ABOUT US:

Twisted Vine is a student-run journal curated by the Master of Arts Interdisciplinary Studies program at Western New Mexico University. We are committed to publishing both emerging and established literary and visual artists. Twisted Vine seeks to represent an eclectic mix of ideas and values. We look for both experimental and traditional forms of prose and poetry and want to provide a diverse experience for our readers. We have a particular interest in pieces that challenge or redefine expression in new and inviting ways.

On the Cover:
Sacristy Fledgling
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TWISTED VINE

LITERARY ARTS JOURNAL

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A Message from our Managing Editor:

HAVING BEEN AFFORDED the honor of writing the preface to this edition of the Twisted Vine, I find myself struggling for words to do each and every submission justice. As the managing editor, I have seen the huge amount of time and effort that the staff have put in to creating this journal. We have had the privilege of reviewing some fantastic submissions throughout this period, which has made it an incredibly difficult decision for us in terms of what we were able to publish. However, this is a great problem to have, and a task that we thoroughly enjoyed undertaking.

With that being said, it ties perfectly with the most important part of this edition, which is of course the contributors. The screeners had had nothing but praise for every submission and as a result have had a tough time deciding which pieces to select. We all understand the thought and hard work that has gone into each and every submission, and for that we are in-credibly thankful for all of your hard work. Without the work of the contributors, the Twisted Vine journal would not be what it is today, so for that we thank you.

There is a huge amount of people to thank for the publication being able to be published this year, especially with the global pandemic that we are experiencing and the world seeming to be put on pause. Having said that, I am indebted to my team here for the hard work that they have done, and the team work that I have witnessed to enable us to produce this issue of this journal. I would finally like to thank you, as the reader. We hope you enjoy reading these pieces as much as we did. The wide range of poetry, fiction, non-fiction and visual arts means that there is something for everyone to enjoy.

This period of time that we are all going through has bought the arts to the centerfold of how we are getting through our days. As the world changes, the arts will become more and more important. This journal is simply a reflection of the outstanding work that goes on around the world. Thank you for taking the time to read our journal.

~ Harry Wetton

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SPEEDWELL

DAVID OBUCHOWSKI

THE HILLSIDE TEEMED with speedwells and dandelions. It was all so lush, Elizabeth found herself unable to resist. She slid off the rough concrete ledge of the sound barrier that they'd erected between the highway extension and her old neighborhood to muffle the roar of traffic, and she waded into the weeds.

They'd built the highway---and the wall, as well---only five years earlier. At the time, it seemed tragic to see the woods razed. The mounds and mountains of ensuing dirt piled up by grimy, grunting heavy machinery was not only a sad sight, but a disgusting one. The cacophony of the construction was so loud it could be nerve-wracking.

But now? Now it seemed as if it were always here, as if it had always been like this.

***

Five years ago. That's when it had all started changing. Not just the destruction of the woods to make way for the highway. But the pain, too. Her parents had treated her with ibuprofen and acetaminophen, had chalked it up to the changing hormones of an eighth grader. She would curl up in her darkened bedroom weeping softly, her soundtrack the relentless metallic pounding of those machines out there amongst the trees.

One day the violent sounds of razing had stopped, and the deeper more thunderous sounds of earth-moving sounds had begun. Her pain had given way to something else, as well. It had been a relief to escape the agony, but in its place were raging fevers. The thermometer said she was burning up, but her chills made her feel as if she were freezing to death.

More acetaminophen, more ibuprofen.

A terrible flu season, her parents supposed, and so, too, did Elizabeth.

Antibiotics. More acetaminophen. More ibuprofen.

The so-called terrible flu season stretched out beyond the cold winter and the wet spring.

The time had passed painfully and miserably. And, yet, somehow quickly, too.

It was the blood that had caused everyone sufficient alarm. That had started in her sophomore year. Doctors were visited and specialists were consulted. And then there were the tests and the labs and the scopes and the imaging.

And, finally, answers.

But the answers had only begged more questions. What can we do about it?

It was always it. Never spoken by name. Never spelled out in letters. It was a word too terrifying and offensive to be applied to someone so young.

***

The rough stems with fuzz like microscopic thorns scratched the skin of her shins as she made her way down through the brush. Someone honked their horn, and the urgent, ugly tone pitched steadily downwards as the car sped past her and away from her, east toward the city. They meant to warn her, she assumed. They meant to jar her into awareness so she wouldn't walk onto the highway, into traffic, into certain death. She could understand the driver's alarm---or at least their concern---when they spotted her coming down off the wall, down the embankment, toward the traffic. But, she was well aware of what she was doing, and Elizabeth had no intention of walking into some horrific oblivion.

She only wanted somewhere to rest. Somewhere to think. Somewhere to be scared. Somewhere out in the wide open, but hidden all the same. She paused halfway down the hill. The tips of the stems and purple flowers reached as high as her hips. This will do nicely, she thought, and she lay down in the veronicas.

***

They had started with the most mild treatments, which had only made her sick and hurt in different ways than she had previously been sick and had hurt. These strange medicines had only nauseated and discomforted and distressed her all while doing nothing to stop it. Perhaps if they had succeeded in doing anything, it was to reunite Elizabeth with her own body, which she'd come to resent; regard as traitorous. But in this new misery, she'd come back to her physical self, not just as a vessel for her spirit or thoughts, but as a compatriot, a partner in a fight that they were losing but were still striving to win.

The highway, which had been opened officially the year before, was still new, but the machinery and the noise---just as the trees that had once grown there---were now gone. Things were no longer changing. They had changed.

She would change, too, she knew. Only she had no idea how.

***

Above her, a small silver jet cut across the indigo sky leaving a white contrail in its wake. She closed her eyes and inhaled deeply, smelling diesel fumes and earth and salt. With her eyes closed, the traffic of the highway sounded something like an ocean, each speeding car a wave rushing the sandy shore. She opened her eyes and the jet was gone. The contrail remained.

She closed her eyes again. "The chances are very good," she whispered weakly, repeating what the doctor had told her and her parents, as he explained the intricacies of the procedure and her fragile, critical network of blood vessels and nerves. The chances are very good.

When he'd said it, he sounded somehow both encouraging and pitying. When she heard herself say it, there was nothing but pity. She opened her eyes again and saw that the contrail had smudged slightly by the unseen air currents of the upper atmosphere.

She closed her eyes and tried again.

"The chances are very good." She inhaled through her nose and exhaled through her mouth. It was what they called a deep and cleansing breath in the yoga classes she had once tried, but that did nothing but bring her more pain. In this moment, though, the term volcano breath, came to mind---a fragment of a memory from a mostly forgotten time: kindergarten. Volcano breath, Ms Orizbal would tell the class if they got too worked up. Deep breath through your nose, and push it out through your mouth.

She opened her eyes to the sky. The contrail was softer now than it had been before.

She squeezed her eyes shut. Tears rolled down, leaving a wet trail on her skin, over her temple and into her hair. "Elizabeth," she said loudly, clenching her fists around stems of speedwells, "the chances are very good. They are very good, Elizabeth."

She opened her eyes, and her vision was blurry with tears. She could still make out a gauzy ribbon of white, leaving a scar where the jet had sliced through the sky.

Blood vessels. Nerves.

She blinked the tears away, and now she shouted, she yelled, she screamed so that she might be heard by someone somewhere over the rush of the cars and the roar of the tractor-trailers. "The chances, Elizabeth, are very good." She tore the plants from their roots and held the speedwells to the sky as if offering them to the gods.

"Tell me my chances are good!"

But no answer came. No sign was given.

Volcano breath, Elizabeth…

She did as she imagined her teacher told her. And the unseen traffic once again sounded like the ocean.

Her fear remained, but her calm returned. Though she had learned to live with both.

The chances are very good.

Perhaps in time there would be nothing that remained of this but a scar. A black asphalt highway stitched across the soft, light landscape. A contrail.

A scar was not so bad.

Elizabeth brought her arms back to her body. She opened her hands and the speedwells spilled out across her chest. And, above her, in the indigo sky, the contrail was nothing more than a faint wisp of white.

THE BUFFALO WORD FOR GOODBYE

DON STOLL

RYAN THREE BULLS looked at his phone while he waited for Mr. Nelson to finish the call he'd taken just as Ryan sat down. The cafeteria manager had called Mr. Nelson. Ryan had no interest because the food was always bad no matter what they tried. Ryan went on espn.com in order to study team statistics so that he could find encouragement. He had a bad feeling about the upcoming game against the Ravens. But he knew the Patriots' numbers were good and that they would make him feel better. Going only by the numbers, the Patriots should be fine.

Ryan didn't think it was fair that Mr. Nelson had decided he would be the only student at Spotted Elk School to miss the Buffalo Harvest. Yet he gave no thought to how he ought to argue his case as Mr. Nelson spoke to the cafeteria manager. There was no point. Ryan had decided that Mr. Nelson was the kind of Principal who was afraid to change his mind because he thought it would make him look weak.

Mr. Nelson ended his call and Ryan put his phone away.

"Even the handicapped kids get to go," Ryan said.

You're not supposed to say 'handicapped,'" Mr. Nelson said. "And if I can put Rose Black Thunder's wheelchair in the back of my pickup, why shouldn't she go?"

You can still say 'handicap' when you're talking about horse racing," Ryan said. "But horses don't get their feelings hurt and whine about it. And what about Michael Bouchee, who's blind?"

"Michael's mother will drive him and tell him about it."

"So Michael will be her handicap."

Mr. Nelson wanted to finish writing up the new English teacher, Mr. Hart, for friending students on Facebook. He'd started to worry that the friending might be part of a bigger problem. But Ryan was distracting him.

Her handicap?"

"Like in a horse race," Ryan said. "Just like a strong horse has to carry extra weight, Miss Bouchee's truck will have to carry Michael."

Mr. Nelson wondered if he should mention the bigger problem in the report Mr. Hart would have to sign and that would go into his permanent file. Mr. Nelson understood the importance of documenting every issue that a teacher had. When the time came—if the time came—to let Mr. Hart go, a paper trail would be useful. But he didn't know if he could support his suspicions. Putting something in Mr. Hart's file without evidence would give the teacher the upper hand.

"You see what I'm saying, Mr. Nelson? If Michael is like extra weight carried by a strong horse—his mother—why can't we say 'handicapped' just like in horse racing?"

Ryan inspected Mr. Nelson's face. He'd shaved too closely and his skin was raw.

"Does Miss Bouchee remind you of a strong horse, Mr. Nelson?" Ryan grinned.

The image of Tyla Bouchee with her jet-black hair trailing all the way down her back, when she hadn't piled it on top of her head so that all of her long graceful neck was visible, passed through Mr. Nelson's mind. She wore her blue jeans skin-tight, filling them up like she filled up the Fighting Terrorism Since 1492 T-shirt that she'd always had on for the fine citizens of Rapid City the few times Mr. Nelson had bumped into her there. He stood and opened his office door.

"Go tell Mrs. Little Horse why you shouldn't miss the Buffalo Harvest," he said. "But tell her my mind's made up and you're just whining."

He watched Ryan walk to the end of the hall and turn right, toward Mrs. Little Horse's office. He thought about Tyla Bouchee. She was said to be wild, so maybe it would be inappropriate for a school Principal to date her. But what did wild mean, in her case? It wasn't her fault that Michael's father had refused to marry her and had run off. Then he'd moved around, though everyone said he spent most of his time in Denver. Tyla Bouchee was still young enough to have a good time. She deserved to have a good time as long as it didn't get in the way of raising Michael. She was a good mother, as far as Mr. Nelson could tell. He thought he would ask her out if he could work up the nerve.

Helen Little Horse's job title at Spotted Elk School was Coordinator of the Gifted and Talented Education Program. She'd told Mr. Nelson that her title was too grand because she was the only person working for the GATE Program, so she needed to coordinate only herself. He'd pointed out that she needed to coordinate with the different class and extracurricular schedules of the fifty-odd children in the program and he expected her to do a grand job of it.

Mr. Nelson's note about the exclusion of Ryan Three Bulls from the Buffalo Harvest had made her unhappy. It meant that she would miss the Harvest, too. Coordinating the GATE Program was considered a privilege for which she was required to pay an equivalent penalty by supervising Detention Periods. Mr. Nelson had decided that Ryan would serve his Detention during the Harvest. After receiving Mr. Nelson's note, Helen had called him.

"Ryan's Detention can be another time," she'd said.

"I don't have the band-width now, Helen," he'd said. "I'm dealing with something bigger."

"Bigger than making a boy miss the Buffalo Harvest? Is the government giving back the Black Hills?"

Mr. Nelson didn't answer.

"Mr. Hart?" Helen said.

"You shouldn't have told me about the Facebook friending if you didn't want me to do something about it right away, Helen."

"Does Mr. Hart have Detention too? Better not send him to my office."

"He'll ride with me and Rose Black Thunder. I don't want him alone with the students."

Mr. Hart had thought he would be a driver. Now Helen wondered if he would leave in humiliation. She'd worried about him from the beginning. So young, she'd thought, that he might think he's still in high school. She thought now that if Mr. Hart left and Mr. Nelson had to find another AmeriCorps volunteer to replace him, he should get a woman.

"Anything else, Helen?" Mr. Nelson said.

"Only my sincere wish that you should be scalped by the ghost of Custer."

"I'm still thinking of being Custer for Halloween. But I'll probably be something less scary: Dracula, or Freddy Krueger."

Helen remembered that he'd told the same joke last year.

She graded essays while waiting for Ryan. She tried to work efficiently because she knew he would distract her by arguing his case the second he came through the door.

"Who cares if I plagiarize my homework?" were his first words. "I learn what I'm supposed to and get perfect scores on the tests. The homework is practice and I don't need to practice."

"You need to learn about honesty."

"I know about honesty. That's why I can be dishonest."

"You need to practice honesty," Helen said. "A long time ago there was a man named Aristotle who said that the need to act in the right way always comes up in specific situations. And because they're specific, they're all different. The person who's going to act the right way in a certain situation is the one who's developed the habit of acting the right way."

Ryan seemed interested.

"Who's your favorite quarterback?"

"Tom Brady," he said.

"Maybe it's third down and three yards to go and he has to decide whether to run or pass. That depends on whether his running back is feeling strong, on his confidence in his receivers, on the field conditions. . . A rookie quarterback has to consider the same things, but you feel better about Brady making the decision because he's made the right one so many times before."

"Quarterbacks don't call their own plays anymore," Ryan laughed. "And Jim Thorpe died a long time ago."

Helen shrugged. She glanced at the last page of Jamie Proud Crow's essay about Othello. One paragraph to go. She looked at Ryan. He looked at her chest.

"CHIEFS," he read. "Why is it okay for us to be the Spotted Elk Chiefs if we don't want them to be the Washington Redskins?"

"We were the Spotted Elk Chiefs before people worried about that stuff."

"But they were the Redskins before we were the Chiefs. Why can't we be something else?"

Helen thought about Othello. She wanted to organize a production and she had the idea of making Othello an Indian.

“Great idea, Ryan,” she said. “We’ll be something else and then you can write a letter to Mr. Duke Snider to tell him. He’ll read it in the back of his chauffeured Cadillac and say ‘If this piss-ant Indian school in the middle of nowhere doesn’t call themselves the Chiefs anymore, obviously a big-shot millionaire like me has to stop calling his team the Redskins.’”

Ryan sat down across from Helen.

“Why can’t we be the Spotted Elk Hunters?”

“That’s worse than the Chiefs,” she said. “Like we’re the cavalry that hunted down Spotted Elk and left his body in the snow.”

Ryan felt the heat beneath the skin of his face.

“It wouldn’t mean that,” he said. “It would be like we were hunting elk. And buffalo.”

“Elk Hunters or Buffalo Hunters is good if we change the name of the school to Elk or Buffalo,” she said. “But I’d even take Redskins over Spotted Elk Hunters.”

“How about something that doesn’t have anything to do with Indians? Something cool. The Patriots, or the Jets. The B-52’s. The F-16’s.”

“I guess the Patriots are your favorite team?” she said. “They’re having another good year.”

“But they have a hard game coming up. The Ravens.”

“They’ll lose.”

“Because the raven is a sacred bird?” Ryan snickered. “Then why aren’t the Ravens better every year?”

“I didn’t say it’s because of the name. The Ravens are just better.”

Helen smiled to herself as she read the last paragraph of Jamie Proud Crow's essay without focusing on it. She looked up. Ryan was looking at her.

"What are you doing?" she said.

"Practicing honesty."

She prepared herself to hear about her thinning gray hair, the creases in her face, her limp.

"I really want to go to the Buffalo Harvest, and I think Mr. Nelson could have found another way to teach me a lesson. I think when it comes to Principals, Mr. Nelson is no Tom Brady."

Helen suppressed her smile.

"He doesn't have a pretty wife like Tom Brady, either," Ryan said.

He'd been wondering about something. Maybe Mrs. Little Horse knew the answer. And maybe if he were to spring his question on her out of nowhere, she would let the answer slip out.

"Do you think Mr. Nelson likes Michael Bouchee's mother?" he said.

Helen pretended she hadn't heard.

"Maybe in this specific situation you can learn your lesson by being made to stay with me," she said. "I want to go to the Buffalo Harvest too, but I've already been to lots of others."

She sat back in her chair.

"Maybe it's a lesson for me, too," she said. "Maybe I'm better off remembering the others instead of going to this one."

"Maybe something bad will happen to the people who go."

Helen looked at him sharply.

"I'm not saying I want that."

"Only the buffalo will have something bad happen," Helen said.

Ryan examined the Navajo rug beneath his chair. Age had discolored it.

"Maybe he'll die right away," he said.

Helen waited for him to raise his head.

"How many Harvests have you gone to, Ryan?"

"A few. But last year we had the big storm."

"You were up north," she said. "This is the Banana Belt."

"The Principal said wait for the snow to melt. But the water main had burst at the school."

"It was that cold?"

"School was closed for a week," he said. "When it opened again the Principal said we have to catch up with the work. And then it got colder, so. . ."

"And then it was the Thanksgiving vacation," she laughed.

"I had Thanksgiving dinner last year."

Helen's eyes opened wide.

"You know that's the edge of the rez," he said. "I had a white friend who invited me. I was staying with my uncle and he said eat there every day if you can, one less mouth for Keiko to cook for. He said just don't let them make you wear feathers."

"Keiko?"

"My uncle's girlfriend. Japanese."

Helen leveled her eyes on him.

"You stayed up there a long time. I hope you learned some Japanese."

"She was from Minnesota," he said, shaking his head.

Helen stared at her walls. She wished her office had a window.

"Weather should be good," she said. "Last year that storm just missed us."

"You went to the Harvest last year?"

"It was cold for October, so we were lucky that the buffalo was shot right away."

She closed her eyes. "He ran for a little ways, then he fell."

"He was dead?"

Helen opened her eyes.

"We were too far away to tell. So maybe he ran farther than I thought."

Ryan looked away. Every time he'd visited Mrs. Little Horse's office, he had wanted to tease her about the famous picture taped to her wall. It showed the eight survivors of the Battle of the Greasy Grass, reunited more than seventy years later. He thought it might be fun to tease her by asking why the man on the far right, who wore fewer feathers than the others, had been named Comes Again. But he decided it would be a bad idea. He asked a different question.

"You think any of those old guys was the one who killed Custer? I mean, by himself?"

"He wasn't dumb enough to say so, or he wouldn't have lived that long."

"I bet it was Comes Again," Ryan said.

He thought he might tease her, after all.

"I don't think any one Indian killed Custer," she said. "It would have taken ten Indians."

They laughed.

"Taking the piss, Miss Jacobs would say."

"I don't like that," Helen said.

"But she's from England. There it means—"

"I know what it means in England, but I don't like it."

Ryan sighed.

"I was telling you about the Harvest last year," she said. "Do you want to hear?"

"Whatever."

She stared at him.

"Sure," he said.

She composed herself. She didn't want to be angry while telling her story.

"Some of the people were eager to get closer, but John Injured Hawk, who was the leader, said to stop. The other buffaloes were forming a circle around the one that had been shot. Except for the biggest bull. He stood outside the circle and faced us. One by one the buffaloes left the circle and went over to the one that had been shot."

Ryan turned his head toward the picture of the survivors of the Battle of the Greasy Grass, but he didn't think about the picture. He imagined the scene that Helen had just described. He wondered if buffaloes would really behave that way. He wondered if she had invented the story. He wondered if he should ask her.

He looked at Helen again, but her expression made him look away.

"It's funny that in our language there's no word for goodbye," she said. "Have you been working on your Lakota?"

He continued to avoid her eyes.

