

# *Twisted Vine*

*Literary Arts Journal*

*Fall 2015*

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Van Gogh's Yellow Paint  
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# Contents:

## Prose:

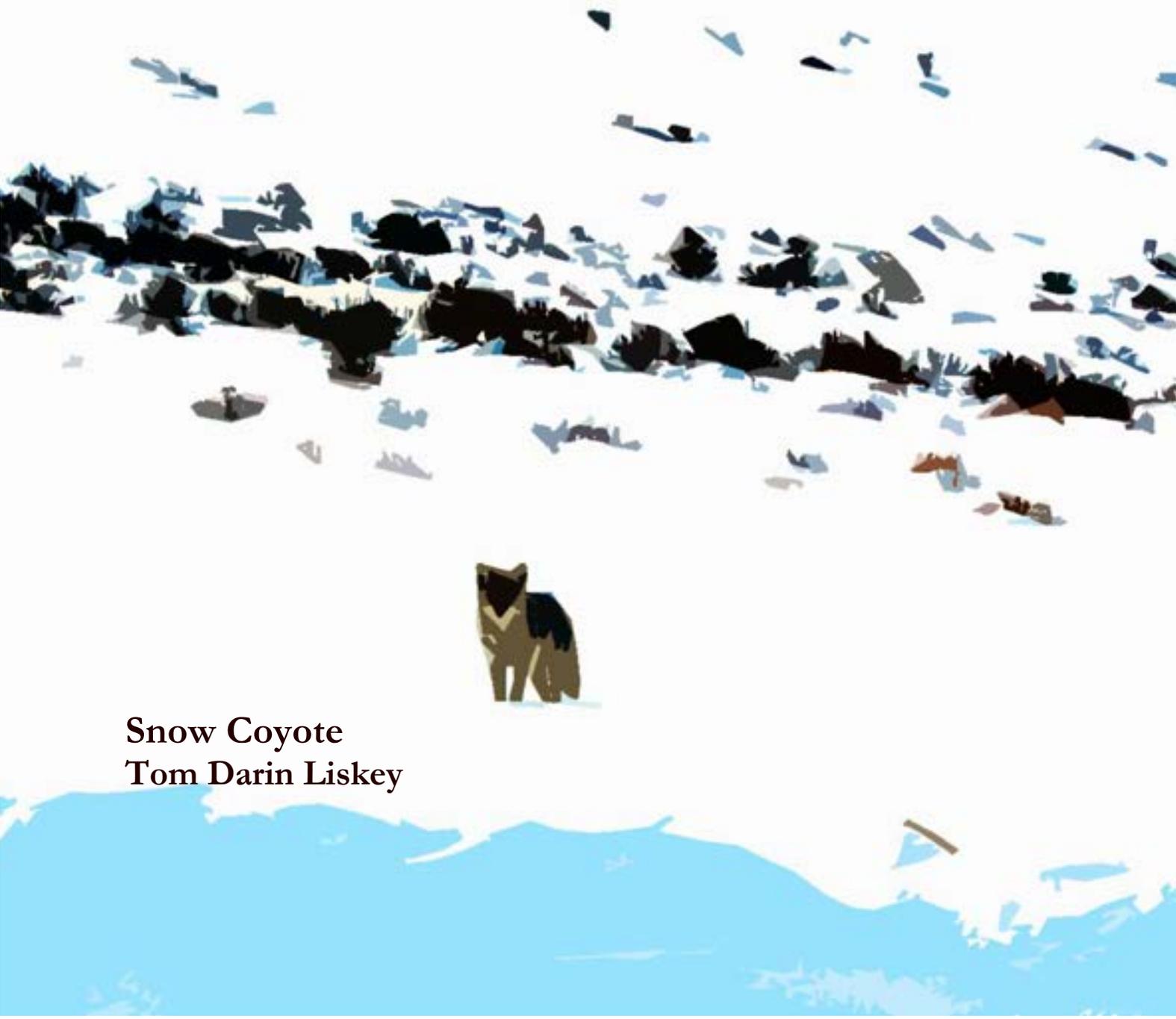
- Snow Coyote** | *Tom Darin Liskey* | 4
- On The Penny Dreadful** | *Liz Bertsch* | 5
- Catch Up** | *Nicole Provencher-Natale* | 8
- Talking Through the Wall** | *Robert L. Penick* | 9
- Knowing Jerry** | *Marlene Olin* | 10
- The Cool Blue Eight** | *Danny Judge* | 14
- Sentinel and Protector** | *Katrina Johnston* | 15
- Games We Once Played** | *Kevin Brown* | 18
- As a Madman Shakes a Dead Geranium** | *Brianne Holmes* | 24
- Caught** | *Ian Delaney* | 31
- Beware of Scorpions** | *Mark Babin* | 40
- An Unkind Winter** | *Joe Kilgore* | 48
- Homeward** | *Amy Wood* | 54
- The Council Woman** | *Tom Ray* | 57
- Best Friends** | *Galina Vromen* | 63
- Second Coming** | *Nortina Simmons* | 70
- Straight Up, Three Olives** | *Laura Jensen* | 76
- Change in the House of Light** | *Mike Pielact Strayer* | 82

## Poetry:

- Up-close Moment** | *Pete Madzellan* | 90
- 3 Poems** | *Gary Glauber* | 91
- Steinbeck Take 2** | *Jeremy Mele* | 93
- Today** | *Wendy Scott* | 94

<b>2 Poems</b>		<i>Kristen Kane</i>		95
<b>Barefoot</b>		<i>Jon Yungkans</i>		96
<b>The Physics of Love</b>		<i>Sandra Kolankiewicz</i>		97
<b>Letter to Theo van Gogh, Unmailed and Discovered in His Brother's Room</b>		<i>Russell Thorburn</i>		98
<b>Selling Dreams</b>		<i>Forrest Evans</i>		99
<b>The Under Coat</b>		<i>Kathleen Boyle</i>		100
<b>Self-countered transference</b>		<i>Karina Lutz</i>		101
<b>Lao Tzu on the Men's League Bowling Night</b>		<i>S.A. Volz</i>		102
<b>Intersection of Hope: Blackbird</b>		<i>Anne Kaiser</i>		103
<b>A Dark Suspicion of Imaginary Yellow</b>		<i>Jason Jones</i>		104
<b>27 Slices of Pi</b>		<i>Michael Coolen</i>		105
<b>The Photograph</b>		<i>Charles O'Hay</i>		106
<b>Diagnosis</b>		<i>Mary K O'Melveny</i>		107
<b>Our possessions all have magical qualities</b>		<i>Eugenia Hepworth Petty</i>		110
<b>Dusk amid the Cornfield</b>		<i>Brandon Marlon</i>		112
<b>Inheritance</b>		<i>Linett Luna Tovar</i>		113
<b>2 Poems</b>		<i>Sarah Johnson</i>		114
<b>2 Poems</b>		<i>Bethany Reid</i>		115
<b>An Old Photo Rediscovered</b>		<i>Diane Martin</i>		117
<b>Invention</b>		<i>Jason Kahler</i>		118
<i>Contributors</i>				125

# Prose



**Snow Coyote**  
**Tom Darin Liskey**

# On The Penny Dreadful

## Liz Bertsch

I teach at a school in which each classroom functions as a one-room schoolhouse where the interests and intellectual passions of the teacher drives the program. When faced with developing an engaging program for kids, on-going study in a range of areas and disciplines is a necessity. It's not a stretch to make the claim that "you are what you teach," and so in addition to knowing lots of things in a range of subjects, you better be interesting - it matters. I read widely during the course of the school year, visit the museums, expose myself to a range of new disciplines and writers, and as the year winds down, I carefully select books to read with the hopes that most of what I read will have some bearing on what I do with the kids in the fall.

At the top of this summer's reading is Stephen King's writing memoir that I polished off before the school year officially ended. I was inspired by his life's story: imagine writing your family out of a trailer home, and your wife out of her job at Dunkin Donuts with the money you earned from the sales of your first novel. I hung on every word of his kind advice to writers and when I finished the book, I put it down and promised myself that I would read it again in August. I will definitely read excerpts of it to my kids, especially those portions when King was a child. I know they'll love his conversational writing style and his stories as much as I did.

Last year my students tried their hands at music writing after reading Rolling Stone's playlist issue. We had many lively discussions about what was and what was not included in the issue the issue, and so of course we had to write our own much better publication. While writing about their song selections, some of the kids learned about the economy of the semi-colon, some learned that you don't use an apostrophe at the end of every word that ends in the letter "s," and all of the kids learned how satisfying and exasperating it is to capture in writing the essential greatness of a song that you love. I hope to develop new and inviting writing projects for the next school year, and I know full well that it's going to be hard to top this year's, which required listening to music during writing time.

Also in this year's summer reading is a recently published collection of flash fiction for young adults; the older kids in my class might enjoy learning how to write their own expertly distilled short stories. There are a couple of novels on time travel because I like time travel stories, and lastly, there is a bright yellow book with red letters entitled, *The Penny Dreadful or, Horrid and Sensational Tales* Edited and Introduced by Peter Haining. My student's beloved comic books have their origin in the penny dreadful, and so in the fall I thought we might roll up our sleeves and learn a bit of the literary history of Victorian England. Hands down the Haining book is the least attractive looking in my summer pile: originally published in 1975, the cover screams the seventies.

Many of us know of the eight- page paper publications commonly referred to as the penny dreadful by way of the story Sweeney Todd. The character of Sweeney Todd, The Demon Barber of Fleet Street first made his appearance in the penny dreadful, *The String of Pearls* published by Edward Lloyd. Each week the newly emerging readers of England's working class purchased their copy of Lloyd's, *The People's Periodical* for a penny and read about Sweeney's penchant for murder by shave whose victims ended up in meat pies in the bakery next store.

It is believed that the legend of Sawney Beane, the Man Eater of Scotland, serialized in the *Terrific Register*, one of the earliest penny dreadfuls, influenced the infamous Sweeney Todd story. In one hundred and four issues, readers learned that during the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Sawney Beane and his family captured, robbed, and ate

many an unlucky traveler who happened by their cave on the coast of Scotland. In addition to murder and cannibalism, Sawney also sired a clan of children with his own children. It's obviously a very slippery slope. The story found its conclusion with Sawney and his family brought to justice and put to death. Imagine what it was like to learn how to read by way of the cumulative narrative of the Bean clan - Dick and Jane couldn't hold a candle to Sawney and his brood.

The industrial revolution of England with its steam-roller press, machine manufacturing of paper, and rising literacy rates made it possible for publishers like Lloyd to create a whole new form of inexpensive reading material for the working class. The penny dreadfuls garnered large profits for their publishers, and teams of unscrupulous writers were assembled to write in existence new and horrific characters as well as plagiarize stories like those penned by Charles Dickens. Making no attempt to hide his thievery, Lloyd's People's Periodicals published *The Pickwick Dreadful*, *Oliver Twiss*, and *Nickelas Nicklebery*. Dickens, a reader of penny dreadfuls, could not have been happy about this.

Unsavory ethics were commonplace amongst publishers driven in the 1800's and one only needs to acquaint oneself with Rupert Murdoch's investigation before English Parliament to learn that history does repeat itself. The English tabloid paper, *News of the World*, owned by a subsidiary of Murdoch's *World News*, was closed after 168 years of publication amidst a phone hacking scandal. The centerpiece of the trial involved a private investigator employed by Murdoch's *News of the World*, who hacked the cell phone of Molly Dowler, a missing thirteen-year-old girl from a London suburb. The private investigator in search of tidbits of publishable information, allegedly paid off a member of the police department for Molly's cell phone number, and began intercepting and then erasing Molly's phone messages in order to make room for more messages, and while doing so provided false hope that that Molly was alive.

The Dowler case appeared to be just the tip of the iceberg of the case against Murdoch's *News of the World* where it was alleged that high level employees of the paper regularly paid off London's police department for cell phone numbers and other information to produce stories with headlines such as *My Big Fat Gypsy Divorce at Just 19*, and *FBI Boss has sick Nazi Orgy with Hookers*. The televised investigation before British Parliament revealed a less than contrite Murdoch, a line up of poker faced lawyers including the former New York City Chancellor of education, Joel Klein, and Murdoch's much younger and dour-faced wife. The televised trial really came alive on the day that a courtroom observer, a performance artist named Johnny Marbles, charged at Murdoch with a whipped cream pie only to have his efforts thwarted by Murdoch's lightning quick wife. Hilarity aside, it seems, Murdoch deserved much more than a pie in his face, perhaps the pie was better suited for Edward Lloyd; to be thrown by one Charles Dickens.

Most of the sensational stories of vampires, cannibals, and demon barbers in the penny dreadfuls, are not suitable for young children, although one could argue that a child playing a vigorous game of *Grand Theft Auto* with an older sibling or cousin is the equivalent to reading the story of *Sawney Beane* - in its entirety. There are a couple of dreadfuls about Robin Hood within the acceptable boundaries of sensational that I will read to the kids, as well as some of the works of Dickens and Wilkie Collins - both writers whose stories were published in serial form. I hope to look at some of the illustrations in the dreadfuls and try our hand at creating our own using the same woodblock method. We will definitely learn about the people who read and enjoyed them, and when we're ready, we will write our own sensational and serialized stories, and of course sell them for a couple of pennies to friends and family. I know my kids and I know they'll enjoy this writing project.

In his memoir on writing, King recalls a time when, after seeing the horror movie, *The Pit and the Pendulum* starring Vincent Price, he was struck by the idea of novelizing the movie. Unlike the publishers of dreadfuls, King was oblivious to the existence of Poe's short story on which the movie was based upon, as well as copyright laws, and he novelized the story, printed multiple copies on his

brothers' drum press, and then sold it in an eight- page installment to his friends in school. He sold all of the copies, although his success was short lived when the school principal found out and forced King to return all of the money not because of her student's mistaken foray into plagiarism, but because she considered the work base. What seemed to soften the blow of the experience was that his readers loved the story so much that they refused to give it back when he returned they money.

As a young writer, King was passionate about writing sensational stories and he learned that what he loved most was looked down upon by some of the adults in his life. His principal, a former teacher of his, referred to his work as trash and although he stayed the course with his love of the genre, he writes about feeling ashamed of his work which remained with him for some time.

My daughter has a similar love of horror stories, a love that began with her obsession with fairytales. When she was seven years old she wrote a story entitled "Tear You to Shreds," a lively first attempt at a werewolf story, which was well received, particularly by the older boys in the school who were charmed by her bloody illustrations. She felt empowered by making her work public and she remains unaware of the snobbery waged against writers and readers of certain genres - at least for now.

In 2003 the National Book Foundation awarded King the medal for Distinguished Contributions to American Letters. The literary establishment was up in arms because King is not a writer of literary fiction – he is a genre writer, particularly science fiction and horror. Harold Bloom, a particularly cranky critic of King's, voiced his displeasure with the foundation and King when he snarked, "He is a man who writes what used to be called Penny Dreadfuls. It's not a stretch to assume that Bloom's indictment of King, was also an indictment of King's readers. King has a lot in common with his readers who enjoy a juicy sensational story, and who may work in a local library as well as behind the counter at a doughnut shop.

That the penny dreadful has become a literary slur is understandable but this is not because of their readers, but rather because the Victorian publishers, driven by profits, circulated some really awful stuff. There were also terrific stories that entertained street sweepers, footmen, maids, and all those who labored for the upper class who drank tea while reading books with handmade paper and leather bindings. In the fall I want my students to see all sides of the history of the penny dreadful, and that means they will learn about their publishers, stories, their writers and their readers, and while doing so, come to love them, even if, just a little.

## Catch Up

### Nicole Provencher-Natale

Dad never talks when he eats. He begins on the outer edges of his plate and turns it with each mouthful of food, spiraling inward until everything is gone. When my mother asks him questions he only nods or shakes his head and grunts. I watch as he pours ketchup on his meatloaf. Mom taps her fingers on the table while he brings the heel of his hand to the end of the bottle. She jumps a little with each hard slap. The ketchup oozes out of the bottle as the red pulp slides down the glass. Dad screws the cap onto the top and places the bottle upside down in the middle of the table. He spreads the ketchup over the top of his meatloaf with the back of his fork and it moves like lava between the prongs, over the sides, and onto the plate. Some of it falls into the mashed potatoes and leaves pink splotches as it settles into the gravy. My brother reaches for the bottle but my mother grabs his wrist between her fingers and mouths the word *No*. The ketchup has settled against the lid and there is only enough left for Dad's second plate. Twice during the meal, food falls as he lifts his hand from the plate to his mouth. One forkful onto his pants, the second over the Baylor Hospital logo on the breast pocket of his scrubs. When he is done eating, Dad pushes the plate away and leaves the table. Mom follows him through the doorway into the kitchen. We wait just long enough before reaching for the bottle.

# Talking Through the Wall

## Robert L. Penick

I finally understand the mentally ill. The way they clutter up bus stop benches and empty doorways. Any churchyard that can't be seen from the street. The way they take up space without seeming to offer value in return. They could talk to themselves at home, couldn't they? Each damaged being could crawl back into its own hole, keep its own counsel, traverse whatever wasteland lay inside its scorched brain. Better than to interfere with sane, purposeful folk that speak a different language. Isn't that right and proper and rational? Even for a jumble of failed synapses and pharmaceutical regimens?

But there are two things occurring here: First is the cognitive tragedy constantly blooming in these bedlam flowers. Each is in a boat buffeted by an oddly shaped brain, a tiny imbalance of chemicals or, as Robert Lowell said, "a tiny lack of salt."

The second is the loneliness of the being trapped by ogres as big as night and taller than anyone's Lord. When the twisted ask their captors, "Why am I in this pit?" there is no real answer, only a steady barrage of white noise and misinformation. And when the soul wrecked try to speak to you, it is in that language, for they have forgotten (or never knew) their own. They inhabit the most desolate land imaginable. They can't reach their monsters, and they can't reach you.

# Knowing Jerry

## Marlene Olin

Though I had known him for over forty years, I never really knew him. He was dying now, in the hospice wing of the nursing home. A nurse sat at a desk by his side taking notes. She looked up from her clipboard, glanced at the clock, then down again at the clipboard. Writing, sighing, nodding her head. "It'll be soon," she said. "It'll be soon."

Jerry was my father-in-law. I first met him in 1969 when Michael and I started dating. Michael was in twelfth grade. I was in eleventh. The war in Viet Nam was raging. Sex was out of the closet now that people popped the pill.

*Troll dolls, smiley faces, Rocky Raccoon.  
Lava lamps, love beads, the man on the moon.  
Your hair's too long, Kathy's song, Scarborough Fair  
The Rolling Stones, The Twilight Zone, The Cuban Missile scare.*

My parents were a Jewish stereotype. Short. Round. Loud. Though my future in-laws were just a few years younger, they seemed part of another generation. They tried hard to act cool. Zoe dressed like Nancy Sinatra: hot pants and go-go boots. Jerry pierced an ear and grew a beard.

Seven years later, Michael and I had married, finished school out-of-state, and moved back home to Miami. My in-laws' relationship was already showing signs of trouble. The rare times they vacationed they went separately. Jerry had changed jobs three times.

*Staying Alive, The Jackson Five singing their ABCs  
Hans and Luke, Daisy Dukes, The Beatles' Let It Be.  
Eight track tapes, Three Dog Night, Carole King and leisure suits  
Space Invaders, Lost Ark Raiders, Camp David, Haley's Roots.*

We lived a few blocks from our families. First our son Jonathan was born. Then our daughter Rachel. But in 1980, things fell apart in rapid progression. Right after my daughter's first birthday, my father died of a massive coronary. As soon as their youngest kid left for college, Jerry divorced Zoe.

*Billie Joel, Billie Jean, The Challenger explodes  
Iran Contra, Dirty Dancing, koosh balls and Dusty Rhodes.*

While my son talked and walked like other kids, something was different about Rachel. She didn't make eye contact when she spoke. Instead she twirled like a little pink top, her arms outstretched, her face fixed on the ceiling. We started intervention early. Speech therapists. Occupational therapists. Social skill therapists. No one heard of Asperger's back then.

Just when I needed help, I was alone. My husband worked at his law firm seven days a week. Mom never recovered from Dad's death. And Zoe was wrestling with her own demons. When she wasn't chain-smoking, she was drinking. Cheap Chablis. Johnny Walker. Canadian Club.

Jerry surfaced unscathed. He moved in with a Danish masseuse who was the anti-Zoe. While my mother-in-law was tanned and petite, Ingrid was built like a Viking. They bought a waterbed and

ate only macrobiotic foods. One day they took the kids to the circus. An excursion with Grandpa was a novelty. My son and daughter were confused, nervous, buoyant.

*John Hughes, a Rubik's cube, boom boxes, AIDS and Goonies*  
*Hacksacks, the first George Bush, Beetlejuice and Moonies.*

At first we just thought Michael's sister was under the weather. She was having problems at home and under a lot of stress. No one expected the cancer diagnosis. As soon as they started the leukemia treatment, Lori's husband bolted. A pregnant girlfriend, we later found out, bolted with him. Lori had scored a misery trifecta. We sent them money, consulted with doctors. Zoe regrouped and moved to Orlando to help.

*Beanie babies, Boyz II Men, O.J. and Rodney King*  
*Berlin unites while Bosnians fight, Timon and Simba sing.*

Jerry decided that what his daughter needed was a vacation. Together, they flew to England to visit an ashram. They dipped Lori in vats of freezing water, then plunged her into hot baths. The minute she came home, she headed straight for the hospital. Within a year, both Lori and Zoe were dead.

*Whitney Houston, Yitzhak Rabin, Mad Cow, and Blaze of Glory*  
*Rachel and Ross and Who's the Boss, The Green Mile and Toy Story.*

I once asked Michael why his father never remembered birthdays. None of the grandchildren ever received a present, even a card.

"He never remembered *my* birthday," said Michael. "Do you think he'd remember my kids'?"

Jonathan was our star student. He made everything look easy: making friends, joining clubs. Once he landed the starring role in the high school musical. Of course we asked all the relatives to come.

"Sorry," said Jerry. "I don't enjoy Sondheim. Sondheim is not for me."

Meanwhile Rachel ricocheted from school to school, was tutored in all her subjects, struggled to fit in. Though her I.Q. tested in the gifted range, any skill that required multi-tasking was a challenge. Crossing a street. Riding a bike. Taking notes in class.

Like many people on the autism spectrum, she was sensitive to a fault. The sort of kid who scooped up lizards in the house and carried them outside. On a geekness scale she rated a ten out of ten. I was her best friend. For years her only friend. I rarely left her side.

Then when Jon was in eleventh grade and Rachel in eighth, Michael and I were invited to Detroit for a Bar Mitzvah. In desperate straits, we asked my father-in-law to babysit. It's only for two days, we told him. One night, and two days.

*Fanny Packs and roller blades, Hale Bopp and Elton John*  
*Clinton lies, a Princess dies, Mandela, Pokémon.*

As soon as the coast was clear, Jonathan ordered a pizza then disappeared in his bedroom to watch TV. Meanwhile Jerry cooked a vegetarian feast for Rachel and himself. Chopped liver made from walnuts. A tofu turkey. Ratatouille. After dinner, Jerry got in his car and drove off. The masseuse had left for greener pastures. He had a date with someone new.

The following morning, he was nowhere to be found. There was a note. "I've left to play golf." Jon stayed home with his sister.

*Harry Potter, the climate's hotter, Snoop Dogg, U2, Cold Play  
The Towers crumble, Frodo stumbles, George Bush, iPods, Green Day.*

Another ten years went by. As Jerry approached his mid-seventies, his warranty ran out. Spinal stenosis. Prostate cancer. Gall bladder disease. Wife number two complained that he was tired all the time. Jerry's not as much fun as he used to be. All Jerry wants to do is sleep. She got half his savings and all of the house.

Jerry's world became smaller. He got lost finding his way home to his apartment. Then he got lost finding his way to his car.

It didn't take long for word of Jerry's decline to course through the community. Suddenly, the masseuse was back in the picture. One day she called from Tampa and invited Jerry to visit.

"You're going *where?*" we asked him. "You're seeing *whom?*"

It took Jerry a week to negotiate a five-hour trip. He came home beaming. "Ingrid wants to marry me," said Jerry. "She says she loves me. She says she wants to be my wife."

And at first, we were elated, too. Maybe, we thought, separation did make the heart grow fonder! Perhaps, we thought, she'd see Jerry through in sickness and in health! We assaulted him with questions. Each and every one was answered *none of the above*.

In the decade since they parted ways, Ingrid had immersed herself in the American way of life. Her newly enhanced vocabulary was littered with phrases like Social Security benefits, survivor's benefits, pension funds. She had no interest in moving to Miami. What she wanted was a long distance relationship. What she wanted was financial security with no strings attached.

*Angry birds and rainbow looms, food trucks, selfies, George Romney  
Gluten-free and Tea parties, Zumba, vampires, zombies.*

It didn't take long for Jerry to forget about the whole incident. His thoughts flew like birds now, here one minute gone the next. At the assisted living facility, they unplugged the stove and hid the utensils. Before long he was moved to an Alzheimer's unit in a nursing home. Finally, all there was to do was to wait for him to die.

"The problem," said the hospice nurse, "is that he's developed pneumonia. They lose muscle memory, you know. Forget to swallow, forget to breathe."

We took turns sitting and watching. Michael's brother. An aunt. Michael's brother's wife. Jerry hadn't recognized us in months, hadn't spoken in days. By now, his eyes were clamped shut. A hand twitched. He opened his mouth, gasped, then closed it fast like a fish.

While our children had visited him when he was healthier, we decided to spare them the final stages of his deterioration. Even Michael hadn't seen him in days. Whether it was from a surfeit of love or the lack of it, I'll never know. I watched for both of us.

"You see how his color is changing," said the nurse. "How his skin is already gray."

I reached inside my purse and grabbed a letter my daughter had written. She has spent a lifetime being judged by others and embraces any act of kindness. She remembered the time Jerry took her to the circus. She remembered the most delicious home-cooked meal she ever had. Of all the grandchildren, she bore the closest resemblance. The blond hair. The blue eyes. They had the same gait, the same way of tilting their chin while they talked, talking past you instead of to you. When she looked in the mirror, she saw her grandfather looking back.

The poem she composed took me four maybe five minutes to read. When I approached the final lines, I glanced over at Jerry. His head was tilted toward me. It looked like the words were sinking in.

*You may not have been around, but you were there.  
You may not have shown it but you cared.  
You may not be like other Dads, but we knew  
how much you loved us and that we loved you, too.*

I could swear he was listening. He leaned forward, opened his eyes and tried to speak. They say that Death closes doors. The living can mend wounds, put arguments to bed, start over. Rachel's words had penetrated something deep inside that had lain fallow for years. Jerry looked at me. He lifted his hand. Garbled sounds erupted from his throat. In one tremendous effort he opened his mouth as wide as he could. Then he lay back and died.

*Spotify and Bitcoin, Ben Carson and Ted Cruz  
John Boehner quits, the Pope's a hit, The Donald's bound to lose.  
Clinton's missing server, Fitbits, quinoa, The Voice  
College shootings, Baltimore lootings, Jeb Bush and women's choice.*

The next few hours spun. Jerry wanted to be buried with Zoe and Lori up in Orlando. I called funeral homes, bought a plot, ordered food for the shiva. Only a handful of family members attended the service. A rabbi who never met him spoke. A plane flew overhead. A shovel slung dirt. The casket was lowered. Rachel wept.

# The Cool Blue Eight

## Danny Judge

Immediately I am greeted by a woman whose name I'm afraid to ask: she is a prisoner here, and she is dying, and I feel guilty for departing the elevator with food—food from downstairs, from other places fun and far below (beyond), from some warm green heaven far removed from the tranquil slow drip of the cool blue eight.

