeks. They gave us their blessings each time they dropped us off to doctor and hospital visits.

Today, we were early and had to wait for almost forty-five minutes before Dr. Ryan saw us in the back room. My intransigent father was irritated and kept screaming “when are we going to be called” to which I retorted whether he had any other appointments that day (my snarky rebuttals grew exponentially in this waiting room as I stood behind his wheelchair). Dr. Ryan had a male assistant who took us to the back and checked my father’s blood pressure. “Huh” the young man said and kept repeating this pithy response as he tried one machine after another and let me know that my father’s blood pressure was erratic. The assistant and I moved my father from the wheelchair and onto the reclining hospital bed for a better reading. I noticed now for the first time that my father’s belly had enlarged somehow in the last few hours and seemed distorted like an egg left in a jar of vinegar. When I asked Dr. Ryan about it, he could not surmise why my father’s belly protruded since he had just met him but was worried when he saw the blood pressure numbers come back as sixty over zero.

“I think we need to get your father to the ER. We need to make sure his blood pressure is stable before we can release him. I will call the paramedics,” said Dr. Ryan.

“Are you sure? He is scheduled for the suprapubic operation this Friday. We need to get him there so he can get his life back.”

"I'm sorry," said Dr. Ryan and went onto the next patient.

Just as he left the room, I turned around and saw my father rise from the bed with his arms outstretched before him, gasping for air, his eyes bulging like a bovine. I pressed the red emergency button and screamed for help. Dr. Ryan, a big Irish man who looked like a rugby player, grabbed my father and pulled him back before he fell. His assistant held onto my father as we waited for the paramedics. I washed my father's face gently with a wet paper towel and scrubbed the vomit off his t-shirt. When the paramedics came, I asked him in Urdu whether he was ready to go: "Babajian Babajian...jaana hai humko" to which the all-male paramedics replied whether my father spoke English.

"Of course he does. Do you see that tall building outside the window? The Sears Tower. He built it with many more men from India in 1970. He was an engineer for Skidmore, Owings & Merrill. Fazlur Khan was the head engineer and a friend of my father's...it's just that when we get old, we revert to our childhood language," I answered in my obnoxious professorial voice.

The paramedics had stopped listening to me and were not happy at all. I followed them to the elevator to make sure my father was sitting upright in the wheelchair. Then I went down to get a cup of coffee and a bagel before heading to the ER (I did feel guilty about sitting down and drinking my coffee and checking my email even though I was unemployed and did not need to respond to any email). When I showed up to the ER, my father was in a room near the hub where nurses and doctors were roaming around in a frenzy like ants on a hill. My father had a young male nurse who started his IV and attended to his catheter. "I'm in so much pain," my father bleated out. I asked if his morphine can be added to the IV drip while my father continued to howl in agony. We were in the ER for over eight hours that night. By the time the IV set in and the morphine eased my father's pain, the next round was multiple x-rays to see where the pain was located and eventually a young female doctor came in and stated that my father's intestines were blocked and bile was coming up into his stomach, which was why his body looked so bloated and why he was vomiting.

The nurses at the rehabilitation home also noticed this change in my father and were happy that I was taking him to the hospital that day. The young ER doctor who was managing so many patients spoke in quick sentences: my father needed a NG tube first inserted into his mouth and then into his stomach to pump out the bile. Of course, this would be a painful process, and I knew my father would protest. It took an hour for the nurse and doctor to push the pipe into my father; however, they had to bind his arms to the metal braces on the side of the bed with a white rope. He tried to pull the tube out multiple times, and in doing so, lashed out on the doctor and nurse on both sides of the bed. Within an hour's time, I could see the dark green bile moving through the NG tube and into the plastic container on the wall with its calibrated lines. My father was still moaning but now the sound had lessened in octave as the tube continued to fill up, as if guided supernaturally by algebraic principles. Less moaning equals an increase in bile removal.

Close to midnight, the male nurse came back in and asked my father how bad his pain was based on the numerical scale. To my relief, he answered one and now I could see how his bloated body had gone back down to a normal shape. My father looked over at me peering above the tubes in his mouth and mumbled that I should go back home and so I did. The parking lot was still active, and families were moving across the tunnel to see their loved ones, some having to go back to their cars to get their approved identification to enter the hospital. The next morning, I called the emergency room and was surprised that there was still no empty bed for my father at 10 o'clock in the morning. He was still anchored somewhere in the dim-lit hallways in the first-floor ER and most likely not getting the attention that he needed and often demanded. By the afternoon, I drove over to the hospital, and upon arrival, my father had a room to himself on the seventh floor with an angular view of the city. The sofa chair looked new and there was a TV mounted to the wall. A phalanx of hospital workers was coming in almost every fifteen minutes, which must be why the door was left open and conversations from across the hall drifted into my father's corner room. There was the main nurse who came in to check vitals and made sure his heart monitors showed that the undulating blue and red lines were in the right wavelength. Then there was the night nurse who came in to change his urine bag and took a sample to see if the infection was gone. The radiologist brought in their machine to scan his lower body and checked to see if his bowels were back in motion.

By the end of the evening, there was a speech pathologist who came in and removed my father's NG tube and started to get him to eat solids like apple sauce and soft ice cream. She was a beautiful blonde woman with a soft bob, and I could see my father perk up when she came into the room with her saccharine voice and gentle manners. Of course, he demanded that he wear his dentures when eating the tiny spoonful of food. At that moment, we realized that the dentures never made their way from the ER room to his new home on the seventh floor. The dentures were in a clear blue plastic case with my father's name written in black ink. After finding his dentures at the nurse's station in the ER, I took the elevator back up but now could not make my way to the hospital floors because I had left my purse in my father's room and did not have an ID with me. The security guard had to call my father's room and after a few rings, the new nurse on rotation picked up the cord phone and eventually came down to escort me back to my father's room. The nurse did not say anything and looked annoyed that I threw her rotation off schedule. Now my father was asleep with his NG tube back in and the dentures stayed on the windowsill for the rest of week. Yet my father's condition was not getting better, and he was there for an entire week. Each night, my sister, mother and I talked about the possibility of hospice care and how long we would keep him intubated. There were two main doctors who kept me informed along the way and updated me on how my father was diagnosed with an ileus, a temporary lack of movement in his bowels. By day three, my father was moaning in pain, and I recorded short cryptic videos and sent them to my siblings. The bile was still being pumped out of his body, and we were all waiting to see if my father would heal from the ileus. If he does not heal, then there is a likelihood of Necrosis, when the lack of blood to the intestines then causes a weakening of the walls and eventually a tear in the intestinal walls. This reverse passage of bowel contents into his stomach then would create the

chance of further abdominal infections.

Each day I came and sat on the sofa chair watching my father breathe through his NG tube, the rise and fall of his body getting smaller and smaller in scale. The rounds of nurses brought in new information and numbers were erased and re-written on the small dry erase board. I knew he could sense my presence and by the end of the week called out my name. On Thursday, I brought my mother with me so he could hear her voice, and she conveyed to him in Urdu to stay put and heal. We had finally scheduled a surgery for the following Friday, March 7th, at the same hospital. He would be getting his new bladder catheter, and he no longer would use a Foley catheter that went up his penis and across his enlarged prostate. He could recover within a week and be able to navigate his way to the bathroom to empty the balloon attached to the bladder. Of course, I would be at home helping my father navigate this recovery process. On the last day of his hospital stay, my sister and husband also came to see my father, along with my mother. My sister and I argued in front of my father, who was visibly upset and had us stop yelling at each other about who would take on the major responsibility in his recovery. At this point, I was tired, and I just wanted to go back to work. I walked away from the argument and left my sister there in the room with her husband and my mother. As I was leaving, I smirked as my father was yelling for the nurse since he was having his first major bowel movement in days—happy that he was recovering and also joyful that my sister was there to smell it.

On Saturday morning, my father was released and returned to the rehabilitation home. The ambulance from the hospital transported him over. Even though I had written the nurse a note several times to make sure his dentures get transported as well, they forgot and so when I went to see my father at the rehabilitation home, he reminded me about the dentures, and I went back to the hospital to retrieve them. When I returned with the dentures in the afternoon, my father had fallen asleep in his room. It was that deep sleep in which his eyes were shut tightly, his fists clenched to his sides, mouth wide open and the body slowly rising and falling. By early evening, my father called and said he was not feeling well and wanted to talk to my mother who lived in the apartment below. The night nurse must have only my number and called me. Since it was dinner time, I reassured him that we would visit him Sunday morning with the whole family at his bedside. He just needed to sit tight until the following Friday when we had scheduled his surgery. In that phone call, I could tell that he was not himself and was slurring his words. It took him a long time to get his words out and there was heavy pain in his sighs. Even before I picked up the phone, my father had left a voicemail message that I kept: “I need to talk to my wife. Please.”

On the very next day, Sunday, we woke up early and were preparing to leave to see my father. Within a half hour before departure, we received a phone call from the rehabilitation home. The nurse on call stated that my father’s blood pressure had dropped again, and he seemed to be delirious. She had requested that the ambulance take my father to the local hospital where he had been receiving treatment throughout this whole time. I drove quickly over to our local hospital, hoping to see him in triage. I sat patiently in the waiting room and kept asking the

receptionist whether my father had been processed yet. The security guard even went to the ER rooms and asked if a Mohammad Hadi had been admitted. When an hour had passed, I called the rehabilitation home and asked where he was, and the nurse also panicked that we could not find my father. She made sure to tell the paramedics to take my father to the local hospital; however, now we were in a quandary looking for my father. She then told me to call the local fire department which services the paramedics while she called around the local hospitals. When I called the fire department, they told me that my father had been taken to a much larger hospital because he was not breathing properly and needed to be on an oxygen machine. I quickly hung up and called that larger hospital and asked whether a patient named Mohammad Hadi had been admitted within the last few hours. They said that there was no record of that patient in either the ER or the main hospital. In a panic, I called the rehabilitation home back again and now the same nurse let me know that the ambulance had indeed taken my father to the larger hospital. She suggested that I drive over there immediately, even though he was not registered in the system.

At the front desk of the larger hospital, the attendants could not find my father's name in the system; however, they did say that a patient had come in from an ambulance from our suburb who was given the identity of a "John Doe" with a series of numbers. My father was not breathing, and they needed to intubate him immediately without processing his identity. When I went up to the ICU, my father's team of doctors were looking for his next of kin when I walked in. The young male doctor asked me immediately whether we wanted my father intubated and I said yes. I then gave a lengthy explanation of my father's past medical history and stated that we were looking at end of life circumstances here. Of course, I also mentioned that my brother had been an ER doctor at this very same hospital for over 20 years before he moved to California where my nieces were attending college. My father was now comatose, and I could not speak with him at all. He had a breathing machine attached to him and his eyes were shut tight. However, I could see his hands twitching so I went over and held his left hand. I talked to him about how we all care about him and how he will be alright and come home soon. That evening my mother and sister arrived when the ICU was dark and there was just a half hour left for family visits. My mother started crying when she saw my father connected to so many tubes. She started praying immediately and said her duas for my father's health. My sister was also teary-eyed and held his right hand while I held his left hand. We knew that he could hear us, so we kept sending positive words and energy his way.

The next day I came back to the ICU. This time before entering the nurses had asked me to wear a gown, rubber gloves and a N-95 mask. They never told me why until I came out hours later. My father was in the same position as last night and did not seem to have moved even though it was almost a day later. The pipes were still there and traveling in the same direction. The nurse asked me to look at the monitor and showed me how my father was starting to breathe on his own and that we would need to decide whether the oxygen machine stays on by the next day. I ended up sitting there for hours on end, watching my father breathe from a

machine. When I left the room to go home, I threw out the gown, gloves and mask in the garbage can outside. The nurse at the desk informed me that the precautions were in place because my father was diagnosed with COVID and double pneumonia. I stood in front of her with a flat face. This was the first time that I heard why my father ended up in the ICU on that Sunday morning. My father's steady decline in January started with a COVID diagnosis and now it is ending with a COVID diagnosis in March. We had never known anyone in the family who had contracted pneumonia and now my father had it in both lungs. His immune system was depleting, and he must have caught these diseases on his way to the rehabilitation home from the city hospital.

As I was about to leave, a social worker came up to me and introduced himself. Then he asked a lot of intrusive questions like my role in the family, my father's health and decline, and my current state of unemployment. I told him that I needed to go pick up my teenagers from high school and he made a sleight of hand comment that they can come home by themselves. In my rush to leave the hospital, I did not pick up on the underlying meaning of his words. He asked me to call him toward the end of the day to go over the next day's treatment.

"So how are you feeling about your father staying on the oxygen machine and the tubes?"

"Do you mean whether he should stay intubated?"

"Yes, we need to make sure he keeps breathing."

"Well...today the doctor said that my father was breathing on his own for about 60% of the time and that we can choose to remove the tubes."

"But don't you want to keep your father living longer with the tubes? You now have the time to stay with your father in the ICU."

"Actually, I don't think you know my father. He would not have wanted this. He would not have wanted me to sit next to him in the ICU with the possibility of me getting sick and then my kids getting sick when I come home."

"Have you had this discussion with your family?"

"Yes, we talked about the end of life and how we want to take the tubes out tomorrow."

"Really? I just talked to your sister, and she says they want to keep the tubes in until Friday."

"What? You talked to them? When? I get it...you talked to them right before me. I get it. You believe in the right to life, but we also believe in the right to die. In our religion, we believe that God takes us when he wants and that to live a life of pain is not much of a life. My sister probably forgot to tell you that I am the only one in the family taking care of my father. They are

armchair children who only talk about my father's life and death situation from afar. My brothers haven't even come to see him in the ICU." I cried after hanging up on him.

We waited until Friday and took the tubes out at a little after 9 o'clock in the morning. I had dropped off the kids at school and drove right over to the hospital. I called my mother on the phone when the doctor and nurses made their way into his room. I wanted to make sure she could hear my father's breathing over the phone. His eyes were wide open now and he was slowly coming to life and making sense of his surroundings. One of the attendees was a young Muslim Indian man who I spoke with the previous day in Urdu and shared our family history and story. The attendee came out and told me that he asked my father his name and my father responded correctly: Mohammad Abdul Hadi. I smiled back at him and then turned quickly to my father on the other side of the glass. His mouth was open, and eyes glued to the TV monitor which displayed tranquil images of nature: snow-capped mountains, woodsy green trails and sandy beaches. I stared at my father who was staring at the screen as if he was a child who was mesmerized by magic. When fractal images took over in the second half, I could see my father's eyes enlarging with quiet excitement as the screen swirled with psychedelic shapes changing and morphing. My father stared at the TV monitor for over an hour without much movement. He was still breathing on his own, slowly his chest rose up and down. By mid-afternoon, I returned home and passed the social worker in the hallway on the way down. I did not say anything and looked away, ashamed of our decision to remove the tubes. Yet, there was no guilt at that moment, and I returned home to cook dinner, help with homework, and share my observations with my mother on my father's health.

After washing the dishes and sweeping the floors, I received a phone call from the hospital. This time it was a female Indian doctor with the last name Patel.

"Is this Samina"

"Yes, this is here."

"Hi Samina. This is Dr. Patel. I am taking care of your father tonight in the ICU. Did you have an earlier conversation with my colleague, Dr. Shriver, about your father's intubation and the removal of his tubes?"

"Yes, we decided to remove my father's tubes since he was breathing on his own."

"Okay, I am calling you now because your father is dying. His heart just cannot keep up with the inflections."

Crying uncontrollably, I keep saying "Yes doctor" over and over again. I imagined my father staring at the white medicinal ceiling knowing that his time has come. I wished that his heart went quickly so he could finally rest. I also regretted not being there for his last breaths and how lonely it must be to die alone in a hospital bed with strangers around you.

“Somebody from the hospital will call soon with the next steps.”

“We are all here. My family. I will be on the phone all night.”

I hung up on the doctors and imagined the night nurses coming in next for the last rites. I let my husband know first and he came over to comfort me, followed by my two teenagers, wrapping their arms around me in the dark bedroom. My husband then called my mother and sister who later called my brothers. My husband lets them know that I am still crying uncontrollably and will come downstairs in a little while, reminding me that my family needs me now. By the time I go downstairs to my mother’s apartment, we are all on my sister’s speaker phone and start to share stories of my father as my phone keeps ringing from the hospital. At 1 o’clock in the morning, the nurse asks if we want to come see his body before it goes to the morgue in the bowels of the hospital. We respond in unison with a strong “no”, nodding our heads, and continue to recite our prayers: "Inna li-llahi wa Inna ilayhi Raaji'un" (We belong to Allah, and to Allah do we return).