"My grandmother doesn't like to hear it in the house," he said. "She knows it's nothing to be ashamed of anymore, but. . ."

He allowed his voice to trail off.

"You know we only have different ways of saying later or again, right?"

"Everybody knows," he said. "I bet the first thing every Lakota teacher in the world teaches isn't how to say 'Hello' or 'Where's the toilet?' but that we don't have a word for goodbye."

Helen laughed.

"You think we should have one?"

"Brandon said goodbye to me in June," he said. "The white friend I had Thanksgiving with. He knew I was moving, but he didn't mean he'd never see me again."

"Have you seen him since then?"

"It's only October."

"You don't have to roll your eyes. It was just a question."

"Brandon rolls his eyes every time his mother says something," Ryan said. "She tells him his eyeballs will get stuck like that and then he rolls his eyes again."

The phone rang. Helen picked it up. She listened and hung up.

"They're leaving now and Mr. Nelson's locking the building. We're the only ones here."

"Anyway, who cares if he'd said later instead of goodbye?" Ryan said. "It's the same."

"The same? What if he wasn't ever going to see you again? Or he thought he wasn't?"

“I guess he could take me in his arms and kiss me, if we were like that.”

“And since you’re not?” she said. “Or what if it wasn’t your white friend, but Spotted Elk, and he thought he was never going to see any buffalo to hunt again?”

“But he didn’t think that. He believed the buffalo would come back.”

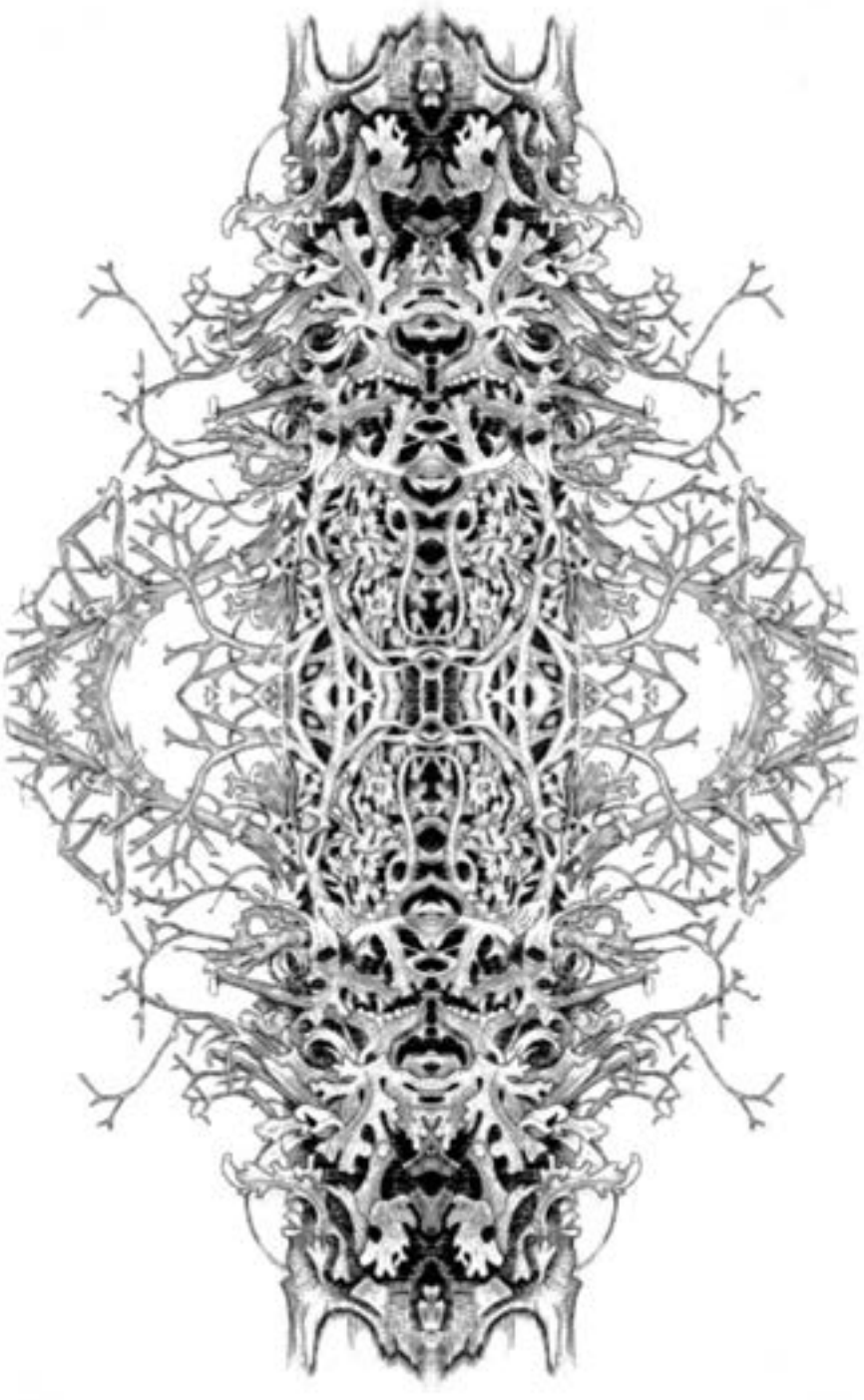
“Yes, he believed that,” Helen said.

Ryan looked away again.

“As for what the buffalo word for goodbye is, I don’t know,” she said. “But those buffalo were saying goodbye.”

Where the Wind Lingers

BILL WOLAK



The Infinite Hotdog

DANA STAMPS, II

Cat walking the universe, a diverse
zigzag of tight ganglia explode

into the open. A frolic of flaccid Germans
bang out Bach cantatas on xylophones

accompanied by castrati wearing
ball gowns that grasp. No one's trash

controlled the voltage. Untitled
promotional brochures for an octopus

named Mick Jagger appeared.
Tipsy under a blood moon, clacking

at season's end, a tiny junkyard
in Cucamonga sold a statue of David

stuffed with raccoons. The all-seeing eye
switches on strobe lights. Party on.

As a mole, flammable as descendants
of Chuck E. Cheese at escape

velocity, as if a barn door were open wide
out past the Meridian, for Paraguay's

premier T-shirt describes it thus. Petals
droop, petrified. Kaput! Earth tilts

a tad. The rubber-band voila of cicadas
die while a mortician hobnobs

amid a fluster, arrayed in sparkles.
Call it a sin of fancy vampire

ideals, the rabbi said. That journalist
was a crafty hero, a decipherer

of Derrida. Could I have some Skittles,
please? The thumb puppets dance.

Before any bombastic Marshall stacks
fortify this once feckless fandango,

toasts by bachelors in blue
tuxedos to Tai Chi ideals calm,

a life before Gucci, that pantomime.

I'm a rep. Vote for teeth!

In a hullabaloo, or just shaking
thy ass until befuddled, bamboozled,

or bedazzled, the fatuous citizenry
evokes a blister. Pray tell,

angels fly invisible as windless
autumn air. I yell at God: "Do they

have towels in Italy?" Prithee,
Cheerios will hitteth the damned spot.

Jehoshaphat in Iraq, ain't that
a reckoning with rutabaga casseroles?

Fuzzy clarinet concertos abound
around the ironing of green cufflinks,
a gala of fabric. Maybelline on
freckle tits, a Venus alter ego, just fit

as the GE refrigerator cooled
her purple paisley granny panties.

Steering wheel troubles near Woodstock,

bequeathed by glib Uncle Sam-

son, fastens feisty chartreuse buttons
on Bermuda shorts. Belching

metaphysics, a monist harvested
the surefire, and snapped: bugaboo!

SIP & SUP

CYNTHIA CLOSE

THE WORK ETHIC runs through my family with a vengeance. Nothing is given. Everything must be earned. My dad was always "at work." When he did finally come home some nights for dinner, if he talked at all, he talked about work; transmissions gone bad, leaky gas tanks, over heated radiators: Dad was an auto mechanic. I forced myself to act interested. I wanted to curry favor with my dad so I tried to understand what a piston was. Even at 6 or 7 years old I would actually have conversations with him about these things. I'd nod and ask questions, hoping to prolong our contact and have no idea what I was talking about.

My mom was always "at work" too, even though she was a stay–at–home mom. Ironing, cooking, cleaning, shopping, and lots more cleaning when there was nothing else left to do. Mom and dad smoked, as did all their friends so ashtrays were never out of reach but ashes were not allowed to gather for long, mom was on top of it.

We had an imposing dark green couch of some sort of nubby material along the wall that faced the small black and white TV in the living room. The firm cushions were like new, as no one in our family would be caught napping on that couch or idly turning the dial to see what was on the 3 stations our TV could pick-up. Inside the floral papered walls of our middleclass, two family northern New Jersey house time seemed in short supply, not a commodity to be wasted on useless, unproductive activity. Once outside, time expanded like my breath, escaping from my body as I took off on my two-wheeler to places I'd not yet seen or imagined. These moments of freedom offered brief respites from a childhood that was not a magical time when I was in it. Childhood, like our neighborhood was never where I wanted to be. It was a place I was eager to

leave behind, or, outgrow like a snake sheds it's skin. To become an adult meant working, being productive, making your own money which to me equaled freedom, and the power to control my own life.

I lied about my age on my first job application. You had to be at least 14; I was almost there, but not quite. The school year was coming to an end and that tumultuous summer of teenage angst between middle school and high school stretched before me. My body was beginning to take the form of a real woman. The image of a snake, shedding its skin was an apt metaphor for the newly experienced physicality of myself and the concurrent budding awareness of female sexual power, a tool that became inextricably linked to my working life from that very first day of my very first job.

I'd picked up the job application form from the bulletin board at the local A&P the day before. It was for waitstaff and kitchen help at SIP & SUP, a drive-in and/or eat-in restaurant on a busy intersection off Route #10 in Parsippany, New Jersey. The restaurant was within walking distance of my house. There were no sidewalks in what was at the time a relatively rural part of New Jersey and much of the walk was along the gravel embankment of the open two-lane highway as family filled station wagons headed for summer vacations in the lake region and long-haul tractor-trailers whizzed by. It was an unseasonably hot early June day as I walked along that highway, clutching my application, feeling a combination of anxiety and excitement when I heard a sucking, a sort of half whistle and clucking sound. Glancing up I saw two guys, leaning out the window of the cab of a huge truck, leering and making gestures that were foreign to me then that would now be easily labeled as obscene. The truck had slowed but was still moving as I picked up my pace heading in the opposite direction. I had been walking against, not with the traffic. It was as if a bolt of lightening had struck, stunning me for a moment. Nothing like that had ever happened before. As I slowly came to the realization it was my body, it was how I looked, it was the fact that I was female and simply by being there, by being visible, I had

the power to cause those two grown men to almost lose control of the truck they were driving. It was a moment of the most profound reckoning. Instead of provoking fear I felt I was in possession of a very powerful force that could be harnessed and used for my own benefit.

That moment was reinforced a half hour later when I presented myself and my job application to SIP & SUP'S manager, a gruff, sour-faced, flaccid guy who looked like he lived on the 25-cent burgers and thick chocolate shakes served by his restaurant year-round.

"How old are you?" he asked suspiciously when I handed him my application. It was the first Saturday in June and I would turn 14 that October, so it wasn't a BIG lie when I answered, "14 sir."

"Can you roller skate?" he asked dubiously glancing at my sandaled feet. Then I caught his eyes crawling slowly up my bare legs, lingering at the line where blue cotton shorts met the soft pink flesh of my thighs. I'd seen that look once before in the eyes of those truck drivers and now I recognized it for what it was. I stared directly back at him when he suddenly seemed to remember why I was standing there. His eyes snapped back to my face.

"Sure, I even have my own skates, and I've been going to the roller rink all winter to practice."

"How many hours a week can you give me?"

"As many as you need, now that school is out."

He told me to show up at 11 o'clock the next day, right before the lunchtime rush and to bring my skates. I'd be working exclusively outside, the parking lot detail, as long as the weather was good. I wore roller skates and waited on cars in the open asphalt parking lot of SIP & SUP. In those days the cars, lots of convertibles in the summer, would pull into the lot, park, and roll down their windows. I had to skate over in my waitress uniform, a short little pleated plaid skirt that swung from side to side and a prim white cotton shirt. There were no menus, I recited what

the possibilities were that day, take their order, skate back to the guy at the service window, give him the order from my note pad and then on to the next car. A bell would sound when we had to skate back and pick up the orders–usually hamburgers and fries – this was before McDonalds– on a tray that hooked on the outside of the car. It was my responsibility to make sure the customers didn't drive away with the tray when they were done. I made $2 an hour plus tips which at the time was not bad money. In retrospect, the sun was always shining. The atmosphere was similar to a David Lynch movie.

When we moved to Dover, New Jersey the year I turned 16 I got a job at Dick's Diner on Route #46. Open for 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, it was a busy place for summer people on their way up to the lake region for vacation. It was also a favorite rest stop for truckers. They loved the rice pudding. It was advertised as "A Special." Dick's chef always seemed to be there on my shift. He'd stick his huge, round balding head through the service window that divided the kitchen from the counter area, the soggy end of a cigar inevitably hung from his puffy lips as a growled a "hi honey" in my direction. Less a "chef"– cook, seems more apt in describing the t-shirt wearing, middle-aged man whose expansive belly indicated he enjoyed the fruits of his labor. He would make huge vats of the creamy sweet white rice pudding in a dark corner of the kitchen. One day, when there was a lull between the breakfast and lunch crowd, he called me back into the dungy bowels of his work area to show me his secret. I watched in horror when, in the last few moments of stirring, he took the stub of the cigar out of his mouth and tossed it in the pudding. He kept stirring till it disintegrated; small brown flecks I'd been telling everyone were nutmeg turned out to be tobacco. He looked at me with a sort of fiendish grin tinged with that now familiar leer, an unspoken warning to keep his secret. My silence was bought with a fear of losing both my job and his.

In spite of it all, I liked waitressing. I flirted and learned how to talk to get the biggest tips. Families would come in. I'd be as nice as could be. The dads seemed to do all the talking. More often than not they would leave a big tip and the wives would take it back and leave little or nothing. I worked every summer and sometimes after school. My mom was the keeper of the money. I'd have to empty my pockets on the kitchen counter as soon as I got home. Mom would start counting my tips before I could even take off my waitress uniform. Piles of change mounted up on that counter to be whisked away to some invisible bank for my college education. I quietly seethed but held my anger in check. While I never had any money of my own unless I asked my mother I knew it was only a matter of time when I would finally cast childhood aside and make my escape.

In my junior year of high-school I decided to apply to early admission programs for college. I did pretty well on my junior year SATS. I knew I wanted to go to art school, or major in art at college and definitely a college in a big city that was not within easy driving distance of home. The night I made my plans known my dad went bonzo. NO WAY was he going to pay for any "artsy fartsy" education. According to him I'd never get a job and would never be able to support myself. "Teaching, now that's a profession worth paying for, or nursing," proclaimed my self-righteous father who I concede felt he was looking out for my future well-being. "You can live at home to save money and continue working to help pay tuition at Montclair State Teachers College, or go to nursing school." Dad had it all figured out. To make my situation perfectly clear he would cut me off, no money for college, no living expenses, no nothing if I chose anything less realistic. It was like waving a red cape at a bull. Dad presented a challenge I knew I had to overcome if I was to be the person I knew I always was, the adult bursting the seams of the child's skin. Art would be my road to freedom.

I applied to Boston University School for the Arts, early admission, with an art portfolio I'd worked on for years. Mr. Thorston, my high school art teacher, gave me all the

encouragement that I needed as well as recommendations. I got accepted, got a scholarship and kissed New Jersey good-by. After a visit home during the summer of my freshman year, a summer I still worked at Dick's Diner, I never went back. I majored in Fine Arts with a focus on painting, continuing on to get a Masters degree. But those teenage waitressing experiences were trial by fire that I applied to working for a slightly different cliental at the Harvard and M.I.T. faculty clubs as an undergrad. That same male gaze I first recognized while walking along the highway at 14 was as evident and no less lascivious among the professors, scientists, scholars, and Nobel laurites of Cambridge than it was among the New Jersey truckers. Why women feel offended by that gaze is a mystery to me. I felt and still feel energized every time I catch a man looking at me in that way. Generous tips helped pay my college room and board. Kindly, thoughtful help from many men helped pave my way successfully through college.

So far, the work ethic, instilled in me by mom and dad, honed to a sharp edge by necessity, empowered by the judicious use of female sexuality has served me well. I've been gainfully employed, doing one interesting thing or another, in an unbroken stretch, for the last 60 years.

DESPITE

EDWARD LEE

Such foolish beings
we are, throwing ourselves
against love, our bones
still fragile from our last deliberate impact,
learning nothing but
what we wish to know,
inexplicably confident
that this time we will not even
bruise the skin.

Dance, Katrin at a Used Paper Warehouse, Katrin Dohse, 2018, 04-28-2017IKA

CHRISTOPHER PAUL BROWN

IMPTOWN

ANN WUEHLER

865741, CELL BLOCK D, observed something new. Through the shimmering electrical promise of death, she observed a rabbit munching the rank grass of the tiny field that nestled against the barrier of the prison fence. Sunlight turned the long ears pink as the insides of seashells, when the rabbit stopped, froze, sat up, then went back to feeding. 865741, also known as Silent Rag, ignored everything else happening in the small exercise yard and delighted in that lone bunny, eating lunch. Shadows filled the sky above as yet another thunderstorm drifted in from the east, off the nearly dead ocean. Silent Rag did not tell any of the other women or draw attention to that feeding wild animal, who fled for no reason at all that Silent Rag could discern.

She turned her left forearm up, examined the still-healing deep scratches placed there by Homestead Bon, the toughest bitch in Cell Block D, as Homestead Bon informed one and all from her six feet one inches and her gigantic hole of a mouth. It seemed important or something to be the toughest. Axegirl made a fuss to her small group of worshipers, and Homestead Bon made it clear Axegirl should keep that talk to herself. Tough and nasty, who was toughest and nastiest. As if that changed anything or made life a bowl of cupcakes and freedom pies. Silent Rag had the rest of her life to watch tough bitches come and go. She had been caught sticking a knitting needle up her works and the law said no, women were to have kids no matter what and you're unnatural and bad. Goodbye! Silent Rag tried to remember her actual name. It had been something like Lana or Lucy. Something sweet and feminine and sweet. The field through the electrified fence had gone empty of rabbits. Beyond it lay dry dusty hills and people wary of women in bright green jumpsuits.

Why had Homestead Bon scratched her? Silent Rag stared at the asphalt, rather than be caught, even accidentally, looking at the wrong woman or even one of the guards. Everyone here seemed full of angry wasps. That anger never died. Why had Homestead Bon dug her fingernails

into the soft, sagging meat of Silent Rag's arm? What ya thinking in there? What ya thinkin'? That giant's bellow of a voice, that powerful hand. No reason, there had been no reason at all. An act of some merciless God. Silent Rag heard an argument nearby. She heard the whispered plans of escapers. She heard the cries of birds. The crackle of guard radios. In ten minutes, those slated for exercise hour would be lined up and marched back in. Back to their cells or back to their chores. Silent Rag would go to laundry after this. Wash sheets. Dry them. Over and over. Wash sheet. Dry them. Over and over.

Something smacked the side of her head. She cowered down. A guard, the mean one. Carrie or Candace. "Time to go, retard," Carrie or Candace said. Silent Rag stood, not making eye contact, to go take to her place in the lines. Paired up. She stood beside Flight, a ragged-faced murderer, who had once tried to fly over the walls of Imptown. What the correctional facility's name was in all circles. It had become Imptown, so named, goes Imptown folklore, by one of the more famous inhabitants, who claimed she was a servant of Satan. Story goes this servant of Satan had been freed by imps sent by her master, who had done so during one of the worst riots to ever develop. Over bread so moldy no one could eat it. During a stormy night, of course. Which had knocked out the power, of course. It was even further said that during this long night of rioting and imps sent in to save the devil's favorite servant, that the devil himself showed up. And fought the warden. Or had been the warden. The story had several versions, all of them vague and often bloody. "Silent Rag!" Another harder slam to her head. "What are you standing here for? Let's go!"

Silent Rag had been standing still instead of moving along with everyone else. Everyone else turned to stare at her, mark her, note her hurt arm, note her now bruising face. The laws no longer seemed to care what happened to prisoners. The laws no longer came to help. Parole hearings and parole boards had become the stuff of legends, same as that night the imps had come to free the devil's favorite. Silent Rag got into step beside Flight, who muttered and snorted

and smelled like piss. Fly me to the moon, Flight repeated over and over and over. Fly me to the moon.