My wife's diagnosis is, well, but (*ab?*) oh... Polly: I thought she was free. The IV pole is gone. She looks like (reminds me of: not the same) Jacob Marley sans chains—light, unencumbered but, you try to remember, less than alive. The old girls' bare ports, these high-speed surgical implants that make it so easy for Mr. Medicine, that chemically slap-happy bulimic, to vomit liquid love into their brittle veins through a big wide tube in their chests: all to kill Mr. Cancer, the elusive little harlequin shit that he is.

Debbie is a nurse that sometimes takes care of my wife, who is a nurse, who cannot stand being bed ridden because of a stupid thing like cancer of the—

—Debbie got engaged. I am not particularly interested, but Debbie is a loud talker. Why stand behind the nurse's desk just to shout? Do it in the hall. From whom are you hiding?

There is a man in a racing shirt (the same racing shirt) everyday, everyday, everyday and twice on most days with his red-rickety eyelids and bruised peach flesh bedding them. He hasn't slept since Nam, and now he's *really* awake. I don't know who he's waiting on, but I know it's a she—I can see it. A she who matters. For Christ's sake, I hope it's not the man's kid.

The cool blue eight is unlike any other floor. We play for keeps here: (*ante?*) oh auntie... mother... father... bets run low but the rake is royal.

The End—all this is *fin* not begin: it's all End. A molar pregnancy was never a baby: no beginning. My wife's diagnosis... first there was an ultrasound, a dark silent night that fell before either of us realized there never been a dawn.... Her diagnosis started with at the End. She's strong; she'll live. But the End is permanent. The endings around here shuffle in soft-heeled slippers, old and weary from years of life (if they're lucky and old), but she and I are remnants of a something that never was... an end with no beginning.

The cool blue eight has a patio. Birds don't land there, don't even crap on it. They simulate the sound of birds with speakers. In a cove of clean concrete in five-minute intervals, the robotic birds chirp like cold clockwork.

# Sentinel and Protector

## Katrina Johnston

I'm forever on high alert for Mrs. Lorenzo. Today, on a hot August afternoon, she carries a glass of something cold – probably lemonade or maybe it's beer – outside onto her front porch. Across the street and three doors down from us, she settles her bulk upon a wicker chair adjacent to the railings of her front steps. I speculate that the underpinnings of that rickety rattan must be squawking and bowing outward. She's fearsome huge.

Within the recessed pockets of charcoal shade, she blends to near invisibility. I'm guessing she's about eighty, a mountain of a woman. She's probably a no-nonsense sort of person who has seen a great deal of life's many tragedies and challenges. Over the last few years her extensive Italian family has dwindled and one-by-one they've moved away. She lives in solitude on Watson Street.

She is grey. Even her complexion is grey. Her careworn dress blooms in muted cornflower patterns, is nondescript and covered by an old-fashioned apron overlay. Her hair is thinning to a frazzle of coarsened wires. Sturdy cylindrical pillars of lower legs in opaque stockings defy definition of ankle or muscle contours. When she sits she hardly bends at the mid-section. But her eyes are fierce dots of luminosity like piercing flecks of crystal black. She sees every detail.

I glare over at her nervously. It seems her attention is always focused toward my house. Or she stares at the sidewalk directly in front, or at my son, Michael, who is outside with me and my cousin's child, Dillon. But especially at me. She is forever peering into my business, judging and evaluating. I fear that she is finding fault. And she is always on guard duty like a neighborhood sentinel.

My cousin Leah is on a job-search here in Vancouver. She arrived with Dillon last Friday. Dillon calls me Aunty Ethena which I find endearing. The boys are the same age but Michael arrives at his eleventh birthday next month, so technically he's the eldest. They look alike. Each is tousle-headed, dark blond and extra thin. Leah has gone shopping for her best interview ensemble and so she's left the boys with me.

They're on the sidewalk, coasting in the seated position on an old skateboard they've discovered and rescued from the dumpster. It's not a manufactured item but a homemade effort of plywood with fixed wheels screwed directly onto the bottom. There's no axle or other mechanism to steer or turn. I've proclaimed that each of the boys must ride it like a sled because neither has a helmet or other safety gear. If they tumble from a lowly seated position the worst I might expect is minor abrasions. They wouldn't necessarily bash their brains.

The street is ablaze in white summer. Painful glints of light, like shards of signal mirrors, ricochet from stationary and moving vehicles.

"Hey Mike," Dillon calls. "Hey. Hey Mike! Another turn. Give me another push."

Dillon is roosting upon the board, has lost his forward momentum. He stalls and hunches his shoulders around his bent knees seeking a new surge of energy. He's stuck. The sidewalk is rife with cracked concrete and broken crumbles. Dillon waits.

I've got piles of laundry to sort and potatoes to peel and dishes to put away, so I leave them. I prop the front door wide open so that I can hear.

"Give me another push, Mike. C'mon. Please! One more teensy nudge."

"No. No way my man. Your turn is finished." Michael hollers so that I can hear it too.

"Move off. Don't be a hog dawg. Hey, let's use the driveway. Then I can really get racing."

"But your Mom said we need stay on the sidewalk where she can see what we're up to."

“She won’t mind if I whiz down the drive just once. C’mon Dil – give me a push from the top, right there by the garage doors. It’s nice and steep. Get goin’ faster that way.”

“Okay, go.”

The next thing I hear is whirring noise and a loud explosion of vitriolic Italian. With soapy hands I rush the hallway, whisking quantities of sweat away from my chin.

Michael is hulking on the skateboard and rattling out near the end of the steep driveway. He’s holding on for dear life. He chunks dangerously over the blip of the curb. Despite the bounce, my son maintains the mount, his knees around his ears. He glides out beyond the parked cars, sailing into the middle of Watson Street. No traffic has interfered. Thank God for minor miracles.

Mrs. Lorenzo continues in full Vesuvius. She barks outrage across the street. I see her now, fully visible in the glaring sun, a dark-edged sergeant-major shouting commands. Her bat-winged arms undulate. She shakes a massive fist and pours out her loudest admonitions.

The boys glance over to her in slack-jawed surprise. Dillon casts his attention everywhere else he can think of, finally settling upon staring at the sun-scorched grass. Michael shrugs and waves.” ‘Lo!’ he hollers, smiling broadly.

I start my own volcanic explosion.

“What in blazes are you doing in the middle of the road?” I shout. “Get back onto the curb. Pronto! Don’t you realize you could be hit by traffic – and killed?”

Michael picks up the skateboard from under his butt and hedges back to the sidewalk. “But, Mom, no cars right now.”

“Listen sonny, it takes only one time – a single car or one truck or a van. Even a bus might come around that corner off 18th Avenue. And the drivers can’t see you. Smash! You boys know better. I’ve told you a hundred zillion times.”

I continue ramping up my loud harangue of parental indignation. “What did I tell you two about playing and being safe? What if you happen to get killed or you have to get to the hospital?”

Michael examines the freckles spiraling between his wrist and elbow. Dillon ducks behind the young alder tree on the boulevard. “Aunty Ethena?” he says.

“Dillon?”

“We’re sorry. We meant to stay on the sidewalk. Really we did. We won’t do it again.”

“Darn tootin’ you won’t,” I shout. “Hand it over. That’s my skateboard now.”

“But Mom?”

“Aunty...?”

“No arguments. Now! Give it here!”

Reluctantly, Michael proffers the skateboard. I yank it away from his hands with an over-dramatic flourish. I don’t dare hazard a look across to Mrs. Lorenzo. The confiscated wheels bump against my thigh as I carry the board inside the house. I take comfort in my intuitive inner voice that tells me that my loud and public display is probably exactly what Mrs. Lorenzo expects and will duly approve. I can almost feel her acquiesce across the distance as she settles back onto her wicker chair, muttering small agreeable sounds deep within her throat. She nods. “A good Mamma,” she is saying in her thick dialect. “She’s no dumb skull. That’s a good Mamma. She is good. Yah.”

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When Michael was almost three and Mrs. Lorenzo began her daily position as a surveillance camera watching the entire neighborhood, I didn’t comprehend that she might actually know my name. But on a summer afternoon, she called out to me: “Etheeee! Ethheee!” I almost shivered with worry over whatever I might have done. “Come! here!” Mrs. Lorenzo said. And because it was an order, I had no choice but to grab little Michael by the hand and over we went.

She foisted a large rolled-up paper bag into my hands. “You take,” she said. “You take this now. “Eees good. Yah.” The bag, when I peeked inside it, contained a light and dark Sicilian loaf of bread and six navel oranges.

“You take,” she said again. “You like.” She grimaced.

I accepted nervously. Michael, with the guile of childhood, seated himself upon a low stool near Mrs. Lorenzo’s massive skirted knees. She gave him a chocolate biscuit and offered lemonade. The two of them behaved like old pals – him with his three-year-old babbling vocabulary – her in broken English and Italian and all her gentle guttural noises. I knew not what they were saying to each other, just that they were conversing and laughing like two grand friends. I sat awkwardly near the railing, clutching my bag of oranges and bread and wondering how to say thank-you. Was it Grazie or should I try a Mucho Grazie? I became hesitant and jealous too, wondering exactly why Michael was not the least bit shy with her. He seemed to enjoy her personage even when she grunted and shouted and looked like – well – kind of like a monster.

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After my cousin and her son Dillon had moved back to Montreal, I noticed that Mrs. Lorenzo didn’t venture outside as much as previously. I watched a UPS truck drop-off a delivery on her front porch. Then on a September afternoon, it rained tempestuously, the kind of persistent and sideways rain that makes puddles where they don’t normally form. I noticed the package again. The wet cardboard box on the front porch worried me. I gathered my courage and went over. I knocked. No answer. I rang the bell again and again.

Not wishing to be labeled as any kind of interfering or alarmist busy-body, I still needed to do something. Back at home, I called the police number, the non-emergency one listed in the white pages, and I asked if someone could possibly drive by to check-up on the old woman. About twenty minutes later I heard the police siren. An ambulance arrived, and then the Fire Department also. They loaded her onto a stretcher under a white-grey blanket, her massive head resting on a pillow. They carted her off. I inquired about her status while I was thinking that first I would settle my nerves and visit her in hospital; maybe take a bunch of carnations. But I was gently told: “No, it’s too late.”

Michael gets off school at 3:30 and he wanders home by 4:00 p.m. I can’t fathom exactly how I’ll break the news. I have regrets you see, far more than the expected feelings of sadness and loss. Tears course freely down my cheeks while I allow myself to sob and heave with gut-wrenching emotion no longer trapped so deep within and never really understood.

# Games We Once Played

## Kevin Brown

“And that’s where the McCrums live. He works out at the plant as an engineer. His daughter works summers as a lifeguard. They’ve really made that house look great. Even look at the way they decorated it for Christmas; those wreaths are lovely.”

I had only been home for two days, so my mother was still on a bit of a high from my visit. She wanted me to go with her on her walk around the neighborhood, so she could show me how much had changed in the eight years I had been gone. They still lived in the house I had grown up in, but the neighborhood had changed considerably, though most of the changes were clearly coming when I left after high school graduation. We were walking in a newly developed part of the neighborhood, one that was being built during my last two years of high school. People had moved in there before I left home, but I had never gotten to know them, had certainly never made any friends from that area.

“The Gibson’s here have just let this house go. It was beautiful when it was built; just look at the front porch. But you can see they haven’t done anything with the flower beds, and the bushes haven’t been trimmed in two years. They’re nice enough, I suppose, but they keep to themselves, so I don’t know much about them.”

It was this lack of knowledge that bothered my mother more than anything, I could tell. What she had always loved about this neighborhood was the sense that everyone knew everyone else, even if we only knew their names and their jobs, in some cases. She had wanted to move here, a new development when she and Dad were younger, because she thought it would be a good place to raise children, and she had been right. There were lots of young families back then, and kids were always playing in yards or streets, jumping fences of people we didn’t even know to take short cuts to meet our friends. Now she wasn’t sure who lived in many of the houses, despite her dedicated efforts, and I hadn’t seen a single child in a yard or street in the short time I had been back.

As we topped a hill, I saw three men coming towards us, the only people we had seen out in about fifteen minutes of walking. As they approached, they greeted my mother, “Good morning, Mrs. Matson.” I didn’t think there was anything out of the ordinary, given my mother’s commitment to talking to people she saw in the neighborhood, or anywhere, for that matter. They slowed a bit, though, and looked more carefully at me. One of them, the tallest of the three, finally asked, “Mark?” It was only then that I recognized Baker, the one who had first realized I was the person walking with my mother.

Baker had been the dominant figure of the neighborhood when I was growing up. He was two years older than me and at least one year older than everyone else who spent time together when we were younger, so he was better at any sport we played, and we played them all. We found ways to play every sport we could, putting up basketball rims on brick walls of houses, making field hockey sticks from metal tent structures, or playing football with the miniature footballs the local university threw out at their games. Baker had been lanky, but quick, so he could jump higher than any of us or simply get around us. Whichever team had him on their side inevitably won; the other team simply tried to stay close.

At night, the games continued, though we switched from more predictable athletic contests to variations on traditional games. One was team hide-and-go-seek, which we would play in the park in the middle of our neighborhood where there were no houses. It was so dark you could stand beside a tree, and one person after another would walk right past you, looking at you, but not seeing

anything. Somehow, Baker's abilities transferred to these games, as well, and his dominance continued into the night.

Baker could not be described as lanky any longer, but he certainly was not heavy. He had added a bit of heft over the years, but he was still clearly athletic. He looked like he could still pick up one of those miniature footballs and take over a neighborhood game, if one had been going on in one of the nearby yards.

Eric and Joey stood beside him, looking amazed to see me there. They had lived two houses away from each other when we were growing up, so they had known each other longer than any of the rest of us. When most of us were limited in how far away from home we could go, they could walk from one house to the other while their parents watched them. The rest of us could only play with those whose parents brought them to our houses unless we saw them at the neighborhood pool.

Eric had always been the smallest child in the neighborhood, but he had found ways to use that to his benefit. He was fearless, crawling through drainage tunnels or climbing up the tallest trees, standing at the top and shaking them for everyone to see where he was. Even when we played sports, he wanted the ball, no matter how hard a hit anyone would give him. He would get up immediately, smile slightly, and want to do it all over again. When he signed up to play football in elementary school, we all knew he would never meet the weight requirements. He spent weeks eating baby food to try to gain weight, but, in the end, he simply hid wrenches in the pockets where his pads would go. The coaches probably knew about his subterfuge, but it was difficult to tell him he couldn't do something.

While he had grown some in height, it was his weight that had clearly changed. Eric seemed more round now than anything. His face's shape was highlighted by his rapidly receding hairline, and he looked like a miniature version of a vice-principal at a middle school. He only lacked the coat and tie to make me wonder if I were in trouble and called into the office. His expression was still one of determination, though, as if the world were still against him, and he was having to prove himself. If anyone had achieved any success in life, I would have bet on Eric.

Joey had been a bit of an outcast in our neighborhood, as he didn't show much interest in sports, though he did play them from time to time. He liked to read, and he had spent much of his middle school years playing Dungeons and Dragons. He was the first in our area to get an Atari and a VCR, as his parents had better paying jobs, though none of us know anything more than that his father worked for the railroad. We spent a good deal of time at his house, mainly to play video games or watch movies, and he would come and watch us play sports, even when he didn't want to play. At times, he would volunteer to referee, as if he felt he should be participating in some way.

He still looked like someone who sat inside and played video or role-playing games. His coat had stains on it, what looked like coffee or tobacco, but could have been some sort of food. His hair was still as curly as it was when he was younger, but it was unkempt and looked as if it had gone a day or two without being washed. He was the only one of the three who was smoking, though he had put the cigarette behind his back when he noticed who my mother was.

Baker looked at me again, "Mark, is that you?"

They started laughing among themselves, amazed that I was actually there in front of them. Each of them took their hands out of their pockets, clasped my right hand, and pulled me to them, one at a time, in that half hug only men in their twenties do. It was clear my mother wanted to stay there and hear about their lives, but she had had good manners drilled into her by her mother, so she excused herself: "I'll just go on and finish my walk and let you boys catch up. I'll see you back at home, Mark. Good to see you, boys. Say hello to your parents for me."

As she walked away, Baker shook his head again, "It felt like we wouldn't ever see you again. You've been gone, what, six or seven years?"

“It’s eight and a half, actually. It’s a long way from California, and I haven’t looked forward to coming back to either the Christmas cold or the summer heat. My mother finally forced me to come home this year, though. It’s been good to see how the city has changed.”

“Man, I haven’t seen you since graduation day. You left, what, the day after?”

“It was probably a few days after. UCLA had that transition program I wanted to do before I started in the fall there, so I had to get out of town fairly quickly.”

Eric said with obvious surprise, “So you like California? You don’t miss the mountains of East Tennessee? It must be so flat out there.”

“I live a couple of hours from the mountains, which are certainly not as pretty as the ones here, though they’re definitely more rugged. I can go anytime I want. I can also drive a couple of hours the other way and go to the beach. It’s the best of both worlds.”

“So what are you doing out there that you can’t do here?” Eric asked.

“I’m teaching history at a private high school, and I coach the boys’ basketball team. We have a tournament next week, in fact, which is why I’ll only be out here another couple of days. It’s great. The parents are involved; they care about their kids’ education, as well as their athletic ability.”

Nobody would be surprised to find out that I became a coach, given the competitive nature of our neighborhood, though the teacher part was not what most people would have expected from me. I was not a great student, making Bs and Cs in a public school that was known more for its football team than for college placement. I was a good enough basketball player to do well in such a system, but not good enough to play college. A private school was a good fit for me, as people cared much more about academics than they did athletics. I had done well enough in history in high school to teach freshmen, so that’s where they had placed me.

“So, what about you guys? What are you doing these days?”

Baker talked about his job as a salesman at the local car dealership, a perfect fit for his personality, as he could convince almost anyone to buy almost anything. His new wife was already expecting a child. Eric was an assistant manager of a Pizza Hut, having worked up from his delivery position he started in high school. He had been dating the same woman off and on since he was hired there, but they never seemed to last more than six months at a time. Still, he talked about wanting to marry her and settle down, once he made manager. Joey was the only one who still lived at home. He had tried attending the local community college a few different times, as he thought he could do something with computers, but he could never keep up the discipline of class attendance and homework for more than a few weeks. He made money doing odd jobs from those who knew him, but he spent most of it on just enough pot to keep an almost constant buzz.

“Well, what about everyone else? Do you all see anyone around anymore?”

Baker said, “I saw Slop just a few weeks ago.” Slop was Brian; he earned the nickname as a pitcher when they all played Little League together. He was effective, but he threw pitches with so much movement, they looked awful. “He’s working at the lumber store and living with his brother and sister-in-law out on the north side of town.”

Eric mentioned, “I heard from John a few weeks ago, ran into him out at Legends where we were watching some football. He’s working for his dad’s construction company. He says the hours are shit, but the money is great. He’s thinking about buying a house.”

“What about Kelly? Do you all see him?”

They all looked away, wouldn’t meet my eyes. It was as if I had asked them to share their deepest thoughts, their true fears.

After a minute, it was Baker who said, “I thought you knew. He killed himself a few months ago. Used his father’s shotgun.”

I couldn't speak. I almost doubled over, felt like the end of every summer basketball practice when coach would make us run wind sprints until half the team was throwing up. They still couldn't look at me.

Finally, I said, "My God. I had no idea. Mom didn't tell me."

None of us spoke for several minutes. I was in shock; the others just gave me time to process the information.

"How's his family doing? How's Alan and his mother?"

Baker responded, "They took it hard. He didn't leave a note, and they blame themselves. They don't remember how much abuse he took in high school, how much people picked on him then and even after. I don't think he ever got over that."

Eric and Joey just nodded their heads, looking down at the ground, not at me.

"Man, I just remember the crazy things we used to do together. One time, when we were bored, we made parachutes for his pet gerbil. We took it up to their deck and dropped it off. I don't know how that parachute worked, but it did, and the gerbil survived. It didn't even seem scared."

Baker grinned tightly. Eric and Joey kept nodding.

"And there was the time he almost burned the house down when his parents and Alan were out shopping for Thanksgiving dinner. I was helping him clean the house to get it ready for having family over, and he wanted to make the house smell better. He thought if he lit limbs from pine trees on fire, it would make the house smell of pine, like a scented candle. He put one on the window ledge, and it caught the curtains on fire. The relatives spent all of the next day sniffing, wondering if the food was burned, and nobody said anything."

With a neutral tone, Baker said, "Yeah, you all had some good times together."

Eric asked, "Have you heard anything from Sam lately?"

Joey looked at Baker; Baker looked at me.

"Sam? I don't remember Sam."

Eric looked at me hard: "You don't remember Sam?"

"No. Where did he live?"

"He was in the Corbin house. Lived there a couple of years, our first two or so years of high school. You all hung out a lot."

"Huh. I don't remember him at all. I guess it has been a long time."

I saw my mother coming over the hill out of the corner of my eye. "It seems Mom has made another lap. I'm going to pick up with her here and finish off the walk. It was great seeing you guys."

Baker shook my hand. "Next time you're in town, let us know. We'll grab a beer or something. Catch up some more." Joey and Eric nodded, started walking away. Baker was slower to move away, looking back at me, as if he had one more question he wanted to ask.

Mom said hello to the three of them as she passed them, then caught up to me. "So, how were the boys?"

"They were good. Did you know about Kelly?"

"I did. I didn't think you would want to know, though, so I was trying to figure out if I should tell you or not."

"Of course I would want to know. That's awful."

I couldn't understand why she would think I wouldn't want to hear about someone I grew up with. Even though I had fallen out of touch with him, I always believed Kelly would turn out fine. He had had a rough time in high school, as kids picked on him on a regular basis, but that happened to lots of us, and we turned out okay. I had seen it from a distance, as I started hanging out with a different group of friends once I started playing on the basketball team. The other guys stayed interested in neighborhood sports and video games, while I was at practice or in the weight

room every afternoon. Once I could drive, I would go to my new friends' houses, and we would watch college or pro games or just shoot around in someone's driveway.

"And do you remember a Sam?"

"Of course, honey. You seem to have forgotten a lot about your friends around here. Maybe you should come home more often."

I knew I shouldn't have given her that opening. I knew I should get her on to another subject quickly, but then I saw a house that sparked a memory, though there was a bush missing in front of it.

"Didn't there used to be a big bush here?"

"Sure. They cut it down, though, when you were in high school. I would have thought you would have remembered that. This is where the bus stopped every day you were in school."

I told my mother that I wanted to stay here a bit longer, to see a bit of the neighborhood on my own. She just nodded, said she would see me at home. I heard her walking away, but I was looking only at where the bush once stood. I walked backwards away from the bush I could now see clearly before me, then stopped just past someone's driveway, the driveway that used to belong to the Stapleton's and in my mind belonged to them again. And I remembered Sam hiding behind that bush.

We were sophomores in high school, and Sam had asked me to serve as a distraction, a decoy of sorts. I didn't know what had happened between him and Kelly, just that Sam was mad at him about something. Everything was coming back to me now. Sam's anger was not surprising, as Sam had a temper, and he was almost always mad at someone. I had fought with him several times, always losing, in the two years he had lived in the neighborhood. He had fought with almost everyone, in fact. It seemed to be his way of making friends, but only Kelly and I stayed around to take the random punches. The fights were never long or even that serious. There would be a few punches, usually on the arms or stomach, and the next day we were friends again. It seemed to be his hobby.

Sam wanted me to talk to Kelly when he got off of the bus, take his attention away from the bush where Sam was hiding. I agreed. Kelly got off the bus, and he smiled to see me waiting there for him. He always smiled when he saw me coming, no matter how I treated him. I saw Sam come out from behind the bush, and I saw Sam's fist come down hard on Kelly's head. He might have even had something in his hand. Kelly collapsed on the sidewalk, and Sam started kicking him in the back and in the head, Kelly too stunned to even cover his head. And I just stood there and watched it all.

The bus stopped behind me, and the driver came running out, yelling at Sam. And at me. I just stood there, watching Sam run away. The driver yelled at me to go to the house, to tell them to call someone, and I just stood there, watching Kelly's blood seep out on to the sidewalk. The driver ran back to the bus and used his CB. I was still standing there when the ambulance arrived, just watching. I never answered any questions about what I saw or what I did, and the police stopped asking them. Sam wasn't at school the next day or ever again. Kelly eventually came back, but I never spoke to him. I was too busy focusing on my classes, getting in to UCLA, getting away from that neighborhood.

After I had replayed that moment I had tried to forget, I went back to my parents' house. I went upstairs to my old room, dug through the closet my mother had never cleaned out, and found my high school yearbooks. I looked at pictures of Kelly and of Sam and of who I once was. I saw the three of us sitting together at the lunch table, arms around each other, full of smiles, full of the future. I wondered how I had forgotten all of this, how I had remembered a life I never truly lived, a life I tried to leave behind. And I wondered what else I had forgotten, besides who I was, who I am.

I looked out my bedroom window as the sky was growing dark. Street lights put in long after I had moved away were beginning to come on, casting a halo around the places I had spent my childhood becoming who I thought I was. I could just see the outlines of houses and yards where I had played tag or Ghosts in the Graveyard, always running away from shadows moving through the dusk, always getting caught in the end.

# As a Madman Shakes a Dead Geranium

## Brianne Holmes

After *T. S. Eliot's 'Rhapsody on a Windy Night'*

*Midnight shakes the memory* as magnetic bombs once shook the quaking walls of houses. Rebels quivered in their army boots while federal planes blasted neighborhoods to bits. Ceasefire! Ceasefire! We were better off before. And the blame descended squarely on the rebels, who shouldered the weight like half-dead horses.

*Twelve o'clock.* Time had run on madly. Through the darkened streets of Savannah, Cristian took the long way toward their old apartment. Behind him, the lights of the bus terminal glared at his back, demanding to know how he presumed to come back now.

Beneath a streetlamp, a poem scrawled across his brain, a poem his mother taught him when he was a child, when they sat on his bed and watched through the slats of his window blinds, counting solitary cars rolling through the night. She told him that the streetlamps were hired by the sun keep watch. When he woke from nightmares, he would look out the window and talk to them. He would ask them what they had seen. Had they seen the shadows that crept into his room while he slept? He pretended they answered him. Yes, we saw them, and we woke you as quickly as we could. They did not tell him these were shadows of substantial things to come.

*Midnight shakes the memory* as fear shook the line of soldiers waiting in the long ditch. The federals counted them off: one, two, three; one, two, three. Cristian was a Three. He climbed out of the ditch with the other Threes, flanked by federal marines. They marched toward an empty airplane hangar. Behind them, the federals fired into the ditch. Later, they called it the Jefferson City Surrender.

*Half-past one, the street lamp muttered.* A waitress stood outside a 24-hour information café, vaping. Cristian went inside. The waitress followed him in, and he asked for a bowl of rehydrated noodles and any information on Lucy Beckman Hall, DMP. The waitress eyed him skeptically. He was still wearing the ripped work pants and duct-taped boots from the forced labor camp in Nevada and the stained, white t-shirt they had given him at his release. His hair had reached shoulder length, a scraggly mass of off-blond. The waitress's gaze settled on the brand on his wrist. 10574.

"Method of payment?" she said.

"Cash," he said and dug everything he had out of his pocket.

The waitress went to the back, and a 3-D image of Lucy appeared in the center of Cristian's table, an unsmiling government ID photo. It almost seemed he could run his fingers through her hair. If Lucy herself had been here, she might have called it the substance of things hoped for or the evidence of things not seen.