The next few weeks are a blur as we work with the Muslim Funeral Service to arrange for my father’s body to move from the hospital, inside a hearse, and then to the Bosnian Mosque where his body will be washed for the ghusl ceremony by men who have volunteered to rinse his body three times. It is a symbolic act of washing my father’s sins away from the right side to the left before he makes the passage to Jannath. The final act will be to shroud my father in white linen before moving his body to the masjid for Friday prayers. The imam reminds us how lucky my father was to have died during the holy month of Ramadan and to be buried on Holy Friday during Jumma prayers when hundreds will gather to pray for the dead. That Friday it was raining with a slow drizzle and an overcast gray sky. In the final stop, we waited at the Muslim section of the Clarendon Cemetery for the hearse to arrive after the imam said the final prayers in the back room of the masjid. The grounds keepers have already dug his grave which we bought from the masjid, along with a site for my mother. Families from the masjid follow the hearse and young Muslim men carry my father's wooden coffin, which does not have a bottom because Muslims believe that our bodies need to return back to the earth. We stand alongside the grave as the final prayers are said, and the coffin has been lowered down six feet under. By the time the headstone is ordered and placed, we have decided on the final dedication without any sibling rivalry and dissent, my mother’s wish before the burial.

**“Varanasi”**

*For Gita*

You said it's our Jerusalem or Mecca.  
Your voice blotted by mango ice-cream  
And Baltimore hubbub, light denuded by  
A swinging glass door: a rapture of colors.

Pilgrimages follow the winding Ganges.  
Maa Ganga the goddess whose blessing  
Rears fertile alluvial soil of the floodplains,  
Receives her worship in prayer and *snan*,  
Ritual bathing with *diyas* of burning ghee,  
Offerings of jasmine, roses, and sandalwood,  
With baskets of golden bangles and fruits.  
Priests begin the *Aarti* blowing conch-shells.  
Mantras temper rhythms of mind and body.  
Vedic devotional fires cleanse the errant soul,  
While fumes of camphor complete its return  
To oneness with *Paramatma*, the universal  
Essence of light and dark, of lotus and fig-leaf.

In the evening, two crows bobbed on two  
Branches of a cherry tree, two blossoms  
Falling as fireflies winked about our feet.

*Deepa purushulu*: her name means song,  
Heavenly song of God and darkest night,  
Of the four paths, of *Atman* in every being,  
Of Lord Shiva under glowing Banyan leaves,  
Of *Tulsi Mala* like chana earthen-red and bronze,  
Of faithful Arjuna mastering his bow, his might.

## **“Heartland”**

My mother's young & searching voice,  
Vibrato in the forgotten rain.

Sweet trapezing steam  
Birthing a Mississippi mud pie.

New York's index & volumes,  
My father's favorite papers,

Rolled salivated kazoos  
When, late, he stumbled in.

Fishing in a pond  
Afloat with frothy Styrofoam gore.

Spreading Easter eggs to hunt  
With a retrofit nine-iron.

Hickory pews with shelved  
Psalms & sticky hymn-books.

Always a soaring voice, parables  
Soothing as wine-dark broth

& brisket spitting over coals,  
Collies pawing for fat & bones.

Woods of anthemic locusts  
& braided twilight & leaves,

The same Babel, my thoughts,  
When I knew I no longer believed.

A new accent & years now  
Since wrestling in the garden - my voice

At my brother's low-signal Lubbock twang:  
*Yes, I'm coming home. I love you, too.*

## “Tour Guide”

He wears an unbuttoned collared shirt  
And blue captain's hat, ashes smokes  
In a tuna can. The pontoon untethered.

We're at Caddo lake, *the only natural  
Lake in all of Texas*. Scents of gumbo  
Waft from a cabin. He unhooks the tarp

As we file aboard. The motor purrs,  
A gurgling vibrato under shadows  
Of cypress looped with Spanish moss.

Skirting water like melted glass,  
Our reflections morph and shimmer.  
A wake of froth and ribbed waves

Trails our approach to a narrow cove.  
Green banks guard colonies of algae,  
Lotus and lilies with jets of black flies.

Fishing spiders trace curlicues across  
The shallows. He grins, tossing fathead  
Minnows to crappies rallying to surface.

A riot of splashes and cockeyed fins,  
Slurps that radiate in murky ripples.  
As we head to Big Cypress Bayou,

He tells the story of *Mittie Stephens*,  
A mighty steamboat from New Orleans  
Whose reign up the Red River to old

Jefferson ended in deadly flames.  
Ghosts of crewmen, sooty and crazed  
Saving ladies in whale-boned corsets,

Jumping from the upper decks. Smoke  
Shoots from his nostrils, the engine  
Fired awake. We ease back towards

The cabin, steering round a party boat  
Booming with music and drunken voices,  
A moment's ecstasy lost in the slipstream.

***Aikaterína***

Ψ

Katerína is my Greek name and I say it only at church when receiving communion or I write it now just to see the Greek *κατερίνα* though I wasn't born in Greece and though my name day falls on November 25 Saint Katherine eloquent martyr and though there was no way walking alone the Venetikos the sound from Pan who leaned against a wall roughing my attention away from the old stone bridge my thoughts of Portitsa Gorge and the otters dened in empty hollows no he didn't know my name but he ruffled my attention, as if he'd called out *Katerína* as if he'd annunciated each sound

*/k/a/t/er/i/n/a*

as if he'd tongued my silk, dawn's unfamiliar birdsong, church bells, even my blistered toes, cobblestones, the market's gold coffee, bouquets of peach tulips, and the young man with angel blue eyes who sliced unfamiliar for me to sample, cheese, hard and salty, the saleswoman my age her kiss on my cheeks the second time I returned noticing her short fingernails and worn flats. She handed me velvet sapphire heels to match my new dress, she said; sometimes the sound of my name in Greek is the Christmas cactus in my dining room that blooms three times a year, that's how infrequently I hear *Katerína* said aloud, and sometimes when aloud it's a twist of the village wrist or Thía Georgia my godmother the sacred spray from the Cretan Sea or a typical Greek day which for no one else but me means love. So my attention toward because its sound

*/k/a/t/er/i/n/a*

*Katerína Katerína Katerína*

is love.

Ψ

The Venetikos with its gentle  
rush. An exclamation or grunt  
or a moan. His face (maybe) handsome  
(maybe) crude. His hands (maybe) rapid  
my attention dropping his face  
his hands his hooves shaking his

half seduction out of the sound

of my, my rough Greek my Greek name  
is my Greek confoundedness that  
croons my half-resilient throat white  
murmur by the river my, echo

echo echo Greek name *Katerína*,  
my Greek name is Never on Sunday,  
my Greek name is Sultana,  
Haríklea, my Greek name is  
walnut tree, gardener, my Greek

name is crochet, Zorba, my Greek  
name is please                      bittersweet me;  
but sometimes the unexpected  
occurs and the Greek

### *Katerína*

hides in a vessel in Knossos  
or in a fissure in olive  
green stone falling into the  
Aegean, my blue silk dress  
does not show enough shadow,

enough of the body's silhouette  
I have little use for the heartbeat  
of the world, eloquent martyr,  
as I stand opening my goddess  
dress on cliffs.

Ψ

My name is *Katerína* though  
I look wholesome in scoop-necked pink  
chiffons, did I mention the blue  
dress bought in Thessaloniki  
has bell- shaped sleeves that catch the wind  
like angel wings, that when I dine

at my hand-crafted walnut table  
I confess I've never made love  
on though it is as wide and long  
as a full-size bed designed by  
many imaginations I  
am bordered on the east by barbed

wire the white horse sensing alfalfa  
on my side sweeter, fresher; on  
the south hooves in the middle  
of nights in spring; in autumn  
the bear and her cubs' predawn call  
out to one another the spring-

fed pond nearly dry. Am I trusted  
by all? No, not all I was told  
to my face. Until then I thought  
I was adored by all. I cut  
my hair an ancient ceremony.  
My lover wears his halfway

down his back sometimes loosens when  
we make love then I see my lover  
is corn husk and December embers  
in the throes of unresisted heat  
my heart both delivers, and aches.

Ψ

*Katerína* is my Greek name  
murmured and body plentiful  
aroused red below bath water's  
rendition rhythmically  
controlled by a finger placed on  
my woman's hope.

Ψ

Skull still shock-hard oh  
cloudless night the helm  
of the body *That*  
story again Pan's  
recognizable  
song and urgency  
swinging from Grevená  
to Thessaloniki.  
My recognizable  
rough sound.

Ψ

Where is the white horse

wandering spring loose  
to the fence line?

Ψ

Yes, my name is *Katerína*.  
The earliest birdsong, 4 am.  
Most from cottonwoods, thin branches,  
surrounding ponds. The creek flows  
east to west. Far from Grevená.

Far from the Venetikos.  
Far from Pan's concrete century's  
beckoning the creases and knobs  
my skull numbed by gravitation  
of late March three days before

Easter. I'm  
shiver.

The horse pisses in the desolate  
field the teepee wrecked by spring winds  
no apple trees in Jenny's orchard  
this view from my cabin window  
falling while the weight of white

butterflies fluttering low  
to the earth I have not softened  
my belly long enough the bed  
fluffed yet cold. For surely my  
lover, if he knew I was

crying. If I do not remove  
the dead soon these vulnerable  
branches soon their impact in  
fatigued  
fall.

Ψ

My village Trapezítsa.

My Greek name is the name  
of the village aunts is  
the name of my grandfather's  
mother is the name of  
the tobacco leaves is  
gesture's circular twist

of the wrist recorded  
in DNA in each  
sunrise and leaf  
intelligence I looked

Ψ

to the sound along  
the Venetikos,  
Pan's face his hands that  
wandered the river's  
edge and all passersby  
I'm still crying nine  
months after having  
my ovaries removed

Ψ

and know it is good to cry with my face covered

Ψ

the tulips blossom from my  
cabin's south-facing window

Ψ

under blankets, and skinned I've felt endangered  
eros rub.

Ψ

He dresses me slipping my legs  
back into panties, my feet into

sandals, with the delicacy  
of dressing the adored dead,

the kisses there afterward and  
there the continued swell who

ever imagined the body  
at 60 would continue with spring

run-off, with all the sense of  
dirt.

Ψ

Tonight a fox, rust darted  
across the highway and as I,  
about to hit it, hit my break,  
it stopping momentarily,  
turned to me, then disappeared  
into darkness. Did I say yet  
that Jesus laid supine on

the floor next to my childhood  
bed at Yióyia's and Pappoú's,  
I enlightened when all else  
dark that yes, he wore white robes and  
yes, I saw his face. I saw  
Jesus while a child, and he spoke

*Katerína Katerína Katerína Katerína Katerína*

Ψ

Say it. Again.

Ψ

In the ikonostási  
Panagía, the red egg, the  
holy water, the oil, did I  
say I may have been sacrificed  
to birth my daughter and her  
daughter and her daughter.

Ψ

In my mouth he places syrup  
from his mouth velvet from my god,

no wonder he drinks me like he  
does the fluid of birth of dawn  
my fluid my lips into my throat my  
life my god my gold my hold my  
love, this profiled urge. Remember  
me. Spring's menagerie.

Ψ

κατερίνα

Ψ

Have I written that I carry  
rocks with me from one life to  
another? And my oils flow from  
my fingers when cut from my hands?

Ψ

Three mallards fly through cottonwoods their wings the sound  
a crack.

## **Katerína, this poem is immortalizing**

the cat also, who after your plea  
to stop his lurch at others in the middle

of too many nights, and for what, a scent  
of yellow rose, the coolness beneath a lemon tree,

the halting blood-packed earth of Fortetsa  
something, so certain his inscrutable stare back at you last night

is not curled up on your last morning  
close to the almond tree, and you do not hear

the feverish barks of dogs either  
and like these angry, generation-old dogs,

you, too, have slept on your back  
in distress, to avoid, being too close

to an unfamiliar surface, a pillow not smelling  
right, or the earth, or a drip that might as well be a gushing river,

a sliver of light, and here you have heard your own heavy  
breathing. Look at these vacant vagrant dogs and cats.

They have caught up with you. As prayer.  
Or mist. Or breath.

## Bone Cavity

My unpredictable want in its pose of yes  
*yes, my between teeth always taste sweet.*

Here, village air scented with my blood scented with my  
shawl and what's a scar?

My home promises fetish and icon, each night  
from the old country, the 80-year-old blanket, skin bared,

scratched, some poem on my bed  
lined with oblong.

Mouth swollen— who can bear it — can you bear it can you  
bare it — the familial blue

extravagant shudder? It is spring.  
*Wake up Wake up* and still spring, and the goats

they bleat *Harikleá, Andreas, Sultana, Ourania, Nausicaa* and from my basil bowl too  
*the bones* resembling

say it  
*Katerína*  
Yes. and yes.

## Loretta's Love Song

My Husband was killed by a bus.  
Its glass face, aquarium-shaped  
slapped him at the crosswalk,  
hard enough to cut short  
every stem of spark in his skull.

When I got home from the morgue,  
there was a dent in the mattress  
that matched the missing man.  
I fit myself into his mold, like a peanut  
inside a peanut's shell.

I had wanted to make love that morning,  
but he was afraid to be late for work.  
If he had been late for work, he would not  
have left this hard place and become fog.

Unless, no matter the clock's curse,  
that bus was hunting him, fishing  
the streets to hook him. I will never ride  
a bus again. How can I? Enter into  
the machine body of the steel animal  
that murdered my love?

Some believe, we are just computers  
made of blood and muscle; that our memories  
can be downloaded or deleted. Is it true?  
Can we reprogram the place behind our eyes  
to forget our favorite lover, all our worst  
days? If the meat of me is only an appliance,  
then I declare, my instrument arms  
are loyal limbs, that will robot for no one now.

Let my lonely spread like leprosy over my flesh.  
Tongue: retired. Skin: surrendered to solitude.  
My monogamous mouth: mute.  
My throat is a nun.  
My husband, star spirit. More perfect than flesh.

## **You Are Not any Other Thing But You**

I do not wonder if the moth at the back door  
is you, visiting. I do not wait for a certain bird,  
to spy on me with a deep creature stare,  
and imagine it is your return. When I am awake,  
I feel you nowhere. In daylight, you are  
all the way gone. It is only when I am sleeping  
that I sometimes get a glimpse of you:  
your phantom-self is thinner than smoke.  
I cannot make love to vapor. I had you thick, once.  
I don't want your holy spirit, I want all the flesh  
and devil of earthly life. The whole blood and guts of you.  
The part that is unholy to worship.  
If you are dust now, I don't want to be covered in dust.  
Tell me: Was it my anchor heart, fluke dug into your seabed,  
that pulled you to the impossible place you are now,  
where no one and no thing can touch you?  
Where the darkness is so fat  
that all the beasts have giant mouths?

## **I asked him to tell me about the day he lost his hand.**

He told me: Time slowed to syrup.  
Flesh and tendon sliced smooth  
as sausage. Bone made white sparks  
pinwheel, dovetail to the spinning  
metal blade. The nerves, thread-like  
tentacles, filled with all the electricity  
of soul and skeleton, snapped with a spasm.

On the bakery floor: his hand, a lonely, bloody,  
lizard-thing. His wrist: a kitchen sink pipe, two  
arteries spit blood in beats. He looked left, at the lean  
woman who was meant to worship  
every ounce of him: Her eyes were ogres.  
Her tenderness for him fell off like a glass slipper.

If it had been me, instead of her,  
in that moment, I'd have loved him  
mountain-sized, the way a war-mother  
loves a war-child after a limb is stolen:  
*even more than ever before*—because she has tasted  
what it is to stand on this planet  
with a part of her beloved missing, and now  
she knows, that everyday,  
the planet will take another small part,  
until finally, it takes it all.