The steam rose. The smell of harsh detergent. The tired rounded backs of women taking wet loads from the giant washers to shove them into the giant dryers. The sheets stained with blood and shit. No matter the bleach used, those stains from the holes of human bodies never faded enough. Silent Rag worked, her mind filling over and over with that lone rabbit eating rank grass, the sun turning those long ears into seashell pink. Her hands filled the washers, dumped in the prescribed measure of soap, added the bleach

if the load had been marked for bleach, folded or swept the floor if there was nothing to put in or take out. "Hey, you really don't talk? You got a tongue and you still don't talk?"

Newbie. 991209 it read on the breast of her bright green jumpsuit. Bright malicious eyes in her moon face. Young. Like a puppy with rabies before the rabies has kicked in. Silent Rag moved away, sweeping the cement floor. Unlike that rabbit, she could not flash away and hide herself. She could only wait to see what this newbie would do to her.

Fighting back was reserved only if it looked like death would arrive soon. Maybe death would be better than this. Except the preacher man said death was worse, far worse, than this. You had to let Good Jesus save you. Or Good Jesus would burn you forever. Which confused Silent Rag and kept her from sawing her wrist back and forth over the sharp edge of the screw on the underside of her cot.

"Okay. I like doing laundry. I don't mind it. My hands get red but it's better than stirring slop all day. They had me in the kitchens and I burned that stew they have in the big cans. I let it burn, you know? I ain't never cooked in my life, so how did I know to keep the heat low and shit? I'm J-Snatch, we're in the same block. Shit, mama, you're old. You ever getting out of Imptown or what?" J-Snatch folded jumpsuits and towels. "Well, my real name is Rosarita, but

K-Tell says I need an Imptown name, so she started calling me J-Snatch. I'm a thief, I used to steal purses. You're famous. Been here near thirty years, they say. Thirty years, I say. No shit, I say. I can't even imagine that. Is it true? Everybody lies in here. Even me. I used to be so honest, except for the stealing. Now I just lie and lie. You know?" J-Snatch looked over at the guards, who were watching the laundry room hungering to hurt someone, to put someone in their place. "I hear if you let the guards do stuff to ya, you still get treated like shit. It's a tough old world. They weren't wrong about that, whoever said that." Silent Rag could hardly breathe. What was this? Why was this newbie being friendly? It wasn't natural. J-Snatch kept jabbering away. Until it was time to stop doing laundry and go back to the cells. Four hours of laundry, two hours of the cell, the meal half an hour, then back to D Block, where the cell remained open for two hours and the women could come and go as they pleased. Then lights out. Until morning arrived at five. Always at five. The unholy buzz of morning's warning. Ten minutes to stand in front of the cell you called home so you could be checked off the Who's Still Alive list.

Silent Rag lay on her cot, in the dark, with her arm itching. She had not been offered medical assistance, as those in charge decided she needed to be taught a lesson. You're in here to be punished, this is nothing compared to what your baby had to go through. Silent Rag had accepted that and tried to keep her festering arm clean and dry. But working in a laundry did not help that at all. She let her fingers run along the parallel scratches and it did not seem they were healing all that quick. That lone rabbit feeding free as it pleased. That rabbit showed up in her dreams and turned into some creature with long naked wings. And it flew away over the walls of Imptown and flew into the moon. Silent Rag sat up right before the morning warning sounded. She emptied her bladder and her cellmate called out to Jesus, still asleep somehow. Ratti, however, spoke of nothing but Jesus all day so it made sense she'd call out for her boyfriend all night. Ratti spoke of Jesus as one might speak of a husband, but many women in here did.

"Good morning, Rag!" This drifted down from several cells up. J-Snatch. And then Homestead Bon spoke as well.

"Shut your hole."

"I got a right to tell someone good morning, you fucking cow," J-Snatch called back and laughter colored the air like a rancid coating of mist.

Today, there were two rabbits. Silent Rag watched them from the corner of her eye, sitting hunched up near the death fence. That death fence beckoned the gals to try it, just try it. How many had been scooped up with a shovel and slid into a bucket after trying that fence? How many? But the two rabbits hopped and fed, hopped and fed, in the shadow of the junky trees, filling their bellies on the rank long grass. Hop, feed, look around. Hop, feed, look around. The scuffle of a fight, the guards yelling. J-Snatch and Homestead Bon, of course. That had been building for days now. J-Snatch a smart-mouthed soon to be rabid puppy facing off against the rabid dog that actually ran this shitter. Sorry, puppy, thought Silent Rag. Sorry. She watched, while appearing not to watch at all, as they all did. She watched Homestead Bon bang J-Snatch's head against the asphalt. As the guard hovered nearby, waiting for Homestead Bon to kill her so Homestead Bon could go to solitary and J-Snatch could go in the incinerator. As prisoners who died got cremated, their ashes thrown away. No lawyers showed up to ask why they had died. Or who had killed them. No anymore. That had ended twenty some years ago, longer. Memory had become a sheet too ripped up and full of holes to be used anymore. Homestead Bon got admired and praised by the guards for being strong and not succumbing to the prison blues, as the inevitable crush and grinding got called. The guards admired the prisoners who could keep the others in line and rewarded them for doing so.

"That's enough," said Carrie or Candace or Pauline or Penny. Homestead Bon got marched to solitary, grinning, her big hands dripping with J-Snatch's drying blood. J-Snatch still

twitched now and then, her head a new shape. Her face seemed missing. She still twitched. The rabbits hopped and fed and sat up. Silent Rag caught a glimpse of other guards arriving to drag J-Snatch to the infirmary. J-Snatch twitched and sent out cries that sounded like a crow. The end of exercise time sounded, early today. Silent Rag lined up beside Flight, who muttered about flying to the moon.

The giant dryer sent up smoke right before it died for good. The guard came over and cursed, then told Silent Rag to put the wet stuff in another dryer, but there were none open. The dryer, dead as J-Snatch, would sit there waiting for repair or replacement. For years perhaps. And yet the same amount of laundry would be expected to be done. Or there would be consequences. No money in the budge, it was claimed, to fix anything yet all the money in the world to punish. No money in the budge, ever, to improve Imptown in any way. No money in the budge, ladies! Rabbits with seashell pink ears, munching rank grass in the sometimes sunshine. Soon it would turn hot and dry and the rains would not show up again until the fall, if they showed up at all. Rain had become a rare thing here at Imptown and the lands around it. A slap. The guards on the other side of the big dank room. "I know you was friends with that commie bitch," Homestead Bon said. She had an odd streak of absolute patriotism and long eyelashes stuck around her wolverine eyes. She grabbed Silent Rag's left arm, then laughed. "Looks like I marked you as mine, honey. I branded your ass!" And everyone nearby laughed as well, like well trained seals at the zoo. Silent Rag had gone to one once. Those animals in pretty cages. Those animals in such pretty cages.

Homestead Bon turned to go back to folding sheets nearby. Silent Rag saw the gleam of metal in the lumpy wetness of the undried sheets. A spoon shaped into a crude little weapon. Her hand closed over it but she slipped it into her jumpsuit, down between her sagging breasts. What are you going to do with that, she asked herself. What are you going to do with that?

Her heart beat in secret little pumps and bursts. Don't know yet. Don't know.

Silent Rag waited now every day for her glimpse of those rabbits. Sometimes they remained absent. Sometimes just one, sometimes both. Her arm festered, then slowly began to heal but she was not so young anymore. Her bones ached and her back seized up now and then trying to move wet stuff into the dryers. Newbies came and went. The old timers got older. Some even managed to finish their sentences and were let go. Only to return not that much later. Once a captive of Imptown, it seemed, you remained one all your life. Learning your lesson never took hold here. Nobody ever learned anything but how to line up and keep their eyes slid away just enough. Just enough. Jesus shook a finger and yelled a lot during Sunday yellings from various preacher men. Always men.

No woman ever showed her face during Sunday to lecture other women on getting right with God. It would have caused riots. It had caused riots. Women found being told they were sinful nothings by another woman intolerable and an excuse to go crazy and try to kill everything nearby. Silent Rag felt that, too. Women telling other women they were damned, no sir. Men could say it because men lied all the time. Women meant it and that could not be borne.

A man with a shovel stood on the other side of the death fence today. A baseball cap shielded his face somewhat from the sun. Homestead Bon wandered over as Silent Rag forgot to pretend she wasn't watching anything at all but her own big feet, in cheap canvas slip-ons. "We got pests around here. Gonna be some dead bunnies, yessirree." All one word, yessirree. Silent Rag kept her head turned toward that man, with the slight belly, sliding that shovel's end into the untilled earth, then shaking something from a tin can down into that wound he had made. "Poison. It's poison. Gophers, rabbits, squirrels. All dead. All dead, Rag. All dead." Laughing as little creatures died. Laughing. No. No, that was not what Homestead Bon's laughter sounded like. Homestead Bon honked and oinked her laughter. This sounded...like fingernails scraped along a scarred gray wall in solitary. "Fucking shits," Homestead Bon whispered in such honest disgust that Silent Rag met the wolverine eyes and they were the eyes of some woman so lost, so

insufferably damned, it blinded her for a bit. And then it was just Homestead Bon lurching away, her big hard body giving tiny shudders, her fists perhaps never to become hands again.

That night, Silent Rag sat on her cot, holding that bit of metal, turning it over and over. The pulse in her wrist throbbed. She heard sobbings in the dark and the grunts of women finding solace and the sighs of ghosts. Night sounds never changed, nothing changed and perhaps she had just imagined Homestead Bon with her hidden little soft spot toward some stupid wildlife far too stupid not to try living right up against the death fence of Imptown. Nothing changed in the day time, but Silent Rag noted that Homestead Bon sometimes looked at that little patch beyond the fences humming with devil juice. As if looking for wild rabbits with seashell pink to their ears. With her wolverine eyes as soft as the down on an inner thigh.

Years pass like the snap of bones. Silent Rag sat watching, yet not watching, that field on the other side of the death fence. No rabbits. No rabbits for years now. They had cut the old trees down, leaving raw stumps, as if to make that sad view as sad as possible. The sun hit her face and burned her skin. There. The seashell pink of an ear. Had she seen that with her fading eyes? Her eyesight seemed worse lately. Her head ached and the world seemed dimmer, indistinct. Yes. A single small rabbit, in the shadow of one of the stumps, wandered in off the sagebrush dirt hills. Axegirl beat Homestead Bon to death nearby as the guards waited for the right moment to step in. That rabbit began to feed on the long rank grass. Silent Rag stood. She had that bit of shaped metal spoon weapon in her right hand. She sank all six inches of it into the back of Axegirl's neck, with everyone growing still at this third entering the known world of Who's Queen Bitch of Imptown showdown that had been brewing for days now. Homestead Bon lay quivering and twitching, the guards began to yell and beat at Silent Rag, who withdrew that makeshift blade from downed Axegirl. "For the rabbits," Silent Rag said to Homestead Bon, who twitched and bled all over the exercise yard's cracked surface. She jammed that makeshift knife into her own throat. It went easy as pie, just as easy as pie. 865741 smiled up at the sky, hoping

she got made into a story, hoping there was a wild rabbit wherever she went next. She felt nothing at all after her small wish.

We Live Every Moment Many Times

SAM MEEKINGS

WE LIVE EVERY MOMENT many times.

First as anticipation [excitement] [fear]

Second in that fleeting

rush

of raw present.

Then finally when it is repeated and remade, again and again, as memory played back on the cinema-screen lit up on the underside of our eyelids.

Some memories change, and some remain the same.

Others get lost somewhere along the way.

A few get pushed down, locked up, hidden, disguised.

Others still you cannot escape. And this is mine.

This is the one I cannot cast off.

My brother is bounding up a winding staircase that leads into a narrow gallery. As ever, I am following close behind. He is little and lithe and so fast that I am having trouble keeping up. I cannot say for certain where this strange place is, for I never returned there, and must have pushed it to the very furthest corners of my mind. We must have been on our way home from visiting someone, an elderly relative, perhaps, because we had broken up a long drive by stopping for lunch at some bistro just off the main road. We trudged inside to find that the restaurant was a dark and airless place with a thick, bristling carpet that almost swallowed our shoes. The hint of disinfectant in the air reminded me of a hospital. From the moment we walked through the door something told me that I would not like this place.

I think my parents felt much the same, but none of us had the energy to get back into the car and search for somewhere better. We settled at a table near the door and looked around. The walls were covered with huge glass boxes filled with stuffed birds and squirrels set out in poses that suggested they had been frozen suddenly while collecting nuts or building nests and were as surprised to find themselves in this grim, stale place as we were. Around one corner was a canteen where people were picking up wooden trays and queuing to collect plates of food before following the line round to a grumpy woman seated at a till. My brother must have been seven or eight, and it was he who spotted the sign that advertised a

Museum of Curiosities

on the top floor of the building. After a little badgering, my parents agreed that he could take a look around while they got us some food on the condition that I went with him. With that, he bolted for the staircase and I ran after him as quickly as I could.

The stairs led up to a narrow gallery with many shelves and glass cases on either side.

There was no one up there but us.

The room was unnaturally quiet, as though it had been soundproofed to stop the sound of people in the gallery reaching the diners below. Each footstep was muffled. The next few minutes were akin to one of those dreams where, though you know perfectly well that you are dreaming, it is impossible to wake. As soon as I stopped at the first display, I knew that something was not right. Inside a huge glass jar I saw a piglet with two heads sprouting from its pink puckered carcass. At first I was sure that it had to be some kind of fake, an elaborate rubber puppet designed to scare children. But the longer I stared, the more I began to doubt my initial judgement. Both its pairs of eyes were screwed shut, and its tail was coiled behind it like the tiny, intricate spring of a pocket watch. I remember standing transfixed, unable to move until I heard my brother calling in amazement further up the gallery. I turned to see him grinning wildly as he pressed his face up against another display case. Though I cannot recall what he said to me, the image is burned in my mind of his breath spilling mist across the glass in front of him. As it cleared his reflection appeared to merge with the collection of strange mutations and curiosities preserved within the jars inside.

There are still a few small museums hidden within pubs and inns throughout the country, yet I have never seen one as strange and ghastly as this. The whole gallery, though admittedly small, was crammed with an unsettling assortment of deformations and unusual anatomical specimens. Rows upon row of curios were displayed within the cabinets. It was like some Victorian carnival. I passed countless jars filled to the brim with formaldehyde, and bobbing amid the thick, viscous liquid were an array of pale, malformed foetuses.

I saw a toad with an extra set of spindly legs.

A hare with an extra eye peering back at me.

A stillborn calf with grey, mottled hooves folded up against its chest and

a face that was almost human.

Then there were rats and rabbits

preserved in various stages of dissection,

skinned and flayed and with rungs of muscle

unwound from their tiny skeletons.

Each of the exhibits spelled out the simplest and clearest of truths:

that the tiniest of changes is enough to transform the familiar world into something else

something terrifying

There were many more misshapen creatures on display, each staring at me through the glass with pleading eyes.

I remember that I hurried down the second half of the gallery with my hands up around my face, shielding my eyes from the rest of the jars and cases. By the time we returned downstairs I felt stunned and disorientated, while in contrast my brother had become giddy with excitement. At the table I could not bear to even look at my plate, let alone at the relish and enthusiasm with which my brother wolfed down his food

– sloppy halves of grilled tomatoes,

browned mushrooms slick in their juices,

rashers of sunburn-pink bacon

with curled lapels of fat,

greasy hashbrowns and bulging sausages

so swollen they looked ready to burst.

I managed only two mouthfuls before my stomach rebelled and I had to make a run for the toilets, hands clutched tightly over my mouth.

Even when we had left that astonishing place, I felt nauseous and perturbed. Beside me, in the back of the car, my brother was babbling on in gruesome detail about the freakish animals on display in the gallery. My brother is dead now.

Like the curiosities in that strange museum, he is bottled in time.

Trapped in a moment that only I can relive.

He is always seven or eight and running

up

those

stairs.

As we drove home he went on describing all the horrific things we had seen up there. I remember that I was not able to focus on what he was saying, however, as my mind was mulling over something that had been said the week before in school. For some unknown reason, in the middle of a lesson about basic arithmetic, one of the girls down the table from me had raised her hand and asked our teacher what being dead was like. Though this shocked the rest of the class

into silence, our teacher did not seem in the least bit surprised by this uninvited question. After only a short pause, he replied that death was like a calm and peaceful sleep, and that we would all awake at the end of time and rise from our graves to join God in heaven. Then, as if there had been nothing unusual about this interruption, he returned to the blackboard.

It was this deeply alarming concept that filled my head during the long drive home from that strange pub. For as my brother babbled on, I could imagine nothing more horrifying than the idea that all the creatures in the *Museum of Curiosities* might, after their own long sleep, suddenly come back to life –

the rabbits leaping from the bottles

trailing skin and fur and muscle behind them

as if they were

the trains

of bloody wedding dresses

the grey-tinted calf breaking free from its jar and starting to low

the toad dancing on all six legs

and the two-headed piglet starting to blink,

beginning to see the end of the world in perfect double.

We live every moment many times. We live every moment many times.

Many times every moment. We live

– inside, around, between.

But sometimes we get caught in one alone. Entangled, ensnared, enrapt –

suspended out of time,

and helpless to do anything but watch, again and again, as though from behind a wall of glass.

81

JACOB KOBINA AYIAH MENSAH

Mixed Media

The Beating of Unseen Wings

JOSEPH MURPHY

there is in me
older and harder than life and more impartial,
the eye that watched before there was an ocean.
— Robinson Jeffers
Before there was an ocean and more brilliant
than a well-dreamed sun,
a yet-to-be-spoken word
shimmered from a stone's
rigid shadow.
And before that shadow
could raise its voice, an echo
resounded in the throat
of a well-worn,
but never walked path.
And older and harder than that echo,
within each of our cells,
others' heartbeats; eyes of creatures
being birthed; stars
yet to implode.
And more within me
than the beating
of unseen wings, the arc
of a bird's flight — but no more

than what any mountain

has hold aloft

in its out-stretched hands.

THE BLOCK

JOE FARLEY

THE HOUSE WAS around the block, at the end of Leo Babic's street. It's long been torn down now. But thirteen winters ago, Leo Babic went into it and never came back out again.

Months and even years afterward, my mom and dad would wrap their arms around me so tight they'd knock the wind out of me whenever I'd leave the house for a bike ride or whatever, pressing their faces so tightly against mine like I was shipping off for war and, later at night when I'd return, they'd stare at me as if I'd just sailed around the world, not stopping and going back about their business until I said, "What? What did I do?" They'd say, "Nothing," and smile smiles that weren't quite smiles and tell me they loved me. Did I know how much?

Leo had just celebrated his thirteenth birthday, and I was less than a month from following. Leo lived around the block from me, but our backyards were adjacent from one another, with the edges of our fence posts kissing in the right corner of my backyard. We'd been best friends since his family moved here from Croatia five years before. The Babic's came to love the droll suburbs of northern New Jersey, and the hideous humidity that came with its summers, the bite that chased its winters. Leo and I rode bikes together, shot hoops in my driveway, and, when his dad wasn't sauced on homemade wine from warding off ghosts that followed him after fighting (and eventually fleeing) the Serbian Aggression, had sleepovers in his basement.

Leo loved having the shut-in at the end of his block. It was something to talk about when we stayed up late with his older brother Alex—what the hell was that guy doing in there? All we knew was his name: Murray. Murray was old, seemed much older back then, like 70 or 80, but when I think about it now the guy likely wasn't even 50.

There were rampant rumors about Murray. We all had our favorites. Murray was a war hero. Murray was brainwashed by the government during MK Ultra (this was Alex, he was a freshman in college and had recently started reading…he knew everything far as I was concerned.) Maybe his whole family died, he was sick, lonely. But, our collective favorite, by far—especially when we were trying to spook each other—was that Murray murdered his family. Hacked them to pieces. Kids in town, especially the older ones (when drunk) would dare each other to go knock on his door, hide in his bushes. If he ever came out they were supposed to capture him on camera.

That was thirteen years ago. I no longer live in northern New Jersey and Leo is no longer alive. Still, this is what I tell my girlfriend when she asks what I'm always thinking about when I get too drunk and start getting that far off look, or why I wake sometimes in the night. I tell her I see Leo and we are talking again, things like this:

It's just after Christmas, everybody still has up all the bullshit decorations, and Leo is lobbing snowballs from his yard towards my bedroom window, a few hours from his death. He keeps throwing snowballs but I ignore him—I'm not allowed out for something we got into earlier in the week with is brother Alex. He doesn't stop lobbing snowballs until one of them, pure ice, cracks and splinters my window. I panic, but before I react my dad comes in, yelling. I'm not allowed outside or to see Leo for two weeks.