Information popped up on the tabletop screen. Assuming it was up to date, she still lived in the apartment they rented before he was arrested a year ago. The waitress emerged from the back with the noodles. Cristian read on. Six months ago, on February 22, 2058, Lucy had nearly been murdered by a lynch mob, intent on "executing" Dismissed Military Personnel. Cristian gripped his fork and plunged it into the noodles. He ought to have been here.

Cristian looked at his hand, the one holding the fork, and watched it tremble. The hand was callused and bony, young and old, toughened and frail all at once. Earlier, he had seen his reflection

in the window of the bus, and the sunken cheeks frightened him. He realized suddenly that he had no plan for what he would do if Lucy didn't want him back.

Before he could lose his nerve, Cristian logged into his government account, both hoping for and dreading a message from Lucy. The government had sent her a formal notification of his release, so she should know. But there was nothing—no message from Lucy at all, only the government's automatically generated reminder to register in Savannah's Office of Dismissed Military Personnel. The bright lights of the tabletop screen poured up at him like reversed acid rain.

It had been drizzling off and on the night Cristian met Lucy. It was June, 2054, three days after the surrender, and Cristian was in a line again, this time outside a military office at the Jefferson City airport. Behind him, past the line of waiting soldiers, beyond the Missouri River, the lights of Jefferson City grinned.

Now the line moved and he was inside, and he couldn't see the river or the moon or the watery stars. Missouri. Misery. Murder. Mangle. Massacre. Memory. And he was next in line. Cristian held out his left wrist and gazed at the florescent lights, barely glancing at the man with the brand or the man who gripped his forearm. The brand sizzled against his skin, like white electricity that shot up his veins and sent air hissing through his teeth. It felt as if it were smoldering down to the bone, and he could smell it burning. He felt a sharp prick, just above the burning, and he knew that was his tracker being inserted. They would know where he was for the rest of his life.

He stumbled into another room to face a woman in iGlasses who said, "10574. Hall, Cristian," and gave him a bus ticket chip, a government voucher, and a dismissive glance. In the next room, other Threes waited: several dozen men and a few women in uniforms from all branches of the military, surrounded by federal marines with Magnetic Assault Rifles. One of the Threes held his wrist out in front of him and muttered, "Indelible ink would have been just as efficient." "That's not the point." This from a young woman whose short white-blond hair appeared singed on the ends. She was rubbing her thumbs over a cloth medic's cross, torn from a uniform.

When the room was full, the guards led them out into the drizzly night and herded them onto shuttles across the river and deposited them at the Jefferson City bus terminal. Then the guards left without a word. The Threes shifted, looking around at one another like people waking up. They roamed toward the glowing kiosks of bus routes, heads down against the intermittent rain.

As Cristian stood in front of a kiosk, the girl with the scorched hair stepped up on his right. She looked too young, and her army fatigues hung large on her body, as if she had borrowed them from an older brother.

"Where are you going?" she asked. Her voice seemed like a sudden sound in an empty room.

"Charlotte," Cristian said. "North Carolina." There was no going back home to Raleigh. His family were federals to the core.

"I'm going to Savannah," the girl said. "My grandmother lives there. We'll take the same bus until Nashville, I guess."

Cristian looked down and got a good look at both sides of her face. The left side was Scandinavian-pale, but the right side was red and stiff with blisters on her cheekbone and forehead. Her blue eyes reflected the glow of the map kiosk, deep lakes in a sun-scorched land.

"Yes, I'm old enough to be here," she said, as if he had asked.

"Okay," he said, and a rusty chuckle crawled up his throat.

"Lucy Beckman," she said, "but you can call me Charity."

"What?"

"Charity. We could use a little more around here, don't you think?"

She turned away abruptly, but not before he saw her face twist like a wrung-out dishcloth.

"Lucy," Cristian said to her back, uncertainly. "Or Charity. Or whatever your name is."

She cleared her throat and faced him, blinking rapidly.

“We can’t see everything, can we?” she said. “Like Charity. We know what it is, but we can’t actually see it.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.” Cristian was beginning to think this girl had seen more of war than she could handle.

“Love,” she said, and he could almost imagine her stamping her foot. “I’m talking about love. Faith, hope, and love.”

Cristian glanced around and saw a few other soldiers eyeing them curiously. Most hadn’t seemed to notice, though. They stood under the awning to avoid the drizzle; they sat on benches; they spoke to each other in undertones. Lucy faced the map kiosk and ran her fingertips down its glass screen. The glass squeaked with moisture. Lucy muttered, “We can’t see everything.”

Cristian considered moving away and leaving her to her quasi-religious ramblings, but he couldn’t do that. In fact, he didn’t want to do that. He wanted to stay. After a few minutes, Lucy turned around. Her face was composed.

“I’m sorry,” she said. The left side of her face had turned red now, a deep blush. “You just seemed like someone who would listen.”

“I was,” Cristian said. “I mean, I am.”

She smiled with the good half of her face—a sheepish smile, but a smile nonetheless, like a guttering candle in a large and empty room.

That night on the bus, Lucy fell asleep against the window. The good side of her face was turned toward him, as unmarked as if the war never happened.

Cristian crossed his arms and stretched his legs out, leaning his head back against the seat. He fell asleep and woke up ducking his head between his knees with his arms shielding his head. He thought he had spotted a Chameleon breaking camouflage with the sky. The spider bombs were falling.

“Cristian. Cristian. Wake up.”

Cristian lifted his head. Lucy was nudging his leg with the toe of her boot. When they made eye contact, she said, “I see those things, too, except I see them when I’m awake.” She turned and looked out the window. Under the new morning sun, the scenery rolled by, punctuated by the broken bones of cities. Sometimes, the bus had to leave the main highway to avoid blasted sections of road.

“I’m not a soldier,” Lucy said abruptly, still looking out the window.

Cristian didn’t interrupt. He studied the burnt ends of her hair.

“I volunteered,” she said. “My brother was a medic. I thought I could help.”

He noticed the past-tense about her brother. Too many people were in the past-tense.

“And then,” Lucy said. She thrust the palms of her hands away from each other, an explosion of fingers. “I was stupid to think I could help.”

“We all thought so,” Cristian said.

As they travelled southeast and changed buses, the soldiers dispersed, shrugging into frayed jackets, pulling the sleeves down over their brands, and ripping the patches with the rebel insignia from their sleeves. Some pocketed the insignia, the blue field with its circle of stars disappearing into their pockets. Some threw them into trash cans at bus terminals. Displaced civilians boarded the bus, their faces like closed doors. They cast suspicious glances at the soldiers’ uniforms.

They had a seven-hour delay in Grand Rivers, Kentucky, where rubble blocked the road and only half of the bus station was standing. Cristian and Lucy took the chance to buy sandwiches with part of their government vouchers. They ate them behind a pile of rubble. The meat on the sandwiches had been labelled “Turkey Flavored,” and it seemed to be made of Pressed Excess, but

Cristian couldn't remember when he had last eaten, and the mustard went a long way to improving the flavor.

After she ate all the crumbs on her paper plate, Lucy leaned back against the rubble and cupped her hand around the tender side of her face to shield it from the afternoon sun. She began to move her hand away from her face and back, away and back, staring at her hand.

"Shadow," she murmured pensively.

"What?" Cristian said.

"Nothing. It's just weird. That light always makes a shadow."

Cristian was trying to decide if Lucy was waxing philosophical or going nuts when she abruptly sat up and changed the subject.

"Would you do it again?" she asked.

"Do what?"

"You know. The war."

Cristian sighed. He remembered reporters tried for treason, a priest before a firing squad, the president who wouldn't step down. These were reasons, but they seemed to crumble like the rubble of the bus station.

"I don't know," he said. "A lot of innocent people died. We were supposed to be protecting them."

"But if a thing is right, then it's right," Lucy said. She leaned forward on her pile of bricks and mortar, hair sliding down her temples in ragged drifts.

"The world's more complicated than that," Cristian said.

Lucy stared at the sky for a long time.

"There's an awful lot we can't see," she finally said.

Two fifteen, the streetlamp sneered, when Cristian left the information café. The streetlamps said, we do not warn you of the shadows. We make the shadows. We send them after you all night, tugging at your heels.

In the labor camp, he had watched the search lamp, throwing darkness around like the rusted nuts and bolts of many lives. He'd had every intention of holding out. But after the interrogations; after the cold and the heat, the stiffened joints, the creaking mind; when he lay stiff-backed and empty, looking for sleep, he found barely a residue of hope. And what was one name? What was just one name?

An orange cat leaped across the sidewalk in front of Cristian and stood in the gutter arching its back. Don't go on. Don't bother Lucy. She hadn't known she was marrying a traitor. The cat bounded away east, toward the Savannah River. They used to go down to the river sometimes, Cristian and Lucy, and sit in the park by the statue of the Waving Girl.

Local legend had it, this woman spent 44 years welcoming ships to the harbor. Some people said she was in love with a sailor who never returned. Lucy said this was hope if she ever saw it. "And what good did it do her?" Cristian had asked one day as they sat on the base of the statue. Their fingers were intertwined in his coat pocket against the November chill. "Well, she got a statue," Lucy said gazing up at it.

Midnight was just that sort of time when memories were created and bent in all directions. It was midnight in April 2055 when Cristian arrived in Savannah the first time. He spent the night on a bench near the river. It had taken him seven months after the surrender to realize he wasn't going to stop thinking about that odd girl, Lucy Beckman. It had taken him another three months to consider the possibility she might not mind seeing him again.

When he found her, she was burying the war in a new cause: she'd gotten involved in the Georgia underground. She had a 3-D printer in her apartment living room that spit out fake IDs for rebel fugitives and political refugees.

"I never even have to leave the comfort of my apartment to be subversive," she said, tapping her wrist where the government tracker lay beneath her skin.

"I find subversiveness highly attractive," Cristian said with a goofy grin.

Lucy laughed. Her hair had grown and showed no evidence of the explosion. The right side of her face had not been so lucky. It was a mountain range of warped and crinkled skin.

Another time, they were sitting in a café halfway between his job at a cereal plant and her job at a motel. She said, "What if we had won?"

Cristian was eating his sandwich quickly, checking his watch. "Never was much chance of that."

"But what if we had? Would it really be so much different, so much better? I'd like to think so, but I'm not sure."

Cristian paused in his sandwich-eating and looked at her. If not for the war, she was the sort of person who might have floated through life as a permanent idealist.

"If we had won, I wouldn't have met you," Cristian said. It was the best he could do.

Lucy frowned. "I guess we can't see everything, can we?"

He had learned that this was her short-hand, her code-speak, for her belief in the oversight of God.

"Nope, we can't," he said.

She squinted at him hard. "Don't make fun of me."

"I'm not."

"You are."

"Okay. I'm sorry."

Lucy lived like a coiled spring always about to snap in two. But somehow this strange sense she had—that hope was there, just out of sight—this sense always seemed to bob back to the surface. And he hung on to her helter-skelter hope without even knowing he was doing it.

*Half-past two, the streetlamp said.* Cristian was several blocks from the apartment. He walked slowly. He caught a flash of light above him, and he looked up to see a curtain drawn from a window above. The silhouette of a woman stood dark in the light. Wouldn't it be odd—wouldn't it be something—wouldn't it be fantastic if the woman in the window were the woman he'd betrayed—how many—three days ago? No odder than falling in love on a bus in the wake of a massacre.

But that woman, no. The name he had given—there was no reason to believe she was in Savannah. He didn't know where she lived. That wasn't his job, as he told the interrogators at the labor camp. He only printed the IDs.

The curtain above swished closed. The woman was gone. Closed, like a cell or a gate or a second-floor apartment door. Closed like a case or a mind or a heart. Why hadn't Lucy sent him a message?

Light flashed again. Just the streetlamp flickering, the blub almost burnt out. His shadow wavered in front of him. Funny how light always makes a shadow, hadn't Lucy said? His mother said the streetlamps were hired by the sun.

The streetlamp went dark.

An awful lot he couldn't see.

It was midnight when they married. Lucy wanted to be married in a church, but most of the churches were closed, so an old Presbyterian pastor opened the back door of a church and married them by candlelight with his two middle-aged daughters and their husbands to witness. This was 2056.

They kept making the fake IDs from the real photos and false names someone left in a box on their doorstep sporadically. Someone else in the underground—they didn't know who—was busy tampering with the data in the information cafés, and someone else was evaluating ID requests.

Faces zipped by through the printer, people Cristian didn't know with stories he hadn't heard. It was better that way. Then one day, he did know a face.

"Lucy," he said, staring at a young, non-descript woman with brown hair. Adeline Rhodes was the fictitious name. She couldn't be older than twenty. "Lucy. Why do I know her?"

Lucy looked over his shoulder. They should never have contemplated it. They should have put it in its box, unnoticed, and left it outside their door to be mysteriously picked up, the way they always did.

"Oh," Lucy said, and at the same moment, Cristian remembered.

The woman in the photo was Katherine Emerson, whose father and brother were two of the rebellion's foremost leaders. Right after the war, her face had been plastered on screens and billboards, wanted for treason.

"Put it away," Lucy said and snatched it out of his hands. But they couldn't un-remember.

*Half-past three, the lamp sputtered.* Cristian sat on the bottom of the stairs. At the top of the flight was the landing and two closed doors. One was his and Lucy's door.

Wake me up, he told the lamp. Take me back to Nevada. I will make it right.

The streetlamp showed him nothing he didn't already know.

It was midnight, a week after their one-year anniversary when the police stormed their apartment and caught them forging IDs. They took the printer, of course, but what they really wanted was a list of the falsified names.

"We don't keep those," Cristian said. Lucy was staring down the barrel of an MAR, lips white. It was like waiting in line in the ditch. "We just print them."

"But you might remember this one." They showed him a picture of a girl in her mid-teens, a non-descript, skinny girl with brown hair. And he did know her, oh, he did. A younger Katherine Emerson.

The pools of Lucy's eyes stirred. Don't you dare.

"I don't recognize her," he said.

They could have said right then and there, "A name, or we shoot your wife." But they didn't. Maybe they knew he was strong there beside Lucy, the one who saw so much, in spite of not seeing everything.

Instead, they shipped him off to Nevada, worked him, starved him, and then they said, "A name, or your wife is dead." And then he said, "The first name was Adeline. I don't remember the last," which wasn't true, but it was his last attempt at loyalty.

*The lamp said, "Four o'clock, here is the number on the door."*

He knocked. He heard her footsteps, almost immediately. She must have been awake already. She must have known he was coming. His stomach jolted so hard, he almost vomited rehydrated noodles on the step.

Lucy opened the door. The light behind her filled up the apartment, and her shadow met him in the doorway. Her arms came next, wrapping around him, then her hair spilling over his

shoulder. But she had to know he'd said the name. She saw too much to miss that. Deep pools in a sun-scorched land. Don't you dare. Charity Beckman Hall.

He let her pull him inside. The streetlamps did not know the time. They looked at one another in bewilderment. The light of things not seen was outshining them.

# Caught

## Ian Delaney

At dawn, off the shore of Cayucos, a small crab fishing boat rocked along the dark waves. It was the only boat for miles. It stopped alongside a buoy, which Mitch reached over and grabbed. He untied the buoy from the cable and hooked the cable to the crane arm, then hit the button to start up the crank. The motor turned and the rusty pulley creaked as the cable passed against it. The arm of the crane sagged with the weight of the pot.

It looks heavy said Dan.

It sure does said Mitch, but he guessed the arm was bending because it was old and overused and cheap. It was like the rest of the boat.

After a minute the cage came up through the water. It actually had a few dozen crabs in it.

I could tell the arm was bending more than usual said Dan.

Mitch pressed another button and the arm turned and lifted the dripping pot over the back of the boat. The crabs were panicking now. They opened and closed their pincers and climbed over each other and up the sides of the cage. Mitch felt sorry for them, but he mostly felt disgusted by the hundreds of scuttling legs and the angular bodies and the sharp lateral movements. With more creaking, the crane lowered the pot onto the floor of the boat. Mitch and Dan opened the top, tossed the crabs into the holding tank, put a few dead codfish in the pot, and then had the crane lower it back into the sea.

Take us to the next pot said Dan. I'm going to celebrate.

Dan went into the cabin and pulled out a glass pipe and a lighter and a Ziploc bag filled with tiny crystals. He smoked and then walked outside. Mitch went inside and took the wheel, leaving the door open to air out the smoke.

Do you want any? said Dan, calling through the doorway.

No said Mitch. Still no.

Mitch thought about how he never would have taken the job if he knew Dan was a meth addict. It didn't bother him now, but an hour into their second outing he almost quit on the spot when Dan calmly started smoking and asked Mitch if he wanted a hit. Mitch must have looked shocked, because Dan didn't smoke again or bring it up until a couple weeks later, after they had starting getting used to each other.

I picked it up in Alaska, Dan had told him. On the king crab boats. This was back before the quotas, when each crew had just a couple weeks to fish, and really only a few days before the population took a serious dive. So we couldn't afford to sleep. We used the crystal to stay awake.

Everything about this job was strange at first. Mitch had never worked on a boat before. He had never been on the ocean for more than a couple hours at a time. When Mitch moved to Cayucos, he found the crab fishing job on Craigslist, listed as Assistant Needed. The description was muddled and mentioned working on a boat, but Mitch figured it meant fixing a boat or painting a boat. He met Dan at the docks, beside a small old boat named the Virgin. It looked like it would sink if it weren't for the ropes tying it to the dock. Dan was old, but his age was impossible to guess. He was thin with a spindly white beard and missing back teeth like a child.

You don't look like a surfer Dan had said.

I'm not.

The only boys your age who live here are surfers.

I can't surf.

Can you swim?

Yes.

I pay 15 percent of the profit from each catch, all under the table.

Okay.

The two of them sailed out that morning.

Now Mitch knew that 15 percent meant around fifty dollars a day. That was just enough to cover food and beer and the rent on his mobile home. They worked six full days a week, taking off Mondays because Dan and his crabbing friends stayed up all night on Sundays drinking and gambling away their earnings. Mitch was okay with the long hours. He preferred keeping busy.

Mitch sailed north. He pulled the Virgin around a craggy peninsula and brought her to rest alongside another buoy. Dan hopped up and switched on the crane. When the pot came out of the water it held a single frightened crab. Mitch pitied it immensely but tossed it in the holding tank just the same.

He went back into the cabin and set a course for the next buoy. It was several miles north, almost to Cambria. Then he came outside and sat next to Dan.

I thought that first catch had us in line for a great day said Dan. But now we're back to average after that last pot.

It's too bad said Mitch.

Did I ever tell you look like my nephew?

Dan told him every time he was high.

No said Mitch.

Peter is his name. Or Samson. Or something biblical like that.

It's Paul.

Paul, there it is! Thanks.

Any time.

Say Mitch. What are you here for?

This question was new. Mitch figured Dan was really feeling good now.

To make money.

No one moves to Cayucos to make money.

I thought you meant— Are you asking why I moved into town?

Exactly. Me, I moved to escape. Simple as that. So tell me, partner, why are you here?

Mitch considered this for a moment. He had a boilerplate answer that he used when he met new people in town or when one of his old friends called him. He always said he was here because the rent was cheap and he was learning a trade. Something that could lead to a career. But he didn't feel like telling this to Dan. For one thing he'd see right through it. And Mitch was feeling his own sort of high at the moment. Maybe Dan's excitement was rubbing off on him. Or maybe it was the wind whipping against his face, and the waves sloshing against the hull, and the endless morning sky, and the green hills on the coast that made him give an honest answer for the first time.

Beauty.

What?

I came here for beauty.

You came here for beauty...

Yes. I was tired of my job and my friends and my ex and the Central Valley. I needed a change in my life. I knew I needed to move somewhere else, but I didn't know where. So I drove down Highway 1. Driving helps me think. And as I was driving I looked at the sea and the cliffs and the hills and I realized that the answer was staring right at me. The beauty of this place, the sunrises and sunsets, the dunes and cliffs, the driftwood on the beaches, the horizon, the pastures—that's why I'm here. To take it all in and recharge and think and relax.

Dan stayed quiet for a while.

Sounds to me like escaping he said.

I'm not. I'm here because I like it here. Not because I don't like it somewhere else.

I'm here to escape. The difference between you and me is that I've come to terms with it.

What are you escaping from?

Commitment. Family. Fear of failure.

Wow.

Yep.

Any details?

My daughter was born sixteen years ago. When her mother first told me she was pregnant I was excited. It was a chance for a new start. To finally build something around another person. But then as the months wore on and the date got closer and closer I started to panic. I was scared of being trapped. Because if I was trapped with a family and I failed to take care of them there would be nowhere to run. It would be all on my shoulders and I would be reminded of it every day I was with them. You must know by now that I've made several mistakes in my life. Drugs. Jail. Bankruptcy. I didn't have a lot of confidence in myself to get things right, and I didn't want to be there when everything fell apart. So I left.

The Virgin was out in the open sea now. The wind had picked up. The land was far off and looked like a second horizon. A seagull was flying overhead.

What's her name? said Mitch.

What?

What's your daughter's name?

Oh. I'm not sure.

The third pot was another good one. It had twenty crabs. They were back on track for a positive day.

I'm going to celebrate said Dan, and he went into the cabin.

When Dan was done Mitch took the wheel and steered the boat toward the shore. He thought about Dan accusing him of escaping. But Dan couldn't be right. He was a meth addict and if he couldn't figure out his own life then how could he diagnose someone else's motives. Mitch, meanwhile, had a degree and had held a salary job. He was self-assured and capable and could make a middle class life for himself someday. He could set aside a year or two to explore the world and the people in it, because if he didn't do that now then when would he.

What's her name? said Dan.

What?

Your ex. Her name.

That's not the same thing at all.

What do you mean?

Mitch sighed. Her name is Sally he said.

Wow. What is she, fifty?

She's my age.

No one is named Sally anymore.

Well she is.

And what happened?

I cheated on her.

Ah. I gotcha. Son, I've been there.

Well I hadn't.

So you felt guilty.

Yes.

But let me guess. You didn't feel as guilty as you should have.

I suppose that's right.

Ha! I knew that was it. You're probably starting to respect me a little more, aren't you?

Mitch didn't answer.

I'm not as crazy as I look said Dan. I can tell you a little something about yourself, just like your philosophy textbooks.

It's philology.

What?

I studied philology.

Well I can rank with those books too.

Okay.

Dan jogged around the boat with a huge grin on his face, humming a tune that he was making up on the spot. Mitch could tell because it made no sense melodically. Dan threw his arms in the air and lifted his face to the sky and started singing nonsense words. After a few laps Dan came to rest in the doorway of the cabin and stood behind Mitch, panting.

Take it from a man who should have felt guilty all his life but never did said Dan. I used to feel guilty about how I didn't feel guilty. I still do sometimes. But life is better when you just stop worrying about that shit and don't let it hold you back. It doesn't do anyone any good. Especially not the people you've hurt.

I'll try said Mitch.

Good. Now where the hell are you going? The buoy is over there.

That afternoon Mitch left the docks with 156 dollars. It was his best day since he had taken the job. On his way home he stopped at the one sports bar in town and drank three IPAs in a dark booth in the corner. When he left it was after six so he picked up fish tacos to go. He staggered up the hill to the trailer park, ate dinner quickly, then napped until nine.

When he woke he picked up his phone for the first time that day. No messages or missed calls. He stared at the screen for a while and thought about calling William or Sally or someone but in the end he threw his phone across the room onto the couch.

He needed to be up in eight hours but he was wide awake. He took some aspirin for his headache and read *De Profundis* for a couple hours, turning words over in his mind, searching for double meanings and progressions and recurring phrases, marking lines that struck him. This is the life he thought. After finishing the book, he tossed it across the room and it landed on the couch next to his phone.

It was late. He needed to sleep but couldn't. All night he lay there in the dark, telling himself he wasn't escaping but discovering.

The next morning Mitch still had a headache, and it got worse when they got out to sea. The weather was cloudy and windy, the waves were choppy, the tiny boat rocked, water crashed over the deck, Mitch's boots got soaked, and he ended up vomiting over the railing. As Dan steered the boat Mitch watched his vomit sit on the surface of the water like flotsam, holding its shape, refusing to separate, rolling over the waves, until finally a pack of seagulls dove on it.

Long night? said Dan.

Yeah said Mitch.

Their catches were meager. As the morning wore on it became clear that they were catching so little that it would offset the gains they had made the day before. The few crabs they did get were small and sickly looking.

So tell me about her said Dan. This Sally.

I don't know said Mitch.

Come on. We're out here every day. We're gonna talk about everything sooner or later.

How'd you meet?

We went to school together.

School.

College.

You meet at a party, or what?

She was studying creative writing, and we both had this biology class we hated. We were lab partners, and she couldn't stand the dissections, so I would do all the messy stuff in the class, cutting up the worms and frogs and things like that, and then she would write the reports. Pretty soon we started going out.

And then?

We stayed together through the rest of college, graduated together, and moved to Bakersfield. I didn't want anything to do with Bakersfield, but she had a job offer. A good one. So it seemed like the right thing to do. She wanted to move in together, but I didn't. I guess I saw the end coming the whole time. I just couldn't articulate it to myself.

How long were you together?

Five years.

Shit.

Yeah.

Longer than I've ever been with someone.

Yeah?

Oh yeah. Longest I've done is a year and a half.

Really?

I'm a free spirit I guess. Or a lousy lover.

Or both.

Or both.

Mitch felt sick again and ran to the railing. He vomited some more and the seagulls dove on it again. As he was gasping for air he looked over at the holding tank. He couldn't see any of the crabs. He walked over to the tank and looked inside. The crabs were on the floor of the tank, fighting each other. The largest one was attacking the smaller ones and it looked like it had killed three already. Its pincers were huge and hooked and razored and it had the smaller crabs backed into a corner, piling on top of each other. Mitch reached in, grabbed the big one, and dropped it into a second holding tank.

Cannibal? said Dan.

Yeah.

The seagulls had finished with the vomit and were now circling over the boat. There were five of them.

We may need to run for cover soon said Dan. I don't want your puke landing on me.

That's disgusting said Mitch.

You know what? You're the most clean-cut fisherman I've ever met in my life.

I wouldn't doubt it.

Even the ex-military guys enjoy a dirty joke here and there. They come in like you, short hair and polite and all, but eventually they'll start telling me about their girlfriend's tits.

If you want me to tell you about Sally's tits you're going to be disappointed.

You're proving my point, Mitch. That's all.

One of the seagulls spotted the crabs in the holding tank. It landed on the rim and stared down into the water. It held still for so long that Mitch thought it was just looking at its own reflection, but then it jabbed its head into the water, reaching for the crabs. It came up empty.

I'm going to get the gun said Dan, and he went into the cabin and started rifling through the drawers. After a minute he came back out.

I guess I left it somewhere he said.

By now the other seagulls had noticed the crabs. Three of them landed on the edge of the holding tank, and they looked down in the water and fished with their beaks and squawked at each other.

Don't just stand there said Dan. Do something.

Mitch charged at them and waved his arms around and they flew up in the air. They circled back around a few times but Mitch stood by the tank and waved his arms and they stayed away. Then the largest of the seagulls saw the one big crab in the second tank. The seagull dove down and in one fell swoop splashed into the tank and came up with the crab writhing in its beak. It flew away and the other seagulls chased after it, snapping at the crab, trying to pry it loose. The birds flew off in the distance, fighting over the crab. Soon they disappeared.

Well shit said Dan.

Sorry said Mitch.

Don't worry about it. That's what I get for leaving my gun behind.