## Morning Love Poem

It is morning, and I lift myself out  
of the swamp of him. Light creeps in  
from two slits the window wears  
like parentheses. My shoulders still  
remember last night. I let a leg  
out of the bed, into the open air,  
but he quicksands me back  
into the mud we made.

Inside our tabernacle of sheets and limbs  
I have a pulse only in the places  
where parts of us junction, the rest of me  
is soup. When he plugs into me, when we  
machine ourselves in sync, all my dread  
is devoured. We are enshrined.

A pitch-black canopy of curls  
hovers over us, a furious funnel of hair,  
as I pray:

*Holy Mary, Mother of God, let me dive  
into this tunnel of a man.  
We are miners. Let me mine  
him. Let him mine  
me.*

by Mark Jackley

## WHEN THE DAY IS DONE

Three fingers and a thumb,  
he runs his hand over  
the jagged, finned teeth  
of the sawmill's blade,  
forged to circle fiercely,  
an older, undulating  
hunger, feeding something,  
both shark and wave.

## AT EASE

even in daylight  
somewhere  
the moon is wide awake  
unblinking  
unimpressed  
with Bezos  
Captain Kirk  
at ease with  
its indifference  
our brightest  
coldest eye  
if you were the  
moon you too  
would never  
need to dream

## THE ACTIVE TENSE

Car radio at midnight  
erases Indiana. Weird,  
your dream of stars  
like dolphins swimming  
through you, finding you  
and knowing you.  
Loving you, hon,  
we guessed. Weird  
your dad is dead, that dead  
could be an 'is.'

## **A CATERPILLAR IS NOT CLARK KENT**

More accurate to say  
self-immolating monk. Serenity to burn,  
return ticket paid.

**AFTER BEING T-BONED  
BY A HIGH-SPEED TRACTOR-TRAILER**

The self went dark. A self-  
driving mode kicked in,  
engineered by ghosts, I think,  
in lab coats made of stardust,  
an endless rain into  
John Lennon's paper cup,  
but slow, not runaway trucks  
our dust is likely not.

## SNOWLINE

Awake, we pulled our pants on.  
Our privilege bags were swollen,  
near rupture. Did you say rapture?  
No sir, I distinctly did not.  
Back then we spoke of mindfulness,  
mendicants hunched on hardwood pews.  
But once the shit went down,  
that silliness was incinerated.  
We are animals in search of instinct.  
We pack up the essentials:  
condoms, journals, binoculars, socks  
and point the sled toward the squall.  
We had grown tired of just sitting there  
smartphones in our meaty fists  
watching life trickle down our legs,  
so we opened up the twin burners  
and listened for wisdom from the fossil fuels –  
their whispered hiss – stay here, stay here.  
But we drove, then biked, then walked.  
Our new world is this trench,  
mismatched dogs, bursts of breath.  
Something pulls us northwestward  
toward the interwoven aspen,  
the direction the dippers point,  
toward the open meadowland  
where we will join the owls and the elk  
soon enough for whatever is left of  
quote unquote eternity.

## THE FIRST FROG

Dialect and diction detach  
one by one like tadpoles attracted  
to the surface. Kristie Noem  
is on the roof in her Ray Bans,  
the present is past. Elevated  
levels of Ozempic in our wastewater,  
the buzz of helicopters,  
our government has invaded us.  
Our medical bracelets ask if we need help,  
decibels and edibles, rotor chop,  
my goggles have fogged.  
Even the wind is about to give up.  
You see it first in the treetops,  
a stillness fills the streets  
and the first frog steps forward  
a hip waggle in the teargas light.  
The phalanx tightens around him.  
Camouflaged and cold-blooded,  
we join arms and shuffle  
toward conception.

## SCRUBBING METADATA

Moon-streaked and hamstrung,  
the barkless trees muscle through  
the blue-black, a harbinger of  
our ashes jammed into vases.

No more toothaches, no more sore feet,  
insomnia no longer a stand-in for eternity,  
thumbtacks in the corkboard, we lurk  
outside the clock door waiting for the cuckoo.

It has been said that grief is love with no  
place to go. Sounds true. Whoop-de-do.  
Eventually the grackles got into our crackers  
and ate their fill. Janitors gathered

after hours out past the refinery,  
then one night: the Northern Lights.  
Things hadn't turned out as planned,  
but this other actual thing might do.

We just need some new nouns, some polished  
up verbs, and a stronger pair of boots.

## The Last Holocaust Survivor

Joseph Gosler

*It rained for forty days and forty nights. The parched earth gulped the punishing rains and nearly choked. The crevices filled quickly and the excess slime, a mixture of rainwater, dirt and sewage, serpentine like, segmented highways, uprooted trees and swallowed everything in its path. There were no birds to be seen or heard. In fact, the usual air traffic of automated navigation vehicles that transported shoppers, commuters and resources from one place to another, were not to be found. The landscape below showed the devastation of climate change, whether through extreme heat and draught, or through rising ocean levels and incessant storms. The Atlantic Ocean, which had risen a foot in the past twenty-five years, no longer displayed the traditional coastal features of prominent beachfront; patches of grass and trees, homes, and sharp cliffs. Nature's manic weather patterns produced all sorts of new pestilence which made certain areas uninhabitable. As a result, new homes and developments were built in areas that were not only far from the danger zones but two hundred feet above sea level or higher. Many developments and industrial centers were built below ground and there was even discussion of building a flotilla of homes, offices, shops, factories, and "hot house" farms below sea level.*

~

An entourage of vehicles inches forward along Route 9 on its way to Beacon, NY. It is the beginning of the last week of biblical rain, and they turn left at a signpost for Revelation Care Hospice. They enter a paved road meandering between two stretches of wetlands. Steam is rising between tall weeds and a cluster of Larch pines. There's an odor of death and decay. It is late fall, and the air is getting colder. The road ends a half mile later where a tall, majestic willow tree shades a paved courtyard and a green, glass domed building greets the entourage.

A stocky man with a clean-shaven head, furrowed brow, and full beard steps out of the lead car. "Hey Pop, give me your hand and I'll help you out of the car."

A delicate pale, grey wrinkled hand extends from the front seat towards Joshua, followed by the body and face of an ancient man well into his nineties. This is Morris. He leans on his son as they enter the small, tinted glass complex. An attendant guides the drivers, who are still in their cars, to the parking lot and specifically to the electrified pavement section to allow their vehicle batteries to recharge. Whereas the first car is the family car, the rest belong to the German government. All the cars seem cavernous, the last is small by comparison and comprises the government's Press Corps. Each driver seems to be carrying a small gift of one sort or another for Morris' new home: a small vase of flowers, a framed photo, a plaque, a box of dark chocolates, and so on.

Joshua and Morris take the escalator from the modest first floor with its glass dome, down

into an airy chamber, an emporium of various shops, offices, hospice rooms, and crematorium. The circular floor lays well below the earth's surface. The depth of the floor explains the snorkel-like air filtering pipes that Joshua saw near the bushes as they entered the building.

Except for the beige floor tiles, Morris's private room is pristine white. To support his circadian rhythms underground, tunable-white RGBW lights allow for a full spectrum of color to filter through the single window, mimicking the cycle of natural daylight. The space is adequate, having a voice controlled electric flex-a-bed, a modest bathroom and wall mirror, a chair, and a small wall writing desk. A robotic arm attached to the ceiling scans the room from time to time, measuring Morris' body temperature and the activity of various organs. There are no intrusive machines or people checking his pulse, taking blood, or serving him a cocktail of prescribed medications. There is a tiny speaker through which soothing melodies play without end. The rhythm matches Morris' weak, if not shallow, breathing. The speaker also has a telephonic and public announcement feature.

His son arranges the furniture, the minutia of gifts given by the German government and family mementos. He puts the photographs on the writing desk and window ledge. The photos of family and friends also include two of Morris' beloved lab retrievers, Milton and Reuben. The room gains color and warmth as Joshua hangs an ink drawing of a smiling young girl on the wall that Morris' father, Sam, drew while he was hidden in Amsterdam during WWII. Joshua sets a stack of vintage magazines on a shelf near Morris' bed, right next to a vase of red, black, and golden tulips. He places the interactive holographic projector near the window, not far from Morris' favorite easy chair. And lastly, he thoughtfully places his father's well used, antiquated, soft toothbrush in a glass near the bathroom sink.

Joshua kisses and then hugs his father. They stand there in silence, facing each other, with odd and frozen smiles, holding each other's hands for what seems a long time but proves to be less than a minute. Joshua turns and as he leaves the room he exhales softly. In a cracked voice, he says, "Goodbye Pop." Morris is now alone. He tires easily. He suffers from end stage kidney disease. It is 2047.

#### Day 1:

Morris sits in the easy chair, conscious that he has hours or days to live. This is his final destination. "Underground", he waits for death to appear and slips into a mythopoetic daydream-like state, where various images, impressions, and stories, conjure all sorts of memories, both real and imagined. He smiles, recognizing the symmetry that embraces his first few years of life and his last few days on earth, both marked by being in hiding or "underground" and remembers his early childhood as though it was yesterday.

~

*Oorlog. Oorlog*

War all around me. Planes. Bombs. I was told that I awoke screaming into the night sky.

I kept hearing *Onderduiken, onderduiken*, “go into hiding”, in hushed desperate tones.

At seven months, clinging to my mother’s breast, I was bundled into a blanket and given to a nursing student from the fledgling Dutch Resistance. She placed me in a basket on the front of her bicycle and pedaled away into the darkness...

*Moeder. Vader.*

The Van Dijkstra family received me with open arms. *Moeder, Vader*, Emma and Johanna, their twelve and seven-year-old daughters.

And Tobus, a big fat cat that I chased everywhere.

*Peter Van Dijkstra.*

My name was immediately changed to Peter Van Dijkstra. I played in the backyard that was contiguous to an elementary school’s yard. Pressing my face against the chain link fence that divided our backyard from the school’s yard, I was mesmerized by the laughter and chatter of the children and desperately wanted to join them.

I was never hungry.

They told me that during the winter of 1944, food was scarce, and many people starved to death.

Devastation and tumult.

The Americans bombed Nazi military positions near us in Maastricht.

We sheltered in our small, dank cellar.

To stop the seeping cold from clinging to our bones, we wore extra layers of clothing. I sat on Moeder’s lap, safe, content. Emma and Johanna sat on either side of Vader. We sang songs, read and told stories, as the hum of the American planes fused into white noise and lulled me to sleep. The single light bulb hanging from the cellar ceiling, flickered but endured throughout the bombings. A small beacon of hope. I loved Moeder and Vader so much. The pain of their passing is still anchored in my heart. I bonded with them only to be separated at war’s end.

“Why did I have to leave them? Still unresolved.”

Sam and Sarah, my biological parents, found me. I didn’t understand. All I wanted to do was to return to my “real” parents, Moeder and Vader.

Sam and Sarah were not as fortunate as me. They had been caught by Dutch police, working in tandem with the SS, three months before the end of the war. They were beaten, Sam transported to Westerbork, a transition camp, and Sarah, because of her Aryan blue eyes, was warned that if she associated with Jews again, she would be killed.

Through a twist of fate, the Nazis were in retreat. The death trains were no longer running, and my father survived the war.

I've been told, the reunion with my parents was difficult and traumatic. They were strangers to me. In some ways they were strangers to each other and to themselves. In fact, all three of us shared the scars of war; a lack of trust, and an inability to care and nurture each other. Through old photos, I saw a three-year old with pensive eyes, furrowed brows and pouty mouth. I remember that I often wandered away or followed other people. Ever searching for my *onderduiker*, underground family.

Searching for my family, community, and identity became a lifelong struggle.

I even burnt the bathroom curtains, a clear cry for help that no one understood. I hoped that this desperate, angry act would blot out my surroundings and transport me back to the Van Dijkstras; Moeder, Vader, Emma and Johanna. I hoped that once I was with them, we would never be separated again.

My parents were struggling to reclaim their lives. Sam was struggling to find work and Sarah, six months pregnant, tragically suffered a nervous breakdown. Sadly, my parents would never plant roots again, as they had before the war. Frozen in state, they lived in a bubble, and if they planted any roots, it was in me, and my future sister, Miriam.

Learning about their misfortune at an early age was the first time that I felt a sense of guilt. I wanted to shield them from anything that might cause them harm or pain

.~

For a moment Morris, shifts and jerks in his easy chair, as he viscerally pictures his parents' roots germinating, forming shoots which sprout through his skin, causing him to bleed. He awakes momentarily and feels his body for possible wounds. Not finding any he reenters a daydream state and segues away from the traumatic vision into a more pleasing memory: Joshua's first haircut.

~

"Morris, the little one can sit on this barber's chair," Roberto the barber said to me, "I have a nice hard pillow on it and also a little plastic train with a string he can hold while I trim his hair." I brought my three-year-old, Joshua, for his first haircut to Roberto's Shop, an old Italian family barbershop where your name and desired hair cut are etched in the barbers' memories from the first time you visit. I still visualize the narrow shop with five barber chairs, a modest wall bench near the coat rack and four extra chairs in the back for those who waited to be served. There was a bank of mirrors above a shelf lined with all sorts of children's toys.

I went there regularly and always looked forward to my trim and scalp massage but on this day all attention was focused on Joshua. Roberto grew fig trees in barrels at his Staten Island home, and I always wanted to know how his trees were doing.

“So good, so good. You should see, the limbs, heavy with fruit, and changing to a bluish purple.”

Joshua’s shrill cry sliced the peaceful exchange between Roberto and me, as his plastic train fell to the ground. One rubber wheel broke off and nestled in a fallen tuft of his blond hair. The suddenness of the cry echoed and reverberated through my head and body like a bolt of lightning and my own first haircut flashed in front of me.

The vision made me shudder.

~

I remember walking with Vader, from our home in Maastricht to the barbershop. Clutching Vader’s hand, we walked up the steep hill over uneven cobble stones. Sitting in the barber’s chair I was excited and frightened at the same time. I was told, subsequently, that the image of the barber’s shears above my head, cutting my hair rapidly and chaotically, produced a reaction on my part akin to having him cut my flesh. I worried I would be in great pain. After all, my hair was part of my body, right?

But this peculiar experience was not the reason for the sudden flashback to my first haircut. I recall a loud collective roar emanating from outside the barber shop, as the leather boots of countless soldiers marched in unison, followed by tanks and jeeps and more soldiers, thumping and rattling on the cobble stone street. The thud of the goose-stepping soldiers, the periodic Nazi salutes, and the mixed reception they received from the pedestrians hugging the sidewalks triggered me to shift my head to the bay window and shout at the top of my young lungs, “*Rot Moffen!*”

Suddenly, many hands covered my mouth, and I was dragged into a back room until the parade passed. Yelling “rotten Nazis” was a good enough reason to get yourself killed - even if you were not quite three.

~

A man dressed in a beige uniform, matching the color of the hospice floor, enters Morris’ room. Finding him on the easy chair, he states, “Mr. Hofstein, would you like to bathe after dinner?” With one eye open and the other closed Morris replies, “Oh, okay-but only from the waist up.” The dinner was non-eventful: a less than sweet section of honeydew, some nondescript chicken, mashed carrots, and applesauce. Morris no longer remembers the last time he had a large cut of rare Porter House steak, fried rosemary potatoes and a good bottle of wine but he certainly remembers that it was always a celebration for his mouth. In contrast to his dinner, the sponge and water experience proves to be quite pleasing. His pale grey body feels an afterglow from the Victorian bath. Dressed in flannel pajamas, he crawls onto his lowered bed,

covers himself with the quilt and promptly falls asleep.

One curtain closes and another opens.

His wartime years as a toddler keep playing repeatedly, like an old film, each frame whether sharp or faded, never stops.

The reel is alive and moves with the speed of light or in slow motion. In either case, new memories abound, and others disappear, suggesting there's a limit to what Morris can retain at any given time.

~

Just before I drift off to sleep, it's 1949, the postwar recession was ever present, and the ghosts of war danced nightly on the cobble stone streets. Every night this nightmare play would repeat itself. Curtains would close and some remained open, whispers were heard, we bore witness to the nightly raids. Many Jews and other undesirables never returned. Fear and memories plagued my parents incessantly, while their economic struggles never went away. They applied for visas to the USA, but as fate would have it, they could not find a "host" to sponsor them. Visas were extremely difficult to attain, especially for Jews. There was a quota. Desperate to leave, they looked to Israel and Israel welcomed them with open arms. Israel?