I sneak out once dad is asleep. I slip through our forsythia bushes and scale the fence, landing in a mound of snow where Leo waits. His parents are passed out on wine. Alex is drinking beers inside the shed, standing with a few people I don't know. Alex gives us a job to do, and we are at the age where we want more than anything to impress him, to belong—we crave the responsibility.

We are tasked with going to retrieve a left behind 30-rack from Tim's house, there are girls coming, this is an unexpected development and they are short on beer, a situation that will

become dire as the night goes on. He gives us a beer to share, to think it over. I'm in. Leo is, at first, unsure. We take small sips while I watch the shadows from my parents' upstairs bedroom. Before the beer is finished there is movement in my backyard, rummaging. The floodlights snap on, followed by my dad's voice, "Home." There is a lull, then, "Right now."

From my room I try to watch as Leo moves toward the end of his block, but my view is ruined by the Solimando's massive place a few houses down from mine. The Solimando's more or less own the town, with generations going back to the founding sometime in the mid 19th century. Solimando spawn is all over the towns payroll as cops, fireman and sanitation workers, to go to the borough hall is like walking in on a family get together. They are nice people though, and they let Leo and I jump on their trampoline whenever we want, not seeming to care when we strip down to our boxer shorts when it gets too hot, our pale little bodies sweating all over their merchandise. They just roll their eyes and smile, leave us iced tea while staying out of our way. Sometimes when they aren't home we sneak into their house, move around their massive basement and check out their clutter, they never know.

*

I still think about the moment my dad screamed at me, how I left Leo alone, holding the bag. I should have told him to forget about it, it's only beer. I envision scenarios where I do. "Next time," I say, "we'll get another chance." Sometimes he even listens to me, and instead of leaving his backyard and walking down the block, he tells his brother he is tired and he doesn't feel like it. Alex is pissed but what can he do, Leo is his brother. But when I get to my room and look out the window it's still too late, Leo is moving down the block with purpose. The story changes a little bit each time, but the result is always the same: Leo moving quickly and quietly down his block.

As time goes on I remember more, not less. Leo's face is stamped on my brain—a mix of doubt, mischief and earnestness, like the stud prospect after getting the call from the minor leagues to the show. More than anything it is the look of not wanting to let Alex down.

In the story that runs on all the news outlets there are five bodies in total, Leo's included. In my mind there were much more, but when I look up the actual article years later on my phone it is still just the five. Leo got the beer, that wasn't where it went wrong. In his excitement he goes by the house at the end of the block. He wants to snap a picture of Murray, to show up with this and the beer in tow would make him a legend, or at least that is my informed understanding of Leo's logic.

Murray wasn't what any of the popular stories said he was, though he was just the same. He thought an unspecified enemy was watching him, and was fighting some endless, invisible war. When they busted in they found the remains of some boys that went missing a few towns over a decade earlier, a mailman who was thought to have walked off the job, an unidentified old woman, and, finally, Leo. He wasn't a complete shut in (worked part-time down at the water company), but he did live like one—the house likely would have had to been torn down even if it wasn't hiding a cache of corpses.

In my mind it goes quick, despite the fact that I know the guy called in sick the next couple of days, even though I'm aware some sort of interrogation went on, one that left me unable to view my friend on his final day above ground.

*

Later, after my family moved to Nebraska, and a few more years after that once I've moved to Denver and am teaching in the public schools, I get an email from Alex Babic. Alex is recently sober and has a few questions about his little brother. He was your best friend, he says, what was he really like? Most of them are like this. He's sorry to bother me, but he's in the

recovery process and he thinks this might help. Everyday he wants to drink, and when he isn't dreaming of drinking he's dreaming of his little brother.

I wait till I get home from school to answer. I sit down at my desk, a desk at which I thought I might one day write great things, but all my early drafts start and stall on this story, so instead I teach literary devices to kids who are mostly just pretending not to be on their phones. Once I start the email though, things begin to happen. I go into great detail about Leo, his tics and quirks, the things that made him him. I tell Alex about my own dreams, and I even tell him if he were ever out in Colorado to hit me up, I'd love to grab a coffee, maybe go on a hike. When I'm done I don't send it right away. Instead, I save it to drafts and go to the kitchen, kiss my girlfriend on the lips, pull a beer out of the fridge and begin poring over papers with my red pen. A month later it's still sitting in my drafts, unsent.

*

It's a week after New Years, and the husks of Christmas trees line the block. A crowd has gathered around the house at the end the block, at least as far as the police line will allow. Neighbors throw their hands up in disbelief, say things like "how could this happen?" and "I had no idea—did you?" Some are crying, and the few reporters milling about go to them in search of quotes.

When they carry out Leo I instantly know it's him, even though he's zipped up in a black bag. Leo's parents are by the police, his mom is silent while his dad gestures violently, curses in Croatian—he looks like he might take a swing at the cop closest. Instead, he turns and smacks Alex in the back of his head, dropping him to his knees. Alex springs up, wipes the tears from his eyes and pushes past the crowd, and, once he's around the corner, breaks into a full sprint. People will say how bad they feel for him, having to carry a burden so big so young. Poor kid.

After everyone has gone home to their dinner and bad television shows, my mom comes down, tells me that's enough, time to come back home.

*

Leo's parents never speak to me again. I want to tell them I wish, often dream I went with him. I want to tell them how pissed I was I couldn't go, as it was me who convinced him, me having no brother of my own.

That is really how it went down, I'd say. Try not to blame Alex. However, I will not tell them the other dream I cannot stop dreaming. The one where I go into the house, and Leo sleeps warm in his bed.

The Threads That Bind Us

ROSHNI S. PATEL

I.

Sci-fi green glow-in-the-dark stars arranged in
counterfeit constellations and charged with the
chronicles of growing children will eventually
fall off ceilings, or they stay until gentle hands
peel them away, and in their spots is the intact
color from the day that they were scattered among
this painted sky; other stars, with hearts weighed
by fusing nuclei, attempt to tear holes in spacetime
when they fall or vanish like flames of birthday candles.

II.

After my grandmother's funeral, we sat outside in the autumn air,
watching our shadows move like hour hands across the pavement.
One after another, we washed the scent of ash out of our
hair and the bad omen off our skin without a notice to the
hot water that had run
out, and we sat in the living room, with our puffy eyes
closed,
listening to the washing machine wash out the tear stains
off our
white clothes—but I don't think that's how bleach was
meant to work.

III.

Einstein probably looked at real stars, imagining
the fabric of spacetime to be spandex—something
that would stretch to great lengths to accommodate
the weight of stars and planets; it was ridiculous of
me to think that silkworms were the weavers of the
universe. But I can see it: silkworms spinning threads
patterned with the secrets of stars, continuing to compose
the expanding cosmos as they left the proximity of Earth.

IV.

The hospital had taken her paisley patterned
nightgown: I know because I never saw it at home
again—they had ripped the faded fabric to shreds
when they loaded her into the ambulance as if she
were a bullet loaded into a gun and shot away from a
home that loved her. She wore that nightgown when
she said her nightly prayers and kissed our foreheads
goodnight.

And the crematorium had taken her boysenberry stiff
silk sari, the one with golden threads at the hem that
were slowly unraveling, the one she once wore at my
mother's wedding—moments before the funeral
directors had ushered her into an oven preheated to
the temperature of star cores, she was at the nucleus
of a negative charged white clothed crowd.

V.

The fabric of the universe doesn't fade,

does it?

It never tears or burns,

just harmonizes with the whispering secrets.

VI.

The dress I wore in the electron

cloud,

closest to a boysenberry nucleus

never came out of the wash quite

right.

I let it hang in the back of my

closet, behind heavy winter coats

that I rarely wore in Georgia's

bipolar winter.

It was caked in dust, with tears

caused by nervous fingers, and

stained, and small when I found

it again.

Twisted Bridge

JULIA MUENCH

Fiber Art

TURNING

TOTI O'BRIEN

1.

SO THE YEAR when I sold the house, that year of peeling and re-painting, dismantling and re-building, searching and searching, and packing and then again searching—

Then not finding, and doubting, then fearing and then counting, all the counting never amounting to, never a-mounting, always kind of dismounting, teetering at the edge of something and always somehow falling below, always, a sixteenth of an inch, like a meringue never reaching the right consistency (when a fork tossed on top of the foam should remain afloat)—

A meringue constantly melting and the muscles of your arm can't take it any more, not anymore.

That year my arms hurt all the time, my elbows, my knees, but what most obsessed me wasn't fatigue or frustration. Wasn't fear, insecurity, impatience. What obsessed me the most was a kind of abstraction—rather a geometric pattern, perhaps a timeline. A time diagram, right, with added spatial elements.

What obsessed me was the triple motion of the couple (I'm calling it A) hastily leaving the place where they had lived a few quiet decades—

I pictured them quiet. A serene, modest, shielded, perhaps monotone existence was what their house and garden betrayed—quiet decades of a decent life for which I felt, strangely, an intense sort of tenderness.

These folks of whom I knew nothing besides their names, glimpsed at and promptly forgotten, were packing away, pushed by an implacable deadline—my arrival—hurriedly

clearing the place of myriads of boxes that would be promptly replaced by myriads of quasi-identical boxes.

Same cardboard. Same assortment of sizes. Same labels, hand printed with a felt pen—bedroom, bathroom, pantry, garage. Boxes of the same brown/beige color, the color of travel, of transit. The color of train stations, gas stations, the color of rain.

Then I thought of B. That was me and my son, busy packing, our myriads of boxes about to be spat like an avalanche, like a cascade, like puke, barely enrobed viscera on the battlefield just freed of the previous lot, still punctuated by war residuals and spoils, limbs lost from wounded bodies—an old tricycle, a tire and a broken planter, an oil lantern, a broom, a large spool of rope rotten by dampness. A birdhouse. They had meant to take it with them. They had forgotten at the last moment—our stuff a giant wave pushing their stuff ashore, their stuff breathlessly running, running, then falling.

And I was obsessed of course by the immanence of C at our door—Mom, Dad, teenaged children ready with their truckload of portable life all squared up, all tied up and like ours beige, brown, the interstitial color.

How they threatened us, their mail filling our mailbox, their contractor pacing our living room, measure tape in hand. And I knew they were right. I knew that the pressure of their daily-ness—boiling water lifting the lid of the saucepan—was part of a complex osmotic movement.

Without knowing the next link of the chain, I could sense that something haunted C, rushing them towards the place that just yesterday, that today still was mine. They had to come and chase us away as we in turn were chasing A, the first couple. None of us could avoid this natural shift. On the contrary, we all feverishly allowed it and yet a bit confused, a bit blurred.

Perhaps blinded. This I felt, sometimes—that we all, ABC, CBA, in fact groped a bit. My perspective, see, tended to rise up high, in order to encompass the three houses among which our disjoint team stirred itself.

As my point of view levitated to embrace the field of operations, people shrunk. We all became very small and so did our cars, vans, trucks—only made noticeable by their laborious transit, the back and forth shuttle, the turbulence.

Well, the metaphor is truly worn, but of course from a distance we looked like ants, carrying those things ants like to transport: a minute shred of paper, a fragment of straw.

Although when my viewpoint lifted, simultaneously and strangely shifting in time, as if sucked into the future, I could not see what A, B, C—these dark, creeping little formations, these m dashes, n dashes, ellipses—carried along.

All the boxes, from up above, under tomorrow's gaze, disappeared.

*

So the awareness of our synchronous displacement, so momentous for each of the pawns switched around the checkerboard, yet irrelevant with regard to the large picture—since every square would be filled as it was before—didn't cease to occupy my mind.

The whole shuffling struck me as significant per se—something to be remembered not by the individuals concerned (who of course would never forget) but by a kind of external memory within which the new arrangement would be a sign, a marker, the head or tail of some micro-era, the beginning or closing of some historical chapter.

Do you recall the year when the As left their house on the hill and the Bs came in, rushing out of the cottage with the two maple trees and the Cs, after such a long time, sold the flat at the waterfront?

Yes, of course, of course. Meanwhile, someone would take the flat the Cs were about to clear. Someone I didn't know was already planning to occupy the Cs' flat at the waterfront, magnetized by its newly found emptiness, while I packed and packed and I was obsessed. Someone only scraping the edge of my consciousness, because thanks god I couldn't see it all—the huge, constant sliding of particles. The small figure I had captured—a three-pointed star, modest comet dazzling through the night sky—made my head spin already. I had to pretend that while we were moving, something else—a big chunk of reality, I hoped—remained steadfastly in place. Then believe that somehow, somewhere, I would also find rest.

2.

Meanwhile, the woman walked.

I had noticed her when I had first arrived in the neighborhood I was now about to leave. I had seen her walk by. Never still, sitting at a bus stop, for instance. Standing at a pedestrian crossing? It just didn't occur.

I had spotted her countless times, and she had captured my attention since the beginning. I had felt an immediate sympathy and an intense attraction, of the kind that you experience about perfect strangers you don't necessarily plan to befriend. You may envision having a casual interaction, such as a direct stare, a nod or a smile. Perhaps a verbal greeting or, in times past, asking for a light.

Yet such contact might never occur and it wouldn't matter. Nice 'regular' strangers have their own appeal. They become part of the landscape that they make more pleasant—as the house painted bright pea-green does, the tall jacaranda tree, the mailbox with the tinsel peacock.

So the woman I frequently spotted—each time with a kind of spark, my attention aroused—had enhanced the attractiveness of the neighborhood since the start. Somehow, her presence had welcomed me in.

Though she wasn't jovial at all. I had never seen her, I said, other than in motion. Brisk progression… I should call it propulsion. She was bent at hip level. A very sharp angle. Her spine must have some kind of problem. Scoliosis. Arthritis. Severe. Due to age.

She was old. How much I couldn't tell. She dressed like a young person. Nicely, I mean, variously and adequately. She wore sport gear, for instance, when she went for a run. In those cases she put on a bandana, pulling back her scant hair, still quite long.

She must have run considerable distances as I spied her within a large radius. Going that far, at that speed, must have cost her effort. I had seen sweat on her brow. I had noticed her paleness.

Each time that I had seen her run, a slight feeling of incongruity had stricken me. Sure, elders do exercise. Age wasn't the reason of my disconcertment. Something I couldn't quite name, though, made her activity look a bit odd, bit displaced.

What could have been less athletic than her minute frame folded on itself, those two segments so precariously joined, those thin, rigid limbs oscillating off-beat, the intent, pained gaze on the wrinkled face, the exiguous braid wavering in the wind?

I felt sympathy, I said, for her, and great admiration for her stubborn training, though I couldn't suppress perplexity, as if something escaped me, as if I were missing a secret of sorts. As if she might have a special reason for working out so… so conscientiously, but I couldn't guess which.

What was she running for? I know it is obvious. Her health, her good shape. Oh please, that could not be the reason. What was she running for?

When she wasn't, her apparel showed her excellent taste. Her clothes were well assorted. Pieced together, I mean, also assorted to the season, the weather, perhaps to her mood or the occasion. There must have been occasions. She must have gone somewhere. To the market, perhaps to church, perhaps to the movies.

Her gear was exquisitely complete... Nothing was amiss, yet nothing superfluous. She wasn't coquettish. She was thorough—the hat, the umbrella, the vest, the foulard. When she wasn't running she clutched a purse—never large, always dark in color—close to the very point where her body hinged upon itself, the point of weakness, of fracture.

When she didn't run she didn't stroll either. She walked very fast, her expression betraying exceptional focus tinged with strain. Tinged with a streak of despair, as if reaching her destination each time were a matter of utter importance. Extreme urgency.

Maybe it was. Although, paradoxically I most frequently saw her in cute verdant areas of our neighborhood (of which she roamed several square miles), threading tree-lined avenues bordered by quiet bourgeois mansions. Perfect itineraries for leisurely promenades. Yet she crossed such pleasant décor—in beribboned hat or in flannel coat, wearing laced boots or fringed moccasins—as if she were reaching the frontline with a life-or-death note in her bra, as if rushing to minister a last rite, deliver a firstborn.

Perhaps once she had done such things. Her face had such furious intensity. Meek ferocity emanated by her feminine attire mixed with her trooper stride. Yes, a ferocious meekness. And a complete abstraction, I felt, from her surrounding, notwithstanding the fact that she accorded her wardrobe to the weather, the season…

She displayed on her features—especially her gaze, pointed in front of her, never deviating—an impervious solitude. As if she were carrying along a separate universe, a mobile one that she deftly wove within plain reality, without puncturing the membranes dividing the two, without a single spill.

Sometimes I saw her among other people. I mean other than me. At a big intersection, by the gas pump or the carwash, next to the post office or near the mall. Even in those locations she

never was still, never did something else than running or walking in haste. And I never saw her interact with anyone, anything except for her precious destination, to me of course obscure.

Her feet followed her head, due to the misalignment of her torso. That must have been tremendously hard.

*

So the year when I sold the house and then moved away I saw the woman walking, and the thought brushed the periphery of my brain, sweet and sour. The thought that I'd be missing her stark elusiveness, her arcane trajectories. Her moon-born evanescence, birdlike fugacity.

3.

That year I left the bad lover and found the good hairdresser. The two events aren't connected. Oh, no.

Shedding the lover was uneventful, one of those things sheer inertia performs. I—a person of strong will and conclusive action—that year was so consumed by the meringue-making, egg white-beating effort of losing and finding abodes, that all other endeavor seemed unaffordable.

I couldn't, to save my life, face the responsibility of ending a relationship. Though I didn't truly have one—just a worn, empty habit. Even that I could unbutton, unzip, so to speak. Unless it would mercifully fall off—a dead skin, crumbling chrysalis.

Since the start, my lover had been spartan as it came to communication. He was fond of never calling, never connecting if not perfunctorily, right before the opportunity of en erotic session. Should his unpredictable schedule suddenly allow a chance for sex, he would let me know with the most concise of notes. I should reply with a yes or a no. Any flourish, such as offering a slight variation, a "shall we," would exceed his capacity and make him shy away. Until the next

opportunity, the next telegraphic note to which I should reply yes or no. I had soon learned my lesson.

Otherwise, my lover wasn't too bad. I mean, not a bad man, though so un-courteous that to call him unkind would be fine. Incapable of care or attention, he was mellow nevertheless. That, I believe, was the tricky part of it.

Because he wasn't mean—on the contrary, kind of armless—unavoidably I was tempted to nurture sweet feelings about him. Tender thoughts, emotions, attachment came naturally.

I was prone to think of him when (almost always) he was absent, although I knew I shouldn't contact him unless an occasion for sex were close, I mean within the half hour. Then I should ask concisely, "are you free in thirty minutes?" Any addendum, I said, would throw that gentle man, gentle, man, into panic. So I preferred abstaining.

I remember acutely longing from him, that year, when butterflies went amok. It was mid-March and they were migrating. The butterflies. And I happened to be on their route, as I went South for a weekend-long job. That year I rarely left town, being fully occupied by what I already described. So the brief trip felt exhilarating.

As I drove around for work-related reasons, swarms of butterflies materialized out of nowhere—like small clouds, sudden vortices, miniature maelstroms. Oh, the sound of their wings. Hush and murmur. Secrets whispered by many voices, screamed secrets and yet undecipherable.

They appeared in groups of various sizes. Big crowds, sometimes, redolent of biblical invasions. Sometimes just a small bunch—four, five, twenty? Hard to say, as their presence was always so ephemeral and impalpable.

Wings were yellow but their back was brownish, a dull tint melting within the background. As the insects danced around, the under-wing color dominated. So the eye starved for golden flashes, craved the intermittent shine.

All that fluttering, I guess, pushed me out of balance. Sort of kicked, slightly dislodged my heart. I was stirred by an acute nostalgia, a sharp longing. I called, left a sweet note. Message in a bottle. Then I knew I should let go. Then I knew I should learn how not to reply.

Towards the end of the year, in the fall, I interviewed for an interim job. I decided that, prior to the meeting, I should have my roots touched in order to be presentable. I had scrubbed and bleached the bathroom for my upcoming open house. I did not want to stain sink and tube with hair die.

I hadn't visited a hair salon for more than twenty-five years, my entire adult life. Such small luxury exceeded my budget, and I could do my hair. Therefore I didn't know where to go, and I didn't want to devote much time to the search. I hoped to chance upon a shop where I wouldn't be charged too much, where the job would be decent and quick, and the woman in charge of my head would be kind of quiet.