Soon it started to rain. It began as a drizzle but within minutes it was pouring and Mitch and Dan had to huddle in the cabin. The waves were getting bigger and the Virgin was really rocking and they decided to just head back and try again tomorrow.

Look at that said Dan. The day is over and I haven't even had any crystal yet.

He reached into one of the drawers and pulled out his pipe and his lighter and his Ziploc bag.

Do you want any?

No said Mitch. Still no.

The rain stopped when they returned to land. Mitch walked to the dunes and lay on his back and watched the cloudy sky swirl above him. He knew that lying down like this wasn't helping his nausea but he didn't move for a long time. He felt top-heavy. Finally, he got the strength to sit up and right when he did a gust of wind came through and shot a bunch of sand into his hair and eyes and mouth. The wind kept bursting in off the sea, so Mitch put on his hood and tucked his knees inside his jacket and rocked back and forth slowly. He looked out at the water, which was pitch black and completely empty.

After a while he stood up, steadied himself, and staggered up the hill to his trailer. When he got home he started boiling water on the stove for tea. He could hear the wind howling outside, and the trailer's cheap windows rattled in their frames. The sills were wet from the rain.

He drank his tea, which warmed him up and took his mind off his stomach. But an hour later he felt sick again and threw up in the bathroom. He touched his forehead but couldn't tell if he had a fever or not. He was woozy and a little delirious but he knew it could just be dehydration. Either way he felt bored and confused and vulnerable. So he called Sally.

Mitch? she said.

Yeah. It's me.

What do you want?

I don't know. To talk to you.

About what.

Anything.

Ummm.

It's just been a while since we talked, so I figured I'd check on how you were doing.

I'm doing fine.

Really?

Sure.

What does that mean?

It means I'm doing fine. Thanks for checking.

Okay.

Is that all?

No.

Well?

I know I've said this before—

If you start apologizing I'm going to hang up.

Okay, sorry—

Sally hung up. Mitch called her back and she didn't answer and he threw his phone hard against the wall. It stuck, like an ax in a log. Mitch walked over and yanked the phone out of the sheetrock. The screen was shattered and the wall had a hole in it.

Soon it started to rain again. It rained all night, and water seeped through the hole in the wall and warped the paneling on the floor.

The next day was Monday, his day off. He was feeling better so he got in his car and drove north on Highway 1 with no destination in mind. He drove past the Cove, which was filled with people lounging and kayaking and playing volleyball. He kept driving until he reached San Simeon. The beach there was empty except for a thousand elephant seals. He got out and walked right up the seals and stood there for a while but then got annoyed with the bellowing and the sex, so he walked to the pier. There were a few people on it. All couples. He walked out to the end and hopped up on the wooden railing and sat there with his legs dangling twenty feet over jagged rocks.

Better be careful sitting up there said a guy behind him. It's a dangerous spot.

I won't fall said Mitch without turning around.

Okay. But you'll still get an ass full of splinters!

Mitch turned around and looked at the guy. He was wearing a tiny black t-shirt and giant black sunglasses and was laughing hysterically. He walked away with his girlfriend or wife or whoever was holding his hand. Mitch closed his eyes and willed the pier to collapse and take all three of them with it but nothing happened. He realized he hated Mondays for the opposite reason as everyone else.

He walked into town and got a bad, overpriced sandwich. He started driving up to Big Sur but he felt sick so he turned around and went home and lay in bed for the rest of the day, napping and reading and drinking.

The next morning the sea was calm and clear. They were off Avila when the sun rose, the light illuminating the vacant beach and the green pastures against the still-dark sky, and Mitch could tell that the air that day would be warm and crisp and the sky deep, the sort of day that drew him here in the first place. Their first few catches were good, and the first holding tank was almost full already.

Dan was feeling good. After smoking he came out of the cabin and sat next to Mitch, who was looking out at the shore. Dan slung his arm over Mitch's shoulder.

So tell me about her said Dan.

What? said Mitch.

The girl.

I already did.

Not Sally. The other one. The one you cheated with.

Oh.

So...

Well, I don't know if—

It's a guilt thing, I got it. But you got to get over that, son. Just tell me her name at least.

I just—

You can do it. Just one word. Her name.

Well...

Well what?

It wasn't a her.

It wasn't a her.

That's right.

Holy shit said Dan, and he took his arm off Mitch and jumped to his feet.

Yeah said Mitch.

Jesus.

His name was William.

You don't need to tell me that.

Sorry.

Jesus Christ. How does something like that happen?

When you feel that way all along, I guess.

Oh.

You can see why I was hesitant to—

Yes, I see that now.

Okay.

Dan paced around the deck, muttering to himself and shaking his head. Once he froze mid-stride, gazing off in the distance with his mouth open. He held still like that for several seconds before going back to pacing. Mitch just sat on the deck, looking in the direction of the shore but not really looking at anything at all.

I knew you were escaping something said Dan.

I guess so said Mitch.

Well, we're in the same boat then. And I got just the thing for you.

Dan went into cabin and pulled out the pipe and the bag and the lighter.

No thanks said Mitch.

You don't know what you're saying said Dan. You're out here to forget something. To get away from your past. I can tell you that doing that is impossible unless you give yourself a fighting chance. Take it from me, kid, this is your fighting chance.

He offered the pipe to Mitch.

Sorry said Mitch. Not now.

You're sure said Dan.

Yes.

All right then.

Mitch thought about Bakersfield. Right now Sally would be starting her lunch break. She was probably heading to Max's Deli, their favorite spot. He wondered if she could go there without thinking about him at all. He wondered if she could sit in the patio, under the towering oak tree, with acorns falling down on her, and not think about how they had gone there every day for three weeks so they could rank all the sandwiches on the menu. He wondered what she felt when he came

to mind. He wondered if she could dwell on a good memory of him without feeling a pang of sadness. He wondered if she was handling this differently than he was.

Hey loverboy, said Dan, come lend me a hand, will ya?

Dan was rolling up a rope that had come unspooled and was splayed across the deck. Mitch walked over and started rolling the other end. The rope was wet and heavy but soon enough they had it in a coil and Dan knotted it and hung it back up on the deck wall.

I suppose I could try it said Mitch.

Try what? said Dan.

Your pipe.

I think it would be good for you.

But I don't want it to be something I do to escape. I'd only do it to have a good time.

To celebrate.

Yeah.

That's how I use it. No harm in celebrating.

Yeah.

How about this next pot? If it's a winner, we celebrate, smoke some crystal, and head in early. What do you say?

Okay.

Okay then. I got a good feeling about this one, Mitch. I think our luck's about to change.

Mitch walked into the cabin and steered the Virgin toward the next pot. It was far out to sea. Soon the coast became faint and then it disappeared entirely. The sailboats to the south vanished. The seagulls stopped circling overhead. The wind picked up and the waves became larger.

Finally, they reached the buoy. Mitch hooked the cable to the crane. Dan hit the button, the motor pattered, and the crane started to lift the pot. The Virgin tilted hard to the side, and the crane strained with the weight.

This is a big one yelled Dan. He was ecstatic.

The boat continued to tilt. Water sloshed over the side of the holding tank. Mitch grabbed the railing to keep his balance. The motor kicked into a new gear and buzzed like a dentist drill. Slowly, inch by inch, the cable scraped over the pulley, and the boat tilted more and more. Mitch had never seen the Virgin have to work so hard for a pot. This could be the catch of all catches he thought. He knew that a completely full pot might allow him to move out. He could make a security deposit somewhere else, a city where he could have friends and be around people like him. And he would have a story to tell, about how he worked as a crabber on the Central Coast with a meth addict and learned about the sea and himself. Another new start, but one that was sustainable. For the first time in months he felt free and excited and hopeful.

That's when he saw how the arm of the crane was bending with the pressure. It looked ready to snap.

# Beware of Scorpions

## Mark Babin

I push at the pancakes on my plate with my fork, trying to figure out what happened to my life. I think of that song “Once in a Lifetime” by Talking Heads when David Byrne screams out, “Well, how did I get here?”

*Letting the days go by.*

My wife, Marlene, is talking about her day, and try as I might, I can’t pay attention. She shovels another pancake on my plate, so I smile and nod, but I’m daydreaming about what my life could be like. A good-looking, no-nonsense detective who always solves the case and has a beautiful, young girlfriend who is an aspiring singer. Or an up-and-coming lawyer with a hard heart and a huge bank account who sleeps with a hot stewardess for kicks.

In this life—the real one—I am an average-looking teacher and a failed writer. I shouldn’t be this old, this overweight. This apathetic. But I am.

I try to remember the last time I was genuinely interested in something Marlene said. Three weeks? Longer? I look at her shuffling around the kitchen in her wild, colorful scrubs—she’s a pediatric nurse, and the kids like the colors she says—and I honestly can’t remember when I was concerned about what she was saying.

I do remember—fondly—how we were in the beginning. When we were all passion and full of aspirations. Before life.

She was a pistol. Different from the rest of the girls. I knew plenty of girls who wanted to be nurses, but none of them talked about it the way Marlene did. She believed in it. She genuinely wanted to help people. Her little brother died from the flu when they were kids, and she’d be damned if she’d let that happen to anybody else. No kids were going to die on her watch.

But things didn’t work out exactly that way. Sure, she started out working with all passion and gusto in a children’s ER, but then she got pregnant, and we had Sebastian. Money became more important than high ideals. Now she works for Dr. Emmitt Levon, an overpriced pediatric specialist who caters to New Orleans’ rich, uptown clientele. I hate the guy. For one thing, he has the last name of my favorite Elton John song, from my favorite Elton John album, and second, I’m pretty sure he’s banging my wife. The combination of the two things don’t work in his favor.

One would think my suspicions would give me something to talk about with Marlene. But the truth is, I don’t have any proof, and when it comes right down to it, I’m not sure I want to know. I can’t really blame her if she is cheating. Levon, that little fucker, is young and vibrant—asshole knows Elton John more from some duet he did with Eminem on an awards show than from *Madman across the Water*. I am old and bitter.

Affair or not, I’ve grown less interested in what she has to say. I’m sure some of it may be important, but it is stuff I’ve heard for twenty years. I know everything about her, and still she’s a stranger.

“Dale, honey, don’t forget that Sebastian is coming back from drama camp today. You need to pick him up at school.”

Drama camp. All of my friends’ kids are athletic. Chris’ kid is shaping up to be the star tailback for the football team. Dave’s boy is a basketball and a baseball stud. We’ll be out slamming back a few, and they’ll be bragging on their boys. How Winston gained over a hundred yards and scored two touchdowns or how Tommy dropped thirty-four points even though he sat out most of the fourth quarter. And then they’ll both glance at me with this look of pity because they know my bragging about Sebastian would sound a little different. And they don’t give a shit about costume

designing for the school plays, no matter how good. I guess I don't much care about it either. I always just smile and bring up some memory of my own high school exploits like I'm stuck in Bruce Springsteen's "Glory Days."

"Got it," I say in between bites of pancake and make a silent promise that I'll visit *Bobo Joe's Vinyl Shop*. I haven't been by in a while. I can spend hours there, just perusing the old records, asking Joe to play one that I'm interested in. Music sounds right on vinyl. Even the scratches seem perfect.

"And Dale?" Marlene says.

I look up at her, knowing from experience that some type of instruction is coming. And then I get this strange feeling in my gut. Sinking, like I'm trapped in a car falling off a bridge.

"Try to show a little enthusiasm dear. He's really passionate about this."

I nod and go back to my breakfast. Why couldn't he be really passionate about sports? Computers? Even chess. Why did it have to be something so girly? Passionate about being a costume designer. My father would have kicked my ass if I tried to get him to let me go to a drama camp. He certainly wouldn't have paid for it. I attempt to convince myself that I'm better than my father, that because I don't hit Sebastian and I financially support his passions, I'm a good father. Deep down, I fear I'm as much a prick as my old man.

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I get in my old Taurus—like a-year-from-scraping-for-parts old—to go teach English at Delgado Community College. I sit there, my hands gripped tight around the worn rubber of the steering wheel, and then it hits me. I'll just leave. Just take off and start a new life. People do that sometimes. The thought is freeing until I think of my father. He left my mother and me when I was seventeen. He was younger than I am now, but perhaps the Lipinicki men can only take seventeen years of family.

He didn't take a damn thing with him—just left. So maybe it's in my blood, in my nature. Sebastian's sixteen. Maybe that's when Dad started feeling the itch. A little, tickling boil in the pit of his stomach telling him his life wasn't his own. So maybe he scratched it for a year, and it spread until he couldn't contain it. Or maybe it just festered and spread on its own. Point is he left. Waited till I was a man, or close to it, and then high-tailed it to wherever deadbeat dads high-tail it to. For most of my life I didn't understand it.

I think I'm beginning to.

The thought evaporates into a realm beyond reality, and I finally start the car. Then I start it again after it dies while backing out of the driveway.

I go to my first class like a responsible adult, and I teach with the enthusiasm of a fat kid at a fitness test.

I used to be a good teacher. I don't think I ever had the passion Marlene once had for nursing, but I really cared about helping my students, and I earnestly tried to make a difference. At some point I stopped giving a shit. Maybe it was because I couldn't relate to the kids anymore. Maybe their indifference caused mine. I don't know the when or why of my demise. I just know that kids no longer actively try to get into my class.

Today, the blank faces staring back at me only make me more depressed, so I have them do a writing exercise. At least I won't have to talk and watch them ignore me anymore. I spend the next thirty minutes wondering if any of the females would even consider having an affair with Mr. Lipinicki. Ten years earlier there were always a couple whom had crushes on me. I never took advantage, and I didn't really want to now. But it might be nice to have the option.

After my second class, which was eerily similar to the first one, I sit in my office like I'm

supposed to, in case a student actually realizes he needs help. Students rarely come. So for the moment, I sit alone and think about Sebastian.

I remember how proud and happy I was when he was born. When the doctor put him in my arms and suddenly I completely loved this chubby little thing, this little person that I hadn't known minutes before. He was my son.

Immediately, I had visions of all the things I would teach him. All the father-son adventures we would go on. Fishing trips, playing catch in the yard, shooting baskets, going camping, watching the Tigers on Saturdays and the Saints on Sundays. He'd be an athlete all right. I had been a varsity letterman in both football and basketball in high school, and Marlene was a tennis star all through college, until her knee gave out. He'd be the next freaking Pistol Pete, or maybe Terry Bradshaw.

But that didn't really work out either.

My phone rings and interrupts my musings.

"Mr. Lipinicki's office," I answer.

"Hey Lipinicki, you want to go grab a late lunch with me?"

I am thankful for Chris' invitation. I'm wallowing too much today. I agree, and we decide to hit up a sushi joint on St. Charles.

Dr. Chris Fredricks. He's who I was supposed to be. Doctorate in English Literature with a concentration on the modern novel, and he has written three of his own novels, all critical successes and one a national bestseller. He teaches over at Tulane. He has the intelligent jock son, and a wife who still looks great in gym shorts. His students hit on him constantly. He's a prick. He is also my best friend.

I feel like Pete Best when I'm around Chris. Like he was Ringo Starr, and had just swooped in, replaced me, and stolen my dream. Still, I have a perverted fascination with him. I get to listen to all his literary exploits and adventures and secretly pretend it's me. I get to stay with The Beatles.

I used to think I had just as much talent as Chris. When I was twenty-five, I won a fiction contest for a story about a runaway dad and the effects on the child and wife he left behind. I was so proud of myself. And I thought it was just the first step. Then I showed it to my mother. She didn't talk to me for months. I couldn't write about my family after that. I got published a few more times, but nothing big. Chris meanwhile had become a bestseller and a media darling. I no longer think I'm just as talented.

"The protagonist is too sympathetic. Almost pathetic. I think he needs some more backbone." He shoves a Philadelphia Roll into his mouth. The roll is too big for his mouth and tiny bit of cream cheese drips onto his bottom lip. I don't tell him.

Chris always uses me as his sounding board. He doesn't really want my opinion, just wants me to say something so he can continue his thought process out loud.

"So give him more backbone," I reply.

"I wish it were that simple, friend. But it's a delicate balance. I don't have to tell you that. I'm afraid changing him too much will make him seem unnatural."

That is a big dilemma, isn't it? Who says natural is better though? It's true that people always tell you to be yourself, but what if you needed to change? My father had a tattoo on his shoulder of a scorpion on top of a frog. The scorpion's tail was poised, ready to strike down with its venom. When I asked him about it, he told me the parable.

The frog agrees to ferry the scorpion across the river, warning that if the scorpion stings him, they'll both die. The scorpion agrees not to sting him, but midway through, the scorpion strikes. As they are both about to drown, the frog asks why. The scorpion replies, "Because it is my nature."

He ended by telling me to be cautious. No good deed goes unpunished. Beware of scorpions. But I think my father admired the scorpion for being itself. For saying I am who I am,

and I ain't changing. He never seemed to realize that the scorpion dies as well, that its nature was its demise. For my part, I just remember thinking the scorpion was an asshole.

The waitress brings the check, and Chris lets his hand linger on her wrist. "You have beautiful hands," he says.

The girl blushes. "Thank you, sir."

"Ouch. Sir? Call me Chris please."

She smiles and walks off. Chris follows her with his eyes, no doubt looking at her young, perky ass and imagining his hands all over it.

He turns back around and says, "Don't you just love Asian girls. They stay so tight."

Chris picks up the bill, despite my protests, and thanks me for listening. I am supposed to go to campus for another round of office hours, but I don't feel like it.

I go to a bar down the street from the restaurant and order a beer. Again my thoughts drift to my dad. The king of embellishment. Most kids have to endure lectures about how their fathers had to walk uphill in the snow for hours to get school, but my father was ridiculous. Of course he didn't use hills or snow—New Orleans has neither. He never really talked about how hard he had it. He would just make shit up. He once told me he had been the driver of the getaway van for the guys who broke into Watergate. Said it with a straight face too. I stopped believing anything he said when I turned twelve.

I order a second beer and think that it's amazing how much our parents can fuck us up. After he left, I used to imagine that my father was Cat Stevens. Because of that song, "Father and Son." You know, where Cat changes his voice to show the different sides of a conversation between a father and a son. In the song, the son is pretty much fed up with his father's advice, wants to strike out on his own. But I identified with the father. He was trying; he was giving advice; he was sticking around.

It's the son who's supposed to leave the father.

I wonder how Sebastian would react to the song. I don't know if he's ever heard it. Is he like the son who has to go away? He couldn't be. Because I wasn't the father trying to give advice. Sebastian had nothing to ignore.

After downing the second beer, it's about time to pick up Sebastian, so I settle the bill and head out.

As I pull up to the school, I see him outside with a group of friends. He talks naturally with a very pretty girl, until he sees my car. He kisses her on both cheeks, Parisian style, then walks away from her smiling while carrying something in a big black garbage bag.

Marlene says when he smiles he looks just like me. We do share a physical resemblance. You can tell he's my son. I had forgotten about that smile. He rarely shows it around me.

I love Sebastian. I really do. I'm just not sure I like him. I know that sounds awful, but what I mean is, if he wasn't my son, he wouldn't be a buddy of mine. Although we look alike, I see nothing of myself in him. We have little in common.

Marlene has asked why Sebastian's passion bothers me. "You know he gets it from you," she says referring generously to my writing. "You should be proud of his creativity."

It shouldn't bother me. He's good at it. I've seen some of the costumes he's brought home to work on, and they're impressive. But I was an athlete growing up. I got dirty. Broke limbs. And I held on to those dreams I had when I held him as a newborn in my arms. Held on to them longer than I should have. One by one they crumbled. He showed more interest in dressing up than playing catch. He wanted to watch *Gone with the Wind* or *Dr. Zhivago* instead of watching LSU or the Saints. I enjoyed those movies, but not at the expense of sports. There was the fishing trip debacle, when Sebastian cried every time we caught a fish and ended up throwing all the trout back into the water.

Or the camping trip when he spent more time sewing patches onto his favorite pair of jeans than hiking or swimming. I tried forcing him to play sports until he was ten and flat out refused.

I finally realized that Sebastian was never going to be whom I had dreamed of in those first few moments of his life. I stopped pushing. I stopped trying all together. I paid for his drama camps and sewing machines, but I didn't show interest. I didn't encourage. I didn't try to connect.

"How was camp?" I offer after he has gotten situated and we drive away.

"Fine."

He doesn't present any further information. I wonder if this is because he knows I'm not really interested in the details or because he wants to keep the experience for himself. I hope it's the latter.

We drive in silence for a while. I try to speak up a couple of times. To find something we can talk about.

"Who's the girl?"

"What girl?" His thumbs pound furiously on the keys of his phone. Text messaging.

"The one you were talking with when I pulled up. She's pretty."

"Tori."

Again with the one word answers. It frustrates me, but I recall being the same way. So we do have something in common.

I want to ask if they have anything going on. If he and Tori are going steady, or talking, or dating, or doing whatever sixteen-year-old kids do these days. But I don't. Maybe I'm scared to. I've speculated that Sebastian is gay on more than one occasion. I mean, costume designing? That was a tell-tale sign, right? He's a little effeminate, but he doesn't wave his wrists around, or whatever. I don't know all the signs. I've wondered how I would react if he ever came out to me. Honestly, it wouldn't change anything.

So I don't ask him about Tori; it doesn't seem important anyway. But I want to say something important to him. Something that will let him know that I love him, even though I don't know how to relate to him.

"Sebastian," I say slowly, "the world is full of pretenders. Don't go through life pretending."

His thumbs stop pounding, and he looks over at me. I can feel his eyes on me, and I think he must think I am crazy. It would be an understandable reaction. He looks like he's about to say something. He doesn't.

I'm not sure why I said it. It just bubbled up. My father told me the same thing the day before he left. I think he was telling me that he had just been pretending at having a family, at being a father. Another way of saying be true to your nature. He was telling me he was a scorpion. It never offered me any comfort. And yet still I say it to Sebastian.

I think I say it more for me than for him. He's not pretending. He's doing exactly what he wants to do, what makes him happy. Despite me. If anybody is the pretender it's me. But what am I pretending. Am I like my father? Pretending to have a family, to be a father. And if I am, if I am a scorpion too, then am I supposed to just leave like he did?

I try to think about what it would mean if I just took off. What would happen? I try to think about if I would be happy. If Marlene and Sebastian would be better off. But I can't. Instead, I think of my dad.

He took me to a Saints game once. One of the years with Archie Manning when they were God-awful, cellar-dwellers. I was only a little boy. He held my hand as we waited in the concession line to get hot dogs and nachos and large sodas. We were high up in the cheap seats of the Superdome, and I could barely make out the different players, but I didn't care. He sat next to me explaining the different formations, and he didn't become impatient when I asked questions. The Saints lost, but that didn't matter. I don't think I even saw the end of the game. But I remember my

father carrying me out of the Dome. I could smell his Old Spice aftershave as my nose brushed against his cheek. It is the nicest memory I have of him.

We pull into the driveway, and I kill the sputtering engine before I remember that I was going to stop by *Bobo Joe's*. Maybe some old music will help clear my head.

Sebastian is already out of the car, carefully removing the plastic bag from the back seat. I tell him I have an errand to run, and ask if he has a key. He nods, walks off, and easily unlocks the door with his free hand as he holds the bag in his other. I wait until he gets inside and then get back in the Taurus.

I'm only a few minutes from *Bobo Joe's* when my cell rings. Marlene. She asks if I can meet her at the coffee shop down the street from Levon's practice. She wants to talk. It's important she says.

So much for listening to music. I just want half an hour to myself. I think about skipping the little meeting and going to Joe's anyway. Maybe if she hadn't said it was important. But she'd said we needed to talk. In a public place. She's finally going to tell me that she's been fucking that little weasel, Levon. Doesn't want me to make a scene.

As I drive, seemingly hitting every pothole in the city, I get worked up. How dare she pull this crap. She thinks I'm going to flip out and go crazy? If I wanted to cause a scene, did she really think being in a coffee shop was going to stop me? What did I care what a bunch of hipsters and college kids thought about my crazy ass yelling at my wife? I park down the block on a one-way street, and push the door open carelessly. The bottom scrapes the curb as I get out. I cringe at the sound then kick the door hard to close it. The car's a piece of shit anyway.

Marlene is sitting alone at a table drinking some coffee concoction that's more whipped cream than coffee. She smiles at me, and I realize that just like with Sebastian, I haven't seen her smile in long time.

"Do you want anything?" she asks.

"I'm good," I say.

"Well thanks for coming. I thought it might be nice to get out of the house for a while. We used to meet for coffee all the time, remember?"

I do remember. When she worked the ER and something awful happened—some kid that didn't make it—she'd call me and tell me to meet her when she got a break. I would console her and think about how lucky I was to have a wife who cared so much. The tradition, like so many other things, drifted away.

"There's something important I want to tell you," Marlene says and takes a sip of her coffee concoction.

I look into her eyes, searching for some glimmer, some twinkle of that passionate girl I married. And for a moment I see it. That fire dancing in her eyes. I wonder about the last time I had that passion, that fire, inside me. And seeing it in her now, I know I can't fault Marlene for looking for that again, even if she had to find it with Levon. The indignation I felt on the drive over dissipates.

"I think I already know."

Marlene looks confused. "Know what?"

"About you and Levon."

"Emmitt? And me? What about us?"

"I can tell by the way he looks at you." I try to keep calm. She doesn't deserve a scene.

"Excuse me?" Marlene laughs.

"So you're telling me you're not sleeping with him?" I ask.

"Are you kidding me with this, Dale? Dr. Levon? Seriously, I don't care how he looks at me. You think I would fall for him? He's a child."

I'm surprised. I'd been so sure. And now looking at her, seeing her react with her own surprise—I almost can't believe it.

"You're not having an affair?" I ask again, half expecting her to admit it this time.

"No, Dale," she says, not amused. "Certainly not with Dr. Levon. Discounting for a moment his dandruff and his horrible halitosis, he's barely over thirty. I already have one child to take care of. I don't need another one."

I sit there staring at her, the passion still gleaming from her eyes.

"I wanted to know how you felt about me taking a shift back in the ER?"

I reach over, grab her coffee concoction, and take a sip. A warm sweetness swirls over my tongue, and I realize that though I complain about all the crap they throw in coffee nowadays, I never actually tasted one. It tastes a little strange. But good. I wonder why I had been so sure. What else was I wrong about?

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I sit in the Taurus a block away from the coffee shop, watching the people outside go about the business of life. Doing little daily things that fill the hours. Eating, getting gas, shopping, talking on the phone. I question if they stop and wonder why. If they think about how we are just star dust living beneath the stars. If they ever think about what it all means.

Marlene and I had sat in the coffee shop for a while, talking. We talked about the things we'd let slide for years. We talked about why we didn't talk anymore. About why she thought it necessary to call me to a coffee shop to have a conversation, instead of doing it at home like a normal couple. I told her I thought it was great she wanted to go back to the ER. She'd ended by asking me if I was happy. I didn't answer.

I start the car, revving the engine a bit so it won't die. David Byrne's voice scratches out from the speakers.

*And you may find yourself in a beautiful house, with a beautiful wife*

*And you may ask yourself—Well...how did I get here?*

And for a moment I think this is a practical joke. But maybe there is an order to everything. The very song I was thinking about to start this whole day is playing now, as if God, or the Universe, or some cosmic entity is trying to tell me something. Or ask me something.

So I think about the question. How did I get here? A wife I'm so out of sync with, I thought she was cheating on me. A job I'm no longer good at or passionate about. A son I can't relate to. As if I had been plucked randomly and placed into this life that had nothing to do with me. And a tickling desire to chuck it all, to forget my whole life and just run away like my father.