We're leaving?

What did that mean?

I was six, had just started first grade, but still carried the emotional trauma, of anger, confusion and a sense of abandonment. I had no idea where or what Israel was.

"How can I go and leave my dog, Whitey, my friend Dimo and my class" I remember saying in anguish.

Uprooted again, torn from all that was familiar, we left for Haifa on a cargo ship. Packed like sardines in steerage. So many people, primarily Jewish families, children, plus the persistent screeching metallic sounds coming from the engine room. I couldn't sleep.

We were bound for *Eretz Israel*, the Promised Land.

Everyone talked about the promised land and the expression on their faces changed.

I had no idea why or what Israel meant.

All I could see was the steerage, crowded with narrow metal framed beds, chests, suitcases and buckets, neatly stacked under each bed.

There was a constant long line for the single bathroom.

Midway across the Mediterranean, I vividly recall, a terrible storm. Lights flickered, beds rattled like chattering teeth, babies cried, chests and valises slid like bowling balls from one side of

steerage to the other and buckets of urine spilled mercilessly.  
The horrific light show and chaos lasted for several hours.

One prolonged horn blast introduced us to Haifa.

The indignity of it all.

I wonder what my relatives felt as they were pushed onto the cattle cars, packed so close, unable to move, as they were transported east to the death camps of Auschwitz and Sobibor.

Israel.

Transition camp. Miriam suffered from dysentery. We didn't know if she would survive. We were sent to live on a kibbutz called *Beit HaShita*. I was the new kid on the block, "the Dutch boy." I got into many fights. I wanted to belong. I even stole another boy's stamp album. A day later I shared "my" album with other kids to gain favor. Instead, I was found out, ostracized and made fun of. I can still feel the embarrassment of being caught, doing something wrong, of making a mistake. It has stayed with me my entire life.

Then I met Beersheba.

Beersheba, the librarian. She was beautiful, with long black hair worn in a single braid. She consoled and nurtured me and taught me Hebrew. Living in a dorm with other children, away from my parents was a blessing for me because it gave me the privacy and distance, I required to work out my problems. Mornings usually began with a cross-country run, then breakfast and classes. Lunch and working in the fields followed. We plucked clusters of grapes or milked olive tree branches. The olives fell on khaki canvases that were carefully placed around each tree and then put into wooden crates. I can smell the fruity scent of the green olives on my hands even now. After dinner, games were played on the large lawn in front of the *chadar ochel* (cafeteria) under the proud and watchful eyes of our parents, including Sam and Sarah.

I loved the routine, the work, and the recognition.

I felt important, part of a community.

"I loved it all!"

Sukkot was my favorite holiday. The communal act of helping to build a sukkah out of bamboo reeds was celebratory and empowering. During the Holiday evenings, the bees buzzing over the pungent fruit, the distant howls of jackals, and the stars that were visible through the bamboo reeds transformed the setting into a bacchanal for the senses that I gladly inhaled.

Not only was I carefree but the whole kibbutz was now my family. The distance from my parents allowed me to heal and to sort things out. The kibbutz became a dream within a dream. I remember, being barefooted, gliding down a mountainside, like a mountain goat, over gravely

soil, tufts of purple flowers, past various caves, *wadis* (riverbeds) and bramble bushes. Eretz Israel saved me. I felt fulfilled, confident and part of a greater whole.

The opposite was true for my mother. For Sarah, living in the kibbutz proved to be a punishment. Not only did she have to share her clothing in this community but her children as well. Especially me! Forced to share her son with a whole community before she could properly bond with me, must have felt like putting salt on her wounds.

She wanted to leave and convinced my father to apply again for visas to the USA.

### Day 2:

Morris wakes up with a bitter taste in his mouth and tears in his eyes as he envisions his parents' agony and sense of loss when forced to give him away during the war. He deeply understands that desperate times demand extraordinary and sometimes painful actions but throughout his life the experience of being abandoned left him disoriented and fostered a lack of trust. Like the infant Moses in a reed basket floating down the Nile River, neither his mother nor Moses' mother, *Jochebed*, knew if their infants would survive.

Today he's grateful for his parents' actions and thankful that his own son was not forced to undergo the same. In fact, he marvels at how different his son's life is. He recognizes that each person sees the world through a unique prism and that the insights received are relative. The impact of a particular action may end up pleasing one person, upsetting another, and leaving a third unchanged. As a result, who truly knows what demons have tormented another person's soul?

"Well, at least he didn't have to face death or abandonment," Morris mutters to himself. He gets up and shuffles to the bathroom. His urine is as dark brown as tea, but he has seen that before and moves to the sink to brush his teeth. The morning artificial sunlight irritates his eyes, and he reaches for sunglasses to shield them. Though meals are routinely sent to the eight hospice rooms, today he decides to explore the rotunda and its small botanical garden. But first, he wants to get a coffee and donut at the small coffee shop across from his room. He leans on his motorized wheeled cane, that serves as a friendly arm, and slowly makes his way to the coffee shop. No room number, account, or any other form of identity is necessary as he orders the donut and coffee, which they promptly bring to botanical garden bench. He follows and sits down admiring the succulent plants, their various shapes, textures, and flowering colors. A recording of exotic birds piped into the garden completes the setting. The garden's tropical beauty is the result of a special instrument parroting the weather in a rainforest and every afternoon around two, a warm light rain comes from spigots overhead. The garden is enclosed in a transparent egg-shaped polycarbonate greenhouse extending to the first floor, in part to accommodate a very impressive forty-foot-tall baby blue eucalyptus tree from Australia.

The lush greenery of the garden reminds Morris of *Jardin Majorelle* in Marrakech. He travelled to Morocco when he was thirty with his future wife, Sophie. The garden becomes as a cocoon, an inner sanctum, and he fades in and out of sweet memories.

~

We travelled to many countries. Our destination was Morocco, *Al Maghrib*. Agadir, a city in the south along the Atlantic had three hundred days of sun. A good a enough reason to hitchhike almost two thousand miles from the Netherlands, south through Belgium, France and Spain, to Morocco.

*A smile crosses Morris' face as he remembers the reasoning.*

But first I wanted to visit Vader in Maastricht. Vader had remarried and was now in his early eighties. I had not seen him in twenty-five years. Had no idea what he looked like, what his temperament was like or how he would greet me. Though eager to meet him I was nervous. We met in Vader's front yard and though we were each smiling, I felt awkward. Vader suggested that we visit the old home, my *onderduiker* home, which was nearby. A perfect segway to ease our discomfort.

We strolled to the old house. Vader introduced me to the homeowners, and the young couple invited us in. I remember asking to look around. To my surprise, the school, which was separated by the backyard's chain link fence, was still active. I could still hear the chatter and laughter of the children. I then found myself in the small cellar. Now painted a vibrant yellow and with several light fixtures, it looked much more inviting. After tea and *spekulatius* (ginger and almond spiced cookies) we bid the wonderful hosts goodbye. Throughout the walk to Vader's home, I could not stop thinking about the old house. It seemed smaller than I remembered, with more light peering in. I glided from room to room and sensed watchful eyes. Was Moeder watching?

After a sumptuous classic Dutch meal of *geroosterde kip*, (roasted chicken), *nieuwe gebbaken aardappelen* (fried new potatoes), and a *groene salade* (green salad), Vader and I retired to a couch on the porch

."Do you think the people in the barbershop knew I was Jewish? Part of your family?" Your Nephew?"

Vader responded, "So tell me, what are you doing now?"

I wanted to talk about the past and Vader only wanted to talk about the present.

Were the memories too traumatic? I wondered.

Questions answered with more questions.

His trembling hand touched my shoulder. We both stood up at the same time. His serious, stern face softened. His body relaxed. We faced each other for a while. I bid him good-bye. But my heart was full of sorrow, when I left. I knew I would never see Vader again.

The curtain closed on that part of my childhood.

We made our way South by Southwest to Malaga, caught whiffs of Arabic music there, and then took the ferry from Algeciras to Tangiers. The transition to Morocco from Franco's Spain felt like a shift from high grain black and white to exotic mediaeval coloring: rough, woolen *Djellabas*, ranging in color from off white to deep reds, fancy caftans, and Goulimine African trade bead necklaces. *Morris' face twitched with excitement as the images fluttered in front of his eyes.*

We arrived in Marrakech, the red walled city, two days later. *El Jemaa el Fna*, the main square of the *madina* (city) was an exotic tapestry of life: snake charmers, old water porters with goatskin bags filled with fresh water to sell, story tellers, dancers, food stalls, and young children with outstretched hands. El Jemaa was surrounded by a maze of narrow streets with bamboo reeds shielding the open-air stalls, shops, and their patrons from the noon day sun.

Days later, as we traveled through the Atlas Mountains to the Atlantic coast, we came upon a beach hamlet of young long-haired travelers from every corner of the globe: Australians who had been on the road for a half dozen years, Dutch, French and Danish university students, Canadians of various ages, and an assortment of other Europeans. Many hippies walked the beach and swam in the nude. Berber men gawked at the Western whores while their women who wore seven layers of clothing, looked on scornfully.

*Morris sitting on the botanical garden bench with eyes closed nods his head back and forth as though in agreement with the Berber women's sense of indignity.*

No harm was meant but we found them obtuse and their narcissistic display, offensive. On the bank of a *wadi*, a seasonally dry riverbed, which extended to the sea, grew a streak of banana plants. Goats greedily fed on the riverbed grasses; a single donkey dozed in the blistering sun. At another wadi nearby, bamboo clumps grew robustly.

The beach was littered with tents and geodesic domes, made from bent young bamboo saplings and wrapped over with clear plastic sheets. Buckminster Fuller in Morocco! We paid \$20 or 400 dirhams for a well-constructed home. Our first and only condo. A hothouse during the day but comfortable when the sun folded into the sea. It was home for three months. We shopped at the local *Souk*. A Moroccan styled farmer's market. Berber blankets filled with two feet high pyramid mounds of saffron, ginger, cumin, and turmeric.

Plucked chickens on hooks.

A surge of people, claw to the butcher's stall. Fresh cuts of lamb.

An old, weathered horse was swatting flies with his tail.

An Imam's call to prayer further feeds the frenzy.

Pungent air filled with spices, decaying fruit, sweet, nutty barley bread and dung.

Everyone plays a part.

Harmony.

I bargained. I was good at that. Walking away, “insulted” by the asking price. The dollar was strong, and we bought a kilo of blood red oranges for ten cents.

Sophie kept a journal with sketches, drawings and mementos. We adopted a stray six-month-old puppy who we named Gopher. We cooked sumptuous meals every night, bartered and negotiated with local merchants and simply folded into an idyllic rhythm. After dinner, we sat on the dunes, a silhouette of the High Atlas Mountains behind us, watching the sun fold into the deep blue waters like a golden parachute. Its radiance fading as it spread. It was blissful and I felt on top of the moment.

~

Morris awakes from his daydream and takes the escalator up to investigate the ground floor. He recognizes the hallway through which he entered twenty-four hours before with Joshua and admires the round, silvery blue eucalyptus leaves. As he turns left, a ten-foot dieffenbachia plant guarding a white door, greets him. The door is locked, and he notices its cryptic signage, “Passage Room”. He retreats downstairs via the elevator adjacent to the escalator.

Unaccustomed to locked doors, at least in the hospice, he asks the orderly, “What is the Passage Room and why is it locked?”

The orderly, very soft spoken, but blunt says, “That is where some people die.”

“Oh,” Morris responds, “but why is it separate from the other hospice rooms?”

The orderly pauses for a few seconds and then responds diplomatically, “The Passage Room serves as the eye into the next world, this portal has no controlled air, or temperature monitors and opens to the universe. It’s like a screened in porch. As a result, no attendants of any kind, including family can stay in the room for longer than an hour without wearing a hazmat suit.

From time to time, a patient desires to be near the world that was or ought to be, rather than the one we are in now.”

The soberness of the exchange forces Morris to weigh whether he prefers to die alone or surrounded by loved ones. Being of Dutch stock, he had planned his farewells in an orderly manner, consciously making sure that his son, Joshua, would be the last one to leave his sight. Morris loved him most; his presence and reverence left him at peace. Yet there was something appealing about a gathering of friends and family, as well. Though he knows death is near, the decision is not one he wants to make at this moment.

Morris returns to his room and takes out his holographic projector with the intent of seeing his grandson, Kymani. Kymani lives in London, a well-regarded chef and a marathon runner. He juggles a lot of tasks simultaneously. Typical of his generation. While he waits for the hologram, he remembers Kymani at age ten. How handsome, full of energy, curiosity, tenacity and stubbornness.

It takes a while for the interaction light detection and software sensors to work but in five minutes Kymani's hologram splashes in front of Morris. Kymani, thirty years old, at six feet tall, is the tallest Hofstein in the family.

~

"Hi Kymani, you look great! What's cooking these days?"

Kymani smiles, "Assuming you mean food, I can only speak in themes. It's a fusion between my Jamaican and Dutch roots, but it's not ready for showtime." Morris smells a whiff of spices: Nutmeg, garlic, cinnamon, and ginger.

"How's your better half and little Benji?"

"Where is Benji? Oh, he's like a human ball at my feet. Stand up Benj and let your great grandpappy see you." With that, Benji unfurls and stands next to his dad, his head reaching Kymani's waist. He waves.

The call doesn't last long because Kymani's life is typically busy. He needs to pick up some supplies for his new dish, Benji wants to go underground to the old locomotive museum, and Kiki, his partner, is planning to meet him downtown. She just called from Paris and is about to take the hyperloop train which arrives in a half hour.

*The hologram ends but Kymani's three-dimensional image still flickers in Morris's mind.*

"Sweet boy."

"So like his dad."

~

Morris is exhausted, has increasing muscle and joint pain, and this morning found blood stains on the sheets. Not surprising. He has been forewarned that these are common signs of kidney failure. Nevertheless, it depresses him as he falls asleep to the mantra of sounds emanating from the speaker.

~

An odd ripple sensation crossed my chest, like a cool October breeze. A half a mile from my country home and near the end of my fifteen-mile run, I plowed on. Driven by fear and ambition, nothing was going to stop me from finishing my run.

A true metaphor for my life, I think.

I sat on the bench next to the wall and then, everything turned black! I lay on the floor comatose, and slowly regained consciousness as the phone rang.

Staring at the ceiling I saw a disappearing blur, as my son, Joshua, answered the phone, "Hi Mom, Pop is on the floor stretching, I think."

After a run I always lay down on the kitchen floor to stretch-but this was different.

"Put him on!" Sophie stated urgently.

"Pop, Mom wants to talk to you."

I slowly got up and reached for the phone.

“Are you alright?” Sophie’s voice trembled.

“Something happened, I think I fainted.”

A silence followed and then Sophie said, her voice more stable, “I think you should go to the ER!”

“The ER?” Though, in shock, I answered, “I would rather wait until later, and drive back to the city.”

A tug of war ensued between us and finally Sophie said, “You are putting your son’s life in danger driving two hours to the city”

“I relented.”

With Joshua in the car, I drove to a nearby hospital. After a host of tests including blood, cardio and X-rays, they told me that my heart enzymes were extremely elevated. *Morris stirs and moves into a fetal position.* They didn’t know if it was due to the fifteen-mile run or a heart attack. Sophie and my sister arrived three hours later. I was kept overnight in the ICU. I felt totally numb, out of control and helpless. A day later, I was transported by ambulance to NYU hospital where after an angiogram and angioplasty, was told that I had a mild heart attack and that my right coronary artery was blocked 97%.

Heart attack? Me? Unbelievable!

*Still in a fetal position he shivers at the thought of what could have occurred on Marathon Day.* On that day, I would have ignored the symptoms and could have died. The reality of the “event” and possible outcome was not simply a tap on my shoulder but more like a sledgehammer blow to my head.

The aftershocks also impacted Sophie and Joshua. They saw me as indestructible. Never sick. Marathon runner. Within a year I dropped thirty pounds, my waist and chest shrunk and how I paced myself at work and at home changed radically. Both Joshua and Sophie seemed to walk on eggshells around me. They rarely confronted me and catered to me, fearing that any disturbance would bring on another attack. Inadvertently, there was a sense of doom which hovered within the family.