The guy, I mean. Cordero's salon opened on a wide parking lot, empty, which was quite a bad sign. But the calmness felt soothing to me, almost intimate, and it magnetized me instead. When I stepped in, a girl was getting her color done. Long, thin, straight hair rained down her tilted neck.

Cordero, all by himself, hovered upon his customer's head. But he lifted his eyes, smiled and said he would be with me in twenty minutes. For a while then, he alternated between me and the girl. Here a wash, and now let it soak. Here a timer and I'll put you under the helmet, ok? He attended to us as if managing a couple of simmering pots.

Soon the girl was all done, her mane shining gold. As she stepped out, a client called to reschedule her session. And so we were alone. The salon was darkish and deep, cozy and crimson, a kind of Ali Baba's cavern. As I said, I hadn't entered one for a quarter of a century. Sitting there was as if having stepped in error into someone else's life.

Cordero had named his tariff up front—a ridiculous sum compared to average. Since I used to do the job, quick and easy, by myself, I knew his price was actually honest. And he didn't try to sell me any extras. On the contrary, he immediately figured what I needed: touch of brown, good rinse and pat dry. Out! The sun would take care of the rest.

But he added conditioner, proteins and a deep scalp massage on the house. Perhaps he was trying to seduce a new customer. I doubted it. I believed he had well understood I was just an accident and he didn't care. His next job had been canceled. He did not have a lot on his hands. Perhaps he was bored. He could waste some time and pennies on me.

Yet to me his extra care was manna from heaven. What a marvelous gift. My scalp, hair and head pampered? When had that occurred last? For sure, not in the company of the lover I had ceased seeing in late spring, when all those tiny butterflies had swarmed by. He would not have tickled my nape, dipped his fingers into my hair. Such erratic gestures would have been distracting, futile, superfluous and ludicrous.

"You have wonderful hair," said Cordero. Yes, sir. True. I had known it at some point.

I had hoped that while the die soaked I'd be left in silence. But Cordero was a chatterbox and he talked. And no, listening wasn't bad. He was funny, smart and well traveled. He remembered far-away places he had visited in his past—places I happened to have seen as well, in my past. I enjoyed the idiosyncrasy of his impressions, how he had gathered unique details and how vividly he could recall them.

He was fond of international cuisine, which meant he loved local recipes. He had tried all sorts of dishes over the years. He remembered tastes and textures long gone. At one point, as he expertly rubbed my neck, water flowing like tears down my cheekbones, he described the best dessert he ever ate. In a distant country where I also had traveled, in an ancient town where perhaps I had sat at a bar.

Fascinated, I asked specific questions, but he needed no prompt. He knew the exact words evoking the lightness of the beignet topped by thin slices of orange and puffs of cream, the exquisite contrast of crisp and dense, tangy and lacteus. The dessert he recreated in words was a poem, a work of art. How he had chosen it among all, how he had treasured the memory of its tiny, incidental delight simply amazed me.

Then we sat face to face while we waited for my roots to be refreshed in full. He started singing a tune that sounded familiar—maybe a theme from a symphony or such. That he would reproduce a classical melody impressed me. I smiled, but he didn't react. Didn't notice, perhaps. He was singing in front of me and in my presence. He did not sing for me.

Soon I recognized the motif—the Moldau by Smetana. It's a quite famous air inspired by a river. Oh my, I loved it immensely. I'd get goose bumps whenever I heard it—the whole thing I mean, as the composer scored it, not the bare motif crooned by Cordero's morning voice.

And yet he sang well. Then we commented on the music, which he loved, he said, exactly as I did. Well, of course. To be able to perform it impromptu… But why would I be surprised? We discussed it—the flow, the liquidity, the polyphony of myriads of lives, nature's cycles captured by… We were almost talking philosophy while Cordero expertly toweled my hair. I was ready. I reached for my purse, planning on a tip.

Then I suddenly recalled that I had sent a record of the Moldau to my ex-lover, when we had freshly met and I still thought flourishes would be allowed, and of course he hadn't replied, not even acknowledged it. And I had forgotten, forgotten.

Now the stream had reemerged from some underground bed where it might have sunk. On a tune, in Cordero's voice, the river, teeming with life.

WAITING FOR YOU

MARKA RIFAT

Your daily run will soon bring you here,
you with your righteous plumes of white breath on the frost,
your skinny frame and fat alimony,
your sharp eyes noting and despising what does not suit your view,
your machine-bright mind finding ways to power, frictionless,
through the years.
He was your one mistake, a weakness you
excised when he failed to meet your standards, tried and failed
to worship correctly at your cold altar.
Left bereft, he could not continue, my only brother,
Your black heart blocked all the light.
And you will glance up, frowning, recognising his letters –
pleas you returned unopened – but unable to fathom
why they should be in the park. They are neatly tied with twine
as straight and red as the lines on his wrists,
they are held by branches more tender than your embrace.
The why will slow your progress and I will step forward
to end it.

THE RED STAR

HANNAH LEE

BACK THEN, I wanted to die a death that would belong to everyone. We all did. We shuffled down sandstone corridors, waiting for the pure, impossible tug of the call. Those who felt it dived into their own private mortifications – hours of meditation, walking on cinders with blistered feet. They wrung out their minds like soaking wet linen.

We – the un-called, their sisters – were exaggeratedly, good-naturedly happy for them. In private, we knuckled the walls, nails biting into the solid, unyielding flesh of our arms.

The day of the ceremony, we streamed out of the caves with a carnival air. Shasta grabbed my sleeve and we ran for the spot with the best view, an entrance with an uninterrupted line of sight to Mother Temi at the staging-place. At the higher balconies, our sisters clung to the cliff face like a flock of startled white birds.

In the permanent low-light of the red star, Mother Temi's shadow stretched over the bare sand of the desert. Far to the north, the dunes rolled to meet a quiet sea. The only other interruption to the landscape was the sandstone cliff behind the staging-place, honeycombed with tunnels. Our home.

The other stars pulsed, many-coloured, but the red star was three times the size of any of them. It was a boat, a beacon. The stars were the reason we were here.

Mother Temi began the song, a sound too big for one body issuing from her throat. It was a deep, plangent sound that cut off the festival chatter and made some sisters weep. Shasta slipped her hand into mine and we swayed together, knowing that however many times we heard the song, we could never hope to imitate it. The song was for the Mothers, a secret passed down.

There was a moment of stillness as we waited for the song to reach the stars. Then, I heard it – a whisper-thin thread of sound.

O-oo-ooh…

I looked around.

You and me, me and you, let's stick together just like glue.

The girls' faces around me were blank and innocent but the rhyme continued, hissed under the bell-like melody of the Mother's song. I had heard it before. How could I not have, when everyone knew that Shasta and I loved each other the most?

Love is careful. Love is proportionate and finite. Love is a right.

In the exhilaration of the ceremony, we had forgotten ourselves. I dropped Shasta's hand and stepped away, clasping my hands in front of me just as the first star began to fall.

The star was young and fiercely hot, burning greenish blue. We gasped as it arced towards us. Who would do it, who would be brave enough? A flurry of movement among the white-robed ranks and Jeanne broke through, sprinting onto the bare sand of the staging-place. The star landed and burst, sending out a blinding flash of hopeful energy. When our vision cleared, Jeanne was gone.

Mother Temi never stopped singing, calling down stars one by one, inviting them to take only the most virtuous, the most pious, the Called. We gasped and whooped as our sisters went, biting down the disappointment of not being chosen.

The last girl was too weak to walk, so Shasta and I took her arms, manhandling her across the sand towards the staging-place. Her body was wasted and insubstantial, easy to lift. At some point, she had attacked her hair, shorn it off in tufts.

We bent over her. Her face was raised, blank and ecstatic; her skinny arms reached out. The skin over her hollow cheeks was translucent and something white and mealy had built up around her mouth. I said her name, but she did not seem to recognise any of us. She had no more need for memory, reason, language. I staggered back, suddenly terrified.

We watched her crawl across the blasted sand. Then her star fell, and she was gone.

*

The ceremony still weighed on me a few days later. I had watched many sisters sprint towards starfall but had never delivered one there myself. Never seen it up close.

Let's go foraging, I said. Shasta agreed at once, slotting our minds together with the ease of long practice. We went to the hangar and linked up to a Tern. Even as we left our planet behind, I could still hear it. O-oo-ooh, you and me me and you stuck together just like glue!

It must have filtered down our cerebral link. Shasta stared straight ahead, into the blackness of space. Then she said, Last one for a long time. Okay?

What? I said.

She gave me a look, which I deserved. Of course I knew what she meant. It's not right, taking the love away from everyone else, she said. We should try harder if we ever want to be called.

We skidded beyond gravity, following the pulsing urgency of the Tern's computer to worlds whose air, unlike that of our red planet, is stirred by life. With a touch of my mind, I could have nudged the Tern off course, spun into uncharted territory, perhaps even finding the planet Mother Temi said we came from – a devastated planet, with alkaline water and cracked stone. A sour planet, its promises sucked empty at the centre. Man-made. Men – cautionary-tale

creatures, counterparts so distorted as to be barely recognisable. I still find it hard to believe these creatures existed.

The world we visited that day was old. It had run wild, forgotten the sizes of things. Shasta and I parted leaves big as blankets, cutting down berries the size of our heads. Everywhere was the riotous smell of damp earth and the things growing in it – flourishing and wilting, dying, dissolving. Shasta clipped a filter over her nose and mouth. I did not, breathing in the smell, and she looked at me but said nothing.

We reached a small pool, fed by a clear running stream. Shasta bent over, tentatively dabbing the surface of the water with a finger.

I sat down beside her, scooping up some water in a cupped hand. How do you think it will feel to be called?

Shasta wiped her hand self-consciously on the hem of her robe. A wideness, she said. Opening, expanding, connecting to those who have gone before. Total obliteration of the self for something much larger. Her teeth as she smiled were very white.

I was silent for a while and she put a hand on my shoulder. It will happen, she said. It just takes the right kind of conviction.

Are you sure?

Listen, go to the cold pool, rinse off your mind. Try hunger, thirst, pain. Your body is the conduit to your soul.

As she spoke, my vision blurred at the edges and the only sensation I was aware of was the warmth and weight of her hand. My body reacted in way I had never felt before, some vestigial instinct leaping like a flame.

Perhaps I had breathed too much of this strange air, air shivering dangerously with life, made up of far more than my sisters' quick, dry breaths. Maybe something had become lodged in my soul like a piece of grit, and my body was turning on itself, trying to expel it. I unclipped Shasta's air filter and felt her body stiffen. I leaned over, pressing my mouth to hers.

This was different from the cerebral link. My mouth led and irresistibly, my hands began to follow.

I felt Shasta's breath puff into my mouth and her lips slide over mine. She was trying to speak. She pushed me away as if my touch had burnt her, our link in tatters, shredded by the blade of her fear.

She scrambled up the bank of the pool. A safe distance away, I followed her back to the Tern.

*

Sister Beth had fine blonde hair curving downy over a pink scalp, red-rimmed eyes stung to constant wetness by sand. Standing at the centre of the room, she rotated like a wheel around its axle.

Yesterday at lunch, she said, I let the server give me a bigger portion without pointing out her mistake. Now you. You go.

This was sister time. We had been assigned to each other. Beth was the person who would receive my confessions until the wheel turned again and I would do the same with someone else. We talked about every little peccadillo, forging admissions into armour.

Let's see, I said. I picked a flower from one of the plants in the hydroponics room.

What did you do with it?

I ate it, I said, and I could still feel its delicate petals in my mouth like crinkles of skin. Swallowing something that had grown in water and air, whose roots had never touched soil, had been strangely thrilling.

Beth looked at me strangely, pulling her patience inward, iron down her back. She could sense that in some undefined way I was not taking the whole thing seriously. I knew she would rather be here with just about anyone else, someone who would take half the weight of their combined sin, help her disown it, throw it out.

But she was stuck with me. I felt what I had done to Shasta as a weight on my tongue. Inside, I held the dizzying, shameful knowledge that my body, and therefore my soul, had betrayed me.

My turn, said Sister Beth. I lingered by the cold pool today, shivering, unwilling to take the plunge. Now you.

It is possible, I said, that once or twice I have drifted off to sleep during meditation.

For the first time, the whole process made me angry and impatient. Sister time had become a meaningless paradox. I listened to Beth as she, with watery eagerness, shared sins that were hardly sins at all. Meanwhile, I had something dangerous to hide, cradled in the hollow of my chest like something furred and sleek, glitter-eyed. If I told Beth, she might gasp a little, act pious and concerned, profess not to understand such urges. She would recommend the necessary purifications – meditation, starvation, the cold pool. And it would be as if she had cut the heart out of my creature, dabbled in its blood.

I wondered if Shasta was telling today's sister about me. It felt like something sour in my throat, rising fast. I feel sick, I said. Can we finish for today?

*

As I stepped into the corridor, I almost collided with Mother Temi. With her dark skin and white robe she was statuesque – tall, straight-hipped, shorn cleanly down to bone. I did not know whether she was passing, or whether she had been standing outside listening. Either way, I was sure my crime read plain on my face.

Child, how you have grown, she said. Her voice was light but I still heard the sinuous twist of doublespeak, woven in to keep me honest. I knew what she meant. Since the day on that ancient planet, my appetite had increased. My breasts hung heavy, my hips swelled. I had even stolen a small ceramic honeypot and hidden it under my mattress. When I was alone, I would take it out, rolling it between my palms, dipping my fingers into the honey.

As Mother Temi spoke I imagined perversions pushing out from under my skin, unsightly rolls of flesh. I will meditate on it, I said. I am just off to the cold pool.

Good, said Mother Temi. She smiled, resting a hand on the small, swollen mound of her belly.

Blessings, I said hastily.

It had only happened once or twice in my lifetime but I knew what this bulge indicated. Soon, there would be a new sister wailing and squirming in the sandstone-carved birthing pit, and we would all file past, dipping our right sleeves into the blood.

Mother Temi's body was the only one that worked this way. When the time was right, she would take a Tern alone, returning to the devastated world we had left generations ago. She would take some of that toxicity into herself, coming home with a new sister in her belly. To spur on her return, we would eat and drink nothing, crowding at the staging-place in the half-light of the red star.

My pain cries out to your pain, Mother Temi replied.

We walked together for a while, until I felt crowded out with guilt and unsaid things. Mother, I asked. What was the old world like?

She raised a delicate eyebrow. Violent. Narrow. Dangerous. Our women were red-rashed, choking on smoke, haemorrhaging from their noses and ears. They were dying from the lesions on their souls.

I wondered if what I had felt by the pool had been part of this spiritual disease. Was I carrying contamination? Did it travel across time and space, sinking straight into the gash of a shameful thought?

And the men? Did they die? I asked.

Mother Temi stopped and turned to face me. She held herself very still and straight, and though her face was blank I could feel the anger radiating off her. For a second, I thought she might strike me.

Where do you think the contamination came from? she said.

She saw I was scared and took the hand away from her belly, stroking my hair as if I were a small child.

Men were only the beginning of the story, she said. We transcended that world, we came here. It has been a long time. The men have all died. They can no longer harm anyone.

*

I did not seek Shasta out, my guilt kept me away. Instead, I danced a shambling dance of mortification, purification and praise, trying with increasing weariness to feel what I had been told I should feel. I lost weight but the inside of me felt no different. Several times a night, I woke to troubled dreams – dark hair, soft breaths in my ear.

But I did see her, one sister time. I sat at the window of my assigned room, hoping that it would not be Sister Beth, that I would never see Sister Beth again. I barely recognised Shasta when she walked in – thin, so painfully thin, with her lovely hair gone. I had taken her life, breathed it in through my mouth, and now she was closer than ever to salvation. Beside her, I felt grotesque.

We sat together in silence, looking out at the desert. The bench must have hurt her jutting bones, but Shasta was past caring. It was a while before she spoke.

I feel it, she said. Finally, I feel it. The call.

Something opened up inside me, a pit, dangerous.

Shasta rested a hand briefly on my shoulder before leaving the room. I continued to sit, bereft.

*

When the next ceremony came, I sat alone, off to one side. None of my sisters joined me; they could feel the negative energy coming off my body – associating with me, breathing in that miasma, was enough to knock them out of favour, stop them from feeling the call. I was past caring. I watched the first stars fall, saw the first sisters taken.

When it was Shasta's time, she walked very straight and proud out to the staging-place and stood there waiting. Mother Temi's song bent and flexed like a strip of warmed metal. I watched Shasta greedily, her thin, straight back glowing against the red dunes, and time flexed with the Mother's song, everything poised, drawn unbearably taut. I knew I was seeing her at her most perfect.

When Shasta went, so did her memory of me. The part of me which loved someone the most, snuffed out with the object of that love. In all ways that were important, I had ceased to exist.

As I sat with these thoughts, I noticed that something had changed. The stars were no longer falling. Everything was eerily still and very hot. Then, a huge rumbling sound. A metallic smell, invading like a nosebleed.

The night was blasted wide, white and shadowless. When the sisters saw what was happening they pushed and pulled and climbed over each other, and the cliff roiled like an anthill.

The red star was falling. Around me, my sisters ran forward with outstretched arms. Instinctively, I followed, but stopped. I turned and ran back the other way, towards the cliff. Sand sifted over my feet and I fell, covering my face against the red star's dying flash. The implosion sucked all the light out of the sky. Even so, I could sense that I was alone.

*

Without sight, I began to relearn touch. I flexed my toes, curling them into the sand. I pulled my robe up and over my head. It was achingly cold but not the mincing clench of the cold pool. This went deeper; into my bones, laying me open.

I ran my hands up my legs, feeling the hair pulling against the grain. I felt the loose flesh of my thighs. I imagined that my hands were Shasta's and something rose in me that I had never felt before, sweeping everything I had been before it until all that was left was a blessed emptiness.

I am lost. I have ceased to exist.

I slept where I fell. When I woke, still in darkness, I made up my mind.

I'd take a Tern, go back to that lush dying world where everything was so big I felt small and safe, unable to do any harm. Maybe I wouldn't find it. I'd search and search until the Tern, lopsided from the power of a single mind, failed me. Then, in the sweetness of relief, I'd spiral out into an endless stream of molecules – atoms searching, grouping, intertwining. Pressing together in the hot belly of a new star.

Venus Underwater

LINDA KING

WHAT SHALL WE HOLD?

PATRICK CABELLO HANSEL

At the end,
all you could taste
was onion
in scrambled eggs,
no black coffee,
no radishes picked
by your own hand.
In the dining room, your recliner
became your bed, your life,
as rumpled lungs wrestled
with whatever oxygen
made it through.
On Ascension Sunday,
we gathered together
to ask your blessing
for the last time.
What shall we hold?
Words will stumble over themselves
as the years pass by,
as the ground refuses to burst open.
Who will know
your name, the weight
of your walk,

how you spoke

in rage and in love,

how you did not

take your last breath

but gave it,

the air holding your flesh,

a Pieta of wind, the last wound

sweeter, more bitter, than the first?

Mother was the Easter Bunny

GEORGE BLESI

“MOM, BE REASONABLE.”

“There’s no time.”

“It won’t work. It can’t work.”

“It's all we have left.”

“It’s madness. I don’t want to be a part of this.”

The Daughter’s words stuck in the thickened space between them. Cancer makes everything heavy — even the air.

“I’m sorry. I don’t want to be a part of it anymore either.”

The Mother sat in a rocking chair she couldn’t move if she tried. Weathered and hunched and covered in an off-white crocheted quilt, she looked twenty years older than she should. In twenty years, she would still be too young to die this death.

“Last night I dreamed about Samantha. Do you remember her?” the Mother said.

“Of course I remember. She was a good cat — except when she would puke in my room in the middle of the night.”

“I dreamed about how peaceful she looked at the clinic. Do you remember? She knew. She was ready.”

“She’d been sick a long time.”

“She looked so peaceful.”

Again, the words sat between them, adding weight where little more could be held.

“Mom,” the Daughter’s voice broke, “when the nurse gets here we can have her increase your pain meds. That’ll make it better.”

“No,” the Mother tried to swallow. “I’m ready.”

The Daughter wobbled to her feet. “I’ll grab the box from your room, and then we’ll go.”

It was a small house, and the Mother’s room was only a few feet from where she was dying. The outside of the house was green. They painted it last summer to defy the prognosis. Green, the color of spring, the color of new life.

A faded cardboard box sat in the center of the bed. A white, furry foot with a pink, studded sole hung over it’s edge. The Daughter had agreed to the plan when she thought it was a joke. Something in the bottom of the box rolled and rattled as she carried it into the living room.