I've got no one to blame but me, myself, and I. My Dad isn't here now. I can't blame him forever. It is me. At some point I just gave up. So my kid isn't going to be the next Terry Bradshaw or Pete Maravich. So what? Why did I feel like nothing about my life had my stamp on it?

"Beware of scorpions." I can hear my old man say it, as if it were the greatest pearl of wisdom one could pass on. Beware of scorpions. What the fuck did that even mean? I didn't know. But I do know one thing. If I am a scorpion, if I am destined to drown, I'm not going down without fighting my own nature. I'm not just going to give up and run like he did.

It's the son who's supposed to leave the father. I have to try.

David Byrne's now singing about water flowing underground.

I beat Marlene home and run inside. Sebastian has an intricate dress laid out on the dining room table. It looks like something out of a fairy tale, and although I still really don't get why he spends so much time on a costume, I have to admit it's pretty impressive.

"Sorry, Dad," he starts, "I'll have it out of here in a second."

“No,” I say. “It’s fine. You can work in here.” I smile at him, and his eyes widen with surprise for a moment.

“You made this yourself?” I ask.

He nods.

I walk over to him and reach out to touch the dress. I feel the satiny fabric between my fingers, surprised at the strength of it. Then I reach behind Sebastian and give him a pat on his shoulder. It feels strange. Awkward.

But it feels good.

# An Unkind Winter

## Joe Kilgore

The cold air mass started in Canada, moved across Lake Michigan, and blanketed Chicago in lake-effect snow. In the bars, old-timers warmed themselves with single malt scotch and told visiting businessmen, "Should have been here twelve years ago in 1930. White ice was twenty inches thick. Hell, this is nothing."

At Finnegan's, muted conversations, bleated expletives, and disgruntled exchanges of five-spots were interwoven with the recurring clack of cue balls. Brendon O'Byrne was having a particularly bad day. His game was off. Not much, but enough. He had rushed his entry. Now he was paying for it.

Normally, Brendon would spend a half hour at the bar before suggesting a friendly game. This afforded him plenty of time to study the players' skills. Then he'd choose one who wouldn't be a pushover. Beating your opponent too badly too quickly caps the competitive spirit. Thereby stopping the goose from continuing to lay golden eggs. Today however, he had been in a hurry, and haste had put him on a green felt table where his opponent was taking Brendon's green.

"Another?" The winner asked.

"Got a lot going on," Brendon said. "Let me make a phone call and I'll let you know."

Brendon entered the phone booth and closed the folding door behind him.

"We still on for tonight?"

"Why wouldn't we be?"

"Just checking to make sure nothing has changed."

"Why would it?"

"The weather, I guess. I was just wondering, you know."

"You're not getting cold feet are you kid? This thing's been set up for some time.

Too late to back out now. Plus, the snow will probably help. Cops don't like to get out much when it's wet and nasty."

"I said I was in," Brendon answered. "See you guys at nine."

Brendon didn't make commitments easily. But when he made them, he kept them. Even if he thought less of them later. And he was definitely thinking less of this one. It wasn't fear that was gnawing at him. He wasn't afraid to steal things. Of course, the only stealing he had done so far was shoplifting, and that wasn't real stealing. Well, at least it wasn't in Brendon's mind. He had a selective sense of right and wrong. Everybody takes from everybody, in one way or another. That's what had been drummed into Brendon from the cradle to his ripe old age of twenty. And what you learn on the tough streets of Chicago's south side, you don't forget.

Young, sharp, and eager for opportunity, Brendon believed there must be more to life than endless routine. So he always kept an eye open for locals who seemed to be doing a little better than everyone else. He'd gravitate toward guys buying the most drinks, or wearing suits instead of dungarees and jackets, or the swells with polished shoes. If it wasn't summer, and your shoes were polished in Chicago, you definitely had more money in your pocket than you knew what to do with. And the way Brendon saw it, if a shortcut was required to be in that league, he was willing to take it.

The decision to knock over Feldman's Pawn Shop hadn't been that difficult for Ian and Snapper. They were used to supplementing their income with breaking and entering. But this would definitely be a step up for Brendon. The rationale had been simple enough. Feldman was a Jew living off the hard times of his neighbors. Why shouldn't three good Irish boys advance their stature in life by pocketing a week's proceeds of the kike's ill-gotten gains? It sounded eminently reasonable,

even righteous after the third pint. But now that the day had come, Brendon was less than anxious for the hour to arrive. Which might have been why he picked the wrong opponent. So he made the decision to stop throwing good money after bad.

Leaving the phone booth, Brendon said, "Sorry friend. Have to take a rain check on that rematch."

"Better luck next time," his nemesis replied.

With you sport, I'd need more than luck, Brendon thought to himself as he left Finnegan's and headed up the snowy street toward Hightower's Drugstore.

In addition to dispensing pills, patent medicines, and a vast array of therapeutic remedies, Hightower's had the busiest soda fountain in the neighborhood. Brendon wasn't addicted to sweets but he was attracted to the young lady who worked behind the counter. Her dark hair, blue eyes, and trim figure had caused him to watch many a milkshake melt in his glass.

"So, Jilly McIntyre, what are you serving today?"

"Our menu hasn't changed since you were in here yesterday."

"Well, better give me whatever I had then."

"And I'm supposed to remember every customer's order, am I?"

"Not every customer. Just me. Besides, you're the one says I have to order something."

"It's not me. It's Mr. Hightower. He doesn't like us fraternizing with customers too cheap to buy something."

"You wouldn't be calling me cheap, would you, Jilly?"

"No. But Mr. Hightower would probably have worse names than that for you."

"Well, just to show I'm no cheapskate, suppose I take you out to dinner tomorrow night?"

"Dinner, is it? And just where were you thinking of taking me? Down the street for free finger sandwiches at Finnegan's?"

"No, I was thinking you might want to accompany me to dinner at The Drake Hotel."

"The Drake Hotel? I had no idea I was being asked out by such a high roller. Since when do you have the price of dinner at The Drake?"

"Oh, I have a little work to do tonight. Once it's done, I'll be a man of means."

"Now what kind of work would you be doing at night that's going to get you enough money to—" She stopped in mid question, put her hands on her hips and stared accusingly.

"Don't be jumping to any conclusions now. You always tend to think the worst of me.

I just happen to have a job cleaning out this warehouse with a couple of friends, and it's going to pay enough for us to mix with the swells if you're up to it."

"And just why is this job being done at night?"

Without hesitation, the falsehoods continued to roll out. "The warehouse owner waited too long to get started. He's got new merchandise coming in tomorrow morning. The place *has* to be cleaned out tonight. That's why he's paying so much."

"The Drake, you say. I've never been to such a ritzy place. I'm not sure I have the right thing to wear."

"Jilly, you dress up anything you put on. Every man in the place will have his eyes on you. And every woman will wonder who that good-looking young man in the pinstriped suit is. A swell couple arm-in-arm."

"I didn't even know you had a suit. I've never seen you in one."

"I'll have one by tomorrow night. And we'll be something to see, Jilly. Something to see. Say you'll come with me."

The smile on her face grew wide as a banana split. "I wouldn't miss it for the world," she beamed.

By nine that night the snow had started to fall even harder. Brendon stood on the corner of 87<sup>th</sup> street and Stony Island Avenue beneath a green canvas awning now covered with a layer of white. He had gone home for dinner, told his parents he was going out to shoot pool with friends, and now he waited apprehensively with a cigarette dangling from his lips and his hands stuffed in his pockets to ward off the cold.

Keeping his eyes peeled for Ian's 1939 Desoto Coupe, Brendon didn't notice the street waif who rounded the corner and walked up beside him. A tug on his pant leg got his attention.

"Flowers, mister? Want to buy some flowers?"

"Hey, it's kind of late for a kid like you to be out, ain't it? Shouldn't you be home?"

"My mom says I have to sell all my flowers before coming home."

She can't be more than eleven or twelve, Brendon thought, as he looked down at the skinny little girl in the well-worn coat. Must be tough on the kid in weather like this.

"Why don't you just dump them somewhere? Tell your mother a bum stole them from you."

"No, that would be lying," she innocently answered. "Anyway, mom says we need the money."

"Well I can't buy any tonight, sweetheart, but I tell you what. If you're here tomorrow night...say around seven, I'll buy all the flowers you have."

"Honest, mister? You will?"

"I'll do it. And you know what, there's a hospital just a few blocks from here, down 87<sup>th</sup>. Why don't you head over? Bet lots of people will want to buy flowers there."

"For the sick people?"

"That's right. Bet you'll sell out there."

She took off down the sidewalk, through the drifting snow, shouting without turning around, "See you here tomorrow night, mister. At seven."

"Seven it is," Brendon yelled back. But she had already turned the corner.

Ten minutes later the black Desoto pulled up. Ian was behind the wheel and Snapper was in the back seat. Snapper Dooley was a mental deficient who made up for his lack of intelligence with an abundance of meanness. Growing up, he spent most of his time in and out of reform schools. He would have gotten into even more trouble than he did were it not for Ian Donovan. Ian's misspent youth was no less checkered than Snapper's. But Ian was smarter and infinitely more cunning. He used people like rungs on a ladder, and he always found ways for someone other than himself to take the fall for his nefarious endeavors. But he had a knack for endearing himself to others before his true colors unfurled. That's how he had pulled Brendon into his orbit. On the surface he seemed a sharp operator. One who knew the score and what corners to cut without getting into trouble. But Brendon was about to find the surface was a lot slicker than he realized.

"I'll slide over, you drive." Ian told Brendon.

Five minutes after that, all three were sitting in the car across the street from Feldman's. So far, Brendon thought, everything was going according to plan. But so far only goes so far.

"It's almost 9:30," Ian said. "Now, when Feldman comes out, if he's not carrying any sort of satchel, or package, that means the week's take is still inside. But if he's got something under his arm, just drive up ahead of him. Snapper and I will jump out, shove him in the alley and take it from him there."

Brendon's response was instantaneous. "What are you talking about? You didn't say anything about jumping anybody on the street. You said he always leaves the take inside."

"Well if he doesn't we've got to be prepared to adjust," Ian answered.

"Look, this isn't what we talked about. You said all I had to do was sit in the car and wait. You said I should hit the horn if a patrolman got too nosy, and pick you guys up at the back entrance five minutes after you went in. You said that's all I had to do."

“Well, laddy boy,” Ian retorted, “as the legendary Robert once said, the best laid schemes o’ mice and men gang aft agley.”

Snapper piped up from the back seat. “Not goin’ weak-knees on us, are you boy?”

“It just not what we talked about. It’s not what I agreed to.”

“Agreements be damned,” Ian countered. “You heard what to do if he comes out with something under his arm.”

“But Feldman’s an old guy,” Brendon said. “If he struggles, or resists, he could wind up getting hurt. I never agreed to be part of hurting anybody.”

“Oh I doubt he’ll be resisting,” Snapper said coyly, pulling a revolver from his inside coat pocket.

“A gun! You brought a gun?” Brendon couldn’t believe it. “Look, breaking and entering is one thing. Armed robbery is something else. This is crazy. I’m not going to be part of—”

“Look,” Ian said, pointing across the street and cutting off Brendon’s protests.

The lights inside Feldman’s were going out. Any moment now the old man would be stepping outside and locking the door. Snow continued to fall. The temperature continued to drop. But Brendon had broken into a sweat. A sweat that rimmed his collar, beaded on his forehead, and wet the top of his upper lip. Don’t have anything with you, he said silently to himself. Leave it inside. Please.

The door swung open. Feldman stepped outside. He was wearing a fedora and a bulky brown overcoat. It took him a second to find his keys and lock the door because he had to take the big manila package he was carrying and put it under his arm.

“Start the car,” Ian said.

“But look,” Brendon began. Then he felt the cold muzzle of the revolver pressed against his neck.”

“Start the car,” Snapper added.

The engine turned over as Ian said, “Start off slowly. Let him get almost to the corner. Then cut in front of him quickly so he can’t cross.”

Brendon pulled away from the curb and started down the street. How had he gotten himself into this? He knew the answer. It was another short cut. Another way to get money without really working for it. But it was all going to go wrong. He could just feel it.

Feldman was getting closer to the corner. “Alright, get ready to hit it,” Ian said. “Get ready. Now!”

Brendon stomped the gas pedal hard and cut the steering wheel sharply to the left, sliding Ian and Snapper to the right side of the car. But just as he was coming to an abrupt halt in front of Feldman, he knew he didn’t want to be part of what might happen. With no thought of consequences, he whipped the wheel back to the right and hit the pedal again. The speed of the thrust and the icy streets caused the Desoto to fishtail. In a panic to straighten the car but get away from Feldman, Brendon jerked the wheel again. But the overcorrection on the slick pavement sent the car into a spin. Centrifugal force took over as the Coupe spun like a top down the middle of the street barely missing parked cars on both sides. Then the tires hit the curb jolting the front of the vehicle upward and bouncing it onto the sidewalk. When the wheels came down with a thump, Brendon could swear they barely preceded a muffled cry.

By the time Ian and Snapper had climbed up from the floorboards and made sure they were in one piece, Brendon had opened the driver’s door and stepped out into the street. The first things he saw were crimson rose petals scattered over white snow.

“Get back in the car,” Ian yelled, “we can catch Feldman in the next block.”

But Brendon didn’t respond. His gaze was now fixed on the little girl lying in a heap against the side of a building.

“We hit her,” Brendon said.

“We didn’t hit her. You hit her.” Snapper barked.

Ian yelled, “Get back in the car!”

By now, Brendon was on the sidewalk, leaning over her. “We have to help. We have to.”

“You help her, altar boy. She’s your doing,” Snapper growled.

“But not a word about us,” Ian threatened. “Not a word if you know what’s good for you.”

With that, Ian slid behind the wheel, Snapper joined him in the front seat, and the Desoto backed off the curb and sped away.

An hour later, on the third floor of Mercy Hospital, a policeman who had recently stepped out of the elevator was wrapping up a conversation with the duty nurse. The last thing he asked was “Who brought her in?”

“That young man sitting over there on the bench,” she replied.

The policeman walked over and put his hand on Brendon’s shoulder. It startled him out of an exhausted sleep. The first thing out of his mouth was, “Is she going to be okay...officer?”

“No, son. I’m afraid she’s not. Now, suppose you tell me exactly what happened.”

Brendon couldn’t believe it. He felt sick inside. He knew it was an accident—knew the car was out of control—knew he had never even seen her there. But when he spoke, words just started pouring out. Words that were far from the truth. “I don’t really know. I was on the next street over. I heard some tires squealing. And when I turned the corner, there she was. I picked her up and carried her here, to the hospital.”

“The night nurse confirms you brought her in son. But now that you’ve told me what you’ve told me, it might interest you to know that Shamus McElwane has a newsstand near that very corner, and he witnessed the whole thing. You better come with me.”

Brendon spent the next day and a half shuttling back and forth between a cell in the Cook County lockup and a sparsely furnished room the police used for interrogations. His initial story disintegrated rather quickly once he learned there had been a witness. Fear made him lie, he said. Fear of being accused of a crime that was really an accident. Fear that was heightened because the little girl died. He couldn’t get past that. He couldn’t come to grips with the fact that the little girl who had asked him to buy her flowers was gone now. Not just gone from the corner or the neighborhood or the city, but gone completely. Gone from everything that was and ever would be. Brendon also couldn’t get over the fact that it was his fault. He was responsible. No matter how he tried to rationalize, everything kept coming back to him. He told her to go to the hospital. He agreed to go with Ian and Snapper. He was driving the car. He swerved to avoid Feldman and sent the car into a spin. He hit her. Accident or not, he was the one who killed her. That was an undeniable fact. A fact that burdened him so, he couldn’t stop himself from telling the truth.

The police believed his story. They believed it because they could see the pain in Brendon’s eyes, and they could feel the anguish in his voice as he tried to relate what he had done. They also believed him because later the night of the little girl’s death, a homicide and apparent robbery had been called in. An old man had been shot to death only blocks from where the accident Brendon described took place. The old man’s name was Feldman.

Now, in addition to vehicular homicide, accessory to murder could be added to the charges against Brendon. And they would be too, the police said, unless he agreed to testify against Ian and Snapper. If he did, they coaxed, they would see to it that the District Attorney and the Judge would go easy on him. Minimal time, they promised, maybe even a suspended sentence for turning state’s evidence. All this they told him. The only thing they didn’t tell him was that Ian and Snapper had yet to be apprehended.

By the time Brendon met with the public defender assigned to his case, he had moved from fixating on what he had done to focusing on what he hadn’t. He hadn’t been the kind of son his

parents wanted. He hadn't become one of the swells. He hadn't even kept his promise to Jilly. He hadn't shown up to take her to dinner at The Drake Hotel. Would she think he simply stood her up? Would she think he was nothing but a blowhard? And what would she think when she learned what he had done?

"In addition to notifying my parents, sir, would you contact Jillian McIntyre? She works at Hightower's Drug Store. Let her know what happened, and please tell her that I really meant to keep our date, and that I never meant for anything bad to happen to anyone."

The third day following his arrest, a short walk awaited Brendon from the front door of the jail to the waiting squad car that would take him to the pretrial hearing where his version of events would be heard by the presiding judge. Flanked by officers on either side of him, Brendon stepped out into the cold and took a huge breath of the crisp, fresh air. He pulled it deep into his lungs and tilted his head back to stare at the falling snowflakes.

Those guarding him stopped and watched their prisoner enjoy a fleeting moment of renewal. But in so doing, they failed to notice the Desoto emerge from the alley. As they resumed their walk, the black Coupe sped across the street and quickly turned so the open passenger window was only a few feet from the approaching trio. Snapper thrust his arm through the opening, leveled the revolver, and fired twice. Brendon doubled over, staggered, and fell to the ground.

Ian gunned the engine in a desperate attempt to get away. But the waiting squad car had an officer behind the wheel. As the Desoto tried to race by, the officer threw the car in gear and swerved directly into its path. The crash was instantaneous. Metal bent and glass shattered. Smoke rose from the mangled hood as Ian and Snapper struggled to pry open their doors. They were kept from doing so by a hail of gunfire. Once the first shots shattered the stillness of the morning, cops had dashed from the jail to aid their fellow officers. Now they all stood around the wrecked cars. Their attention fixed on the two bodies inside. None seemed to notice or remember that thirty yards away a prisoner lay wounded.

Brendon's head felt heavy. He struggled to rise. Somehow, through sheer force of will, he managed to sit up, but then his strength left him. He knew what had happened. He recognized the car moments before the shots felled him. Managing to turn his head slowly, he looked at the crowd gathered around the still smoking autos. They got what they deserved, he thought, maybe we all do in the end. Tilting his head back slowly, he again let the falling snowflakes land gently on his face as his mind wandered. First to Jilly in a pink and white uniform behind a gleaming counter. Then Jilly in a sequined dress, on his arm in the glittering lobby of The Drake Hotel. The lobby felt warm and inviting. He knew they were meant to be there. But in an instant the scene began to dissolve like the snowflakes on his eyes. It's cold, Brendon thought, so very cold. Looking down, he saw blood seeping from his wounds. There seemed to be blood everywhere. On his shirt, his sleeves, his cuffs, even on the ground. But it wasn't really blood, was it? The crimson spots that dotted the snow-covered grass? No. In the dimming light behind Brendon's black Irish eyes, those spots weren't blood at all. They were something else. But what? Oh yes, he realized. They were roses. Rose petals in fact. Red rose petals on soft white snow. That's what they were. Or at least that's what they were to Brendon O'Byrne when the snow stopped falling, and his heart stopped beating, and he became inanimate, frozen forever in the chilling grip of winter.

# Homeward

## Amy Wood

Rain dripped from Nathan's worn felt hat and ran down inside his collar. He paid it no heed but stared at the crumpled letter in his hand.

"Bad news?" Joseph Morgan asked, shivering inside his looted Yankee coat.

Nathan rubbed his exhausted eyes before mutely holding out the paper.

Joseph sneezed and cursed as another bout of shivering wracked his thin frame. The letter shook in his grimy hand as he read it. Eliza's slanting script was brief and to the point. Nathan already knew the little note by heart and heard the words in his head as Joseph's eyes slid over them.

*'We are starving, Nate. There are no crops for there are no men and no horses here. The fields have not been plowed and there will be no food this winter. I am feeding our boys on what dried food I can find but even that will not last for long. I fear for our family. Already the boys are thin and weary, they need food I cannot provide. The Cause was right to call you to arms, Nate, I am so proud that you fight to protect us from the Yankees. But we need you. Please, come home if you can. Your loving wife, Eliza.'*

Joseph cursed again as he handed the letter back. "Clara wrote me the same thing last week." He clutched the hated Yankee blue around himself, searching for more of its meager warmth. "I don't rightly know what to do."

Nathan closed his eyes for a dozen heartbeats. Lord, he was tired. Tired of the rain, tired of endless marching, tired of inspired commanding officers exhorting them to fight like demons for the blessed Confederacy. Life had been so pleasant and predictable before the war, governed only by the ever-consistent changing of the seasons. He hadn't been one of the fabulously rich plantation owners, it was true, but his little farm was enough. It had been his and he'd known he was safe and secure in ownership of it, glad that he had something to pass down to his chubby-cheeked sons.

Then the whirlwind came and swept him and his neighbors into Confederate gray. He'd never envied soldiers their glory, never wanted to be part of it. His grandfather had spun lurid stories of the war against Britain's red-coated army, blood-soaked tales of loss and privation. Soldiering was far from Nathan's mind as he'd peaceably tilled his land, no part of him yearned for martial prowess. Yet now he found himself marching to stand muzzle to muzzle with grimly determined bluecoats, defending the glorious Cause of the South from the vile encroaching Yankees.

There seemed no end to the drudgery of conflict. One battle after another decimated the Confederate ranks. Men Nathan knew and liked died painful, lonely deaths far away from their loved ones. Even the victories were costly. The bluecoats weren't the cowards Nathan and his comrades had been promised. This was to be no quick rout, no swift decisive victory. If eventual victory did come, it would be at a terrible, unbearable price.

Every moment Nathan spent crouched around spluttering campfires, Eliza and the boys were starving. The whole of the South was starving. It was too much to bear. Vivacious, bright-eyed William and Charles with his serious face and quick mind — he could not let them waste away. They were all he had left, their lives testament to the fact that once upon a time peace reigned in the South.

Frantic fear bloomed in his chest, suffocating him with unspoken terror. What if he was already too late? How long had Eliza's note taken to reach him? What if right now, as he lingered and worried, one or both of the boys was slipping away? Dear God, please, no. And what of Eliza, the woman he was glad to call the love of his life? She was taking on a man's burden, running what was left of the farm and scrambling against all odds to keep her family alive. He pictured her long, elegant hands, smooth dark hair and patient smile. She wasn't made for manual work, it wasn't right.

He stood, buttoning his threadbare coat and reaching for his obsolete musket. "I have to go," he muttered, the words like ash in his mouth because he was abandoning his friends and his sworn duty.

Joseph nodded in tired understanding but young Lance Howell, barely eighteen and a regular firebrand, glared up at him.

"You'd desert? Leave the Cause? How can you even think such a thing? Does the South mean nothing to you?"

"Be still," Joseph snapped. "You don't have a family to feed nor a home to worry about. So hold your tongue and don't presume to judge what you cannot understand."

Weary, faithful Joseph. They'd known each other bare months but the things they'd seen and done now bound them more tightly than kinship ever could. Joseph understood. Starving children took precedent over wars and politics.

"I'll come back," Nathan said, sure in his heart that he would. "I just need time to get the fields plowed and a crop sown. What good can it do the Cause if our families starve while we kill Yankees? I'll come back."

Lance wrinkled his nose and pushed a damp twig into the smoking fire. But the heat in his eyes had gone and Nathan knew he'd been forgiven.

Joseph stood and gripped his shoulder, his mouth a grim line. "Don't go getting yourself killed, there are plenty of heroes these days without you being one of 'em."

"I'll be careful," Nathan said, pushing a piece of stale cornbread into his pocket. "Don't tell anyone I've gone? At least, not till tomorrow? Give me a day's start?"

"We won't say a word," Joseph promised. "Wish you lived near my old place, I'd ask you to look in on Clara and the baby. She's got her father to help her but he's too old now to be out plowing. I should go, but—" he broke off and coughed into his sleeve, hanging on to Nathan for support. "Aw, damn it, Nate, I wouldn't make it back home and be of any use when I got there."

Flecks of foamy blood stained Joseph's lips before he drew his cuff across his mouth, wiping away proof of his frailty.

Tears pricked Nathan's eyes. Joseph did look terrible and how much longer his wiry strength would hold out against the constant near-starvation and punishing battles only God knew.

"I'll look in," he said, not knowing how he'd make it from his farm to Joseph's with no transport. "I'll make sure they don't go hungry." It was a reckless promise but gallantry demanded he make it.

Joseph nodded. "And don't you be making eyes at my wife. I know you, Nathan Wilmslow. An eye for anything in skirts."

Nathan forced a laugh. "I promise. Clara's safe from me." He looked into Joseph's ravaged face. Would he see him again? His throat tightened as he remembered battles past and the savagery of the fighting. God willing, they would both come through it all.

He fully intended to return, he wasn't deserting per se. But his family needed him more than the Confederacy did at that moment, painful as it was to admit it. Plenty of other men vanished in the night, their feet bearing them home and their hearts sore for fear they'd arrive too late to help their starving kinfolk. They nearly all came back after plowing and doing what they could to ensure their family's survival, the fire of Confederate pride burning bright within them.

The Cause was worth fighting for, worth dying for, but war was a man's business and Eliza and the boys shouldn't suffer for it.

Rain trickled inside Nathan's coat, soaking his threadbare shirt. His heart beat a wild rhythm and his breath came short and hard. He sought Joseph's hand and gripped it tight.

"I'll come back."

“I know,” Joseph said, grinning despite the rain and his never-ending shivering. “I imagine we’ll be here when you do. Bring us a ham each, plenty of decent cornbread and barrels of the best whiskey you can find, huh?”

“First things I’ll pack,” Nathan said, fighting tears.

Joseph released his hand and sat down, huddling close to the dying fire. Lance looked up, then back down at his boots, silent and withdrawn. After a long moment, Nathan turned and walked away into the night.

The Confederacy would go on fighting without him. The war would wait, his family couldn’t.

It took only a short time for the noise made by thousands of exhausted men to recede into the distance and then Nathan passed into his own world — a nightmare world. Nothing existed but the road and his sore feet in their almost-gone boots. Thick, silent mist descended as he walked, deadening the countryside and sending shivers down his spine. But on he plodded. He had to keep going, there was no other choice. He was going home.

# The Council Woman

## Tom Ray

“Who is this?”

Because of her lousy telephone etiquette, I decided to play with her a little bit. “Who’d you want to talk to?”

“Brandon at the Overlook Country Club told me I could talk to somebody at this number about a job I need to have done.”

“What kind of work do you need? Landscaping?”

“No. Do you know Brandon?”

“Do you need to have a house painted?”

“I must have the wrong number. So, you don’t know Brandon?”

“What do you need to have done?”

“I can’t discuss it over the phone.”

“In that case, why don’t we meet? How about three this afternoon?”

“Are you sure? You do know Brandon, then?”

“Meet me at Markham’s.”

“Where is that? Are you sure I have the right number?”

I gave her the address for the waterfront bar, which catered to barge hands and warehousemen. It would be quiet in the middle of the afternoon. She wanted to ask more questions, but I hung up.