I was at a crossroads.

Middle aged, I had never felt vulnerable, and my shield of invincibility evaporated in front of Sophie and Joshua’s eyes.

Fifty-three years old.

The “event” forced me to reach back into the crevices of my mind, to dig up and dust off the memories of my past.

~

Morris awoke, startled, disoriented, gulping for air as though his head had been submerged under water. He recognizes the issue immediately as the sewer back up of his malfunctioning kidneys and presses a button near his bed. A palliative care nurse enters a few minutes later, to find him heaving, struggling to breathe. The diagnosis is pulmonary edema. She reaches for the oxygen mask and places it over his nose and mouth and he immediately feels relief. She then gives him a dosage of diuretic medication. Since this is the first occurrence and no other symptoms are apparent, like swelling in his legs or further change in skin coloring, there's no need to do more. Deep down he knows his hours and days are few and though fatigued, he orders schnitzel and potato dumplings and has more than one glass of wine with his evening meal.

The last supper?

Self-medicating, the wine puts him in a familiar zone. He doesn't have to justify his indulgence to anyone. In a stupor, he falls into a deep sleep. Under that veil of darkness, he recalls his ninetieth birthday.

~

A registered letter from the German government conveyed that I was one of 5000 Jewish Holocaust survivors remaining worldwide. I promptly found fifteen thousand Euros in my bank account. Thrilled by the recognition and the money, I told my relatives and friends about it. I felt compelled to tell my "story" more often.

I questioned what it meant to be a Jew.

Do I need to wear a yarmulke?

Attend synagogue every week?

Observe the holidays and the Sabbath.

Religion never played a major role in my life.

No synagogue or Jewish community center memberships.

No Bar Mitzvah.

If I worshipped, I did so in a very different setting, namely at a Quaker Meeting, a community of people whom I identified with closely.

Ironically, although my early childhood had all to do with being Jewish - the war, death, memories, migration, my parents were not religious at all.

Except for certain holiday dinners, I don't recall any rituals marking the Jewish holidays or making them meaningful.

My parents never belonged or went to a synagogue, even before the war.

Was this a conscious or subconscious effort to remain hidden?

Perhaps, for the same reasons, I simply mirrored my parents' behavior, having no interest or longing to exhibit myself as a Jew in any way.

In Holland, I was a Dutch boy, in Israel a young Zionist.

It wasn't until we came to the U.S. that I recalled identifying as a Jew. My parents wanted me to have a Bar Mitzvah, the Jewish religious passage into manhood. The sudden introduction to this tradition meant little to me, although the promise of getting a three-piece suit was all important.

The suit symbolized adulthood and prosperity.

But sometime during my Torah studies my mom got into a heated argument with our host, *Tante* Rose. Rose had promised to pay for the Bar Mitzvah, the reception that would follow, and the suit. All of which she promptly reneged on. I was upset. Not because the religious stamp of manhood was withdrawn, but that I wouldn't get the anointed suit.

Another incident which raised my consciousness occurred when I got into a street fight with some boys who derided me and my friends with all sorts of antisemitic slurs. I left my Bar Mitzvah lessons with two friends wearing yarmulkes. A group of rowdy neighborhood kids accosted us. It happened and ended so quickly, that it felt like an out-of-body experience. The skirmish lasted for no more than five minutes.

They scampered in all directions.

But the sting of their words lasted for a long time. This was the first and only time that I remember being singled out and denigrated for being Jew.

Organized religion was not for me.

I have been highly spiritual throughout my life. My quest for community, was also a search for spirituality. Even before Joshua was born, Sophie and I celebrated Pesach with an eclectic, evolving, home-made Haggadah that celebrated freedom for all people. The same was true for other major Jewish holidays like Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur and Joshua's favorite, Hanukkah.

We made them our own.

~

Day 3:

Morris wakes up early, his mouth dry from the wine and fumbles towards the bathroom in the darkness. He's guided by a night light but imagines he sees a familiar figure in front of him. Obscured by the darkness he can make out the warm yet stern face of Moeder, his wartime mother. The ghostly figure reminds him of the letter his parents received from the Van Dijkstra.

~

I was numb and could not be consoled.

Receiving a letter from them was not surprising since my father had kept up a correspondence. Grim news.

Moeder had died.

Acute leukemia.

The sudden news hit me so viscerally that I could not inhale. I mourned her passing for weeks.

Whimpering and listless.

My parents could not console me. I couldn't understand why the news hit me so hard. After all, I had not seen her in ten years. I did not realize that Moeder's spirit and guidance laced my heart and mind, protecting me from all the sharp edges of life.

~

She always lived in the recesses of his mind and now she waits to take him home. He reaches for the bathroom light but there is no one there. The reality of the brown colored urine confirms to him that he's awake. He drinks some tap water, returns to bed, falls into a light sleep and drifts into a dream about the Catskills.

~

We moved to a small town. My father became the supervisor of a large dairy farm, and my mom made various fresh cheeses for us.

"Yummy."

She earned additional income as a beautician.

My sister and I attended the local school. Twelve-year-old Miriam began to date boys and one day declared that she was going "steady". Unlike Miriam, I was not allowed to stay out overnight nor stay out late until I was seventeen.

I excelled in sports. Loved soccer in particular.

It connected me to my past. My father gave me my first ball, weeks after I was returned to them in Holland. Being on a team opened a social world I had not been privy to. My English was much better and between my improved communication skills and athletic prowess, I gained confidence and friendships.

~

Morris wakes up mid-morning, his face a pale grey canvas. He smiles, eyes dancing with resolve, as though he experienced a revelation. He decides to move to the Passage Room later in the afternoon. Morris had said his goodbyes - to his son a few days before and to other relatives and friends a few weeks before that. His resolution to die alone, to let go, to accept his fate, was part of the process of unburdening and making himself lighter. To change that process and outcome would undermine his sense of order.

Jessie, the orderly isn't pleased but after the lunch meal, he moves Morris' sundry things, even the large easy chair. An hour later, in pajamas and a regal bathrobe, he rests his left hand on the escalator handrail and the other on his motorized cane, as he majestically ascends. The room seems larger than the room below but that is an illusion mostly due to the floor to ceiling windows through which he sees the ancient willow tree and a section of the wetlands. The room has the same features as his room below except for the controlled temperature and artificial light. Several windows are open, and he is simply separated from the great outdoors by a fine mesh screen. It feels humid, the air can be sliced with a butter knife, and he turns on the ceiling fan. Fortunately, the incessant rain cools the room, allowing him to doze off for an afternoon nap.

Lightning strikes across the wetlands.

The spasmodic light dance ripples across water.

~

Soft rain enters my window, spraying my eyelids.

I saw the shoots sprouting through my skin, once more.

They didn't grow outward. Instead, they reentered my body inches apart and then out again, as though I was being stitched.

My body contorts in pain, and I look bent like a person carrying a burlap sack of stones.

I shriek.

But my dream and its sentiment continue.

~

My parents lived for their children and in some way, this put enormous pressure on Miriam and me.

Guilt?

Tradition?

Something else?

I felt the responsibility of caring for them from a very early age.

No child should be saddled with this kind of burden. Nor feel compelled to swallow his parents' anguish

.

Did this pressure contribute to my heart attack?

This role of forced advocacy for my parents laced my genes so completely that it defined my role in life.

I became "The Provider."

Pressure, pressure on my shoulders.

Nowhere to escape.

I psychologically hovered above the landscape of life.

Nicknamed “the happy wanderer,” I always exhibited a frozen smile and could never sit still.

Like a dancing bear.

I always needed to move, to avoid being scrutinized by anyone, including myself.

Like the three little pigs. I did not simply build a house of bricks.

I built a psychological fortress.

Aware of what little light can seep in or bleed out!

A self-made ghetto. It protected my feelings.

A false sense of security.

In other ways it stunted my growth. In my thirties, reluctantly, I started to focus on myself.

Some would have called me a late bloomer but upon reflection, I was more like a porcelain doll.

Fragile.

I needed to crystalize my past, put it in perspective and then allow it to become a fading image in my rearview mirror, as I shifted from one lane to another.

~

Morris wakes from his nap to find that his feet and the mattress are wet. He gets up and sees several magazines scattered on the floor near the writing table and as he approaches the open windows he slips on the wet floor and lands on his knees. For a moment he stares into empty space, confounded by the occurrence. He collects himself, rolls to one side, reaches for the windowsill and slowly drags himself up to the ledge. Knees throbbing, he struggles to stand and is reminded of an incident some twenty years before when he wasn't as lucky.

~

I missed my footing on the last concrete step of a brownstone building landing on both knees.

I couldn't straighten my legs.

I lay there in the soft rain, perplexed and helpless, and in pain.

I ruptured the tendons connecting the patella and the quads, in both legs. Six months of rehab allowed me to become mostly functional, although I walked spastically for a long time thereafter.

Was it hubris, a sense of vanity, or my enduring spirit, that motivated me to overcome the challenge in front of me? The irony of this moment, standing at the wet windowsill, registers instantaneously. This time I'm able to get up immediately, no rehab necessary but no future to look forward to either. The experience of the knee accident was eerily prophetic, as though a spirit opened a portal to the future, giving me a cruel sampling of the aging process.

~

Morris closes the windows and carefully makes his way to the bathroom, neglecting to pick up the magazines on the floor. Though his bladder seems full, he releases very little urine, and he presses harder without result. With little appetite, he looks gaunter than ever and he walks unevenly back to the bed. Life is being squeezed out of him, his shoulders strain, and he's in definite pain.

SEP: Morris pushes the button for the palliative care nurse. When she enters the room, he asks her for pain relief medicine laced with mood altering substances. Like Curtis Mayfield's "Pusherman" without question, she injects him with a mysterious solution. Within twenty minutes there's no pain or exhaustion. His neck warms and warmth spreads throughout his body. He feels sublimely content, the way a baby feels sucking on his mother's breast. Then he's transported into an opium den and reclines among fellow travelers. He lay there without movement, a warm corpse in a morgue, reflecting on another time when he was full of adventure, vigor and hope.

~

The 1960s swept many traditions under the rug of time. A counterculture youth movement sprouted, filled with post-war baby boomers, bohemians, socialists and intellectuals. It was spawned during the McCarthy period of the early 1950s, then nurtured by the strong Eisenhower economy, and flowered ten years thereafter.

~

I moved in with my cousin Andy in Brooklyn Heights. I was twenty-one and entered a Bohemian world.

Always on the go.

Making experimental films, happenings, street theater, anti-war and civil rights demonstrations, experimenting with weed and other mind-altering drugs.

No room for sports. Sports were an anathema, representing mainstream America; Brutality; Competition.

This was not a time to take stock of myself.

That was yet to come.

I needed to let go.

To take risks.

To fly.

It was exhilarating.

No longer living at home, I worked sporadically to support my modest lifestyle.

I travelled, partied heavily, met Sophie.

I felt a joy reminiscent of what I experienced on the kibbutz.

Freedom!

Freedom to roam both physically and psychologically.

It was a time of jubilation.

It allowed me to symbolically try on different personas. I took on the aura of “the writer” and it became a true passion that continued for the rest of my life.

But I still had no voice of my own and followed others.

I still desperately needed to “fit in.”

My own moral compass was yet to be defined.

Curiously, the escapism of the 1960s and the shared commitment of the kibbutz experience produced the same outcome. The difference was that the joy received from escapism was finite, while the joy and satisfaction received from commitment to a community was everlasting.

The kibbutz served as a model for community that I searched to replicate, in form and feeling throughout my life.

~

The memory of the 1960s, some eighty plus years before, still resonates in his mind and throughout his emaciated, parched body, even tingling his toes.

Morris also remembers the aftermath that occurred, when in a manner of speaking, his magic carpet flew too close to the sun and crashed to earth.

~

All good things are tenuous. They end, fall apart.

Waves of anxiety splashed through every pore of my body.

Sleepless nights.

Fear that I would not wake up.

I ate sparingly to avoid gagging.

I felt like an exposed piece of human flesh, without skin and open to all elements.

Without control.

I feared being raped in the prison of my mind.

*Morris shudders as he remembers.*

Sophie was my rock. She was with me throughout this nine-month labyrinth.

She bore witness to my agony.

Nurtured and consoled me.

Three years of therapy followed.

I escaped the maze.

With newfound clarity, I was able to build my family, find a fulfilling job and reconnect with my

love for sports. For the first time I no longer lived in a corner of my body.  
My voice was strong.  
I could advocate for myself in the way I had always advocated for others.

I became a mensch.

~

Morris perceives life through a band of colors reminiscent of Joseph's coat of many colors. A realist or a romanticist? One would argue both. He's also eclectic, covets intimacy, is anarchic, speaks in metaphors and embraces spiritualism. In fact, they all co-exist, interface with one another and through this spectrum, influence his thoughts about time and space, regeneration, physical matter and the metaphysical.

~

His opioid pain killer wears off and the pain slowly returns. His eyes are fuzzy, as he sees a nurse leaving his room. She moves in a mechanical manner, and he wonders if she's human or a robot. He hears steps outside the door, followed by a knock and the familiar voice of the orderly, "Will you be having your evening bath?"

"Ah, no thank you, Jessie. I'm too tired. Just bring me some warm green tea and a petit Madeleine."

"Tomorrow is Wednesday and, I believe, it's your one hundred fifth birthday. Will you be wanting something special for your meals or a ceremony?" Morris declines any special recognition. He remembers that the last birthday he celebrated was his one hundredth when he was still living in the nursing section of Fleetwood Manor Senior Citizens' Home. After his one hundredth birthday Morris decided not to recognize any other, mostly because of the ordeal associated with his failing kidneys. At Fleetwood Manor, he received three sessions of dialysis per week, which meant that he divided his week between dialysis, recovery and everything else.

He suddenly remembers his ninety-fifth birthday.

~

Ninety-five, ninety-five.

I received my second letter from the German government. I was one of one thousand Holocaust Survivors worldwide. Again, I found a tidy sum of Euros in my bank account. Though reduced in mobility and general function, I was still sharp.

"*Opa*, write about your life," Kymani kept saying, "before it's too late."

He inspired me to write my memoir.

*A smile forms on Morris' face as he savors his love for Kymani and continues to ruminate about the memoir.*

Memoirs are written when you're practically dead, I thought. Fortunately, I recognized that I

might not be mentally able to write at that time.

Write a memoir?

I felt the weight and responsibility of having lived an unusual life. A life filled with loss, anger, love, joy and ironically - a Jewish life. I agreed to write my memoir as a legacy for my family. With Kymani's help, my story was published eighteen months later.

That surprised me. As much as I had always envisioned being a writer, I lacked confidence. The published memoir enriched my life in many ways and tapped a subterranean stream of interest to continue writing. I wrote short fiction. Many of the themes focused on people who lived or events that occurred on the margins of society.

Sadly, this was also the year my lifelong partner, Sophie, died.

My life wasn't filled with profound meaning until I met Sophie.

I had other relationships before, but Sophie was different, she did not fit the Joan Baez mold, my ideal.

She didn't fit any mold.

She was a chameleon.

If she felt good, she was full of energy and a radiance that transformed her facial features into the realm of exotic beauty, but the opposite was also true.

I was absolutely drawn to her, as I fumbled my way into maturation.

I miss her.

~

Morris turns on his left side, knees bent in towards the stomach, his pain in full bloom. He thinks of his late wife of seventy-two years and somehow sleeps soundly through the night.

#### Day 4:

Morris wakes to sounds of a celebration piped in over the speaker. Confused, he thinks it is to recognize his birthday but in fact it is to honor the returnees from Mars. This is the third human exploratory mission of the X Star project in the last five years. Whereas it takes only eight hours to get to the moon, it still takes a month for our rockets to reach Mars. Though half our diameter, Mars shares many similarities with earth and is considered a planetary prospect for temporary living quarters and the mining of precious metals.

It's day four and Morris decides to stop eating. Instead, he begins to sip water and diluted apple juice. Thankfully he spends most of the day in bed. His eyes closed, he hears a hum and is startled to recognize that it comes from deep inside him. He slips in and out of consciousness. He's not in pain and drifts between shadow and light. Sometimes he talks without knowing. It sounds like gibberish but if one listens closely, they have a uniform thread. He is trying to resolve a host of issues. Like a brush fire, he puts out some and others pop up.