“This is ridiculous. You’re too sick. I’ll get in trouble if I take you out of here. What will Nurse Mary say?”

The Mother’s throat struggled with words that wouldn’t come. She didn’t need to answer anyway. They had gone over this a thousand times. A deal was a deal.

“How long have you had this?” The Daughter set the box between them and pulled the bunny suit out for inspection.

“It feels like forever,” The Mother managed. “But, only since you were born.”

The suit wasn’t as white as it was in all the photos and its fur had lost all its fluff. The zipper jerked to a stop three times on its way down to the base of the left foot. Laying it on the floor near the rocking chair, the Daughter stretched out the arms and legs making certain the ears weren’t tucked underneath the hood.

“It will hurt when I move you. You know that right?”

“It already hurts.”

The Daughter's shaking hands pulled the quilt off the Mother's shoulders, and her strong arms lifted the Mother into the air. They were the same weight the day they painted the house. The Mother thought that was funny — the Daughter didn't.

"It's hard to believe this used to fit you."

"You used to believe I really was the Easter Bunny," her mother gasped as the floor took her burden from the Daughter's arms.

"You were the Easter Bunny." The Daughter smiled a full, real smile for the first time in weeks.

The Mother's limbs resisted stretching. She hadn't moved much in weeks. Her hands and feet couldn't reach the pink gloves or the pink studded feet.

"I'm sorry, mom." The Daughter's tears fell into off-white fur. "I can't do it without hurting you."

"You're doing great." The Mother's winced. "It'll feel good to be the Easter Bunny again."

The hood pulled into place as it always had. A wisp of brown stuck out near the Mother's neck, the Daughter tucked it in with soft fingers.

"Your hair is still so beautiful."

"Don't forget the whiskers — I won't be able to talk anymore — Don't forget the whiskers."

The Daughter had forgotten the whiskers. She had also forgotten that once the whiskers were on, the transformation was complete and the Easter Bunny can't talk. The Easter Bunny can only use hand gestures and laughter. Lots of laughter.

The Daughter's hand found the little jar of black face paint in the bottom of the box. There was just enough for one last set of whiskers.

"I love you," the Mother said.

"I love you too."

The Daughter blackened the tip of the Mother's nose and traced four thin lines onto each sallow cheek. The Easter Bunny might have smiled. The Daughter lifted the Easter Bunny into a wheelchair hidden behind the door.

The chair's wheels clicked over the sidewalk's uneven edges. Goosebumps raced their way along the Daughter's arms and neck, but the Easter Bunny had her fur to keep her warm. A blood red cardinal sung its piercing song into the grey of the late April morning. The clinic wasn't far. Just past it was the park they would walk to every Easter to find the eggs the Easter Bunny had hidden there the night before.

A bell above the clinic door jingled as the Daughter used her back to push it open while pulling the chair through. A woman looked up from behind a desk with a kind smile.

"You must be Jessica." The Woman stood seamlessly switching her smile from welcoming to consoling. "I'm so sorry to hear about your rabbit. I'll get you two set up and the Doctor will be right in."

The Woman led them to the third door on the left. The same room as Samantha.

"How long have you had her?" The Woman gave the Easter Bunny a scratch behind off-white ears.

"It feels like forever," the Daughter choked. "But, only since I was born."

La Belle Dame Avec Merci

CLARK MORROW

And now I'll lyricize
About those big brown eyes
That never saw the size

Of things without the purest sympathy:
A man with clownish hair, a free
But sottish show of dance, a three-

Buck blouse unconsciously unbuttoned, all
Call forth her empathy. Enthrall
Her heart with pity, suitor: the crawl

Of years have predisposed her mood
To quiet passion for the awkward. Rude
Men scare her into funny insults, the lewd

Simply scare her. I have never known
More conviction in a love. I had grown
Hard of romantic hearing, but the tone

Of this fresh song (sung with seriousness)
Challenges my gentlemanliness. Less,
Even a sigh less, of her devotion would unbless

My conscience. Fierce in her honor,
Like a highborn dona with jewels upon her
Head and in her eyes, I try to con her

Into a laugh at herself. Nothing worse
Could be imagined: my blunder will immerse
Us in hours of agonized talk, terse

Remarks on dignity and care, random jabs
At the other's sense of pride, till keeping tabs
On points thus made is hopeless. Babs

Gets the better of me: she will, with hesitations,
Slay the high horse under her (this stations
Her on the moral high ground). Pride vacations

While compromise, and joy, wave and return.
In all this she remains herself: taciturn
With the haughty, always willing to earn

The friendship of the real, modest in view
Of her gifts but determined to give them true
Airings; really prepared to be lonely and blue

On principle, but given to outbursts of fun.

She'll delight new acquaintances like one
Practicing comedy, while the latent nun

In her stands by, quick to take offence
At license in her hearers. This tense
Confrontation between her halves prevents

Peace for either half. But still she strides
Stunningly, like those genuine feminine brides
Of the Fifties; she has a figure that abides

In Marilyn Monroeish lines (with just that walk).
That waist, those hips, that heart, will stalk
My lazy mind uprightly, and with class. Balk

As I will at her holding my negligence
In a wry eye, I glow in the effulgence
Of her mixed goodness and neurotic sense.

Sept 1985

Dedicated Practitioners

DAVE SIMMS

Dedicated Practitioners is a Digital Painting combining three of the artist's pieces in his Jazz Musicians from an Alternative world: Some Intricate Rim-shots Just the Blue Tone He'd Been Hoping to Find Big Honkin' Horn.

Music by Moondog

KENNETH KAPP

Owl

"Kerboooom. Smack, right in the kisser. Don't say you weren't warned."

*

"Run for your life, Marty, run for your life!"

TWO WEEKS IN a row on his way across 54th Street to the Sixth Avenue subway Marty Fein heard "Whoo, woo, woo." He was coming from his violin lesson and the first time he was sure it was a major triad. The second time it was a minor triad. Eight notes stepping up and down over the octave. He decided it sounded more like "Who?" – a kind of late-night plaint. Initially, he thought it could have been an owl, but who ever heard a musical owl in midtown Manhattan?

He was fifteen, closer to sixteen, hurrying past a construction site through a pedestrian underpass – metal posts, wood runners across, and pieces of plywood or old doors on top. He never felt safe; this was New York – shit happens all the time. If it had been a construction site in Iowa, maybe a three-story apartment building going up, a brick falls – no big deal – the wooden doors could stop it from crashing through and killing you, but anything coming down from twenty, forty floors up, it was going right on through!

"Who, woo?" followed him around the corner. The third week, he slowed down before he got to Sixth Avenue. Damned if what he had thought was a large fireplug wasn't alive. Swallowing, he stopped, his eyes rolling up from the leather boots to the helmet that pushed against the wooden ceiling. Shit! This guy must have walked off the stage at the Met Opera when

they were doing Wagner's Valkyrie. This is nuts! Then he saw the seven-foot spear and the mouth opened.

"Who are you?"

Damn if he thinks I'm going to stay around and have a conversation.

"No one," Marty said and then beat the hell out of there.

Sixty years later, confused, he dreamed of Popeye giving one to Bluto, winding up and delivering a punch along with a line from the Honeymooners. And there was Moondog looking on, waiting for a pause in the action to ask his question, "Who?" his Viking spear beating time on Marty's head. He woke, it was only a dream, probably the result of too much beer or a flashback from the time he used drugs; or maybe a senile short-circuit.

He asked me if I was Jewish and if I was wearing a hat. I ducked when his free hand reached out for my head. I had no idea then that he was blind. He said if I was Jewish, there was no reason to be ashamed and hide. I looked at him and asked why he was dressed up like that and if he was an extra in a Wagnerian opera.

He said he was Scandinavian and this was what they wore a thousand years ago. I found out later that the spear was made by the same company that made them for the Met, so I wasn't far off about the Valkyrie.

I didn't see him for a month but I admitted I was Jewish the next time he asked.

~ * ~~ * ~~ * ~

Howl

"Ralph, Ralph, Ralph! How many times do I have to tell you – never travel alone."

Marty and Ralph were buddies in high school. In their senior year they shared a copy of Kerouac's On the Road and after reading it, wanted to drop out before graduation. But their mothers, Jewish and Italian respectively, won and they stayed on through graduation. By the end of August, they were "out-of-there," summer earnings wrapped in money belts. Their only regrets were not having female traveling companions and their own car.

"More of an adventure this way, Ralphie."

"Yeah, Marty, and we get the pick of the women we meet on the road. No extra baggage. San Fran, here we come."

They were both a little scared, but this was preferable to listening to their mothers' nagging, "What are you going to do with your life?"

On the morning they left, Marty went into the living room to kiss his mother goodbye. "I feel faint, Marty. In the old country, we were always on the road, but why here in this land of opportunity? And who ever heard of a Jewish boy hitchhiking? I wish you'd never learned to read. What's with this On the Road stuff anyhow? And," she reminded him, "what are you going to do with your life?"

"Ma, I promise. When I get back, I'll know better."

Ralph had arranged for his cousin to pick him up at 9 AM. "We'll come get you fifteen minutes later. You better be ready. As soon as my mother finds my note – all hell breaks loose. Wouldn't surprise me she gets some gumba to break a couple of knees. She doesn't want me going. 'You want San Francisco? All those men singing like castrati – like in the old country. Ralphie, please, I'm begging you, not for any son of mine. Maria, next door, she'll make a man out of you. You can work in her father's grocery. A future – no brothers. You'll learn to make sausage. It's a good store in a nice Italian neighborhood. Listen to your Mama!'"

~ * ~

Ralph's cousin took them through the Holland Tunnel and dropped them near an entry to the Jersey Turnpike. It took them two days to get to Chicago. The first ride they got on Route 66 dropped them at a diner in East St. Louis. There was a little girl playing in the corner. When the waitress heard they planned to end up at the City Lights Book Store in San Francisco, she laughed. "The kid's father said he was hitchhiking there 10 years ago. Good luck!"

~ * ~

California was disappointing as was the bookstore. There was a limit to the number of paperback books you could pick up and pretend to read the back cover of, skimming through a random poem inside, all the while hoping to see the girl of your dreams at the other end of the book bin.

Ralph was the first to observe, "I don't think California is working for me. Even the Italian neighborhood down Columbus Avenue ain't like our Little Italy. Girls don't look any better here, just the skirts are shorter."

Marty agreed. "Yeah. I didn't feel any inspiration when we walked past 29 Russell Street where Kerouac stayed with the Cassadys. Shit, my notebook is as blank as the day we left Brooklyn!"

Two days later they agreed it was time to take the Greyhound back to New York and leave the driving to someone else.

~ * ~

One of Ralph's uncles worked for the NYC Transit Authority and got him his initial job. Once Ralph was through his probationary period, he found his own apartment in Park Slopes, eventually becoming a locomotive engineer. He remained single and told Marty, "My trains are plenty crowded rush-hours; don't need more people in my own place."

Marty's mother nagged and nagged and finally persuaded him to enroll in Brooklyn College. "You like math, so become a math teacher. Teachers are respected. You won't be rich, but so what. Marry another teacher. You'll have summers off together. Maybe have two kids."

Who can argue with a Jewish mother!

~ * ~

Marty completed his teaching degree at Queens College. Allen Ginsburg gave a reading. Marty sat in the front row, his feet folded under him lotus-style and his shoes on the floor under the chair. The English majors moved to the edge of their seats when Ginsburg recited Howl. When the reading was over, Marty could only find one shoe. Luckily, he had a pair of sneakers in his gym locker and walked across campus muttering to himself, "Who the fuck took my shoe; who the fuck took my shoe!" unconsciously keeping the beat of "Who" from the poem.

~ * ~

A year later he began teaching mathematics at Andrew Jackson High School in Queens where he met Clara, an English teacher. They dated for two years before getting married. Thirty years sped by like a fast-tempo scherzo – molto allegro. Before they could blink twice, they were empty nesters. Their two children worked in Silicon Valley.

~ * ~~ * ~~ * ~

What

Marty went to MOMA, The Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art, a couple of times a year. Art, music, mathematics were all connected in his mind. When he left, if he had time and it wasn't raining, he would circle the block – a right out the door on 53rd Street to Sixth Avenue, right again to 54th Street, and then back to the Queens subway station entry near 53rd and Fifth. The first time Clara came along, he told her this was by way of remembering his misspent youth

and the violin lessons he had taken a couple of blocks west. “There was a street musician in a Viking costume standing on one of the corners. Scared the shit out of me. I couldn’t have been more than 15.”

He was a couple of years shy of 50 and it felt as if he was having a mid-life crisis. One night it was raining and the street was relatively empty. He stood with his back against a plywood board from a building site. Moondog was asking him, “Who, who, who?” and his mother’s voice came in contrapuntally two words later, “What, what, what?”

He muttered, “Ma, I still don’t know what I’m going to do in life.” He wanted to scream, but in New York, only street people can scream and get away with it – and he was wearing a suit! He shook himself out of his funk and went home. During the week he went to the library and browsed through the psychology section reading dozens of book jackets before selecting a couple on Jungian and Gestalt therapy and the primal scream.

Clara saw them on his desk and asked, “Is there something I should know?”

Marty had an answer ready. “I’ve got a problem student who’s getting help. He told me about some of this,” waving his hands over the books, “I thought I’d give it a look-over.”

Over the next few weeks, he read bits and pieces from each of them. They seemed to promise to help, but he concluded it would take a lifetime, so why bother. He smiled. Fritz Perls would have said, “Ask a question; you already know the answer. Dig, you’ll find it for yourself!”

Marty thought about it. The urge to scream receded. And then he remembered the Ginsburg poem. He was planning to look for it when he returned the psychology books to the library but remembered the internet.

There was a three-day weekend coming up and Clara decided it was a perfect time to visit her sister in Boston. “Why don’t you come along, Marty? If the weather’s nice, we can walk along the waterfront.”

"I like your sister, but it's been six months at least since you've been together. Why don't you go by yourself, spend some time together; it'll also give me a chance to catch up on my reading."

Marty was determined to work through some of the crap stirred up by the psychological reading. There was a periodic pounding in his head from Howl where Ginsburg's Moloch morphed into Melech, Hebrew for king, or in its verb form where it takes on the meaning of to rule, as in, to rule over oneself. He felt that this was prime material for a weekend and good bottle of scotch – alone.

~ * ~

On the internet, Marty found an article about Moondog and the percussive instruments he had invented. Clara was with her sister in Boston. Saturday night Marty sat down at his desk, a cut glass half-full of scotch, and Howl displayed on the computer screen. He raised his glass in a toast. "To going to where people have never gone before. Fritz, take us up out of here."

In the morning, still half asleep, he saw Moondog in front of a construction site, beating time with his spear and tapping a metal lid from a garbage can on the sidewalk. The vibrating lid was saying, "Wha, wha, wha" and then Moondog spit out a "t" and so that it became "Wha – t, wha – t, what – t!" Marty felt he was being mocked.

~ * ~

Marty didn't see the notice in the paper about Moondog returning to the States for the New American Music Festival in Brooklyn in 1989. Most likely he would not have attended the concert even if he had known.

~ * ~~ * ~~ * ~

Why Not

When you grow up – look for yourself!

When Marty turned 65, he finished out the school year and retired. He hadn't heard from Ralph in years and the phone number he had saved now belonged to someone else. The old neighborhood had changed. Ralph's duplex had been demolished along with the rest of the block and replaced by a high-rise. He finally found the old Italian grocery a mile away.

He asked the stooped-over woman behind the counter if she knew Ralph. "Yeah, I knew a Ralph. He put in his 30 playing with trains and couldn't wait to run off with some floozy. Last time I saw him he said, 'Anywhere south just as long as it doesn't snow.'" Marty thanked her. She didn't have an address and didn't know the woman's name. He had asked and she had answered, "Why would he tell an old woman?"

Walking back to his car, he wondered if the old woman was Maria, the girl of Ralph's mother's dreams.

~ * ~

The next ten years were like a slow dance, where he always felt out of step. There were always things to do around the house now that he and Clara were retired. They joined book clubs and liberal organizations, enrolled in free senior classes at the community college, and participated in senior exercise programs at the Jewish Community Center.

Marty liked to joke, "Clara, we may be old farts, but we're healthy old farts."

They visited their grandchildren in California twice a year and rented a cottage in New England in August for two weeks for some quiet time alone. After 9/11, traveling became onerous. Airlines and airports were anything but people-friendly and driving for any length of time presented its own challenges for old people.

Grandchildren now took turns visiting them. They would declare one night a "family dinner" and over dessert gathered around computer screens conferencing in all the "stay-at-homes."

~ * ~

Clara started to have problems. She pooh-poohed Marty's concerns. "It's nothing, Marty, just old age. Besides, I've had GI problems all my life." But the pain increased and specialists were consulted. They discovered advanced ovarian cancer and, despite aggressive treatment, Clara passed within the year. Marty celebrated his 76th birthday alone.

He told his kids he appreciated their invitations to move out to California: "There are lots of great homes in the Bay Area. Weather's great, Dad. We'll all be an hour's drive away, max."

But he was firm. "Hey, give your old man a chance to find himself. Got to straighten things out here anyhow."

Marty settled back and decided he would return to some of the questions he had shelved long ago, telling himself, "With old age, comes wisdom." He bought a couple of books on gestalt and Jungian analysis online, joking it was cheaper this way since he'd most likely either lose or forget to return any books from the library.

~ * ~

"I'm up here in the catbird seat. Been here all the time. Uncle Fritz, at your service."

Marty tried to get into the habit of taking short walks, failing miserably. If Fritz Perls wasn't in the catbird seat, Clara certainly was. "Marty, you got to take good care of yourself now that I'm not here. You'd want me to do the same if things were the other way around. Eat right and exercise. You shouldn't stay inside all day. Go for a walk; we live in a nice neighborhood. I'm sure Sam and Ellen down the block would love to have you stop in for coffee."

He listened, but as he liked to tell Uncle Fritz, "You get old, your hearing goes bad. All right – I'll take a couple of short walks; it's no big deal."

Fritz interrupted. "You take a couple of short walks? Ha, who you kidding. You're in your slippers for days at a time. Maybe you should pick up a paper at the corner store."

"Hah, yourself. Where have you been, corner stores are a thing of the past. Enough of an effort to go to the market once a week. Probably don't have to – Clara left enough canned food in the basement for me to outlast a nuclear attack."

Marty discovered Google Maps and with the Google man explored the streets of San Francisco, peering in at City Lights and walking down Columbus Avenue. He sighed, "Ralph, don't worry, nothing much has changed. We'll always be looking for the pretty girl at the other end of the poetry bin."

~ * ~

Sam was puttering around the front yard when Marty finally went out for a short walk. Sam waved him over. "Hey, Marty, long time no see. How've you been? Got to show you something. Come on in for a cuppa."

Ellen heard them talking through the screen door and led them into the kitchen. She put the kettle on and took out a tin of Mandelbrot. "The coffee's instant but these I made." She returned with cups, plates, napkins, and a pile of brochures.

Sam spread them out, announcing, "We're moving. Had enough of these winters. Yeah, yeah, I know, it's summer now. But we'll be down in Florida before the Holidays. There're a couple of synagogues right outside our adult community. Big clubhouse, all the amenities. Fun name, Bis 120; you know, up until 120, you should live to hunderdt zwanzig." And while Marty sipped his coffee and dipped the Mandlebrot, Sam and Ellen gave him the grand tour.

As he was leaving, Sam extracted a promise that he would come visit once they had settled in.

~ * ~

A year went by. Marty's kids were again nagging him to sell and move to California, or at least Arizona. "You'll be nearby, Dad, not all the way across the country."

On the anniversary of Clara's death, Marty visited her grave. He placed a small rock on the headstone and stepped back. "You're right, Clara, as you always were. Maybe it's time to move on. I got another note from Sam and Ellen, inviting me down for a visit. They've moved to Florida, west of Del Ray Beach. I'm going to go in two weeks. Maybe it's time for me to move. I've been spending too much time in the house alone – just staring at the four walls."

~ * ~

Ten months later Marty bought a one-bedroom condo in Bis 120. Six months later he was, as the other members joked, "fully vested." He started playing bridge, joined the amateur thespians, and was already playing in the class B shuffleboard league.

Once a week he played nickel-dime pinochle with Sam and his friends. Sam bitched about his beginner's luck. "Never should have asked you down, Marty."

Occasionally Marty had trouble sleeping. There were no city sounds and Clara wasn't there to make him a cup of warm milk. The questions that had started with Moondog would filter in through the grayness of the early morning; he would get up from the recliner and leave the flickering TV screen to take a pill before sliding under the crumpled sheets in the bedroom.