When she showed up at exactly 3:00 I was one of three customers in the place. I was dressed like the others, in grungy trousers, T-shirt and baseball cap. I always wear a few days of beard, to make me look older, and it fit in with this place. The others were drunks at the bar, so she didn’t have any trouble figuring out I was the guy she was supposed to meet. She approached my booth slowly, in her designer jeans, silk blouse, and matching gold earrings, necklace, and bracelet. Up close and in person you could see the wrinkles that weren’t obvious on TV or in newspaper photos. Still, she was attractive for a woman in her fifties, with a nice tan, trim figure, and her hair colored with highlights.

I said, “Have a seat, and take off the scarf and sunglasses.”

“I don’t want to be recognized.”

“Nobody’s going to recognize you here, but the scarf and sunglasses make you kind of stand out indoors.”

“Do you know me?”

“No.”

She pulled off the sunglasses as she sat down, then the scarf. She shook her head slightly, freeing up her hair after it being in the scarf. I would have recognized her, even if I hadn’t gotten the word from Brandon, but I wouldn’t give her the satisfaction of thinking of herself as a celebrity.

I ordered a glass of white wine for her and a beer for me.

“You sounded older on the phone.” She didn’t say this like a neutral observation, but as a matter of concern.

“I’m older than I look, and I started very young. I’m a professional, and I’m good at what I do.”

“Well, you certainly sound confident enough. All right, you’ve sold me.” She sounded amused, like an adult secretly laughing at a kid trying to talk like an adult.

“What kind of work is it you need to have done?”

“You really don’t know who I am?”

“No. Do I need to know?” I enjoyed her look of disappointment.

“I’m Janet Cleary. I’m the city councilwoman from the third ward.”

“OK. What kind of work is it?”

“There’s a man who’s bothering me.”

“Oh. In that case you just need the cops, or a private security firm.” I slid along the seat like I was getting up to leave.

“It’s not like that. The man is my husband.”

“Then get a lawyer, for a divorce and a protective order if you need one.”

“Wait. When I say bothering me, I don’t mean he’s being physically abusive. He’s taken up with another woman, and he’s gone out of his way to embarrass me, and hurt me. He’s going to file for divorce. I don’t want a divorce, but if he’s going to hurt me like this I want something done.”

“Like what?”

“I want him done away with.”

“Done away with meaning--?”

“I want him killed.”

“OK. What’s his name?”

“Daniel Cleary.”

“OK. The price for that is \$10,000, with \$5,000 up front and the balance due immediately after the job is done.”

“Don’t you need to know more about it?”

“We’ll get to that. But the price is like I just said.”

“Well, all right. Where do we go from here?”

“We’ll meet again at a place I’ll tell you. You’ll give me \$5,000 in cash, in hundreds, and as much information as you can about this guy: where he lives, where he works, what kind of car he drives and the tag number, what his schedule is, where he hangs out, what kind of personal security he has like body guards or a weapon, a picture of him, and anything else you can think of that might help.”

“That’s agreeable. When do we meet again?”

“Tomorrow, 3:00 at Butch’s at 17<sup>th</sup> and Broad.”

“Oh. That’s out of the question. I have a meeting with the public safety subcommittee then. It would really be awkward if I missed it. Can I call you back with another time?”

“All right,” I said, scowling. Now I moved to get up for real, but she stopped me.

“You may think I’m crazy. I’m not. We’ve been married 38 years. We started with nothing, just a little help from our parents. My parents actually helped us a little more than his. He started his own business, but he couldn’t have done it without me. He wouldn’t have the power and influence he has now without me.”

“That’s fine. I don’t need to know any of that. Just bring the money and info the next time.”

“I just want you to understand that I’m a serious person.”

“OK.”

The next morning, I found she’d left me a voice mail the night before. She sounded like she’d been drinking.

“Hi. It’s me. Thursday’s a good day for me. Call me back with a time and location. I got the feeling you weren’t too happy with me this afternoon. Like I said, I’m a serious person. I want this done, and will live up to my part of the bargain....” She went on a while longer. She sounded unhappy, looking for somebody to talk to. The recorder shut off when she was in mid-sentence.

I called her back and told her to meet me Thursday at 3:00, at a different bar.

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She was exactly on time again, more plainly dressed, in khaki trousers and a designer sweatshirt. All she was carrying was a little pocket book, which at most might have held some lipstick and makeup.

She smiled nervously as she sat down. "Could I have a club soda?"

I signaled the bartender. After he brought her drink she said, "I've been thinking."

That tiny pocketbook bothered me; it wasn't big enough for the stuff she was supposed to bring. I didn't say anything, just looked her straight in the eyes. I thought she'd look away, but she coolly returned my gaze.

"You must take on some pretty tough customers in your line of work, don't you?"

I didn't say anything, but just kept looking at her.

"Well, don't you?" She had some cojones, trying to negotiate with a professional killer.

"Get to the point. Do you have the money or don't you?"

"My point is, you quoted me a price that I assume is the same you would get for taking out a gangster, who would be carrying a weapon and might have armed body guards. Well, Dan Cleary has no bodyguard, and doesn't even own a gun. This will be the easiest job you've ever done, with minimal risk. It doesn't seem fair for me to pay the same as you'd get for killing John Gotti or somebody like that. Does it?"

I was able to stifle a laugh, and put on my nasty face. "What do you mean minimal risk? What risk are you talking about?"

"Like I said, he's defenseless. It'll be like killing your grandpa."

"Why don't you do it, then?"

"Well, I'm not a professional at it for one thing."

"What risk do you think I'll be taking?"

"Practically none. I told you, he can't defend himself."

"Do you know the penalty for murder in this state?"

"I know it's a capital offense, of course."

"Do you think they'll let me off if I kill somebody's grandpa?"

"Of course not, but..."

"But nothing. My price is based on the risk of what happens to me if I get caught, and on the fact that I know how not to get caught. You can find half a dozen guys who would take this job for a lot less than me, but with a high probability of getting caught. Do you know what they'll do when they're caught?"

Now it was her turn to stare back at me while I waited for an answer.

"Do you?"

She hesitated. "They'd talk?"

"Damn straight. And I guarantee you, the state's attorney would love to give a crack head a deal in exchange for nailing you or any other politician."

"Well, there may be something in what you say...."

"I don't care if you think there's anything in it or not. I don't negotiate my price. You've wasted my time. If I was a lawyer I'd be sending you a bill for the five thousand."

I got up and walked out.

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As I'd expected, she called me late that night. The next morning, I listened to a total of four drunken voice mails, each with a little more drama than the one before it. From a fairly business-like

first message, apologizing for that afternoon, and promising to have the money and information the next time, she went to a second message trying to explain the pressure she was under, and how her husband had betrayed her. The third and fourth calls went on like that, with some crying. Again, when the recorder shut off the last message she was still talking.

I called her back.

“Hello,” she said.

“It’s me.”

“Thank God! When can we get together?”

“Will you have everything?”

“Yes. The money and the information.”

I gave her the name and location of another bar downtown, and told her to meet me at 3:00.

She came in carrying a big straw tote bag. She sat down quietly and handed me a large manila envelope out of the bag. Looking inside I saw a neat stack of hundred dollar bills in a rubber band, an eight by ten photo, and a sheet of paper with typing on it. I didn’t bother to count the money. The photo was of a physically fit man in a well-tailored suit, with a receding hairline, graying at the temples. He was a well-known real estate developer and financier in town, but I wouldn’t have recognized him on the street. He wasn’t in the news as much as Janet, and he and I didn’t run in the same circles. The information sheet was very thorough; I couldn’t have asked for more.

“All right, are you sure you want to do this?”

“Yes, I want you to kill him.”

“You want it to look like an accident?”

“No. I want it obvious that he was murdered.”

“Oh? OK.”

“Everybody will know I had it done, even if the police can’t prove it. I want them to know that I made sure Dan got what he had coming.”

“That’s cool. After the job is done I’ll call you with instructions for the final payment. You remember how much that is?”

“Of course. Five thousand.”

“Now one more thing. The phone number you have for me is a cell phone. I’m going to throw that phone away when I leave here today. You won’t be able to reach me again. So if there’s any doubt in your mind, you can call it off right now. You can keep your money. But this is the last chance to do that. Are you sure you want me to kill Dan Cleary?”

“Don’t patronize me. I know what I want. This is just like business or politics. You have to show you can’t be pushed around. I helped build that son of a bitch’s business. He owes me some loyalty. Where does he get off dumping me for some little whore young enough to be his granddaughter? Everybody agrees, that simply isn’t done. If he wanted to keep her on the side, I could have lived with that, but he went out of his way to humiliate me in public!”

“All right, all right. Not so loud. I just had to be sure. Once I leave here there’s no stopping this train. If that’s what you want, we’re good.”

“That’s what I want. Doesn’t that seem reasonable? I’m not so bad looking, am I? You could go for me, couldn’t you? I mean if you were older.”

“Yeah. You’re fine. We don’t need to get into this. The less we talk about it in public like this the better. If this is what you want, we have to focus on it.”

“You’re right. I’m sorry.”

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Three hours later I was walking with Manny up the sidewalk leading to Amber Marlowe's townhouse. It was actually Dan Cleary's, but Amber's name was on the mailbox. When she finally answered the door I tried to calculate whether Janet was right about Amber being young enough to be Dan's granddaughter. She was about 25, and I would have guessed her to be in her late fifties. So he was almost, but not quite, old enough to be her grandpa. She was barefooted, wearing baggy black shorts with a yellow tank top, and no bra. Her hair was in rollers. Like Janet, she was well tanned, and even had her hair highlighted in a way that reminded me of Janet. She didn't have the wrinkles, though, and her body wasn't sagging yet where Janet's was. Even in the rollers, she was beautiful.

"Yes?" She gave us a bored, arrogant look. I wondered if she'd always been like that, or if she'd learned it from being with a high roller like Dan.

I introduced Manny and me, flashing some I.D., and asked to see Dan.

"He's not here."

"This is really important. Tell him it concerns his wife."

Her face told me she didn't like hearing that. She said, "Just a minute," and slammed the door in our faces.

I started checking my watch. I told Manny when five minutes had passed. He said, "Maybe we should kick the door down." We both laughed. The door finally opened.

Dan Cleary was dressed for tennis, or else for an ad in a magazine for rich, middle-aged men who play tennis with their young girlfriends. He gave us that same bored, "Yes?" that Amber had. I was going to enjoy letting the air out of his balloon.

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That night Brittany and I were in bed watching the eleven o'clock news when the story came on. The deputy district attorney did the press conference. The news cameras hadn't been able to catch Janet in the perp walk, but they did have some file footage of her. They also had a nice scene with Amber at the front door of her townhouse, slamming the door on the reporter, followed by a shot of Dan running from the townhouse to his car, covering his face.

Brittany said, "I can't believe it."

"Yeah," I said. "A member of city council, her husband a rich and powerful business man. It's like a TV show."

"No, I mean I can't believe the cops would entrap her like that. The chief of police in this town is so corrupt it makes me puke."

"Well, it wasn't the local police who handled this, it was the state police. The city police thought it would be better for us to handle it, since it involved a member of the city council."

"You're kidding! Who was on the case?"

"Me and Manny." I didn't like the direction this was going.

She had been leaning against my shoulder, but now she sat up and turned toward me. "How could you set somebody up like that?"

"I didn't set her up. She went to a bartender at their country club, a guy who likes to pretend he's a tough guy. She asked him to put her in touch with a hit man. Turns out he isn't really so tough. He suspected she was setting *him* up. He went to the city police, and they called us in. We set up a dedicated telephone line and got a court order to record her calls. Brandon the bartender gave her the number. Nobody forced her to call it. Whenever she called we recorded the conversation. I met with her, wearing a wire, pretending to be a thug. She kept saying she wanted him killed, and made a cash down payment to me. I gave her plenty of chances to back out."

"Did you see that girlfriend of his? She's young enough to be his daughter."

“Yeah, almost young enough to be his granddaughter. He’s a real prize all right. You should have seen the expression on his face when I told him what his wife had been up to.”

“Good. He’s a scumbag.”

“I have to agree with you there.” I decided it was better not to mention that I thought the councilwoman was a scumbag, too.

## Best Friends

### Galina Vromen

I tried to be Leora's best friend even after she died. Mostly, this meant listening endlessly to her husband, Martin, who had once been a man of few words. Her death, in a hit and run car crash with no satisfactory explanation, had unleashed in Martin a morass of introspection, viscous and sticky as maple syrup. One had only to tap a conversation and the sap flowed.

When Leora first introduced me to him 20 years ago - a few months after she'd decided they were getting serious - he was studying electrical engineering and earning a living by wiring buildings. Martin, like his profession, was exacting and predictable. I thought he was a bore but tried to share Leora's enthusiasm for the impending wedding.

Leora and I first met at a contra dance during our first week at college. When the caller took a break, we chatted under the starry September sky and I asked her what she wanted to study. "Social work," she answered without a moment's hesitation, licking off the foam about to overflow from her beer and flicking her blonde hair over a Rubenesque shoulder exposed by her peasant blouse. "How about you?"

I had no idea what I wanted to study that first day, or later for that matter. Eventually, I chose anthropology because it seemed best suited to leaving my options open. By our third year of college, Leora had married Martin and I was still scrutinizing one-night stands for psychological depth.

Back then, Martin thought of me as excessive. I wanted to go to too many places, take too many risks, have too many men. If he hadn't trusted Leora's common sense, he would have considered me a bad influence.

But now it was my constant instability that he found reassuring. Leora's death had unspooled him and he was free falling down a landslide of emotion, threading his way through pop-psychology books on death, mourning, and loss, in hopes the experts could help him chart the course of his chaos.

"I know I have to go through this. Everyone says so. There are distinct stages. I can tell when there's a shift," he said. "Right now, Leora's in my mind all the time. More even than she was when she was alive," he told me two months after her death, his face a waxy yellow in the light of the street lamp as we stood by his car after one of our nocturnal talks. "In my mind, she tells me every morning if the shirt I'm wearing to work looks okay. Hell, she even tells me what stocks I should sell - and she never even had an opinion on stocks when she was alive."

He sighed into the night, shook his head in amazement at himself, gave me a hug, got into his car and revved off.

Two weeks later, he called and told me he'd joined the Rotary Club. I refrained from showing surprise. For years, Leora had tried to convince him that joining the club would be good for his electrical installation and wiring business, insure they met the right people, those with the connections and lucrative contracts. "Snobby, who needs it?" he'd insisted then.

The next time we spoke on the phone, he divulged he had taken up folk dancing. "I don't believe it," I laughed. "You? You always claimed to have two left feet."

Leora had always loved folk dancing; she and I had literally danced our way together through college. Martin would never join her.

"Next you'll tell me you've started cooking gourmet meals," I kidded Martin as we continued to chat.

“As a matter of fact, I was wondering if you’d like to come over for dinner on Sunday, with me and the kids. I’m getting the hang of this cooking business and I do a pretty mean roasted chicken by now.”

“Sure,” I said. This I had to see. Martin cooking. Mr. Macho himself. As it turned out, his chicken was delicious, so was the rice with pine nuts and the three different salads he made for dinner. That must have been three months after Leora died. The kids no longer looked shell shocked, at least not on the outside. They chattered about the usual – Alice about rock climbing, Tom about the new songs he was learning on his guitar, and Ely about his most recent basketball game. They shoveled in their meal and soon asked to be excused, leaving Martin and me alone.

“You know with the cooking. It’s funny. I never did it when Leora was alive, but I always watched her. I just seemed to know what to do in the kitchen once she wasn’t there anymore,” he mused as he poured me a second cup of coffee. “She was always so organized, had all her recipes in a little notebook, which I found one day. So I’ve been able to make the dishes we always liked best. It’s another way to keep her with us.”

Neither of us said anything for some time, comfortable with our memories of Leora and suffused in the drowsy afterglow of a good meal.

“It’s weird,” Martin said, breaking the silence. “It’s as if by doing all those things Leora really wanted me to do when she was alive, she lives on with me,” he said.

“More likely she’s fuming, turning over in her grave. If it were me, I’d be wondering why you couldn’t have done all that stuff when I was alive,” I answered.

“Who knows? It’s just one more stage, I guess. I just try to get through each day. With the kids, it’s exhausting. No time to think. That’s probably a good thing. I’m spending a lot less time at work - Leora would have approved of that as well. The buildings and their wiring don’t matter much to me these days. Neither does the money. Getting rich was something Leora and I were doing together,” he said.

“I remember all that so well,” I said. “A month after you two got married, she showed me a list she had made of all the things she wanted in life. Ten years later, she tore up the list, because you’d gotten everything on it.”

“Yeah, I guess we did,” said Martin, smiling in satisfaction and looking around at his cathedral ceiling living room with its fine flagstone fireplace. “The house, two cars bought new, a double stove, a separate freezer, ski trips in the winter, summers in Greece. Every item checked off. Plus of course there were the kids. At first we said four but we were exhausted by the time we got to three. But they’ve turned out great.”

“You bet. As wholesome as buttered popcorn at an afternoon matinee - and a lot better looking,” I laughed. “You guys definitely did yourselves proud.”

“Sort of,” he said, meaning, of course, that Leora was dead.

“Yeah,” I said, catching his drift. I couldn’t think of anything more to say.

Leora had been my island of normalcy. She had been directed, sensible. Nothing had ever been an accident in her life except her death. It was I who had taken the risks, hitchhiking through South America, covering guerrilla warfare in southern Africa. I was a colorful figure who traipsed into her life at unpredictable intervals. When I became a television reporter, I would regale her and Martin with amusing stories about famous people. I always left their sprawling split-level home, with its white aluminum siding and chrome kitchen, discomfited. For them, I was a fleeting breath of the big world, reaffirming their satisfaction with their own small one.

“I miss her a lot,” I told him. “Leora always saw through me, to the loneliness, the lack of focus beyond the glitz of my life. She didn’t begrudge me my successes. And she was always there for me, the shoulder to cry on after each promotion I didn’t get, after each breakup with Mr. Wrong.

I could talk to her about new lovers. She seemed to know exactly how they would be destructive to me before I did.”

Martin laughed. “She was like that. She saw to the heart of everyone. She would tell me that you were basically a plain old home-town girl, despite the wild life you led. And all that time, I kept thinking of you as exotic. After all, you were the only person I knew who was getting on to 40 who didn’t have a mortgage.”

“You mean I’m not exotic anymore?” I faked indignation.

“No, you’re more like a tonic, a medicine. Right now, I need to be around people who loved Leora,” he said.

We were silent for a few minutes. Out of Martin’s circle of friends, I had known Leora the longest. If I was a curative for Martin now, it was because, like a homeopathic medicine, I contained within me a small dose of the bigger pain and memories which engulfed him. As we sat that evening digesting the sumptuous meal he had prepared, and drinking perhaps one more glass of liqueur than might have been good for either of us, he sipped solace from me, needing to hear from someone who loved Leora, that he would recover, that he had the right to recover, that Leora would want him to recover. I had been telling him this since Leora had died, and I repeated my pat phrases that night. He lapped each reassurance like a parched dog. Once satiated, he was overcome by exhaustion. I helped him clean up and headed home.

Then for about a month, I didn’t hear from him. I assumed he had moved onto a new stage outlined in his self-help books. Finally, I called him. “Good to hear from you,” he said.

“Yeah, it’s been awhile. How you doing?” I asked.

“Better. Busy. The life insurance policy cash came in. I’ve decided to invest it all in real estate for the kids. That’s taking up my time. It’s strange to be taking these kinds of decisions on my own, but I think I’m getting used to it,” he said.

“Glad to hear it,” I said. We chatted about nothing in particular, just friendly noise. “Call any time you feel like it.”

“Thanks,” he answered.

It was a month before he phoned again. “Just calling to say hi,” he told me. “By the way, I bought a condo, you know, the investments I was telling you about,” he said.

“Congratulations.”

“Yeah, and I’m seeing someone,” he added. I heard him catching his breath, awaiting my reaction. Truth is, I wasn’t surprised. He had “marriage material” written all over him - serious, affluent, steady, a bit of a pot belly, but not too far gone, and monogamously inclined. I did a quick calculation. It had been five months since he had been called in by the police to identify Leora’s body, after it was picked up on a desolate stretch of highway, abandoned by a hit-and-run driver. The police said her blood showed traces of alcohol, which was so weird; it was surely a lab error. Besides what did it matter? Nothing would bring her back.

“Well, should I say double congratulations?” I asked.

“It’s a bit early for that. But it’s serious. I met her while I was house hunting. She was selling her condo.”

“I see. How convenient,” I said, hoping I didn’t sound catty. “So who is this woman?”

“Are you sure you want me to go into it?” he asked.

“I’m curious as hell.”

“Well, some of Leora’s friends won’t talk to me. They are appalled.”

“Appalled?”

“Yes, Deirdra doesn’t look anything like Leora, and her personality is different too. Somehow most of Leora’s friends find that insulting.”

“Let them suck eggs. It’s your life,” I said.

He laughed, grateful.

“So?” I said. “Give me the scoop on her. She isn’t 20 years younger than us or anything outrageous like that, is she?”

“Are you kidding? I wouldn’t have the energy. You’d like her. In fact, you should come and meet her some day.” He gave me the details. She was 38, thin, brunette, never been married, a biologist. “She’s moved into the house,” he said.

“That’s fast work.”

“I guess,” he answered. “But it felt right. Remember how a couple of months ago you told me that it’s people who were happily married who tend to marry again fast? Well, I guess it’s true.”

“I guess SO,” I replied, keeping my voice light.

I promised to visit. But I didn’t. I couldn’t. I kept telling myself I was glad Martin had picked up the pieces of his life. It would be better for the kids if Martin remarried. He had every right to his happiness; his remaining miserable would not bring Leora back. Just three months ago, I had been preaching all that.

In theory, I believed it. In practice, I couldn’t face him, especially when it turned out that this new wife of his was pregnant. Martin was going to have that fourth child he had planned on all along, but not with Leora. Not that Leora would have disapproved, so what right did I have? Still, I stayed away. I didn’t go to their wedding, held eight months almost to the day after Leora’s death. A small ceremony and reception for about 30 people, Martin reported. I didn’t even send a card. I knew I would not buy the baby a present or visit Leora’s home again.

Leora liked to watercolor and her paintings decorated their living room. They were pleasant, wispy renditions of nature, mostly flowers. Were the works, even though amateurish, still hanging in the house or had they been removed in the redecorating of Martin’s life?

Did I think about Leora more often than Martin did? Was Deirdra more fun in bed than Leora? Was he grateful for the years he had with Leora? Or sorry he had not met Deirdra earlier?

I could not ask Martin these things. He had carefully rebound the wiring of his life and had no intention of losing the thread again with the kind of conversations we’d had in those first few months after Leora’s death. It was as if those talks had never happened. We spoke on the phone occasionally but the conversation was staccato on his part and restrained on mine. I seemed paralyzed between the rational thought that Martin had only done the inevitable in moving ahead with his life, and the irrational anger that he had done precisely that. For his part, Martin ignored my slights and called a few weeks before the baby was due.

“Listen,” he said, “we’re making some changes in the house, moving stuff around. There’s a chest of drawers that was Leora’s - she got it as a wedding present from her aunt - a nice piece of furniture. I wondered if you’d like it. Deirdra doesn’t want it, but it’s a pity to throw out and I thought it might mean something to you, to have something of hers.”

“I appreciate the thought,” I replied. “I’d be honored. I know the chest you’re talking about. It’s inlaid with mother of pearl. Leora really loved it.”

“That’s the one. It comes from Indonesia or somewhere like that. Good then, it’s settled,” Martin said. “I’ll have it sent to you. I can get one of my workmen to get it to your house.”

A few weeks later, true to his word, Martin had the chest of drawers delivered. It was indeed a fine piece of furniture, made of three kinds of dark wood, carved along the edges with leaves. Some of the inlaid mother-of-pearl was chipped, and it looked a bit beaten, but serviceable.

I decided to repaper the drawers, since the inside, unlike the smooth outside, was a bit rough, and I didn’t want the wood to snag my sweaters. I tried to pull out the bottom drawer to clean it. But it stuck a bit and I reached in to feel what was causing the obstruction.

I felt some paper and peered inside. A manila envelope had been carefully taped to the top casing of the drawer. I un-taped it, pulled it out. Nothing was written on the outside. Inside were about a dozen envelopes, all opened and addressed to Leora. There was no return address. I considered whether to read them. Or should I call Martin first? After all, they were really his now, none of my business. But Leora had obviously taken considerable care to hide them. Fleeting, I considered simply throwing the package away. But maybe the contents were important, an inheritance for the kids, who knew? The handwriting was the same on all the envelopes, but some of the stamps were from Pakistan and some had U.S. stamps postmarked Madison, Wisconsin. I opened the top letter. It was dated September 17, 1981. That was four years after we graduated college. I smoothed out the plain white typed paper, my hands trembling slightly. The letter read:

*Dear Leora,*

*I cannot tell you how much it meant for me to see you again, to see that smile of yours which lights up my soul and makes me glad to have been placed on this earth at the same time as you, to feel the warmth of your body which is my sanctuary. Your smile has not changed and remains always as I remember it, that smile which tells me the world is a kinder place than I know it to be, that smile infused with a happiness I still only dream of, that smile which makes it worthwhile to keep searching.*

*A son has been born to me this month and I hope you will not be offended if I say that I wish only that some day he may love someone as much as I love you, know the sense of deep connection to another soul, like our conversations....*

The letter went on, talking about a book he had read, a power struggle he was having with his boss at work. I read it all. It was signed Rashid. I could not imagine Leora reading it without being utterly put off by its saccharine style and pedantic attention to the minutiae of the writer's own daily life. But then, Martin was a man of few words. Maybe Leora had been starved for effusiveness, especially if it was about her.

But I could not imagine Leora involved with someone like Rashid, especially not after she was married. I read the stack of letters, sitting on the floor of my bedroom, sucked in by the evidence that there was an entire dimension of Leora that I did not know.

Rashid, it turned out from his letters, had been a doctor from Pakistan completing his residency in the hospital where Leora had worked her senior year at college. The letters covered 15 years. After his residency, Rashid had returned to Pakistan and been wed in an arranged marriage, which he had described to Leora in detail (including his sorrow that it was not a love match and his conviction that, despite this, the marriage would be a workable one).

He had five children as far as I could figure out, so obviously his life with his wife had turned out much as he had predicted. He had come to the States intermittently for various professional training courses. Presumably, it was on these occasions that he had managed to see Leora.

The last letter was dated about six months before Leora's death. Rashid said he was looking forward to seeing her at a geriatric specialists' conference they were both due to attend in Seattle in June. That was a month before Leora died. I knew Leora had gone to that conference. She'd been looking forward to the break. We talked a few days before she'd flown to the West Coast. It was the last time we spoke before she died.

For days, I tried to absorb this posthumous news and put it together with my image of Leora. It was like trying to match up mug shots of criminals with a police sketch of a wanted person and not succeeding.

We had been best friends, or so I had thought, yet she had kept all this from me. What kind of friend was that? A scared one. There had been too much at stake - her marriage - to admit to this

love affair, even to a best friend. Despite the affair, I could not help but believe that she had been happy with Martin. Maybe that was precisely why she could not tell me about it, unable to explain why she was having an affair if she loved her husband. From Rashid's letters, it was clear that this had been a constant topic of discussion between them.

*"I think you must come to accept that in some people the heart is an expansive organ, capable of loving more than one person at the same time. You have such a heart. Unfortunately, in modern society, this is a curse rather than a gift, and a fact which is understood by few and seen by many as a betrayal. In other societies, men have been allowed this multiplicity of emotion although women have rarely been granted equal privilege. If you chose to cut off our relationship, I will understand that it is out of fear of betraying your husband, but in fact you would simply be betraying your most genuine emotions of love. I do not think I flatter myself to say that I would none the less continue to hold a place in your heart even if we do not see each other. Would that not be a betrayal as well?"* he had written.