But one resolution is finally in sight.

~

I'm vacillating between fullness and emptiness.

At fifty-three, a finance director of a large Quaker school. Proud of my role and the school.

Good parent and husband.

Content, yet something is missing.

Why is my search for community so ephemeral? It's like a game of peek-a-boo:

Visible.

Reachable.

Out of sight.

And visible again.

I began to volunteer for Quaker school board trusteeships. The volunteer work became meaningful. It formed a bridge to the future. When I retired, I continued to serve in that capacity.

I found the community that I was seeking,

The Society of Friends, a religious practice without hierarchy, in silent worship and fully participatory.

A community where I didn't have to hide or forfeit my Jewish identity.

~

Their practices of simplicity, peace, conflict resolution and stewardship were familiar and appealing. Unknowingly, I had been practicing them throughout my adult life.

~

A trembling smile forms on Morris' face as he recognizes, like bookends, that he was saved by Christians at the start of his life and as he moved into old age, the Quaker community completed the circle. He twists and turns in his bed, he's no longer talking, he's moaning, whimpering, and at times twitching. His hands are swollen, and he continues with his gibberish sounds.

A knock on his door no longer prompts a coherent response, as he's about to enter the netherworld, a passage from life to death.

The knock, reverberates and impacts a nervous impulse, activating a series of images, train like, across his mind.

~

It was 2039, still grieving my wife's passing. Ninety-seven.

A visitor from the German consulate tells me that I am one of fifty Holocaust survivors worldwide. This news, sent shivers, like shingles, down my spine.

I could not sleep, fixated on my own mortality.

My grieving took on another dimension.

Now, I mourned not just the loss of my dear Sophie, but the one and a half million Jewish children murdered in the Camps.

I mourned myself.

And others.

Whose wounds never healed.

I recognized that I represented not just myself or the Hofstein clan, but a generation of Jewish people.

"And what about all people who are denigrated?"

The people who live on the margins of society.

I mourn them, as well.

*All these separate ideas, visions and nerve impulses percolate through his mind in no particular order. Something akin to a tornado or a seizure upends all which is discernable, into fragments, some familiar, some obscured*

I am the last Holocaust survivor?

Am I worthy?

Interviewed by various news organizations across the globe. Invited to Israel by Yad Vashem.

Spoke at the museum and then at the Knesset. I met with other dignitaries.

I carried the sacred responsibility like a cross.

#### Day 5:

Morris lay quietly, his eyes closed, they flicker, suggesting heavy traffic of images which flutter throughout his psyche. There are perceived spasms of coherence that loop repeatedly. Not too surprisingly, they are images of past experiences. In fact, they all concentrate on the first third of his life.

Aren't all humans, like icebergs, only partially visible and mostly submerged?

It seems that he's no longer here and waiting to be transported somewhere else.

Suddenly, Morris becomes animated and sits up straight and rigid, eyes still closed, he yells at no one in particular, "Where's my backpack! We're traveling and I don't want to be late." He

then tries to get out of bed but finds that he can't move. His strength has disappeared. His body tenses and struggles without movement.

"I need to hide."

"I need to hide."

"Nazis will get me!"

~

Morris is physically anchored to the mattress with nowhere to go but somehow conjures in his mind that he has become invisible. He relaxes and slowly, awkwardly, slides down into a fetal position.

~

"One." "You." "I."

Harmo...y.y.y."

~

His face shows no strain or anguish. His eyes look empty. His mind, like an ancient computer is self-destructing. Data files, corrupted.

Is this by natural design?

Is it the great spirit's sarcastic way of stating, "You came into the world with nothing, and you will leave the same way?"

All these memories (the heart attack, visions of wartime Holland as a toddler, and traveling with Sophie) mingle, flutter and wash over him chaotically. He lay there in the Passage Room. The robotic arm glides over him scanning from head to toe, measuring vitals: heart, lungs, mind, liver, kidneys - everything is slowing down. The music piped in is influenced by Morris's current state of being. It becomes fainter and sweeter in tone, almost saccharine. The music's purpose is to reduce stress and to keep him tranquil, numb, as though floating in formaldehyde. He looks even paler than before and yellow blotches form on his arms and legs, ironically reminiscent of the color of the Jewish star his father was forced to wear during the war.

Day 6:

*The rains stop, the deluge recedes, and the sun breaks through the fleeing rain clouds. It is the Sabbath.*

Morris has not moved in twelve hours. There are some urine and blood stains apparent. The robotic arm hovers above and detects that the heart beats intermittently and somehow the mind and spinal cord are still sending nerve impulses. Faded images from his childhood float in his mind.

A small boy stands alone on a train platform, a suitcase by his side.

What happened to that boy?

His body twitches: his breathing is labored and erratic.

There's a stillness in the air.

The film is ending, the reel is turning, and the last frames begin to flap...

A last spasm of nerve impulses streams forward, specs of light on celluloid.

Then everything is quiet. The robotic arm notes that he dies alone, without human witness at sundown, 8:02PM on 5-5-2047, at the age of one hundred and five.

~

Tall translucent figures with more than two hands and no facial features undress him, wash and then wrap him in a linen gown. The Taharah, is a Jewish ritual preparing the dead for burial. Psalms are recited and it is a way of honoring the deceased as they are made ready for their final journey.

by Rebecca Rogerson

**when you aren't feeling well**

*when you aren't feeling well,*

be sure to take your medicine—4 tablespoons of holy basil in a large teapot—drink ½ cup, 5-6 times a day.

*when you are sick,*

be sure to take care of your thoughts; imagine ravens who carry off the feelings of unworthiness that capitalism breeds. watch them fly away with self-loathing into snow-tasting mountains, beyond low-hanging clouds, to feed boreal ghosts—the unwell-dead need food too.

*when you're under the weather,*

and your heart throbs and pulses differently—too fast—put a palm on your chest and sing life back into her. don't deny her the truth about the anthropocene or say, everything is going to be okay, rather, hum sweetness into the she-worries-too-much parts, the where-does-she-belong parts, the are-you-there-god-it's-me-rebecca parts.

*when you're ill,*

with a nausea that won't go away and knots that tangle up your gut because of gaza and the congo, syria and lebanon, and the war on the ukraine—dead children are the new normal, with the latest met gala styles mattering more.

(

lead and participate in protests to fight fascism, which threatens everything.

write letters to members of parliament and leaders who sign deals for more pipelines on Indigenous land.

organize online and offline with humans and nature to save humans and nature.

donate time, money and whatever resources you have.

make art that goes against regimes, states and systems.

bail anarchists out of jail.

speak to your family, friends and foes about *all of it*.

unlearn and learn wherever possible.

recognize your privileges, if any, and return them to their rightful owners.

care about those who are marginalized—humans, bees and aardvarks, too.

demand that all landfills be searched for 2SMMIW.

fight to find all the missing children and unmarked graves from the residential school genocide.

use your visibility to show up for those who feel invisible.

speak out against billionaires set to become trillionaires—tommy hilfiger and sex traffickers, and everything else that steals your air and gropes at your desires, then shits in your mouth and calls it dessert.

grow plants and drink teas to keep corporate rats from gnawing at your innards—lemon balm, pulsatilla, valerian, mugwort and bear root ward off the wear and tear of living in a neoliberal disaster.

he chews at our resolve night after night.

listen to community, we're all in it.

)

*when you feel like you can't go on,*

—not that you want to die, just not live in *this* anymore—go to the water— teaches MJ, a Sinixt Elder and listen to all her bodies. give rivers flowers, fruit, coins and tobacco. give a treat to a stranger's dog—gazan kids are chewing on scraps left by rodents. kiss your nerve-frying mother's cheek—she was an orphan. offer your saliva to the ground and intermingle with primordial waters. nap on the grass and relax—the white colonizer will never settle on stolen land.

*when your spirit feels low,*

and lively is long gone, let's play the piano—children can hum into homemade kazoos, and our hearts will remember who we are together, how mess and noise are needed in this febreze-ed epoch, marked by trad-wife-reels and middle school kids who gum at zyns and working-class gals who pay rent as only fans for our brothers, sons, fathers and granddads—digitization of the fittest.

when I don't know if my marriage will make it—I didn't sleep again last night—text me in the morning to see if I'm okay. I'll sip your *zuta* tea and you'll taste my bee balm flowers and we will remember why we need games night on the 5<sup>th</sup> night of Hanukkah with latkes piled higher than the snow outside—but not as high as the bodies hastily truck-dumped at karem abu salem.

*when your imagination seems to have left*

the building, instead of scrolling, ruminating, and hiding, make a fire and cuddle with furry

friends and other sober-minded people; let the flames soften the hard resins in your bark, and be reminded that vulnerability is a gift and empathy her master.

*can you?*

make (us) tea,

remind (us) that we're doing okay,

tell (us) we're good enough,

help (us) do the things we know are good for us,

light a candle and pray,

call (us) and find out how we are,

help to end gender-based violence and genocide/s,

dream (our) nightmares,

show up in (our) daydreams,

run (us) a bath filled with leaves and flowers, stems and roots,

share bulbs from your garden,

make (us) dinner,

donate to the gofundme's from young palestinians who are trying to reach (us),

hug (us) for too long,

mentor (our) sons.

offer help to (our) daughters,

welcome (our) theys and them,

invite (us),

walk (us),

learn about the ways that we are weird and wonderful,

kiss (us) goodnight,  
tell (us) we look great on the first day of our period,  
help (us) with helplessness.

*remember (us)*

go for a long walk in the forest,  
pray to whoever you want,  
read this,  
listen to an embarrassing banger: "I was made for loving you, baby; you were made for loving me. I can't get enough of you baby, can you get enough of me?"  
eat dessert now,  
stare at the moon, the stars and whatever else fucking musk has floating up there,  
take care of Elders and seniors—even the unwise ones,  
dance and thank the trees for being our planet's lungs.

*when you aren't feeling well,*  
*when you are sick,*  
*when you're under the weather,*  
*when you're ill,*  
*when you feel like you can't go on,*  
*when your spirit feels low,*  
*when your imagination seems to have left,*  
*can you,*  
*remember (us).*

## White Power, A Rap Sheet: *A Work-in-Progress*

We put on orange shirts once a year,

“Every child matters”.

Twice, if we remember Indigenous Peoples Day.

White power requires that it is  
seen as separate from harm.

It is  
harm.

Our well-being is our *\*priority\**

White power requires that it be  
seen as a *\*self-care\** Sunday.

It is materialism.

It  
is  
spiritual  
famine.

We attend a few powwows

and awkwardly recite land acknowledgements.

White power requires that  
BIPOC people become subservient  
on their own lands.

It  
exploits.

We love the smell of sweetgrass and  
have even been in a sweat lodge or two.

White power requires that it is  
seen to be \*non-racial\* despite  
constructing race, being racist  
and policing race.

It  
dehumanizes.

We periodically read BIPOC  
\*content\* to our kids at bedtime.

White power requires that it is  
seen to be humane  
—we are \*good people\*  
who are “well-intentioned”.

We are indifferent to the  
People of the Global Majority,  
and to their pain and suffering,  
especially at our hands.

It  
subjugates.

We attend a \*peaceful\* protest.

White power requires that it is  
seen to be righteous.  
It wants to set itself \*apart\*

from itself at its disposal.

It is  
surveillance.

White bodies take what we want  
from the People of the Global Majority,  
whenever we can.

White power requires that it be  
seen to care about BIPOC bodies.

White power's sustenance is  
homogeneity, suppression, exploitation,  
acculturation and appropriation.

It  
profits  
at  
every  
turn.

We post on IG about social issues  
that directly impact BIPOC  
people every day.

White power requires that it is  
seen to \*speak out\* It seeks  
\*opportunities\* to enhance status.  
There is no risk of loss, pain or anything  
detrimental to white bodies.

It is  
self-serving.

We are friends with, married to and have  
children with People of the Global Majority.

We believe we are \*in relationship\*

White power requires that it be  
viewed as caring and concerned.  
It works against BIPOCs' liberation.

It is  
murderous.

We seek \*immersive experiences\*  
in "exotic" cultures.

White power requires that it  
is never held accountable  
for the past or the present.

It  
enslaves  
and  
imprisons.

White bodies go where we want,  
when we want and how we want.

White power requires that  
white bodies are always  
protected and cared for.

It  
seeks  
\*comfort\*  
at  
any  
cost  
to  
BIPOC  
bodies.

White bodies \*think\* we know “what’s  
best” for BIPOC people, families,  
communities, territories and nations.

White power requires that it  
is \*right\* all the time,  
about everything.

It is  
deceit.

We are \*saddened\* by the past  
and are \*eager\* to tell BIPOC people  
what we’ve \*learned\* from reading a few books.

We are “different” and \*not as bad\*  
as *some* of our family and friends.

White power requires that its  
abusiveness, evil and savagery

are never spoken of, discussed  
or critiqued. It \*profits\* from  
police brutality,  
boil-water advisories,  
the prison-industrial system,  
Missing and Murdered Two-Spirit  
People, Women and Children,  
and \*genocides\*  
White bodies keep racist  
systems and structures in place.

It  
is  
vile.

We are beginning to learn about  
histories and contemporary issues,  
possibly through a \*non-dominant\* lens.

White power requires that it is  
seen to be “rational”, \*fair\*, and  
all-knowing.

It  
believes  
it  
is  
God.

We \*care\*—individually and corporately  
about BIPOC people.

White power requires that it  
is seen to be \*generous\* and  
\*noble\* while also being \*plagued\*  
with “responsibility”, busyness  
and self-importance.

It  
believes  
it  
is  
the  
centre  
of  
the  
universe.

White bodies are occasionally  
involved in \*diversity\* and \*inclusion\* training.

White power requires that  
white peace never be disturbed.  
BIPOC liberation and equity  
is \*terrorism\* for white  
bodies and white power.

It

is  
hate.

We view ourselves as  
\*non-violent\*, “liberal”,  
“democratic” or \*left-leaning\*

White power requires that it is  
never seen to be harmful  
or \*damaging\*

It is  
deadly.

White bodies love going to \*exotic\*  
places and seek adventure.

White power requires  
white bodies to be amused  
and entertained. We are  
kept safe at all costs.

It is  
\*ownership\*

We \*care\* about climate change,  
we recycle and use reusable straws.

White power requires that  
BIPOC places and spaces are  
treated with disregard and contempt  
—until we \*gentrify\*

Where white bodies work and \*play\*  
are prioritized and cared for.

White power exploits,  
terrorizes and consumes.

It is  
destruction.

We sleep well at night.

White power requires  
that white bodies are contented,  
especially at a cost to BIPOC bodies.

It is  
hypocrisy.

We are individuals.

White power requires that  
white bodies are seen to be  
\*persons\*, while BIPOC bodies  
are regarded as a singular  
and threatening monolith.

It  
decides  
who  
is  
human  
and

who  
has  
\*human  
rights\*

We “hear” and “see” BIPOC people  
and are \*empathetic\* to \*the cause\*

White power requires that it is  
not seen to be a \*perpetrator\* or  
cause of pain, \*murder\* or crisis.  
We demand to be seen as \*human/e\*,  
all the while we maim, harm and kill.

It is  
a  
death  
cult.

We feel we \*deserve\* and are  
\*worthy\* of relaxation, holidays,  
naps, respite, fun, joy, rest and time off.

White power requires that we  
get what we want,  
when we want it,  
all the time.

It is  
hedonism.

We believe our systems  
—science, medicine, religion, education, and  
governance is the \*bible\*, \*law\* and \*truth\*

White power requires that  
“A \*clique\* of the minority  
has the right to decide on  
the lives of the majority”  
– Steve Biko.

It is  
past  
and  
present-day  
\*colonialism\*

We \*expect\* to be served,  
distracted by, tended to and lauded,  
especially by BIPOC people.

BIPOC bodies are raped  
and pillaged for white power.

It is  
\*parasitic\*

We may spend money on  
BIPOC-owned and operated  
companies, initiatives and so on.

White power requires that it

keep an inventory of all that it does,  
especially what it deems good.

It is  
diabolical.

We compete with each other  
to “prove” how \*non-racist\* we are.