If there was a shuffleboard match the next morning, his alarm would have been set and he'd be there on time. His game was never off by much and rarely did he forget to set up a "hide." After the game was over, they'd go into the clubhouse for lunch, and later sit around the

pool. Marty would eventually pull his chair to a shaded part of the pool deck and listen to the chattering of the birds and clattering of the shuffleboard disks.

His outdoor nap was disturbed whenever the dumpsters were emptied. If Marty remembered Moondog's clanking garbage can cover, he would also recall those insistent questions of who, what, and why, and opening his eyes, search the sky for clouds resembling a Viking hat or a Wagnerian spear. Then he would ignore the jabber of the gulls, dismiss all the questions, and smile, knowing that Clara was waiting for him, and besides – who cares. He had concluded months ago that all in all, this is not a bad life.

WINDOW

ANNA JOVANOVSKA

SUBURBAN TRUTHS

ANTHONY SALANDY

It was in that suburban neighborhood
That families sat around a table
In full view of the silent neighborhood
That seemed to never change
Or be anything more
Than a contrived suburbia-
Where behind each door
Sat individuals who were so different
And lost in their own interests
Interests which manifested themselves
In the most unlikely of ways
For within the picturesque suburbia-
Sat men who found pleasure
In the arms of others
And teenage boys who sat lost
In the expected masculinity
For which they were obliged to become
In a suburbia where mothers dreamed
Of being much more than a caretaker
And where daughters swore
To be more than the adulterated nanny-
Of grown men
Who spread their ideologies
Beyond the domain of their homes-
Beyond the supposed sanctity of their marriages.

BULLDOG

MICHAEL CONN

MY BIBLE OFFERED no practical help, so I prayed to Winston Churchill. The resolute prime minister who had led an entire nation to withstand the blitzkrieg and persevere to victory. Five years dead, now, he surely sat somewhere near the right hand of God. With a book of his famous speeches open on my lap, the war years section, I read aloud, night after night, the same passage from his heroic We shall fight on the beaches address to the House of Commons, 1940, that climaxes with we shall never surrender. Seated beneath his graven image, I read his words as a pledge, an oath, my cognac-fueled prayer, for the pluck to withstand my own invaders, although beaches and Nazis had nothing to do with it. And if you founded your own company, as I had, offering a product everyone likes and needs, the world over, I'm betting you won't find what ensued from my prayers unusual.

Or maybe it just feels pretty to think so.

Two in the morning, slumped in a tufted-leather chesterfield sofa in my walnut-paneled study, dusky-dark, tumbler of cognac in hand, I was praying to Old Winnie, the room's only light a tiny brass lamp that shone down on the great man's portrait. Shot by a renowned photographer, that famous menacing scowl (having appeared, among other places, on the cover of Life Magazine), it hung over my stone fireplace, framed in gilded rococo. Remnants of embers cast no flickers on my walls. It wasn't serenely quiet, like those first weeks after our twins had departed for college, and Leona and I had waltzed around each other wondering why our house had so many rooms. More like tomb quiet, with Leona having long since ensconced herself in our in-law suite above our attached three-car garage. Eight lawsuits were still pending against me. My business partner and the bulk of our working capital were rumored to be hiding in Belize. The IRS was up my nose with a flashlight. My cigar moped dead in an ashtray. My

cognac had begun to taste tinny. Winston jeered down at me, in reply, his hand on his hip, growling If you're going through hell, keep going. Advice that somehow led me to dozing a few hours each night.

"If you expect to become more like him," Leona once sighed, jutting her head in my study door to announce she was going to bed, "then become more like him." She was the Brit in our family, born and raised, so I suspected she knew from whence she spoke.

My lawyer had said I was lucky no one had brought a class-action suit. Nine trials were behind me, eight to go: that was class-enough-action for me. When had our society become so damn litigious? And why? Opportunism run rampant, I supposed. I owned a mid-sized ladder factory in Toledo, Ohio. We shipped to hardware stores in seven states, my absentee partner and I. This was before ladders were federally required to come with warning labels. A year before OSHA was established. Nine plus eight suits: seventeen daredevils who'd failed to realize the top step of a stepladder was not a step. The flip-out shelf where handymen, professional or amateur, were meant to rest their bucket or tools or whatever (a thoughtful accessory, to my way of thinking), was not a step. Seventeen falls from the vertiginous altitude of six feet. Fractured tibias, torn rotator cuffs, shattered kneecaps, lost wages. Insurance had carried the freight, thus far, but would bottom out if I lost one more case. I had built our production up, from making footstools and toddlers highchairs to making ladders: it was all my fault.

Mine and gravity's.

Leona found me on the chesterfield the next morning, shook me awake. My neck crackled as I lifted my head off the back of the sofa. She was still a handsome woman, approaching the shadow of fifty, silvering hair drawn back into a twist, makeup subtle as always, willowy figure just short of bombshell. She hadn't missed a morning bubble bath in twenty-six years of marriage. The woman had her routines, they rarely varied. Me, on the other hand, I had put on thirty pounds by the time the fifth verdict was handed down, and ten more after my

partner absconded. Mostly in my gut. I quit using our scale after the IRS came knocking. We hadn't made love in so long I wondered if Leona even cared. I pushed up from the sofa after she reminded me: “We have a showing this morning.” I hoped the couple coming weren’t young. I loathed the idea of selling to anyone younger than us. I had come to view everyone under fifty as scheming opportunists: the age of the litigants I had faced thus far averaging somewhere between mid-thirties to early forties.

In the shower I pondered where I would go while our house was being shown. We still belonged to the yacht club, along Lake Erie, kept our forty-four-footer there. I could take it out for a romp. We still belonged to the golf club, but my usual foursome was only available weekends. We weren’t hurting financially, not yet. We’d kept our memberships up to keep my networking opportunities active. Our house wouldn’t be sold to raise cash, it would be sold to prepare us for separation. Distribute our assets. Was the Rotary Club meeting today? No, that was last week. Christ! if this was what early retirement was like, then fuck that. Leona had her plans today, her monthly gardening club luncheon. Leona always had plans. They used to include me, usually. She planned our vacations, our trips to visit our kids, our evenings out painting the town. Why couldn’t I make my own path? I was an adult, a full grown man, an alpha male, in a temporary slump—four years and counting. Leona also had her own attorney, a woman I disliked having never met her. It had been her suggestion that we sell the house, split the furnishings and other household stuff. Establish clearly who owned what, in case a pending lawsuit resulted in seizure.

Resulted in seizure, haunting words, as I stepped out of the shower. But then I stepped back in, cranked up its steaming spray, and warbled lustily, in the cadence of a nursery rhyme: “I’ve taken it up my ass for so long, I forgot, to lather, my sphincter.”

•••

The young couple who toured our house—yes, young, goddammit—scavengers, childless peacocks, the husband a banker, by which I mean a pirate, his wife a urologist, likely to piss on me, had decided to submit an offer. Our agent looked unusually perky, borderline ebullient. I couldn't tell and she wouldn't say if that was good news or bad. I went out on Lake Erie that afternoon, nary a breeze, high overcast, the water just rippled enough to look like hammered steel. I was so absorbed by trying to write my future, the strutting prow of my Sea Ray 44 cruising at a leisurely three or four knots, its twin diesels pining for a highspeed gambit, that I didn't come fully aware of my surroundings until I noticed downtown Detroit's formerly mighty but now well into decaying skyline looming on the far horizon. The sort of town those two vainglorious poseur insurgents, submitting an offer on my house, would never deign to visit, much less purchase a home there.

This brought to mind a piece I'd read in the Detroit Free Press, about how Henry Ford II had formed Renaissance Detroit, a development group financed primarily by his family's automobile company. His group would build a cluster of five lofty glass towers, downtown, the presence of which would lure back building activity and commerce that had long since fled the city. A foolhardy gesture, doomed to failure, was what I'd thought when I'd read it. But Hank The Deuce, as Ford was known, was nobody's fool. And now, as my Sea Ray lolled along on dull waters, I felt as though Old Winnie himself had sent Hank The Deuce to provide me with a glimpse of my personal renaissance. My shining way forward. I shuddered as my old self unfurled, the return I had prayed for of my inner bulldog. I pulsed with strategies. And, boy, was I ever hungry, ravenous, as if that slab of porterhouse I had polished off at the club, hours before, with twice-baked potato, broccoli in béchamel sauce, two pints of Guinness, had already winnowed into my bloodstream, leaving my belly a cavernous void. I swung my white beast's nose southward, cheered by having regained my senses, though in a way that would soon startle even Leona's analyst (that bespectacled little wuss), aiming back for Toledo as if it were Eldorado hailing me.

I had once been a driven man, you see, made my way on a high school education. Some would say stubborn, Leona for example, but mine was a Titan's confidence. I could sell a refrigerator full of vegetables to a polar bear. My former business partner, may God scorch his craven soul to ashen dust, used to call me The Velvet Hammer. And now I was reborn. You don't accomplish what I had without planning, focus, an articulated mission, irresistible zeal. Business strategy is not a branch of astrology. New product lines would be my lofty glass towers: Prefab organizer and storage units for closets and garages folks could assemble easily for themselves. Unfinished dressers and headboards and barstools folks could varnish or paint however they wanted. Anything consumers couldn't fall from and sue me! I was William Howard Bligh, mainspring of prosperity, builder of empires, fountainhead of commerce, and I already made damn fucking great ladders!

Then again, as I neared the club's docks, Hold on, there, Hoss! came a thought. I was going to need the freedom to bust some moves, act quick on my feet, "broken-field running." React, reassess, execute. And freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose, as sung by Janis Joplin, while I had more than a foundering business to lose: Leona. We had long since paid off our mortgage, laid out cash for my Jag sedan and the Porsche she called her "wee runabout." Our twins were on academic-based scholarships, Wilson at Yale, Angela at Duke. We had the wherewithal to claw our way back, to plow personal funds into my business, replace my limp-along lawyer with a team of snarling whippets to fend off remaining lawsuits. But how long would Leon's patience hold, if our already diminished savings dwindled toward zip? She cherished our club memberships: her golf, her boating, her tennis. Would she surrender her "wee runabout" without raising a fuss? How would she react to bruising penalties if we needed to dip into our retirement funds? I would feel blessed to have her at my side, the very embodiment of Sun Tzu's The Art Of War. But Leona caviling and harping would drive me back gargling cognac again, under Churchill's baleful glare. My woman could throw befuddling heat like a big

iron radiator. I was going to war, now. Would she stand by me staunchly, keep our home fires burning?

I got my answer, of sorts, sooner than later, upon returning to our dead-still home. The note she had left on my chesterfield read: You need space, I need space. I'll be at my sister's an indeterminate while. Please don't visit or call. We'll be better off apart for a time. I want you to find your authentic path, because only that path can lead back to me.

She'd resolved my dilemma by creating a new one.

•••

We didn't just separate, Leona and me, we separated legally, at the urging of her attorney, a shrew with an ostrich-skin briefcase. The distribution of our assets took place at a long mahogany table in a glass-walled conference room, two mature adults faced off congenially across from one another. Our cash would be split fifty-fifty. I would retain ownership of my business and its future proceeds, Leona would retain her interior design firm and its future proceeds. The rest of our assets, including home furnishings, would be similarly divided, which we would possess but not "own"—they would be owned instead by a trust for which our two attorneys would serve as its sole trustees. This ensured that neither Leona nor I could sell, give away, or borrow against more than half of our stuff. Should we reconcile, we would dissolve the trust and return to cohabitational harmony. Should we proceed to divorce, the assets in trust would be divided according to the terms in the document now lying before us. All in all, fair enough. Until, running a finger down Leona's assets column on the paperwork, I found my Churchill listed. At the bottom, the very bottom. It hit me like a shot in the dark. Identical prints came to auction, fairly often, at places like Sotheby's. But mine didn't. I wanted mine. Sure, Henry Ford had shown me the way, but it was Winnie, my deified paladin, who had abided within me, comforted me in my darkest years. I made a fist of my hand, not from anger, but to stifle its trembling.

"This … No. Uh-uh," like a junky jonesing for his stash. "I see a mistake, here."

"And what would that be, Mister Bligh?" asked snakeskin briefcase.

"My Churchill. It's mine. It's always been mine. That's simply not negotiable."

"You are correct. It is not negotiable," she smiled. "It is my client's desi—"

Leona had shushed her with a raised hand. "It's for your own good, William," Leona said. "You were like a stranger in your own house. Brooding every night in your study, talking to a photograph. Grumbling up at it in your sleep. You never once came knocking on my door," meaning her rooms above our garage. "I felt like that dead, fat politician had wedged himself between us," her eyes pooling, she soldiered on. "I want you to reclaim our marriage. But I need you to reclaim your life, first. Rediscover who you used to be. If not for us, then do it for our children."

I stared down at my fumbling hands. Why hadn't I ever knocked on her door? I could answer that, I'd spent hours contemplating it, out on Lake Erie: We'd had twenty-two good years, until the twins leaving for college felt like a retina of our marriage had detached, blinding an eye. And then came a Niagara of lawsuits, blinding its other eye. If her squirrely little analyst hadn't explained it to her yet, then what'd she been getting for a hundred-fifty an hour? Besides, I had fashioned a plan, that day on the lake. A plan she of all people could appreciate. She knew the pressures, the stresses: she'd started her own business from scratch, struggled at first. Couldn't she see that "rediscovering who I used to be" was exactly what I'd already set out to do? Plus I'd be rediscovering who we used to be. I was doing this for us. It was my sworn duty to save our marriage. At all costs.

Now my attorney leaned aside, whispering at my ear.

"If this should lead to divorce," he said, "and no one here wants that to happen—right?"

I nodded my assent, divorce had shriveled my scrotum to the size and texture of a walnut

shell. “Okay, then,” he said. “If it comes to that, I will get your photo back. I will make it a centerpiece of our demands. She’ll surely have relented, by then.”

I looked squarely at Leona. Her smile felt like the one from the night my cousin who became my best man at our wedding introduced me to her at his birthday party. My smile in reply warmed all the way to my feet. Concession made a sudden resurgence in my DNA. I grew faintly aware I was rediscovering the nature of Love, ass-backwards.

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We did pretty well on the sale of our house. Leona stayed on with her widowed sister, who had kept her sprawling manse in a gated community just outside of Cleveland (two doors down from the golfer Jack Nicklaus). I rented a condo that faced the big lake, a sizable corner unit, with a wood-burning fireplace, hardwood floors, a kitchen outfitted with gleaming appliances. Not out of pride, or self-assumed superiority, but in my rigid belief that success sells—as in: witness my trappings, all is well in the burgeoning ladder industry, you should purchase one or more of our fine climbing devices. And I kept my Jaguar, maintaining appearances for my employees, as well as potential clients. I couldn’t carry off feigning success by pulling up in a sputtering puddle-jumper. My new place didn’t seem so desolate as my lake view did as winter drew near, accustomed as I was to time alone, Leona having spent most of her at-home time in her suite above our garage. I adjusted to fixing my own meals, and cleaning up after myself. Meanwhile, several of my customers stood by me, and I scored several new ones, which kept a skeleton crew and my floor manager employed, producing ladders bearing stickers that (my lawyer’s idea) screamed: THIS IS NOT A STEP, in bright yellow on an orange field. I finalized a deal with a nearby plant to manufacture my new products, under my supervision. And Leona had begun calling me, Saturday afternoons, to chat wistfully about our separated lives.

When I eventually worked up the gumption to suggest we add Wednesday lunches to our Saturday chats, she said, “Maybe. Healing is a process. We’ll see where things go.” We’d been a

team, partners, for the span of nearly our entire adult lives! I felt sure she couldn't walk away from our twenty-six years—mostly blissful, for the first twenty-two—any more than I could. My Leona was no more a soloist than I was.

It was my late evenings that had soon turned knotty for me: I wasn't dating, I wasn't even tempted to look around. I had never in our marriage, nor in the two prior years during courtship, lied to Leona. And I did not want to someday have to look into her eyes and see renewed anguish when I told her I had cheated during our separation.

Further, my friends were our friends, and, while they welcomed my phone calls, my occasionally stopping by, it felt all too obvious from their patter, their expressions, their all-around deportment, that they had chosen sides, and my bench was empty except for me. My employees were dear to me, I even knew their spouses and kids, though only from annual company picnics, and our big Christmas bashes, where I brought in a Santa and elves, a handsome bonus check under each employee's dinner plate. Yet to intrude on their private lives seemed painfully awkward and pointedly desperate. What I'm trying to say is, long evenings without my Old Winnie had posted me on too many barstools until closing time, bending one or another stranger's ear. I might've slid even farther down my soused rabbit-hole, had my twins, our son and daughter, not flown in for what they called "an intervention." I promised them I would give up the booze. And I did, although I still frittered my evenings on barstools, club soda in my first, bending affable strangers' ears.

So now a few words about that portrait—my portrait—in Leona's possession:

It was shot while Churchill was in Ottawa to address the Canadian Parliament about World War II. Life Magazine had sent the fabled Canadian photographer Yousuf Karsh to shoot its cover, and Churchill's handlers had allotted Karsh just three minutes for a session with the famously ornery statesman. So, Karsh had prepared everything in advance, and stood waiting alongside his wooden Deardorff camera, with a dark-cloth draped on his shoulder. Churchill

strode in, stood on the X Karsh had taped to the floor, and turned toward camera with a cigar clamped in his mouth like a smoldering howitzer. Karsh asked him to set the cigar aside. Churchill refused. Karsh, standing five-foot-four, marched ahead, swiped the cigar from Churchill's mouth, and marched back to camera. Turning, he found a seething Churchill leaning at him, with his hand jammed on his hip. His irreducibly stalwart glower that later came to define the British Will that defied the blitzkrieg. Karsh snapped the shutter. Churchill stormed out. Life published his photo on its cover, the one and only frame Karsh had had time to shoot. Prints of it like mine were now worth several grand each, but mine was worth more to me than money could buy.

Even so, things were going really well, by spring, even better than I had dared dream: Our prefab stuff sold like Do-it-yourself had become the new American mantra. Ladders went out our doors as if the Arab Oil Crises had prompted folks to save money on gas by performing weekend repairs on their homes. My former business partner got arrested when he snuck into San Diego for his grandson's wedding. He had spent a good deal of our cash, but mostly on hard assets, easily sold—a Costa Rican beach house, a Ferrari, a fifty-two-foot cigarette go-faster (his version of keeping a low profile). A court-ordered auction, along with a portion of the proceeds from the sale of his domestic assets, further supercharged my company's coffers. And he was up on criminal charges. I had long since put him behind me and now prison bars would keep him there. Better yet, my Saturday phone chats with Leona, and their undeniably upbeat tone, had been paired with Wednesday lunch dates. My kids were paying me frequent non-motivational visits. And OSHA started requiring This Is Not A Step stickers on ladders, nudged by a congressman who had bought one of my six-footers! I was the pied-damn-piper on that legislation.

My phone rang, Saturday, too early for it to be Leona. It was my doorman saying a courier had delivered a package for me, would I like the porter to bring it up? I knew on sight

what it was, an all too familiar rectangle. I tipped the porter a gratefully gushy fifty bucks, and set about shredding tan butcher-paper wrapping off of Churchill's portrait. A linen envelope taped below Winston's nose read Darling in Leona's elegant cursive. The card inside, a three-by-five, told me only: You might be needing this, I've met someone.

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I went to her wedding. She didn't marry the someone she'd met. A nice enough fella, her someone, he lasted a little more than a year, until lingering feelings for his ex-wife led him back home. Through it all, and years after, Leona and I had continued our Saturday chats and Wednesday lunches. I do admit that, in the early going, and by early going I mean the first two years, I had sat there pining to woo her back. But at the same time something new was creeping in on me. I had taken my business success for granted, until lawsuits came skulking. I had taken Leona for granted, the hugest most regrettably selfish mistake of my life. Yet once her first someone was gone, and I had watched her happiness re-blossom over a new fella, the man she eventually married, and our daughter Angela had joined her mother's interior design business, our son Wilson had graduated into automobile advertising in Detroit (an easy visitors' commute for all of us), I knew I would never take anything nor anyone for granted ever again.

And I too will someday remarry. It's in my bones, now. Meanwhile I'm playing the field: a widow and two divorcées. Leona said I've become something of a bounder.

She's wrong about that. I'll prove it to her, someday.

Then

GLENN THOMAS

Linoleum print-poem.