Leora had obviously been swayed by his arguments and had not broken off the relationship because a few months later the discussion went on in another letter in which Rashid had written:

*"You ask whether I would be so philosophical if my wife were to admit to being in love with another man while loving me as well. I have given this some thought. I certainly would not like it; I would probably insist that she end the liaison. I would be deeply wounded. But I would not banish her, I would not be as harsh on her as I might have been had I not learned to know my own heart and yours so well."*

I reread the letters several times in the next few weeks, each time finding some new light they shed on Leora. They included discussion of Asian art - I had no idea she had any interest in the subject - and Buddhist philosophy - also an interest of hers that was new to me.

I wanted to get to know this Leora, understand her. The best way to do this was to find Rashid. It occurred to me, too, that he might not even know that Leora was dead. The letters had been sent to a post office box in a town near Leora's, not to her home address. The envelope's contained no last name, no return address. Only a postmark. They might be stacking up in the mailbox; Rashid may have no idea why Leora was not answering. I had grown sympathetic to Rashid from his quaintly formal yet passionate letters and did not want him to think Leora had fallen out of love with him. Surely, he would want to know of her death.

I decided to track Rashid down. I started by contacting the organizers of the Seattle conference and asked about the Pakistani delegation at the meeting. There had been three people from Pakistan on the list, but none was called Rashid, an administrative assistant told me. She kindly gave me the phone numbers of the Pakistanis who had attended. One of them, Dr. Ismael Parhad, worked at a hospital in Lahore, where Rashid lived, according to the postmark on his letters. I called the number and asked for Dr. Parhad, letting the secretary know I was calling from the States. She put me through immediately.

I pretended I was calling from Seattle, impersonating the organizer I had just spoken to. "We are putting together a collection of papers from the conference and a mailing list. We have you, Dr. Lomar, Dr. Mansour and someone called Rashid, but I am missing a last name there. I wanted to check your exact mailing address and perhaps his, if you know who that might be. I believe he is also from Lahore."

"Rashid? You must mean Rashid Bulastan. Rashid was never at the conference. He was to have attended, but he passed away a few weeks earlier," said Dr. Parhad.

"Oh dear," I said. "I hadn't realized. I'm so sorry. Was it sudden?" I pressed, ever the journalist.

"Rather," said Dr. Parhad. "A blood clot in the brain. Most unfortunate. A fine doctor."

“I see,” I said and was about to hang up when I remembered that I was supposed to be confirming the doctor’s address. So I allowed Dr. Parhad to spell out his long street name for me, thanked him profusely and hung up.

I sat down to absorb the shock. So, Rashid had died. Leora must have found this out in Seattle when he didn’t show up. I tried to imagine what she had felt, what she would have done. I grabbed the letters and reread them. I wished, not for the first time, that she had kept copies of her half of the correspondence. But even without her half, it was clear to me that this relationship had been vital to her, had given her something no one else had, not Martin, not me, not any other friend.

A few days later as I washed the dishes piled high in my sink, I kept mulling over what I had learned about Leora since her death. A thought flashed through my mind. Her car accident. The lack of explanation for it. A case of hit-and-run, the police had said. But had it been? Leora, to whom nothing ever happened accidentally? She must have been devastated by Rashid’s death. The passion of her life gone. No way to mourn legitimately. No way to share the pain. No one to talk to. Could she, might she, have been drawn to suicide? Leora? Kill herself over a lover? It couldn’t possibly be true. No, suicide was far-fetched. I could accept her being secretive; not divulging her passionate affair for fear of risking her home life, even if I was sorry that she hadn’t trusted me. But she was the mother of three children. If she had killed herself, it meant that I had never known anything about her at all. I mustn’t let my imagination run away. Surely, surely she died in an accident. Yes, there was that trace of alcohol the police had found in her blood. Maybe the loss of Rashid had been too much to handle without a drink or two to get through the day. Could she have drunk more than she could handle? Leora was not the sort of person who would self-destruct. Not Leora. Surely, not Leora.

The intercom buzzed, startling me out of my reverie.

I had forgotten. Martin had called a few days ago to say he was planning to come into town. He told me he would stop by to say hello before heading home. I pushed the intercom button to let him in, then tucked the pile of Leora’s letter still sitting on my desk away in a drawer.

The doorbell rang.

“Just a minute,” I yelled, glancing around the room one more time to make sure I had not left any stray letters around. I combed my fingers through my hair and patted the ends down as if this would tuck away my unruly thoughts. I took a deep breath and opened the door.

“Hi,” said Martin, giving me a hug.

I smiled shakily.

“This is Deirdra,” he said, turning to a woman standing beside him awkwardly. “I thought it was about time the two of you met.”

“Pleased to meet you,” said Deirdra. “I understand you were Leora’s best friend.”

## Second Coming

### Nortina Simmons

Mya knew the world wasn't coming to an end. She knew that asteroids passed by the earth all the time and nothing happened. She had a greater risk of dying in a car accident, or a school shooting than an asteroid impact. Still, something was different. People spoke of the rapture, the end days, Armageddon, who was going to heaven and who would be left behind to suffer torment with the rest of the sinful world. Even Mya's mother had given in to the new awakening, and on the night before the asteroid's arrival, she sent Mya a text: "If Jesus comes riding in on the asteroid, I'll meet you in the sky."

Mya immediately called her mother, believing that she was having another nervous breakdown. She had already suffered from three since Mya left home for school, and Mya feared the coverage on the asteroid would trigger a fourth, forcing her to miss midterms and rush home to care for her mother. Something she could not do, for she was already behind in most of her classes.

"Mama, you do know that it's just gonna pass, right? It's not gonna hit," Mya said.

"That's what the government keeps telling us, but what if it does? What if I spend my last days an old woman, cold and alone and without my daughter?"

"Don't be so dramatic, Mama. That's not gonna happen," Mya said.

"Won't you just come home? So we can experience it together," her mother said.

"Mama, you know I can't do that. I have to study. Besides, you won't even know that it passed until after it's gone."

"They'll show it on TV. All the news channels. The Weather Channel."

"You're kidding," Mya said. It's just another doomsday hoax like Y2K and December 21, 2012, she thought to herself. It would fly by unnoticed, and nothing would happen. There would be no worldwide earthquakes. No giant fireballs reigning down from the sky. There would be no beams of light cast down from the heavens. No sound of trumpets heard just beyond the horizon. Nothing worth televising for national audiences, especially not her mother.

Mya knew what would happen if her mother watched the broadcast on that day. She would see the picture transmitted from a nearby satellite, or would hear what its size was, and would immediately go into a panic attack. She would break out into hives, hyperventilate, blackout. She would wonder why her daughter wasn't there to hold her, place a cool, damp washcloth on the back of her neck, blow on her ear as she often did when she was a child. She would see that asteroid and realize that even her only child had left her alone to die.

"Please come," her mother pleaded. "I don't think I could get through it without you."

"Don't watch it. When the asteroid comes, don't turn to those channels. Watch one of those cheesy Hallmark movies, or a Disney movie," Mya said.

"How are your studies going?" Her mother's voice sounded weak, distant on the other end. Mya hoped that it was only because she didn't have the receiver close enough to her lips, but she knew her mother was disappointed. She could feel her mother fading, losing another part of herself each day Mya was away. She was cut from the world in their one-story, one-bedroom home, sleeping on the couch in front of the television because Mya's absence haunted the bedroom. Mya knew she eventually would have to return home, visit her mother for a couple of days, maybe a week, to make sure she was alright, tell her of life in the big city of Wilmington, of all the new friends she'd made, of her professors at UNCW—the ones who made early British Literature fun, and the assholes who assigned a month's worth of Calculus homework to be due the next class meeting.

"Fine. Trying to finish some homework before work tonight," she said.

“You have a job?”

“I told you already, Mama. Don’t you remember?” Mya had been working at the Piggly Wiggly across the street from campus since the second week of school. She didn’t have much money. Tuition was getting paid thanks to financial aid, the little checks she received biweekly, and the occasional twenty-dollar tip elderly women would give her when she packed their refrigerator food together without being asked.

“Oh . . . Yes, I remember. My working girl . . . You’re growing up so fast.” She was sniffing, her voice breaking up.

Mya rolled her eyes. She felt as if she were still a child when she talked to her mother. *I am* grown, she thought. She was doing things on her own, making her own money, paying her way through school. Her mother only held her back when she was at home, required Mya to take care of her because she had no one else, made Mya feel guilty for not wanting to stay, accused Mya of not loving her enough.

“Mama, I have to go.”

“Oh, okay. I’ll see you soon?”

“Mmmm,” Mya said, not wanting to confirm or deny.

“I love you sweetheart, so much,” her mother said, barely above a whisper.

“You too,” she said, and hung up.

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Mya rang up each food item methodically, unaware, or maybe just indifferent to the fact that her line had stretched back into the bread aisle. Her register was the only open checkout that didn’t require twenty items or less. Customers waited impatiently, groaning, tapping their feet, checking their wristwatches, but unless someone ran inside exclaiming that Jesus was waiting in the parking lot to rapture them up into heaven, she would not move any faster.

The people in line looked to be preparing for a winter storm. Towers of food filled their shopping carts: bread, milk, canned beans, soup, fruit, and meat. Do people still eat Spam, Mya thought as she swiped three cans of it across the scanner. She placed them in a plastic bag along with a few cans of pork and beans and cream of chicken soup. She picked up the heavy bag, packed it into another to keep a stronger hold on the cans, and handed it to her customer, an older woman with short, white hair, wearing a button down plaid shirt. The woman clasped the bag with one hand, supporting it at the bottom with the other, and placed it in her shopping cart.

“So how are you preparing for the asteroid?” the woman asked.

“Preparing?” Mya asked as she rung up a can of Spaghetti O’s.

“Yes. You know, they’re saying this is it. They’re actually comparing it to the one that killed off the dinosaurs.”

“Who’s saying that?” Mya asked with her hand on her hip. The conveyor belt packed with food came to a halt, and the customers in line groaned unanimously.

“Just everyone,” the woman said.

“The government?”

“Oh no,” the woman said in a hushed tone, bringing her index finger to her lips. She hunched her back and looked around as if she were about to share a secret. “You know they’re keeping this under wraps. They don’t want to cause panic.”

“Is that so?” Mya returned to ringing up the woman’s food.

“Yes. Just give me the eggs, dear,” she said holding her hand out over the register. Mya handed them to her, and she carefully placed them in the tiny basket at the top of the cart. She reached into her purse and pulled out her wallet. “How much do you I owe you?”

Mya totaled the items. "\$46.22," she said.

The woman handed her a crisp fifty-dollar bill. "Keep the change, hon. You may need it." She swung her purse over her shoulder and pushed the cart out of the store.

"Wow. Today must be my lucky day." Mya placed the fifty in her register and slammed it shut. She presumed the old woman had been saving that money, holding onto it proudly as if it made her rich, waiting for the right moment to spend it, do her one good deed before her life ended.

Mya moved on to the next customer, mumbling her hellos as she slid each item across the scanner and tossed them into the plastic bags next to her. The older woman was only a preview of how her night would go. Each person who came through her line either hinted at or directly mentioned something about the asteroid. Children discussed building rocket ships so they could go into a space and blow it up like in *Armageddon*, while their mothers fished through their purses for the debit cards they had once again misplaced. Men in suits theorized how it could still affect everyone, even if it didn't hit. It could mess up the atmosphere. Spike carbon dioxide levels. Warm the planet by six degrees. Melt the polar icecaps. Raise sea levels. Cities like New Orleans, Houston, Miami, New York, would be wiped out instantly. The end of the world could still happen even if the asteroid didn't strike.

Throughout the night, her pocket vibrated with texts and phone calls from her mother, inquiring about when she would return home, why she wouldn't answer her, did she love her. When Mya had the opportunity to sneak a text, reminding her mother that she was working, her mother would immediately call back, assuming that if Mya had time enough to text, she could talk too.

Towards the end of her shift, two women came through Mya's line and gave her business cards to their churches, Missionary Baptist and Wells C.O.G.I.C. Both churches would be having twenty-four-hour prayer sessions, starting that night up until the asteroid arrived, for last minute prayers for repentance and to give the unsaved the final opportunity to give their lives before their Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, returned.

She was a nonbeliever, they'd said, they could sense it. Mya concluded they were like the elderly woman from earlier that evening, looking to perform their final good deed, to seal their fate, ensure a permanent plot in heaven, and offer salvation to a girl who was clearly lost.

"Do you want Jesus Christ to come into your life?" one asked.

"Do you believe that he is Lord?" asked the other.

"I do believe," Mya said. "I just don't believe He's coming tomorrow night!" She didn't consider herself religious. She read her Bible and went to church on Sundays solely for her mother so that the fear of her daughter going to hell wouldn't haunt her. Now that Mya was in school, away from home, she saw no reason to continue, though she still prayed over the phone with her mother each morning to make sure she started her day off right, to make sure that she wouldn't do anything to hurt herself because she believed her daughter had abandoned her. Still, Mya had read her Bible enough to know that no man could predict when the world would end. All the signs could be there, and Jesus still might not show up for another one hundred years.

"We'll pray for you." Both of the women nodded to each other in agreement and left.

Mya was eager to flee the store when she clocked out. She didn't bother to say goodbye to her fellow coworkers, who were all huddled around register five whispering about what they would do if it were their last day on Earth. She dodged Evangelists in the parking lot putting flyers for salvation on windshields. She crossed at the congested intersection at College Rd. under the glare of the orange hand commanding her to stop, desiring to be run over rather than stand at the corner next to a homeless man holding a cardboard sign that read: "Fags Will Feel the Wrath of God on Judgment Day!"

Mya returned to her dorm where she called her mother, who again asked for her to come home. She had a feeling that something bad would happen, and she wanted her daughter to be with her when it did. Mya assured her that everything was alright, promised to call her in the morning, and hung up just as her roommate, Raquel, walked in sporting a T-shirt that said, "I Survived the Asteroid of 2013," and had the Earth and a large, brown bolder colliding in the background.

"What the hell is that?" Mya asked, putting her phone on the desk between the two beds.

"They're selling them at the Union," Raquel said. She held a second shirt in her hand and tossed it to Mya. "Here, I bought you one too."

"You didn't need to do that."

"Don't worry about it. They were only five bucks," Raquel said, shrugging her shoulders. She plopped on the bed closest to the door.

"Do you really think something's gonna happen tomorrow?" Mya asked.

"No!" Raquel laughed. "I just like playing into the whole doomsday stuff. People go really crazy with it. This guy in the Union said that the asteroid's gonna turn people into zombies, and whoever survives will get their brains eaten. Can you believe that?" Raquel said.

Mya nodded. People were crazy. They were overreacting.

"Speaking of crazy, what does your mom think of all this?" Raquel asked.

"Huh?"

"You say she's crazy. You're always missing class to go home because she stopped taking her psycho pills, or something."

"No," Mya quickly said. She didn't like how the words fell from Raquel's lips, as if her mother's loneliness and illness inconvenienced Mya. "I'm her only family. Sometimes she needs me," Mya whispered.

"Whatever," Raquel said. She reached for her laptop on the desk. "Look at this! Facebook and Twitter are blowing up with this shit. Can't wait till tomorrow. It's gonna be an interesting day, that's for sure!"

Mya wished the day didn't have to come, that it would just skip over and talk of the asteroid would suddenly cease, no warning, no explanation, no remembrance of it ever taking over the world's psyche. She wouldn't have to worry about her mother home alone, watching whatever footage they would show on TV. She wouldn't have to anticipate another phone call from the hospital explaining that her mother was found cold, pale, hanging off the edge of the pull out couch. An empty pill bottle found rolling on the floor underneath her stiff fingers. A note scribbled on a sheet of toilet paper. "Tell my daughter I love her."

UNCW wasn't far from Burgaw, only twenty minutes away, but Mya couldn't always scrap up money for bus fare, and her mother couldn't drive. Her license had been revoked when she rammed her car into the back of a state trooper on the shoulder of the highway, claiming that she needed to find her daughter because she hadn't heard from her in two weeks. She'd forgotten that Mya had called her the night before to make sure she was still taking her anxiety medicine.

Mya unfolded the shirt. The words were bold and red, each letter arranged crookedly. In the background, the asteroid was just as big as the Earth. The two collided in a huge explosion, disintegrating half of each sphere into a blast of bright yellow, orange, and red sparks. If anyone were to survive such a collision, there would be nothing left to live for, nothing but ash and rock, a shattered atmosphere, lost family members. She tossed the shirt to the corner of the room next to the dirty clothes hamper.

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On the morning of the asteroid, a thick fog covered the campus, hugging every building, car, and person. Visibility was only about an arm's length, and Mya made sure to stay on what she thought was the center of the sidewalk to avoid walking into any poles.

Her classes were empty that day. Of the fifty or so students that were in each class, less than half showed up.

"Preparing for the asteroid, I presume," her American Fiction professor said. His class was the hardest hit. Only five students were present. He packed his briefcase and canceled class for the day. He told Mya and the four other students that he would send out an email expressing his disappointment in the class and that he would be expecting a ten-page paper about their experiences with the supposed asteroid catastrophe and how they related to Romance literature the next class meeting. The five diligent students who came to class would be exempt to the assignment.

Mya's overly enthusiastic Religious Studies professor, Mr. Peterson, saw it as an opportunity to have a great class debate. Will there or will there not be a rapture?

"Look at all the students who aren't here today," he said, spreading his arms in front of him, his grey goatee fluttering as cool air blasted down from the vent above him. "Who's to say they haven't already been taken up into Heaven?"

"Well, that would mean we got left behind," Charlie said. Sitting alone in the first row, he was the most talkative in the class, sometimes competing with Mr. Peterson for the class's attention.

Mr. Peterson jumped at Charlie and pointed his finger. "Exactly!" he said. "How do y'all feel about that, class?"

The class was silent. Mya looked down at her nails and began picking dirt from underneath them. All her life her mother had worried Mya about leaving her behind. What if this time, her mother left her? What if she spent the rest of her life alone, fearing rejection, while her mother was enraptured by love up above?

"What if the rapture comes just before the asteroid hits? That'll give us a little hope," a student from the back of the classroom said.

"I'm confused. Is it gonna hit? Shouldn't we be hearing sirens? Evacuating?" another asked.

"Where are we gonna go?" Charlie turned around and said to the entire class. "It's an asteroid. It's the end of the world."

"Looks like the Mayans were off by a year," a girl sitting behind Mya said, snickering.

"Alright, I see some terrified faces," Mr. Peterson said, raising his hands. "It's not actually going to hit. We're just being hypothetical here."

"Or are we?" Charlie said, a mischievous grin on his face.

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Mya was studying in the library that evening when a few students came inside to spread the news amongst the books that they could see the asteroid. She didn't believe them, but she followed them outside to look anyway. There was a crowd of students standing right outside of the entrance pointing into the sky. Not wanting to be a part of the crowd, she found an empty bench a few yards away and took a seat. The clouds from that morning had cleared away, but there was too much light emitted from the city for her to see anything. Only the moon was visible, which looked to be what the students were pointing at. Lord, help them if they think the moon is the asteroid, she thought.

Mya wished she was at home where there were hardly any street lamps. Where it was pitch black at night, and she didn't have enough fingers and toes to count every star in the sky. Every light. Even the ones that were moving. Like that one.

Mya sat erect and squinted her eyes toward the heavens. She could see one star, a dim orange color. She turned to the group of students to see if they had noticed it too, but their heads were

facing a different direction. They were still looking at the moon, but this light was travelling away from the moon, or so she thought. It looked to be moving, but it could've just been her eyes playing tricks on her. She was tired. She was stressed over midterms. She was worried about her mother. Maybe it was her tired, stressed, worried eyes that were also making the light shine brighter, get bigger, as if it were coming straight for her.

Her phone buzzed in her pocket, and she brought it to her ear without saying a word.

"Do you see it? Are you watching?" It was her mother's voice.

"Yes. I'm watching," she said.

There was a long pause before her mother said, "I love, you sweetheart."

"I love you too, Mama. See you soon."

# Straight Up, Three Olives

## Laura Jensen

She drank martinis for breakfast. Big ones, straight up, with three olives stacked at the bottom of an elaborately etched crystal glass. She preferred not to drink alone.

I hated it when Mrs. B demanded that we come to her house for an early morning meeting. These meetings, usually monthly, presented me with a huge dilemma that took several occasions for me to solve: To drink or not to drink. I was not a martini drinker to begin with and not at all in the habit of drinking in the morning, but not insulting her was at the top of my list of priorities. She was, for all practical purposes, the “boss” at least in name. She was the titular head of not only thirty staff members, but also a twelve-person board of directors. This woman, with her money and her determination, founded the research foundation where I began working in 1965. She rarely came to the office, housed in the classic Chrysler building in midtown Manhattan, but her hand was visible in almost everything we did.

She lived in a brownstone on the fashionable Upper East Side. The front of the house looked much like the others on this block: Steep steps brought you to the front door, while the servants’ entrance crouched beneath. Mrs. B’s doorbell sounded like Big Ben. The echoes reverberated down a long hall covered in an elaborate oriental runner. I used to wonder which parlor we would sit in that day. Every room was decorated with treasures from Mrs. B’s many world travels. They made the house seem like a museum, and I would marvel at something I had not seen on a previous visit. It almost seemed that she rotated treasurers as if she was the curator of her own private collection.

Now a childless widow (office gossip disclosed that she’d lost her only son when he was a teenager), her demeanor, at least initially, annoyed me. She displayed an attitude of haughtiness that grated on me, but after several months, I began to see beyond the front she presented to the world. I found myself observing her when she thought no one was looking; that perpetual frozen smile would occasionally slip and her gaze would become wistful. Perhaps remembering her dead son or husband? Maybe she daydreamed about a time when she was young, the belle of some long ago ball. She was, I decided, a sad, lonely woman despite being surrounded by multitudes. It took me a long time to label her an alcoholic.

At many of our 8 a.m. meetings, Mrs. B remained in her dressing gown and slippers, but she was always bedecked in jewels. Some of her gems were so extraordinary that I could not let them pass without a compliment. Her morning outfits, always floor length, came from the best Paris designers and her jewels from Tiffany, Cartier, or Harry Winston.

She took a liking to me (for reasons I could never figure out), and she frequently insisted that the CEO bring me along to these meetings. I went, of course, but after the thrill of being asked in the first place and the anticipation of seeing the inside of that home, I cooled when faced with the martini factor. Sometimes our meetings lasted until lunchtime. By then, Mrs. B would be on her third or fourth drink; several of the others were clearly not able to keep up with her, and I would be nursing my first drink. Mrs. B did not appear affected by her alcohol intake as she flitted around the room rattling off ideas about ad campaigns, event planning, the current celebrity gossip, and the latest happenings in New York City politics. She never lacked ideas.

When the telephone rang, she wouldn’t answer and acted as if there had been no interruption. Someone somewhere else in the house was in charge of the telephone, I guess, because the ringing would eventually stop. Our meetings were only interrupted when Mrs. B wanted her

glass filled. A butler would appear out of nowhere with the martini pitcher. No matter how much anyone drank, the pitcher remained full.

In a phone call one day, Mrs. B informed me that, later in the week, she wanted me to go to the airport to pick up her friend who was arriving from Chicago. It wasn't a request.

"I'll send the car 'round to the office," she told me, "and you can pop out to Kennedy and meet Abigail and bring her back here."

"Certainly. When?" I said.

"I'll let you know, I've forgotten the exact arrival time, around four or so. I think its Thursday. I'll call you."

"How will I recognize Abigail?"

"No problem," Mrs. B said, "She hosts a morning TV show out of Chicago. Hers is a well-known face, you'll recognize her."

I don't watch morning TV, I thought to myself, let alone a show from Chicago. Oh well. I would just play this by ear, and everything would work out.

Sure enough, a couple of days later, a call came from Mrs. B with instructions about her friend Abigail. A car arrived (actually a huge white limo) at the front door of the Chrysler Building. The revolving doors whisked me out onto 42<sup>nd</sup> Street and into the back seat. Off we went. The limo let me out under a sign reading American Airlines.

"Miss," said my chauffeur, "if you need help with the luggage, come and get me. I'll move the car and wait down near luggage pickup for you." He tipped his hat and returned to the driver's seat.

The incoming flight from Chicago was on time, and I made my way to Gate 12 as the jet glided up to the ramp. A crowd milled around waiting for deplaning passengers. I found a spot on the opposite wall so that I could view folks as they entered the waiting area, hoping like hell that I'd recognize this Abigail. A slow trickle of passengers—no one remotely familiar—exited the ramp. At that point, I wondered if I was supposed to be greeting the arriving passengers here or in the luggage area where I could hold up a sign reading "Abigail" in big red letters. It would be just my luck that she'd be the last one off and we'd get stuck in commuter traffic on the way back to the city. The crowds around me thinned, and still no Abigail. I approached the woman at the ticketing desk and asked if any passengers remained on board.

"I'll find out for you," she said as she left the desk and made her way down the ramp.

"Are you Stephanie?" she asked upon her return.

"Yes, why?"

"Follow me," she said.

In first class sat a diminutive woman wearing the biggest hat I'd ever seen. "Hello Stephanie," she said in a high-pitched, almost childlike voice. "I'm Abigail. I've been waiting for you," she said.

There was absolutely nothing familiar about this woman, and I sincerely wondered how her dreadful voice played on TV. Even before the question of luggage was out of my mouth, I regretted it. Of course, this woman would have luggage, probably tons of it.

"Shall I take you to the limo or do you want to come with me to the luggage area," I asked?

"Oh, let's go together," she said as she slipped her arm through mine.

After retrieving nine pieces of matching luggage, heaved into the trunk by the huffing chauffeur, Abigail and I settled into the soft leather for the trip back to Manhattan. She prattled away nonstop about the flight, the food, the weather, and God knows what else.

No wonder she has a talk show, I thought, but I doubted anyone else got to talk.

Arrival at Mrs. B's townhouse brought forth a string of oohs and aahs from Abigail who had, evidently, not been in New York City for some time.

“Were you ever in the townhouse on Sutton Place,” she asked? “Wondrous, incredible views of the river from every window. But, Gerald was alive then. Maybe she couldn’t bear to stay after he died.”

I realized Abigail was having another conversation with herself, and there was no need for me to answer. No, I had not known Mrs. B when she lived on Sutton Place, and I had no idea who Gerald was. No matter. I was about to rid myself of this little chattering woman. I could not wait.

I liked my job. The responsibilities varied, it was never dull, and I’d learned a great deal about public relations. The man I worked for traveled most of the time; we kept in touch by phone. When he did appear in the office, he told fascinating stories about growing up. His mother had been a Ziegfeld Girl, and he remembered, as a kid, bouncing on Al Capone’s knee. Ted knew everyone there was to know in the entertainment business, and I suspect one or two mobsters.

Ted and Mrs. B rarely saw eye to eye, particularly on projects that she proposed. He was not shy about expressing his opinion. I suspect his absence from the morning martini meetings was because he wasn’t invited. He did not object when I was dragged off with the “guys” (all department heads except me, the only woman in the group), and he appeared to accept the fact that Mrs. B preferred me to attend these meetings.

All that luggage, and Abigail only stayed seven days! I know the length of her stay because the limo driver arrived at my office with instructions that I was to escort her back to Kennedy.

Mrs. B was nowhere to be seen when I arrived at the townhouse to retrieve Abigail and her suitcases. We headed toward the midtown tunnel for the trip to Kennedy. Abigail was subdued. For a number of blocks, she didn’t utter a word. Trying to engage her in conversation proved unsuccessful, although I have no idea why I wanted her to talk.