White power requires that it  
is never made to look bad;  
it wants \*issues\* and \*problems\*,  
particularly that don't \*affect\* or  
\*effect\* white bodies, to go away.

Hierarchy is our language.

It is  
corruption.

We are \*astonished\* to learn

about white violence.

We are shocked by “incidents”,  
“events” and \*bad behaviour\*  
of white leaders and powers,  
which are categorized as  
\*bad apples\* or separate from  
\*good\* white bodies.

We pearl clutch over  
\*denigrations\* in society

and deny our collusion.

It is  
rage.

We conflate \*our pain\* and personal  
experiences with the harsh lived  
experiences of BIPOC people.

White power requires that  
whiteness is always centred  
and is seen to be \*the victim\*

It is  
white  
women  
weaponizing  
our  
tears.

Our thoughts, feelings,  
\*opinions\* \*outrage\* \*desires\*  
and \*lives\* are more important  
than anyone or anything else.

White power is  
the land I occupy,  
the clothes I wear,  
the house I live in,  
the food I eat,

the music I listen to,  
the work I do,  
the rest I get,  
the life I have,  
the words I write.

\*It is\*  
this  
poem.

A Writing Prompt for White Bodies:

Part I –Use the asterisked words below, from *White Power, a Rap Sheet*, to create a poem or creative work that meaningfully examines the insidiousness of white supremacy, white power and whiteness as well as embodied racism.

**\*priority + self care + non racial + content + good people + peaceful + apart + speak out + opportunities + in relationship + immersive experiences + comfort + think + right + saddened + eager + learned + not as bad + profits + genocides + non dominant + fair + generous + noble + leaders + diversity + inclusion + terrorism + non violent + left leaning + damaging + exotic + gentrify + ownership + play + human rights + persons + empathetic + the cause + perpetrator + murder + human/e + deserve + worthy + bible + law + truth + clique + colonialism + expect + parasitic + non racist + issues + problems + affect + effect + astonishment + bad behaviour + shock + bad apples + good + denigrations + our pain + the victim + opinions + outrage + desire + lives + it is.**

Part II — Upon completing your creative work, asterisk or highlight keywords, images, phrases or ideas that question or push back against systemic and embodied white supremacy, white power and whiteness. Add these words, songs, images, or videos to the above list of words and share this with other white bodies and prompt them to engage with *White Power, A Rap Sheet: A Work-in-Progress*.

### **The Dead Go on Living Someplace Else**

I'm still waiting for you to call and tell me if today is the day you're going to die. The doctor has changed the date so many times, it's hard to know when he will arrive and inject you with a lethal dose of *it's all over*.

After vomiting up bile in between nose bleeds, you tell me *it's time*.

Opioids don't touch the pain anymore.

I realize you're looking for a kind of permission to die, a relief from suffering. Medically assisted suicide is the only fair thing that's been granted to you.

You're ready to be somewhere else, free from a broken-down marriage and incest that lives on in spiritual bodies—free from sticky grabs that took everything and gave nothing, not even omissions of guilt.

I want death for you, if you want to die.

I boil the kettle and rip open a teabag pouch, and put the tiny envelope in a recycling bin to hide my complicity in the Anthropocene.

A watched kettle nearly boils, so I wait, and remember all the cups of tea I made for you over the three days that we waited to hear you wouldn't be dying anymore, were almost dead and then, gone.

"Don't fly out," you said, "I don't want the fuss".

You wanted to handle Dead much like how you handled life, by yourself.

Before you stopped eating altogether, you squirrelled away nuts, seeds and dark chocolate chunks in your housecoat pocket, hoping to combat malignancy one bite at a time.

The people-pleaser, the do-everything-for-everyone-else-er, the peace-at-any-price-er, the

late-to-address-trauma-er; you begged me not to be the same.

You felt responsible for having cancer.

Healers are the hardest on themselves.

Let's forgive ourselves.

Let's forgive dying, too.

We started on the death journey together—as I had promised you. Bright suns, similar to the ones you painted, took you home.

Your death was beautiful. A white candle flickered when you said goodbye from afar.

Your relief from cancer and other human syndromes lasted for weeks. I felt your reprieve, your death-cation. It made me happy you were happy.

Your liberation was my joy. It helped to break up the heartbreak.

Things changed, as they do when we die, and you became a distant presence until I called you back to help me with chronic pain.

For four nights, you did something as close to God as you knew. Your hands worked in new ways, moving like luminous pink clouds across my body. This was our nighttime routine, until the fifth night, when you told me that it would end soon, as all things do.

You said that it would seem as though you were far away, but in fact, it would just be different.

Surrender became your language.

Finally, an end to blinding and binding pain and worried brows that churn over big things that become small things. You let go—not in one big experience but through hues and impermanent energies that only the universe understands.

You were no longer something I could touch, imagine or invoke—my best friend of 40 years.

Missing you never ends.

Stages of Dying—According to Kubler-Ross

1. Denial
2. Anger
3. Bargaining
4. Depression
5. Acceptance

## The Stages After Dying—According to a Dead Best Friend

1a. Adjustment/ Memories

1b-4. Dying and death *are* moving, an uncontained presence/s in constant movement and hues. Death is a becoming and a returning.

1c-4. All-encompassing infinite love. Everythingness.

2. Preparation—ties, connections and promises revisited in preparation for the next phase.

3. Clarity and acceptance—more shifts in beingness and surrender. Felt woven-ness into the fabric of the universe and beyond. Becoming a being among beings within beingness.

4. Perception and attachments shift and become something else, something more.

## Plenty of Hope

I know that I am plenty,  
stars told me so.

Told me that your blood is thick like mine.

Told me that your mother tongue speaks love into prayers, the holiest of songs, sung while under siege.

I know you are plenty,  
your smile helps me forget where you end and I begin.  
Forget the borders between us, the ones that cage you in.

Plenty of deadly drones

hunt you day and night, their relentless buzz tries to deafen life.

“We don’t carry hate, we carry melodies”, says Ahmed Muin Abu Amsha, a teacher who calls Gazan kids to drown out the *zanana* with song.

*Carry on, carry on, oh, camel driver, carry on. May God protect you<sup>1</sup>*, the children chant in the same A key as the drones.

I know we are plenty  
even while billionaires defy planet, crush life and deny interdependence.

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<sup>1</sup> Songs From the Rubble: [www.songsfromtherubble.com/songs/sheel-sheel-ya-ajmal-sheel/](http://www.songsfromtherubble.com/songs/sheel-sheel-ya-ajmal-sheel/).

Plenty of us  
are coming to save us;  
we are the trouble they fear.

Plenty of delicately  
harvested seeds are in our grasp.  
We plant, pick, eat and share to warm cold bodies.  
We will melt their frozen hearts.

We know we are plenty,  
no matter how much hot magma flows across land and into seas.  
“When will slain end?!” We cry.

Plenty of empty  
souls raise flags and claim false Motherlands.  
Surging waves wash through their greedy palms.  
We search for pieces of peace on pebbled shores, where the dead gather,  
still seeking rest.

Plenty of touch  
curls our toes.  
We invoke awe and remember that wonder cannot be extinguished.

Plenty of deadly,  
can't shoot off my hand that reaches for yours.  
We are gigantic care.

Plenty of shelter  
is out there, in the wilderness.  
Let us drink the creek water that I cleaned with my heart.

Plenty of no more  
late-stage capitalism to blanket us in its fear and rot.

Plenty of dance-induced  
fervour helps us to reclaim the divinity in Hafiz's words.  
Our threads are magic,  
we will rejoice in this single garment.

Oh, how I love you.

Plenty are the ventricles  
of my heart that know your children's names.  
I raise them each morning in prayer  
—Oh, Mother.  
Oh, Mother.  
Oh, Mother.

Plenty is the death toll,  
the devastation, and the genocides.  
To vote is not to choose.  
I choose you.

Plenty of courage  
is needed to protect life this year,  
to protect life next year.  
Protect life every year.

Plenty of “ground offensives”  
are “launched”.  
We will not stop proselytizing unity.  
We dream of a future where no one starves, and the land is no longer  
force-fed dismembered bodies.

We are plenty,  
even while you are forbidden to breathe or plant your ancestors' seeds, and the olives  
that your grandchildren will eat are largely unknown.

Plenty of sorry's.  
Sorry, *my people* are doing **that**, and we believe in **this**.  
Sorry, we talk about *our* trauma and then kill you with a curated poison, deadlier  
than what our grandparents choked on.  
Sorry, we've forgotten kinship and the rich taste of meals best eaten  
together.  
Sorry, we say nothing and do nothing.  
We save our empty words in wooden boxes beside our  
grandmother's Shabbat candlesticks on mantles made of  
unanswered terror.

Plenty of goodness  
is what I want for you.

Plenty of intact bodies,  
doing living-body things.  
Going to weddings, not funerals.  
Walking nieces to school and not to rubble piles where the limbs of their  
mother lie somewhere beneath.

Plenty of play  
by the sea, where salty drops soothe throat lumps and stabbing stomach pains.  
Quiet or dead, the little boys and girls are still here.

Plenty of traditional  
foods to eat.  
Even this nourishment cannot fill the unbearable losses.

Plenty of safe passages,  
everywhere.

Plenty of  
flees no more.

Plenty of free  
from surveillance.

Free from dehumanization.

Free from weapons.

Free from permits.

Free from starvation.

Free from murder.

Free from harassment.

Free from hate.

Plenty of  
well-loved shoes in sturdy homes made of bricks that never taste bombs.

Plenty of laughter  
to evict inexorable sorrow.

Plenty of

Plenty of

Plenty of  
hope.

## Belonging

You belong here, you always have.

There has always been a place for you, not at the table, nor down the road, nor in a single house of worship.

There's always been a place for you here, in your heart, in our hearts and with the land, and in the hearts of children who see your ugly parts and play with you, love you, anyway.

Why don't you trust this?

Trust that you belong here.

Your heart is a place of belonging that no one can steal or take; no one.

You don't trust the little birds who visit you—they know your kind heart.

You don't trust the ants that circle your kitchen drain and hope not to drown.

You don't trust the silent markers that show you the hidden crevices in mountains.

You don't trust the secret ancestors that watch over land, seas, wind and soil—they welcome you without knowing you.

You have been our daughter from the beginning.

Even when you gave yourself away, threw yourself to unkind boys on baseball fields.

When you took cheap drugs in hopes of lifting off a calling to heal, we have always been with you, by your side and in your veins—a shiver across your soul.

We only know how we love you and how far you've come.

How beauty, joy, and courage find your door, even while you bash at your guts with worry and try to chew away trauma from your cuticles.

The search for safety is not in a buzzing hornet's nest; the mind.

Do not sting yourself anymore.

You are enough.

We look into your snowy eyes and see how full your spirit is.

How much you care about everything, all the time, but somehow you don't care for yourself.

You belong here, at this ugly time on a beautiful planet made of stars.

You matter in all you do.

When you go {die} and become something else, something more, you will finally understand mattering.

You will wish—as we have wished for you all along—to grasp the meaning of your life, of life, all life. Everything in it, around it, through it, and made up of it.

Pay homage to your life at least once a year.

Take the time to thank life for life, for having a planet to belong to, that you belong on, and belong with, until you descend and ascend to realms of infinity, where you will be released from mattering.

Released from fears of enoughness to belong to something else; to all of it, again.

Listen to us when we tell you—and your planet shows you every day— how life offers life and more life!

You belong, just as I do, as we all do, just as life does.

*Repeat:*

*I belong here, I belong here. We belong. We belong. We belong to life and planet. We belong to ourselves. We belong to each other.*

Mattering is who we are in meandering universes.

We try to carve out our stories, while they are already written across our hearts.

Swoon across precipices of eternity.

Kiss cedar leaves and remember how you are adored.

Wear beads: white, black, yellow and green to honour the planet.

Share the load of pain.

When angered, hold each other's hands and let sweat intermingle with hopeful primordial waters.

You belong to me.

You belong to us.

You belong to grains of sand, anthills, flower petals and stormy skies.

You belong to injured deer and turtles older than your grandparents.

You belong to the crumbs that hide beneath heavy snow and feed chickadees all winter.

You belong to all of us, to all of it and more.

*Repeat:*

*I belong to you. I belong to myself. I belong to all of it. I belong to everything.*

We are the belonging {we seek}.



Gouge, dig,  
cement.

pour

My grandmother dug a basement  
with a son who would die  
before he could run.

while she was in labour,

She served things  
Jello.

preserved, concealed in

Pets  
flee  
behind furnaces, where kids play

hide-and-sick.

Mice scavenge for scraps

from troubled families.

Grief collects  
fixtures,  
on stucco-ed ceilings,  
plastered  
plastered fathers.

on outdated

by

Pears soap sits on a shelf,  
clean.

no one is

We ignore our whiteness,

we ignore our sins.

And of those that we Other,  
demand,

we

“Wash off your skin!”

“Dry up stories of your glistening ancestors”.  
of nature,

Those who were the colour

Anguish hangs,  
beside yellowing prints of dogs playing poker and  
relatives,

those who are the colour of nature.  
and we won't feel it,  
photos of our drunk

who we never knew.

Springtime floods our houses with  
we try to escape.

memories that

Debris and water rush in,  
promising to drown us.

History keeps speaking

truths.

The well that I fell into,  
became a toy,  
a car that I drove around in,  
nowhere,

I'm waiting for you,

I find our voices

that I lived in,

going

frozen in time.

grandmother,  
rescue me.

in wells of remembering.

## Water, Water

*rain*      Water,      down  
on      Water      me,

fill my eyes with clean rivers.

bend my body, curve it, love it, show me how to give in and not give up.

*kiss*      Water,      me  
back      Water      to life,  
let me      taste your saliva.

show      *primordial*      Water,      liquid,  
me      Water      paradise  
in your endless depths, where      gilded queens cradle thrown-overboard children of  
the soil.  
find another mother in the sea.

*teach*      Water,      me flow,  
Water  
when      my blood  
runs      dry and labia curls up.  
dirt,      worms, grass, crow dung and fallen birds, kiss life back into me.  
feed      on life; it has no bounds.

buck drink from meandering streams and crocodiles meddle in river weeds—their camouflaged eyes speak magic into their dinosaur mothers.

*clear me,*      Water,      cleanse me,  
                    Water  
thrash                      on my body  
and at                      my door.  
cum me                      alive relentless storm.

*lick my*      Water,      body,  
                    Water  
comfort                      me with a warm tongue.  
rinse                      snot from my nose and slip coolly between my toes.  
carry                      my tears down drains and wash away goodbyes.

*touch*      Water,      *me*              how you touched  
                    Water  
my                      ancestors,  
let me                      drink you in.  
she is the                      elixir.

*show us*      Water,      how you  
                    Water  
wear down                      mountains  
even while                      weary.  
you carry                      the world inside of you.

                    Water,  
                    Water  
*nomadic*                      *mother* you never hunger,

you are golden fluid.

*carry us* Water, through life,  
Water into the unknowns that we fear  
—tidal waves and turbulent days.  
we are alive, forget despair.

*hold me* Water, as you hold  
Water yourself, unrestrained  
oceans, glaciers, canals, lakes, waterfalls.  
steadily we swim and reach equilibrium.

*my eyes* Water, see only you,  
Water my heart is yours.  
I am made of you.  
show me how to cradle life and be a memory-keeper, too.

*gift* Water, my hands  
Water with your taste  
and my pussy with your caress.

The world globe is kept in motion by fire, wind and air, and every kind of creature is sheltered within it. The heaven with all its glory encloses the upper part of this universe. But where would be the human being whose sight ever succeeded in penetrating such heights? The wide round of the earth, together with the waters that stream all around it, and everything that flows above the abysses, is all contained within the globe of the world. Nor can any human being ever grasp that. Finally, the abyss, with all its wonders, also lies on the base of this universal whole. And where would be the human being who ever succeeded in reaching that base? No one can do it, only God who laid the foundation. But the human being lives on this globe and is enclosed by its system. Therefore no human being's understanding can reach beyond this border.

— Hildegard von Bingen

## C O N T R I B U T O R S

**Richard Flout's** poetry has appeared in the *Blue Unicorn* and *Suisun Valley Review*. A practicing psychotherapist, his writing is informed by a wide range of life experiences as a landscape gardener, an Aikido practitioner, an improv theater actor, and a singer. He has had a lifelong interest in the arts as they relate to personal growth, as well as integrating one's spirituality with the healing process, and has facilitated contemplative prayer and meditation groups for many years. He and his wife, Jane Ferguson Flout, writer and former journalist, live in San Rafael, California.