THE COLOR OF LIVING

VICTORIA RICHARD

WHENEVER I THINK of that day, I first think of the color of a robin's egg, for it was that color which was to follow me throughout that year.

I was sitting at a round table encased by a large purple cloth, my body adorned in a shirt of robin's egg blue with gold buttons marching across its front like overly polished medals. My feet were enclosed by the glossy black flats that herald every future writer, librarian or teacher.

Wedged between my mother and a happy fat black man that seemed to talk quite a lot about Krispy Kreme Donuts, I had the flicker of a feeling that something in the atmosphere was shifting and swirling over my head. Or it could have just been the nerves jumping in my stomach as I handed him the plain yellow file that was my portfolio. I remember each piece as if I had just written them -three poems and the first chapter of a historical fiction novella.

I would like to say that there was a great ominous quiet echoing off the hundred-year-old building's brick walls as he read the carefully stacked sheets, but no. Since then I have found that there are few times in a person's life that the earth grants silence to its inhabitants and that the first painful reading of a young writer's work is not typically one of these times. Alas, the reading was accompanied by the sound of a male dance teacher playing loud music and counting beats as he stepped to the choreography alive in his mind.

Such was my first impression of Jubilee Performing Arts Center. I had been homeschooled up until that moment in my life and rarely ever went outside of my bedroom save to ride or feed my elderly neighbor's horse. I can't quite say that I was happy. It was like dwelling inside of the morning before a rainstorm for eternity, the kind of morning when you can smell it hanging muskily in the air and every shadow seems to have painted himself gray instead of black, afraid to be too much of anything. The birds are twittering as they look up at a lone

patch of blue sky and hope that its color will be bright enough to drown away the rain until they can finish laying their eggs.

I was that bird.

A few futile things had been done in attempt to alleviate this grayness, including buying myself a kit of makeup and expanding my musical interests beyond the Contemporary Christian music my few sweet-souled friends listened to. However, the most memorable of my attempts at escape was dying my hair green, safety green like the neon of a construction worker's vest. It happened after dinner one bleak summer Saturday night upon realizing that the blue-eyed boy I had been fawning over since summer camp had no intention of writing me back from Arkansas.

Now, for those of you raised in the grace of the southern states you have probably already realized what a disastrous error that was. There would be church the next morning with all its town talk bubbling in the blue upholstered pews like a massive, chaotic fountain. Then the deaf choir director would stand and sing all four stanzas of songs that droned about salvation like it was a very sad thing. Next, the pastor would stand, and you would think long and hard about everything he said, weighing it in your mind as you weigh coffee grounds on a scale. Finally, the organ would begin to flourish violently, as if each note played was another soul snatched from hell as the pastor somberly announced, "I want every eye closed, nobody peeping around." You endured it with sweaty palms and a thudding heart, because you didn't have to open your eyes to know that every Aunt Peggy and Grandma Sue was wondering when you would mosey yourself down there and ask the pastor to wash off the glitter caked around your eyes in the baptismal pool. Who cared that you had done that two years ago when your face had never touched foundation and you had not a thing in your closet that hugged your waist? The answer is that once you have been caught holding hands with an anxiety attack before Sunday Sermon, everyone has doubts about how well you have been cleansed of anything.

Now in a sturdy brick building in downtown McComb, Mississippi nicknamed Kramer's Roof, my mother made a point of asking the principal of my new school if I could dye my hair, just in case I ever decided to plunge myself in a bucket of color again. I remember vaguely that he said it would be fine, that he believed in giving children liberty. It sounded like he was calling to me from a mountain. I was too busy watching his hands to pay attention to my mother's worries.

His fingers were clasped around the front page of the novella excerpt I had provided. I flushed; up until that point I hadn't even allowed my mother or my friend Lauren to read any of my work. He gave me a soft, wide smile as if he knew that my insides were shaking before he asked:

"Do you mind if I write on it?"

I shook my head.

"This is how I usually edit. All your work should have two sets of edits, one from me and one from the creative writing teacher, Ms. Ellzey."

"So she's in?" my mother pressed, always hurrying, always trying to gobble up the whole conversation as you were feeding it to her.

"Yes, she's the kind we're looking for."

There was a half pause once again, the almost silence now destroyed by my mother's gasp. I, however, did not have time to peruse the library of excitement for a proper ejaculation. He was editing my work with a red pen, explaining to me each point of error or weakness. A warmth stirred in my chest. He was speaking a language that I understood, a language of metaphors and imagery lit up by windows of imagination.

I looked around at the tall ceiling and the set of couches cornered around a small shelf of books. Somewhere beneath each brick, cabinet and table there was hope the color of robin eggs and blue sky waiting to reach up and snatch a girl that thought being comfortable enough to color her hair was living.

Two weeks later I found myself standing back in the same atrium, strange children buzzing about me, calling to each other as if they had been starved by the summer's languidness and now felt the sharp, ecstatic swing of vigor reentering their muscles like music entering the bloodstream. There was a robin's egg blue book sack strapped over my shoulder.

"Excuse me, may I have your attention please?" the man I had auditioned with stood at the center of the room, speaking in a mid-toned voice.

The room went quiet – actually quiet.

"Here's what we are going to do," he began to explain. "I want everyone to sit with the other people in their major and then come up with something to present in front of everybody. You have fifteen minutes."

I turned shyly to the thin, gangly girl beside me and asked, "Who are the creative writers?"

"Oh, they're over there," she smiled, flouncing away to join a rather large group of visual artists.

There was in the corner, pressed close to the doorway of the kitchen, a group of three girls. The first had plump thighs and blue hair. A second, also blue haired girl pressed closed beside her and struggled to read what was scrawled in her notebook. The last girl seemed to be the leader of the group. Her floral top, button up skirt and gray flats fitted her like a teacher, the spirit radiating inside of the smile whispering the same. I blushed hotly, embarrassed to be noticed by another soul. She had robin's egg blue eyes.

I was too immature and perhaps even stupid to realize that I had just crossed a bridge or that an early August morning had the power to shift my entire microcosm. Or that a building could mean so much. Or that a humble man could rearrange my entire worldview. Or that there was a life in my hands beyond what any fate could decree, that with hard work I could shape myself into whatever I wanted.

But I assure you, by the end of the next three years, I would come to understand.

CONTRIBUTOR
BIOGRAPHIES

GEORGE BLESI lives in Minneapolis with his wife and daughter and a houseful of pets. A story of his was published on the Dime Show Review in July 2019.

CHRISTOPHER PAUL BROWN is known for his exploration of the unconscious through improvisation and the cultivation of serendipity and synchronicity via alchemy. His first photography sale was to the collection of the Standard Oil Company of Indiana. Over the past three years his photographs were exhibited twice in Rome, Italy and in Belgrade, Serbia. His series of ten photographs, titled Obscure Reveal, were exhibited at a Florida museum. He earned a BA in Film from Columbia College Chicago in 1980. Brown was born in Dubuque, Iowa and now resides in North Carolina.

CYNTHIA CLOSE Armed with an MFA from Boston University Cynthia plowed her way through several productive careers in the arts including instructor in drawing and painting, Dean of Admissions at The Art Institute of Boston, founder of ARTWORKS Consulting, and president of Documentary Educational Resources - a nonprofit film distribution company. She now claims to be a writer. A large sample of her previously published work can be found on her website: www.cynthiaclose.com

MICHAEL CONN'S stories have been published, or are scheduled to be published, in Gray's Sporting Journal, The Sonora Review, The McGuffin, The Whitefish Review, Carve Magazine, and five other quarterlies/journals. He is a two-time finalist for the William Faulkner-William Wisdom Award for Short Fiction.

DAN CUDDY is an editor of the Loch Raven Review. His poems have appeared in many journals, most recently in End of 83, the Baltimore Post Examiner, and the Bhubaneswar Review.

JOE FARLEY has a B.A. in Journalism and Literature from Ramapo College of New Jersey, studied fiction in the M.F.A program at Minnesota State University, Mankato, and currently teaches literacy in the Denver Public School system. His fiction has been published or is forthcoming in Weber—The Contemporary West, Trillium, and Down in the Dirt.

PATRICK CABELLO HANSEL My first book of poetry "The Devouring Land" was published in 2019 by Main Street Rag Publishing. I have published poems, stories and essays in over 60 journals and anthologies, including The Meadowland Review, The Transnational, Isthmus, Red Weather Review, Ash & Bones and Lunch Ticket. I have received awards from the Loft Literary Center in Minneapolis and the MN State Arts Board, and my novella Searching was serialized in 33 issues of The Alley News. I am the editor of The Phoenix of Phillips literary magazine, a new journal for and by the people of the most diverse neighborhood in Minneapolis.

ANA JOVANOVSKA received her BA in Printmaking and Graphic Design from the Faculty of Fine Arts – University Ss. Cyril and Methodius, Skopje, Macedonia (2014). Upon receiving a scholarship she spent time studying abroad attending École supérieure d'arts & médias de Caen/Cherbourg in France (2013-2014). She got her MA in Printmaking from the Faculty of Fine Arts – University Ss. Cyril and Methodius, Skopje, Macedonia (2016). Ana had 10 independent and more than 150 group exhibitions in Macedonia and abroad like: Serbia, Montenegro, Greece, Bulgaria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Slovenia, Romania, Czech Republic, Poland, Russia, Italy, France, Germany, Spain, Portugal, Mexico, Argentina, Colombia, India, United Kingdom, the United States and so on.

KENNETH KAPP was a professor of Mathematics, a ceramicist, a welder, and an IBMer until downsized in 2000. He now teaches yoga and writes. He lives with his wife and beagle in Shorewood, Wisconsin. He enjoys the many excellent chamber music concerts available in Milwaukee. He's a home brewer and runs whitewater rivers with his son in the summer. Further information can be found on www.kmkbooks.com.

LINDA KING received a BFA from the University of Tennessee in 2001 and an MFA from the Art Institute of Boston at Lesley University in 2007. Her work has been exhibited at the Blutenweiss Gallery in Berlin, Germany and the Union Street Gallery in Chicago, Illinois. Linda teaches college art appreciation and humanities courses online. She received an Assets for Artists matching grant in 2011 and an individual artist grant from the Berkshire Taconic Artist's Resource Trust Fund in 2015.

EDWARD LEE'S poetry, short stories, non-fiction and photography have been published in magazines in Ireland, England and America, including The Stinging Fly, Skylight 47, Acumen and Smiths Knoll. His debut poetry collection "Playing Poohsticks On Ha'Penny Bridge" was published in 2010. He is currently working towards a second collection.
He also makes musical noise under the names Ayahuasca Collective, Lewis Milne, Orson Carroll, Blinded Architect, Lego Figures Fighting, and Pale Blond Boy.
His blog/website can be found at https://edwardmlee.wordpress.com

HANNAH LEE, a Singaporean-British writer, is a recent transplant to rainy Manchester, having spent the first twenty-four years of her life south of the Equator. She left Singapore to pursue a degree in Archaeology and now holds a Master's in the study of human bones and burial customs, which she has put to good use on excavations in the UK and Greece. Hannah writes in the morning and evening, around her full-time job at a Students' Union. She is due to begin studying with the International Writers' Collective in April 2020.

JACOB KOBINA AYIAH MENSAH, who is an algebraist and artist, works in mixed media. His poetry, songs, prose, art and hybrid have appeared in numerous journals. He lives in the southern part of Ghana, in Spain, and the Turtle Mountains, North Dakota.

SAM MEEKINGS is a British novelist and poet. He is the author of Under Fishbone Clouds, The Book of Crows and, The Afterlives of Dr Gachet, He has also been featured on the BBC website, in The Independent, on Arena on Radio 1, and in the National Geographic. He recently received an award from the Society of Authors, and has been published in a number of international magazines and academic journals. He has spent the last ten years teaching in the Middle East and China. He divides his time between raising two children as a single father, writing, and drinking copious cups of tea. His website is www.sammeekings.com

CLARK MORROW is a published poet and essayist, as well as a professional award-winning actor and radio personality.

JULIA MUENCH is a multi-disciplinary artist, based in the Central New Jersey area, with a creative focus on her fiber art work, spanning back to the 1990's. Julia's artwork is currently on display at the 2020 Winter Show Exhibit in the Duxbury, MA, Art Complex Center. Her additional art work may viewed at online at https://www.artworkarchive.com/profile/julia-muench ulia received a 2020 Award for her work Birthing of Ideas now on exhibit at the Art Complex Museum of Duxbury, Massachusetts through April 18th. Julia's work reveals her esthetic sense of starting with basic geometric and organic forms, then breaking out of them to build into new structures.

JOSEPH MURPHY has been published in numerous literary journals and authored four poetry collections, The Shaman Speaks, Shoreline of the Heart, Having Lived and Crafting Wings. He is a member of the Colorado Authors' League; for eight years was poetry editor for a literary publication, Halfway Down the Stairs.

TOTI O'BRIEN is the Italian Accordionist with the Irish Last Name. She was born in Rome then moved to Los Angeles, where she makes a living as a self-employed artist, performing musician and professional dancer. Her work has recently appeared in the Harbor Review, Door Is A Jar, Pethricor, and Bridge Eight.

DAVID OBUCHOWSKI is a prolific essayist and fiction writer. His work can be found in Salon, The Baltimore Review, Jalopnik, Garfield Lake Review, Longreads, The Awl, Kaaterskill Basin Literary Journal, Deadspin, The Daily Beast, and many others. For work published in 2019, David was nominated---and is currently being considered for---two Pushcart Prizes, one for fiction, one for non-fiction. He is the creator, sole writer, producer, and host of the acclaimed documentary series, TEMPEST, which has been developed into a television series. After living in New York, New Jersey, Texas, Illinois, Maine, and Colorado, David lives with his wife (an artist), their two kids, and dog-like cat in Los Angeles.

ROSHINI S. PATEL is a current student at Valdosta State University, where she is editor-in-chief of our school's literary journal, Odradek. She loves to read, write, and chill with her dog, Moose.

VICTORIA RICHARD is a recent Creative Writing graduate of Jubilee Performing Arts Conservatory in McComb, Mississippi. She currently studying English Literature at Millsaps College. Victoria has received three Scholastic Awards for her work in fiction, poetry, journalism, and creative nonfiction. Her most recent accomplishment is the publication of her poem “Father’s Dwelling Place” in South 85 Journal.

MARKA RIFAT has awards in poetry and fiction. This year, she will be published in the American journals GreenPrints and Lines+Stars. In 2019, UK publications included stories in Arachne Press and The Eildon Tree, and poems in Black Bough, The Doric Literature Portal and Grey Hen Press. She lived in California as a child and is now based in Scotland.

ANTHONY SALANDY is an aspiring poet & writer who likes to focus on the contrast between nature and humanity but also the many similarities that bring the two together. Anthony enjoys the pastoral as well as the depth of human sentiment and action and tries in earnest to express this in his poetry. Anthony travels frequently and has spent most of his life in Kuwait jostling between the UK & America. Anthony enjoys writing about the impact of multiculturalism in his life as well. Anthony has been published nine times in The Kuwait Poets Society's Ink & Oil Zine (June 2019), The Showbear Family Circus, Dream Noir Literary Journal, Straylight literary magazine, poets choice magazine, The Book Smuggler's Den Montana Mouthful literary magazine & Sumou magazine. Anthony is currently pursuing a bachelor's degree in Sociology at The University of Amsterdam.

LAUREN SILEX creates portraits of the inhabitants of a new Eden. Using cut paper collage, acrylic paint and ink, she brings surreal creatures to life with multiple layers of texture and meaning. A lifelong fascination with detail, color, pattern and storytelling is a constant presence in Lauren Silex's collages. Her work has appeared on the covers of the Free State Review and The Mighty Line, and has also won Best in Show and People's Choice awards.

DAVE SIMS After teaching for over thirty years in the trenches of academe, Dave Sims now dwells and creates in the old mountains of Pennsylvania. His poetry, fiction, digital art and comix appear in the pages and upon the covers of dozens of print and online publications, as well as in online galleries and juried exhibits. His totem poles have caught the attention of many strangers, and his music making and singing have been known to leave listeners shaking their heads in disbelief. More of his work (both published and yet to be) can be seen and read at his website www.tincansims.com.

DANA STAMPS, II. has a bachelor's degree in psychology from Cal State University of San Bernardino, and has worked as a fast food server, a postal clerk, a security guard, and a group home worker with troubled boys. Poetry chapbooks "For Those Who Will Burn" and "Drape This Chapbook in Blue" were published by Partisan Press, and "Sandbox Blues" by Evening Street Press.

DON STOLL is a Pushcart-nominated writer whose fiction is forthcoming in THE BROADKILL REVIEW, WILD VIOLET, NORTHWEST INDIANA LITERARY JOURNAL, SARASVATI, DOWN AND OUT, HOOSIER NOIR (twice), BRISTOL NOIR, COFFIN BELL, RAMBLR (twice), CLEANING UP GLITTER, YELLOW MAMA, and FRONTIER TALES, and has recently appeared in XAVIER REVIEW, THE MAIN STREET RAG, THE GALWAY REVIEW (tinyurl.com/y6nxt9nv, tinyurl.com/y4vdsqhe), GREEN HILLS LITERARY LANTERN (tinyurl.com/y2lfxysm), MINUTE MAGAZINE (tinyurl.com/uhwu28n), BETWEEN THESE SHORES, HEART OF FLESH (tinyurl.com/th44enr), THE AIRGONAUT (tinyurl.com/y67mzfmv), A NEW ULSTER, PUNK NOIR (tinyurl.com/y5o2x5fz, tinyurl.com/uwyz7jb), BRISTOL NOIR (tinyurl.com/uzuzo6o), HOOSIER NOIR, CLOSE TO THE BONE (tinyurl.com/y38ac6jv, tinyurl.com/sc9btxl), HORLA (tinyurl.com/y3k6eewx), YELLOW MAMA (tinyurl.com/sqyt5qr and two stories at tinyurl.com/y5yzozel), FLASH FICTION MAGAZINE (tinyurl.com/vcmpa3f), PULP MODERN, DARK DOSSIER (four times), THE HELIX, SARASVATI, SAGE CIGARETTES (tinyurl.com/yyotrtsb), ECLECTICA (tinyurl.com/y73wnmgq), EROTIC REVIEW (tinyurl.com/y8nkc73z, tinyurl.com/y36zcvut), CLITERATURE (tinyurl.com/y5m8arzn), HORROR SLEAZE TRASH (tinyurl.com/qno5ucu), DOWN IN THE DIRT, and CHILDREN, CHURCHES AND DADDIES. In 2008, Don and his wife founded their nonprofit (karimufoundation.org) to bring new schools, clean water, and clinics emphasizing women's and children's health to three contiguous Tanzanian villages.

GLENN THOMAS – born in Newark New Jersey U.S.A in 1941. He studied technical drawing for 3 years at Montclair High School 1959-1962 1962-1963 Hed studied at The Pennsylvania Academy of fine arts in Philadelphia.1964 A three month travel- study trip in Europe. 1970 Moves to Europe, staying first in Cologne Germany, moving later to Amsterdam, Holland. www.glennthomas.eu

BILL WOLAK has just published his eighteenth book of poetry entitled All the Wind's Unfinished Kisses with Ekstasis Editions. His collages have appeared as cover art for such magazines as Phoebe, Harbinger Asylum, Baldhip Magazine, Barfly Poetry Magazine, Ragazine, Cardinal Sins, Pithead Chapel, The Wire's Dream, Thirteen Ways Magazine, Phantom Kangaroo, Rathalla Review, Free Lit Magazine, Typehouse Magazine, and Flare Magazine.

ANNE WUEHLER's Oregon Gothic was published in 2015 and her House on Clark Boulevard was published September of 2017. She had an evening of plays September 2018 with the Ilkley Playhouse in the UK. Bunny Slipper, a short story, was published in Whistle Pig 2018. The Moth and the Whale was published January 2019 in A Door is a Jar. They also published By Starlight By Starlight My Dear, a flash fiction piece, in July 2019. The Rumpus accepted her poem, My Feet Hurt recently. Sudden Denouement featured her poem, His Taste, on their site. Currently she is working on a screenplay tentatively titled Prince Charming. She also has a short film based on her short play, King Leer, in production right now in the Czech Republic. Whistle Pig accepted her Pearlie at the Gates of Dawn for their yearly literary publication. She also debuted her Fish Whisperer at Death Rattle's flash fiction event, in Nampa, Idaho. She has a short story in the Ghastling's Book Ten-- the Little Visitor. Her short play, the Bluegrass of God, will be published in the Santa Ana River Review in 2020. Her short story, Man and Mouse, will be published in the Sun this spring or early summer.