**Melissa Witcher** (she/ela) was born in Brazil, raised in the U.S. and has lived in São Paulo since 2011. She is left-handed and prefers cats. Her rejections far outnumber her acceptances but her writing can be found in the wild & wonderful literary hinterlands. She muses at [atawdrymind.substack.com](http://atawdrymind.substack.com).

**Matthew Hand** is a southern writer living and working in Georgia. His fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Arkansas Review*, *The San Antonio Review*, *The Lemonwood Quarterly*, and *Bull: Men's Fiction*, among others, and has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and the PEN/Dau Short Story Prize. He is currently pursuing his MFA at Bennington College. Outside of writing, Matthew is an active presence in his local theatre community. More of his work can be found at [southernmelancholic.com](http://southernmelancholic.com).

**Patrick Shiroishi** is a Japanese-American multi-instrumentalist, composer & poet based in Los Angeles. He has presented work & performed at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Natural History Museum, Broad Museum, commissioned by the LA Philharmonic, conducted masterclasses at Cal Arts & UCLA, & has toured around the world in various solo/band configurations including The Armed & contemporary classical ensemble Wild Up. He has also read his poetry at the Japanese American National Museum & JACCC.

**Amanda Niamh Dawson** grew up in New England, worked in New York in art and publishing and now lives on the Sonoma Coast in California. A poem won an award in the 2023 Poetry Society of Michigan's Peninsula Poets Contest. Work has appeared recently in *Action*, *Spectacle*, *Pomona Valley Review*, *The Dewdrop*, *Literary Yard*, *Hudson Valley Writers Guild*, *The Ulu Review*, *The Ekphrastic Review*, *The Galway Review*, and *Kelp Journal's 2025 Ocean Anthology*. Instagram: [@thedawsonian](https://www.instagram.com/thedawsonian)

**Richard Jacobs** My short fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in the *Sewanee Review*, *the Penmen Review*, *October Hill Magazine*, *the Lindenwood Review*, *Chicago Quarterly Review*, *Euphony Journal*, *Passager*, *HeartWood*, *Inscape*, and *Bookends Review*. My first novel, *The Hazel Wood*, will be published by New Meridian Arts this year.

**Henry Cherry** is a winner of the Silver Needle Press Award for Poetry. Once a cowhand, now an award journalist and teacher, his fiction, poetry, and criticism have appeared in *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *Coachella Review*, *Cathexis Northwest Press*, *Australia's Cordite Review*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Loch Raven Review*, and *The Louisiana Review*. He also received a Los Angeles Press Club award in 2023. His photography is collected by Los Angeles Public Library and the Claremont Colleges.

**George Zancola** is interested in writing short prose and poetry about the marginalized in Canadian society. A past winner of an Ontario Arts Council Grant he has published in the *Humber Literary Review*, *Nothing Without Us*, and the *Open Minds Quarterly*. He lives in Toronto.

**Alex Rainey Ward** Most recently, I've published in *Sybil Journal*, *Adelaide Literary Magazine* and *The Adirondack Review* by I'm a poet and novelist who lives a peripatetic life. Currently, I'm spending time in Istanbul.

**Linda C. Wisniewski** has been writing ever since she won a loaf of bread in an essay contest in parochial school. After careers as a bureaucrat, librarian, and freelance reporter for the Bucks County Herald, she fully embraced the writer's life. The author of a memoir, two feminist time-travel novels, and an essay collection, her work has been widely published in anthologies and journals. Linda lives with her husband and two cats in Doylestown, PA.

**Roberto Ontiveros** is a fiction writer, artist, and journalist. Some of his work has appeared in the *Threepenny Review*, the *Baffler*, *AGNI* and the *Believer*. His debut collection, The Fight for Space, was published by Stephen F. Austin State University Press, and his second book, Assisted Living, was published by Corona/Samizdat Press.

**Celia A. Sorhaindo** was born in The Commonwealth of Dominica. She migrated with her family to England in 1976, when she was 8 years old, returning home in 2005. She is co-compiler of *Home Again: Stories of Migration and Return* (Papillote Press, 2009), and author of poetry collections *Guabancex* (Papillote Press, 2020), *Radical Normalisation* (Carcanet Press, 2022) and *ABiYA* (2023).

**Michael Egan** In addition to writing fiction and nonfiction, I am a contemporary historian teaching in Hamilton, Ontario.

**C.A. Coffing** holds an MFA in Writing from Lindenwood University. A self-published novelist and playwright, her work has been published in *Flash Fiction Magazine*, *Does it have Pockets*, *Ginosko Literary Journal*, and elsewhere. She was a 2013 Santa Fe Writers Project Finalist, third prize recipient in Flash Fiction Magazine's 2021 contest, a 2022 Pushcart Prize nominee and a 2023 Best Micro-Fiction nominee. An avid eavesdropper, she currently writes and waits tables in a small river town.

**Robert McGill** My work has appeared in *Narrative*, *American Fiction*, *Louisiana Literature*, the *Saturday Evening Post*, the *Southwest Review* and other publications.

**Glen Delpit** I come from poets and kings, bankrupts and seekers, failed salesmen and hysterical preachers. Born in New Orleans and raised in California. Allan Hancock College. A working musician for the last 45 yrs. Being inducted to the Valley Music Hall Of Fame this coming Sept. Singer/songwriter, bandleader.

**Nancy Harris** A native of rural Pennsylvania, Nancy writes fiction in northern California. Her stories have appeared in several journals and magazines including *Passagers Journal*, *The Thieving Magpie*, and *Funny Pearls UK*. She holds a graduate degree in English Literature from San Francisco State University.

**Allison Collings** My work has been published with *Blast Furnace Press*, *Havok by Splickety Publishing*, *Shark Reef*, *Easy Street*, *Literally Stories*, *the Ravens Perch*, *E-Ratio*, *California Quarterly*, *the Banyan Review*, *the Phare*, *Black Fox Literary Magazine*, *New Contexts 2: An International Collection of New Poetry & Prose and New Contexts 4*, *Evening Street Press & Review*, *La Presa*, *Front Range Review*, *BigCityLit*, *Kerning: A Space for Words*, *Pebbles on the Strand: An International Collection of Short Stories*, *Cider Press Review*, *Anti-Heroin Chic*, *Traverse*, *the Bangalore Review*, and *Literary Mama*. I am editor of *Upstate Life Magazine* and a journalist with *Oneonta*, *New York's Daily Star* and *Kaatskill Life Magazine*.

**Swetha Amit** is an MFA Graduate from the University of San Francisco. The author of a memoir, *A Turbulent Mind*, and three chapbooks. Her words appear in *Had*, *Bending Genres*, *Ghost Parachute*, *Gone Lawn*, *Cream City Review*, and others. A member of the Writers Grotto, her stories have been nominated for the Pushcart Prize, Best of the Net, Best Small Fiction, and Best Microfiction. She can be found on [@swethaamit](#) on [Instagram](#) and [@whirlwindtots](#) on Twitter.

**Lenore Weiss** lives in Oakland, California and is a member of The Writers Grotto. She serves as the Associate Creative Nonfiction (CNF) Editor for *Mud Season Review*. Recently, Lenore won the *Magpie Magazine* Clark Closser Memorial Literature Award in Nonfiction. Her environmental novel *Pulp into Paper* and poetry collection, *Video Game Pointers* were both published in 2024. Prior poetry collections form a trilogy about love, loss, and mortality. Lenore is seeking representation for her novel *All Gone!*

**John Picard** is a native of Washington D.C. currently living in Greensboro North Carolina. He has published fiction and nonfiction in *New England Review*, *Narrative Magazine*, *Iowa Review*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, and elsewhere. A collection of his stories, *Little Lives*, was published by *Main Street Rag*. See more at [johnmpicard.com](#)

**Douglas Cole** has published two novels and eight poetry collections. His first novel, *The White Field*, won the American Fiction Award. His poetry collection, *The Cabin at the End of the World*, won a Best Book Award for urban poetry and the International Impact Award. His screenplay of *The White Field* won Best Unproduced Screenplay award in the Elegant Film Festival. He writes a column called "Trading Fours" for the online journal *Jerry Jazz Musician*,

including recorded collaborations with musicians. His work has appeared in *Beloit Poetry*, *Fiction International*, *Valparaiso*, *The Gallway Review* and *Two Hawks Quarterly*. He received the Leslie Hunt Memorial prize in poetry, Best of Poetry Award from *Clapboard House*, First Prize in the "Picture Worth 500 Words" from *Tattoo Highway*, and the Editors' Choice Award in fiction by *RiverSedge*. He has been nominated Eight times for a Pushcart and Nine times for Best of the Net. His website is <http://douglastcole.com>

**Marilyn Davie** received her MA in English Literature and Composition at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst and a Fiction Writing Certificate at the University of Washington. Growing up in the Pacific Northwest has influenced her values and beliefs. She has previously worked as a freelance editor and video storyteller and now enjoys participating in the Amherst Writers and Artists Method. Marilyn Davie's writing explores her lived experience with aging and disability.

**Órfhlaith Foyle** is a short story writer, poet and dramatist and lives in Galway. Doire Press published her third collection of short stories Three Houses in Rome September 2023.

Her work has appeared in the *London Magazine*, *The Dublin Review*, *Wales Arts Review*, *The Manchester Review*, *The Stinging Fly*, the *Gorse journal* and various anthologies. She wrote and directed the radio dramas "May's End" and "How I Murdered Lucrezia", premiered on Newstalk Radio in October 2021 and 2023 respectively.

Órfhlaith Foyle received an Arts Council of Ireland Literary Bursary October 2025 Her fourth short story collection The Other Poet Drives a Black Mercedes will be published by Doire Press Autumn 2026.

**Martina Reisz Newberry** is the author of 7 books of poetry. Her most recent book is Sadie: Queen of the Swollen Nose Saloon (Alien Buddha Press, April 2025). She is also the author of Beyond Temples, (Deerbrook Editions, May 2024), Glyphs (Deerbrook Editions, May 2022) Blues for French Roast with Chicory (Deerbrook Editions, February 2020), the author of Never Completely Awake ( from Deerbrook Editions ), Where It Goes (Deerbrook Editions, August 2014), Learning by Rote. (Deerbrook Editions, May 2012), Running Like a Woman with Her Hair on Fire. (Red Hen Press, September 2005), and Take the Long Way Home, (Unsolicited Press, August 2017). Newberry has been included in *The Cenacle*, *Cog*, *Blue Nib*, *Braided Way*, *Roanoak Review*, *THAT Literary Review*, *Mortar Magazine*, and many other literary magazines in the U.S. and abroad. Her work is included in the anthologies Marin Poetry Center Anthology, Moontide Press Horror Anthology, A Decade of Sundays: L.A.'s Second Sunday Poetry Series-The First Ten Years and many others. She has been awarded residencies at Yaddo Colony for the Arts, Djerassi Colony for the Arts, and Anderson Center for Disciplinary Arts. BIO Passionate in her love for Los Angeles, Martina currently lives there with her husband, Brian, a Media Creative. Her city often is a "player" in her poems.

**Vartan Koumrouyan** is a writer living in Paris. Working on Manila Nights, from his travels in the Philippines and the jungle of Palawan. YouTube channel [Palawan Jungle Days](#).

**Ben Guterson's** writing includes the Edgar Award-nominated middle-grade novel Winterhouse (Holt/Macmillan) and the New York Times bestseller The World-Famous Nine (Little, Brown/Hachette). His stories have appeared in several literary journals, including *Burningword*, *BlazeVOX*, *Superpresent*, *Funicular*, and *SORTES*.

**Robert Vivian** Last book under his own name was All I Feel Is Rivers, but he did publish a novel under a pseudonym last year. He teaches at Alma College and fly fishes as much as possible.

**Samina Hadi-Tabassum** was born in Hyderabad, India and immigrated to Chicago with her family in the early 1970s. Her first book of poems, Muslim Melancholia (2017), was published by Red Mountain Press. She has published poems in the *Journal of Postcolonial Literature*, *Papercuts*, *The Waggle*, *Indian Review*, *Mosaic*, *Main Street Rag*, *Pilgrimage*, *riksha*, *Clockhouse*, *The Canopy Review*, *Tin House* and *Souvenir*. Her poems were performed on stage in 2017 as a part of the Kundiman Foundation and Emotive Fruition event focusing on Asian American poetry. In 2019 and 2025, she was selected to perform for the Gwendolyn Brooks Poetry Contest. Samina Hadi-Tabassum also publishes short stories: "Maqbool" was published in *New Orleans Review* in June 2018 and was a chapter in the New Moons Anthology edited by Kazam Ali; "Lateef" was published in *Another Chicago Magazine*; "Khalid" was published in *Louisville Review*; "Adnan" is being published in the *William and Mary Review*; and "Sajid" won the distinguished award in the Best American Short Story Collection 2021 and was originally published in *Chicago Quarterly Review*. Her micro essay titled "Hair/Baal" was nominated for a Pushcart from "Nonwhite and Woman: 131 Micro Essays on Being in the World" edited by Darien Hsu Gee and Carla Crujido for Woodhall Press.  
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**Casey Morris'** writing has appeared in *Decadent Serpent*, *Atropos Poetry Magazine*, and is forthcoming in *The Bluebird Word*.

**Catherine Strisik** Poetry collection, Goat, Goddess, Moon forthcoming with Holy Cow! Press (October 2025). Publisher & editor of *Taos Journal of Poetry*; former poet laureate of Taos, New Mexico; writing coach for poets & essayists; author of: The Mistress; Thousand-Cricket Song; Insectum Gravitis; forthcoming: Goat, Goddess, Moon, with over 30 years of publications with poems translated into Greek, Persian, and Bulgarian.  
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**Erica Miriam Fabri** is a Brooklyn-based poet and the author of two books: Morphology (Write Bloody Publishing) and Dialect of a Skirt (Hanging Loose Press). Morphology was the winner of the Jack McCarthy Book Award and Dialect of a Skirt was a finalist for the Paterson Poetry Prize and included on the bestseller lists for Small Press Distribution and the Poetry

Foundation. She teaches writing at Pace University and College of Staten Island.  
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**Mark Jackley's** poems have appeared in *Fifth Wednesday*, *Sugar House Review*, *Tampa Review*, *Natural Bridge*, *Ginosko Literary Journal*, and other journals. Read more of his poetry at [www.markjackley.com](http://www.markjackley.com)

**Edward Johnson** is a legal aid attorney who has spent the past 30 years representing people living on and over the edge of homelessness. He is currently living fulltime in a cabin in the North Cascades working on poems, old and new. He has poetry out or forthcoming in *Eclectica Magazine*, *Beatnik Cowboy*, *Indefinite Space*, *Main Street Rag*, *Packingtown Review*, *cc&d*, *The Dissident Voice*, *Evergreen Review*, *Double Dutch*, *Whisk(e)y Tit Journal*, *Winamop*, *Abraxas Review*, *Dog Throat Journal*, *Artvilla*, *The MacGuffin* and *Wailing & Gnashing*.

**Joseph Gosler** was born in the Netherlands during WWII. He immigrated to Israel with his family in 1949 and subsequently to the USA in 1953, where he has lived since. In 2020 his memoir, Searching for Home: The Impact of WWII on a Hidden Child was published by Amsterdam Publishers. Since then he has been writing short fiction and his story, "The White Frog" was accepted by *Adelaide Literary Magazine* for their 79th issue. The Last Holocaust Survivor spans the period 1942 to 2047.

**Rebecca Rogerson** she/her is a Jewish anti-oppression-based scholar, author, folk herbalist and educator. She lived and worked for two decades in this capacity in South Africa, Botswana and Tkaronto. She taught in the Social Service Worker Program at Seneca College for a decade. She has a Master's in interdisciplinary studies and has authored multiple editions of HDEV and co-authored a neuroscientific-based paper about brain circuitry and trance. As a neurodivergent who lives with chronic pain, she finds solace in cultivating plants and amateur opera singing. She channels her despair and healing efforts into writing on Sinixt territory in British Columbia.