Finally, after taking a deep, long breath, Abigail turned to me.

“Do you know she’s dying? That’s why I came. To see her and say goodbye. She won’t last but a couple of months at best.” She paused, giving me a chance to catch my breath and try to think of a response.

“I had no idea she was ill,” I whispered, my mouth suddenly dry.

“She puts up a good front, doesn’t she? I hope she doesn’t mind my telling you; she seems quite fond of you, by the way.” I nodded and blinked back sudden unshed tears, wondering why the news affected me so much.

We sat in silence as the limo sped toward Kennedy. There were questions I wanted to ask, but I held back, waiting for Abigail to supply some details. She wiped her eyes, blew her nose, and then sighed.

“She has leukemia, and it’s at the point where treatment won’t do her much good. Besides, she says she just wants nature to take its course. Even if there was some miracle drug, I don’t think she’d take it. She’s resigned to dying and is definite about doing it her way. I tried to talk to her, but she’ll have none of it. Needless to say she’s seen the best doctors New York has to offer, even took a trip to Hopkins just to make sure. The second opinion was no different than the first, so she came home and plopped herself in that house. I suspect she’ll just stay put until she passes. When was the last time you saw her?”

“It’s been several weeks,” I said. “She’s not called an early morning meeting since the beginning of the month, and that’s really the only time I see her,” I answered.

After depositing Abigail in her seat on AA flight 592 direct to Chicago and bidding her a safe trip, I asked the driver to take me home. I decided I could not face the office crowd. It would be embarrassing to cry while relaying the news of Mrs. B’s impending death. Instead, I ran a hot bath, lit a candle, poured myself a scotch, placed a box of tissues on the edge of the tub, and climbed in for a long soak. As it turns out, I put the tissues to good use.

I did not see Mrs. B again. She didn't last a month. I, along with many from the office, and half of New York City, attended the viewing and service at the Frank E. Campbell Funeral Home on the Upper East Side. Known for its care of the rich and famous, it seemed a fitting location for Mrs. B's last public appearance. Abigail and what appeared to be a cadre of friends and celebrities huddled together in the reception hall. When I approached, Abigail made hasty introductions, hugged me as if we were long-lost buddies, and then just as quickly turned back to her friends.

Several weeks later, I received a call from a man named David Lawrence who introduced himself as Mrs. B's attorney. Would I stop by his office later in the day?

The décor of his Park Avenue office didn't disappoint. Old World would be appropriate. David Lawrence, on the other hand, was young, tall, trim, and elegantly dressed. His Italian silk suit, probably valued at \$3,000, reminded me of a movie mobster, and his manner was less than engaging. I decided straight away that I didn't like him, mostly because he would not make eye contact. After coffee and weather-related small talk, he got down to business.

"She left me an envelope with your name on it and asked that I deliver it personally after she was gone. I agreed." Lawrence's voice was flat, as if he was asking directions to the Empire State building. His manner of delivery further set me on edge.

"She informed me the envelope contained a list of several pieces of her jewelry that she wanted you to have. Perhaps you're aware that she had only a few distant cousins, several special friends, household staff, and no close family. Her estate has been left to the organization she founded. We have engaged an appraiser for its contents. Several local antique dealers are, as you might imagine, very interested, as are some well-known art dealers. The house will be sold eventually. All this will take time. I thought, in the meantime, you might like to have the jewels she picked out for you."

I sat stunned during his long discourse. Taking a sip of now cold coffee, I wondered, why tell me all this?

Bewildered, I mumbled, "Certainly, Mr. Lawrence, if it was her wish that I have some of her jewelry, I'm happy to accept. Please let me know when it would be convenient for me to accompany you."

He handed me the envelope. Not taking his eyes from my face, he said, "Please open this now. Let me know what you think."

Lawrence's tone, while not demanding, was a bit harsh, particularly under the circumstances. He now stared at me. Finally. His face showed no emotion. His eyes were piercingly cold, and his manner was abrupt. But why? He was getting paid, after all, to handle Mrs. B's vast estate. What did it matter to him that she'd decided to give me a couple of baubles? I opened the envelope. Her distinctive and somewhat messy handwriting greeted me. The letter was short and to the point.

"Dear Stephanie," it read. "Several times you were kind enough to extend yourself on my behalf. I always loved it when you came to our early morning gatherings. You were such a bright young light in an otherwise dull meeting. And what a sport you were to join me when I drank my morning martini. I remember you complimented me when no one else noticed a new dressing gown or necklace. I've decided that most of my jewelry would look best on a young neck or wrist. I've picked out a few of my favorites, listed below. I hope you enjoy them as much as I did. I'm only sad I won't see them on you. I should have given them to you while I still had a breath, but then again you might not have seen fit to accept them. Now you have no choice. Wear them in good health, my dear."

The lump in my throat was nearly impossible to bypass so I coughed and searched in vain for a tissue in my purse. Lawrence sat behind his desk, observing but saying nothing. Trying

desperately to absorb what I'd just read, I took a deep breath. "Just let me know when you want me to go with you to the house, I'll make myself available."

"Let's go now," he said, "We can get this done in no time."

Standing in front of Mrs. B's house for the first time in several months, I found myself reluctant to enter knowing she would not be there. I clutched the letter containing the list of jewels I was to retrieve as we climbed the stairs. Lawrence used his key to open the front door. Eerily quiet and stuffy from lack of activity, the house felt odd. I hesitated to proceed by myself; besides, I had no idea where her safe was located. I didn't have long to wait. He walked with determination toward the parlor (probably more aptly called a library) located at the back of the first floor. I had a ghostly feeling being here without the other members of Mrs. B's morning martini group. It didn't feel right.

I had no idea why her death affected me so much. Even over the years, and the morning martinis, I didn't know her all that well. But now I felt incredibly sad and realized I missed her. She was interesting, a character really, definitely one of a kind. She could be funny, had a head for business, and was a gifted communicator. Now, I'd just discovered, she was also incredibly generous. I clutched the list in my moist hand as I stood just inside the door while Lawrence moved a picture (isn't that where all safes are located?) and dialed in a code on the front of what looked to be a rather large wall safe. The door swung open, and he moved papers aside to reveal a jewelry pouch.

"Here, look for the pieces she means for you to have. I think they are in here. If not, I'll have to go to the bank safe deposit box. But we'll have to do that another day. With any luck, your pieces are here."

He said all this without looking at me as he switched on a lamp on a small table near a huge wingback chair. He handed me the pouch. Convinced that my legs wouldn't hold me, I sat. The zippered pouch itself was lovely. Made of deep blue satin, the top contained Mrs. B's initials embroidered in gold thread. Inside, I found earrings, bracelets, a pearl necklace, and several brooches. Baubles they were not. Most of these jewels contained stones that I'd only seen in Tiffany and Cartier windows: diamonds, rubies, and the occasional emerald. Without realizing it, I sucked in my breath. "Oh, how beautiful," I whispered.

"Take the stuff on the list," Lawrence said, "I'll give you an envelope so they won't wander around in that purse of yours."

I did as I was told and carefully removed a pair of diamond pierced earrings, a ruby encrusted butterfly brooch, a pearl necklace, and one diamond and emerald bracelet. I didn't, at first, see the ring mentioned on the list, and had to dig around in the pouch. The ring was tucked into a corner, and as I pulled it out, the light caught the brilliant twinkling star. Tears that had been brimming my eyes began to run down my cheeks. The ring had a star sapphire center and was surrounded by alternating diamonds and sapphires. It was huge and weighed heavy in my hand. I wanted so much to try it on but resisted the temptation.

"Everything on the list is here," I said. My voice was hesitant and soft.

"Great," said Lawrence. "We won't have to make a trip to the bank. I'm glad."

He said this in a rush as he took the pouch, returned it to the safe, slammed the safe shut, spun the dial, and re-hung the picture. After handing me a large white envelope and a release form he asked me to sign, Lawrence's gaze swept the room, and he moved toward the door. I stumbled after him, wiping my cheeks. Before we exited, I made sure the precious envelope was safely tucked into my purse. Once on the sidewalk, he asked if I wanted a ride some place, my office perhaps.

"Thank you, no," I answered as I offered my hand.

He had one of those handshakes some men reserve for women. It was weak and quick. As the car pulled away, I realized I'd been holding my breath. I exhaled. Happy to be on my own, I was very conscious of the treasures in my purse.

Taking a deep gulp of fresh air, I walked slowly west to Madison Avenue and turned north. The air and the walk felt good. Without realizing where I was headed, I found myself on East 76<sup>th</sup> Street, home to The Carlyle and, more specifically, the Carlyle Café.

As I entered the bar, pausing in the sudden darkness, a friendly faced barman greeted me, “Good afternoon, miss. May I get you a drink?”

I took a seat. Again, the lump in my throat prevented me from talking. The barman waited. He smiled and placed a napkin on the bar in front of me.

“Yes, I said, I’ll have a martini, please, straight up with three olives.” I held the glass up and offered a silent toast: *Here’s to you, Mrs. B.*

# Change in the House of Light

## Mike Pielaet Strayer

Monday, January 12, 2004, South Lake Tahoe, California, 7:00 a.m.:

Fingers whisper names and torments through your hair. Your room comes to you in the morning light like a swinging door, destroying the night by its sweep. You do not remember sleeping. You remember the drive back from Mendocino in the dark, the mountain pass, the January cold. Drifts of snow on the roadsides. Highway 50 a bridge of ice in the frozen pole lights. You remember getting home, embracing your mom, walking up the stairs to your bedroom. Afraid to sleep because of the dreams, guilty to sleep because of what you'd seen, what you had done and failed to do. You do not remember sleeping.

A glacial winter morning. Your mother crouches over you. Crying. Her hand floats away. It settles on your forearm.

Then she tells you.

*Blake I... I'm sorry. Conner didn't make it.*

The room is full of sunshine. Hazy, blinding. Gazing at the hand on your forearm you can't stand the feel of human touch. Swooning, the mattress dissolves beneath you. You feel as if your guts have been yanked out and spread before you, cut open, waiting to be studied. The walls explode and your mother is far away, as if at the end of a great corridor.

Conner didn't make it.

Conner is dead.

You see him: his tan face, short black hair. Smiling. His teeth a lunette of devilish sanctimony. The vast and impatient blistering for manhood shuttered inadequately within the naïve lantern of his fourteen years.

He's floating in the water. Looking at the cliffs—the wide blue sky—the spattering of friends and family, watching. His face is tired; his eyes are terrified—then resigned—then opaque.

*How?*

A silly question—you were there when it happened. When the Coast Guard fished him from the sea like a dog from a swimming pool. That's what it looked like. The tiny boat and the coast guard with his aviator shades and his blue polo and khaki pants and the long pole in his hands, the blunted hook gleaming in the light. And Conner, gliding over the water's surface. Caught on the hook and limp as an empty shirt or a drowned terrier.

*How?*

*The water was just too cold... He was under for too long. There was nothing anybody could do. He was gone when they pulled him out. I'm so sorry.*

Ambling to the bathroom. A disconnect between your body and your brain. An empty sensation in the bowels of your stomach. A rent hole. Somewhere things disappear.

In the shower you force yourself to cry. Conner is dead and you're alive and you don't know what that means, exactly, but crying seems the right thing to do.

You're late to school. It doesn't matter—classes have been canceled. St. Theresa's boasts a small community and news of the accident has derailed the beginning of the spring semester. Students and family coalesce at the school in order to grieve. Some don't come. Omar Fuentes, who was pulled into the sea alongside Conner, just released from the hospital in Fort Bragg battered but alive, won't return for two more days. You'll recall nothing of the journey that lands you in your classroom, the eyes of your classmates—the faces—staring like you've come with answers (it was an optional field trip and many of them weren't there and, more, Conner and Omar were your best

friends and word has spread that you were right beside them when the wave came); and you close your eyes and see it, the monstrous arch of water that took your friends—you can feel that wall of cold engulf you, slamming you to the rocks.

You remember the way his body floated on the surface, the sunlight burning away the surface of the sea, a single hand moving in the waves, his left hand, as if alive.

They're still staring. Out of habit your eyes look for him and he isn't there and he will never be there again. You burst into tears.

It's as if you're puking. It all comes gushing forth in a hot wet torrent. You collapse to the ground. Screaming at the God who wasn't there, at the people looking at you—at yourself—who stood and watched as your best friends drowned—who couldn't change it—who couldn't save them.

Your classmates watch. Motionless for the violence of it. Perhaps they're embarrassed, or sad, or simply scared for witnessing someone come undone. A teacher appears and wraps her arm around your shoulder.

*It's okay, she says.*

You shake your head.

*I watched him die.*

*I know.*

*I watched him die and I couldn't do anything.*

*I know.*

\*\*\*

He was born in Barton Memorial in October of 1989. His father was a businessman from Hawaii and he owned a chain of motels across the south of the basin. He had come to Tahoe five years earlier and his son would grow up listening to stories of the islands and at the time of his death—at 7:33 p.m. UTC on January 11, 2004—would harbor in his young mind a rolodex of dreams concerning his future at Hilo. Dreams of a basketball scholarship and dreams of sunlight and dreams of lips parting against him in the dark.

His mother was a dancer from Las Vegas, working as a cocktail waitress in the casinos at Stateline. Her name was Camila and she would call her son her little apple, though in truth he resembled his father more than her. His younger brother Patrick, with his dainty eyelashes and curved lips and fair skin, took after their mother; but Conner was the spitting image of Denis White. All his life he would be told this was so. Just like your dad, they'd say. So handsome! What charm! You don't even know it, son... You'll have to beat them away with a stick.

And Con would smile shyly, his blood bubbling dim and red beneath his soft brown cheeks.

\*\*\*

Girls always made Conner uncomfortable, which you thought ironic, because they were drawn to him. In his final year it was rumored that he and Shelby Grange were on the cusp of going steady. Shelby had black hair and gray eyes and she had been prepped for medical school since kindergarten. They were only seen together once. Holding hands under the basketball hoops at the far end of the playground during recess. The net-less rims. Cold fall in the mountain air. His last birthday just around the corner. She would write in a card signed by all the school and presented to his mother at the funeral: "I loved your son. He was a nice boy. I'm sure we would have been each other's first kisses. I'll miss him every day."

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You receive much sympathy. Adults keep asking if you're okay. You tell them you could have saved them. There was a moment, you say, as the water slunk back, that you noticed them floundering in the sea. So close you could've jumped, pulled them to safety. But you didn't, you say, staring at the ground, as they disagree and tell you it's not your fault.

You'll hear this often.

But you know it's not your fault. That's not the problem. It's the knowledge of your inaction. Jerry Smith, a parent chaperone on that trip, saw what had happened and immediately dove to the rescue. *He* was able to move. His shoulder brushed yours as he sped past, a blur of tee-shirt, jeans and silver hair. His actions are the reason Omar made it. Denis White also tried to leap, but the ocean spat him back against the cliffs, dislocating his shoulder in the process. Many people tried to act that day.

Remember Jerry died, they say. Denis would have died. You would have died. It's a miracle Omar survived.

The notion brings no comfort. You'll always remember that moment as you stood on the rock's edge gazing down at the waters beating the Mendocino coast and your friends clawing at the sky, watching Jerry dive and swim and seize them in his arms and hold their heads above the water, no hesitation, until the moment passed and another wave came and you had to scurry up the bluff and Omar was eddied into a cove and Jerry and Conner were ushered out to sea—out of reach—beyond saving.

The seminal moment of your life.

Because you didn't jump.

Because you watched your friends drowning in the sea and didn't jump.

A stillness you'll carry into the future. Calcified inside you, it coats your bones like rust. This knowing you could have done more and now you can't.

You tell yourself there was nothing you could do. You swear it. But for the rest of your life you'll wonder.

\*\*\*

His parents were athletes and he was raised playing sports and he excelled from an early age. Denis was a runner, but Conner preferred team competition. Baseball, soccer, basketball. He seemed to grow with a ball in his hands, with court or clay or grass racing underfoot. The only one on the team at St. Theresa's with any promise. Like a son to his coaches. He hated to read and he enjoyed hip hop and funny movies and would take a cat over a dog and rarely cursed. The last film he watched was an anime from Japan dubbed in English and while he did not care for the music or the melodrama he liked the artwork. Conner was never insecure about the things he enjoyed, unlike you. The movie was *Samurai X* and you had brought it with you specifically to show him and you watched it together the night before he died. On a couch in the living room of a vacation rental in Mendocino. The sound of the ocean and tang of salt blowing through the house. The chaos of your classmates laughing up and down the stairs and through the halls and someone yelling about a clogged toilet as you two sat alone watching anime and eating popcorn. You were excited and proud to be watching that cartoon with Conner. In chemistry two weeks prior he had spied you doodling in your notebook swordsmen and flaming space pirates and asked if he could have them and was very happy when you agreed.

*I'll do ya better. I'll make you a whole book of drawings if you want. I'll color 'em too.*

*Okay.*

*Five dollars seem fair?*  
*Okay, sure. Yeah. Where did you learn to draw that?*  
*Japanese animation. I'll bring one on our field trip for us. They're pretty cool. Really bloody.*  
*Cartoons?*  
*Yep.*  
*And you think you can teach me?*  
*Of course.*

\*\*\*

Conner laughing on the couch in Mendocino. Lurid colors flashing in his onyx eyes. The static blue of the television shining on his teeth. More than anything what people would remember about Conner White was his smile, his laugh. Booming and full, it did not sound like the laughter of a child. There was wisdom in it and age, as if he knew a secret—the kind of campfire jocularly that always seems imperishable to the innocent.

\*\*\*

Two days after the accident there's a viewing of the body.

Your mom drives you to the funeral home. The silence of the drive is suffocating, thick as wool. The destination looms in the windshield: single-storied, tinted glass door propped open, a small marquee naming the event in one-inch serif stencils, "WHITE VIEWING: 5-6." Icicles stud the eaves above a lawn of snow.

Dark inside and cool. A chemical smell beneath the otherwise scentless cold. Figures shuffle in the formaldehyde gloom. Classmates, friends and relatives of the deceased. The deceased. Conner. People pass you, crying. A face flashes an encouraging smile and is gone.

The coffin is white—the brightest thing in the place. Conner's mother Camila draped across its lip, a castaway. Clinging to this darkling ship an alien unable to breathe the air of passenger and crew. Longing to join them on their voyage but without recourse save to hold the gunwale. As if to moor it. If there is such a ship. If it has a heading. Or perhaps to join them. To plumb that black horizon outside all horizons. Where once berthed they will never again inhabit the limits of her physical perception. Never again.

She is cradling his head and his head rocks like water in a jar, is tugged and pulled against the weight of his body.

*Oh Connie, she moans. Oh, Con, my baby, Oh Connie.*

You touch her. Once, between the shoulder blades. You cannot see her face. You put your hands in your pockets and peer into the coffin.

\*\*\*

Three months before an earthquake measuring 7.3 on the Richter scale off the coast of Japan would send seismic violence cross the Pacific to batter the Californian seaboard, causing the spike in the waves that would take him away you went together to Valencia for the haunted houses they put up on Halloween at the amusement park. The rides screeching on their painted steel tracks over the light-worn night. A smell of funnel cake and dewy copper. Lines of nervous bodies wending the lanes and sidewalks, disappearing into massive black tents. Shrieks of terror broadcast on loudspeakers. A ghostly pump organ. Howling calliopes. Walking tent to tent you and Conner and Omar and Heather Aguilar and Joey Lopez and Omar's father, John. Laughing confidently and

contemptuously at the old carny shows ornate and leering between the clanging, blinking rollercoasters. The neon marvels of the supernatural world up on display. Skulls and eyes. Conner passing dark to light rapt and smirking—he winces once at the sudden swinging whine of a chainsaw, then giggles.

And he laughs at Zarthura the woman who for the cost of a ticket will turn into a monster before your very eyes. She dances on the stage in gouts of electric fog. Dressed in silk and beads and plastic chains rattling on her wrists and ankles this wonder or horror writhing sensuously in green columns of smoke. In his pupils she dances a splinter of jade. He smiles at the lights, the thickening fog. The music changes. Zarthura the Shape-shifter begins to scream. Squeezing her head by the roots of her hair and shrieking wildly, thrashing—fur shoots along her arms—fibrous hair springs between her breasts. Affected gasps from the audience. A child weeping. Zarthura gyrates in her green miasma. With a final loosing of pain her face snaps towards the ceiling and you can see the silhouette of her snout lengthening through the fog. All at once the lights go out. From hidden speakers comes the noise of shattered manacles. A beastly roar! The child cries. And Conner goes on laughing in dark.

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His skin is a different color: bloated and with a blue tint: a stale patina in the half-light of the mortuary. His eyes are shut and his face has the smoothness of a child in repose. His lips are open, as if about to snore, and there is shallow darkness beyond the lips like a child sleeping but he is not sleeping. He wears the red sweatshirt they gave all the eighth graders at St. Theresa's that year and his hands are folded over his belly. The make-up the morticians have applied is smudged in places; his true skin juts bleakly here and there. Staring at his body, this mass of de-magnetized carbon, you recall the energy it once contained. The way his eyes dimmed when it left.

Those eyes. So tired. The fight was gone from them in a moment. Like a heron lighting from a branch.

And his lids closed.

And his face collapsed, like a branch freed suddenly of weight.

Then you remember the seal, gliding through the foam, playfully uncaring of the dying humans beside it.

Sunlight.

His dad on his knees in the sun and howling, a noise unique in the index of this world, as you stood and watched, clinging firmly to his brother—fighting to hold him—to keep him from the cliff's edge so he couldn't see.

You feel an urge to touch the dead flesh, as if to argue or confirm it. Your hand extends—almost of its own volition—pauses and hovers. Then retracts. You wrestle with your fear but no matter what you think or do you cannot bring yourself to touch him.

You'll regret this.

You turn and leave the mortuary. Dark now and very cold, your tears freeze against your cheeks, clumping on your eyelashes and binding your eyelids.

\*\*\*

They'll say you're a hero. They'll tell you that—on the day of the accident—as the wave receded, you grabbed your classmate, Zach Mansfield, and held him against the cliff, preventing him from being dragged to sea.

You saved him, they'll say.

You don't remember this and you'll never consider yourself a hero.

The very word smolders in your lexicon. You think about Jerry, think, There's a hero. Then wonder. To jump or watch was a matter of choice and Jerry made his and Omar's life was saved by his decision and for this he must be honored. But Jerry lost his own as a result and left behind a wife and two children. Selflessness and selfishness are like the contra edges of a single blade—it cuts in all directions. Has one life more value than another simply because it faces immediate annihilation? What did his wife think of his choice? Was she proud, or did she hate the fact he picked a boy he scarcely knew over her, over their sons?

They'll even give you a medal. And every year on Zach's birthday his parents will send you a simple *Thanks*.

Every year it pangs you. These reminders of what you are.

\*\*\*

The day of the funeral you lock yourself in your room. Sunlight pouring through the window. A day identical to any other, yet you'll remember it always as the day you said farewell. You feel strange and restless. Time plays tricks, moves fast and slow—you can't keep up. You find yourself sitting on the floor and masturbating fiendishly. After, washing your hands, you can't meet your gaze in the bathroom mirror.

\*\*\*

Thirteen summers, fourteen winters.

His favorite musician was Tupac Shakur. His favorite restaurant was Big Daddy's Burgers on Lake Tahoe Boulevard where in the fall time he would go nights after basketball practice. His last meal was scrambled eggs cooked in grease in a cast-iron skillet, fried sausage patties, country potatoes, toast, maple bars, cereal, stale French fries, old pizza—whatever yet remained of the preceding weekend in the refrigerator. He ate by himself in the misty morning light at the tabletop under the west-facing kitchen windows. His cheeks and forehead and the flesh about his eyes all creased with fatigue. Quiet men standing in their jeans, drinking coffee. Outside the windows you could see a field of tall dry grass and further away a moldy pinewood fence and the darker shade of the succulents. Trails ran west through the grass over the plateaus to the tiered tide pools and rocky ocean vistas. The kitchen smelled of cooking butter and onions and the air was warm from the stove but the floor was cold and you could hear throughout the house the groans and thuds and clatters of people waking and shambling over the floor and rummaging in their bags. Conner sat in the light of the windows eating overdone eggs off a paper plate with a silver spoon. Denis came up and punched him in the shoulder, grinning. It had been hours since Denis was tired.

*You all ready to go? Everything put away? Make you sure you guys have that room clean before we leave.*

*Leave me alone, dad. C'mon, I just woke up.*

*That's not my fault. Just get it done, okay? We have a long drive today. Hear me?*

*Yes.*

*Alright.*

\*\*\*

The church is full to the point of rupture. An abundance of tears. You can't help but resent the people who weren't there, who didn't feel the wave come crashing down. You are too young to recognize the vanity in this. The sobs of Conner's mom make you wince, set your teeth on edge.

They bounce against the stained glass saints, the oil-darkened crossbeams, the rows of gleaming wooden pews. In the middle of the sermon she gets up and begins to shriek and is escorted outside. You watch her, feeling uncomfortable.

People standing at the podium.

You hate them.

Hating yourself for hating them.

At the end of the service the priest gets up and makes some assertion that your friend is in a better place, that he'll live forever in your heart, awaiting the day you'll meet again, but it seems so false you disregard his promises. Where was God when the wave came? When the Coast Guard hurled the lifesaver Conner's way, only to have it land just beyond his fingers?

There is no God, you think, gazing out those holy windows and remembering a million moments that no longer exist; remembering the way you pleaded and begged with that nameless deity in the sky and Conner was transformed by the shifting light of the sea; feeling the ache of faithlessness come over you as cold and undeniable as the thing that caused it.

And filing out the church doors, passing the bronze sculpture of the Virgin Mary, a drying bunch of pink and yellow roses resting at her feet, the loose petals scratching in the wintry breeze, you feel just as adrift as when you entered.

\*\*\*

You collect newspaper clippings about the accident. Learn everything you can about the weather that day. Search countless articles, reports, statistics. Even make a scrap book. You fill it with your findings, birthday cards, the brown paper cover of his mathematics workbook you pilfered from the waste bin, with his name in green ink on the inside flap.

You scan headlines and satellite imagery.

When you visit your relatives on the coast you look at the sea and try to understand.

\*\*\*

That summer you take up boxing. Boxing was always something of a hobby, but now you pursue it with single-minded devotion. You remember that feeling of powerlessness as you toil in the gym. Deny the fear that rooted you every time you step into the ring. Find empowerment in violence. Lose your guilt in the grueling workouts. Because fighting demands action. Because in fighting you qualify your fear. Exorcise the rage that has built inside you. Take control. Because in fighting you can't stand still. Because fighters *move*.

\*\*\*

Visiting his grave. Always alone.

Sometimes you apologize and sometimes you just sit and look at that marble plaque in the grass with the profiles of cats engraved in the corners; at all the other plaques, slating the grass—minted anonymous histories; and sometimes there are flowers and you feel at peace and sometimes it's as if you're burning alive in the cemetery silence with all those dead screaming unheard beneath the soil.

\*\*\*

What would he look like? Where would he be? Would you have stayed in touch?

\*\*\*

Sunday, January 11, 2014, Ventura, California, 4:30 p.m.:

A breeze meanders across the courtyard of the Community Presbyterian Church. Beyond the peach-colored adobe walls and palm trees you can see the asphalt of Poli Street and the green haze of Cemetery Hill and the crown of the Pacific Ocean, deepening as the sun sets. Your phone rings. You take it out of your pocket and gaze at the screen, still facing the sea, the sinking sun.

Frances.

You do not answer and replace the phone in your pocket.

Ten years have elapsed since Conner and Omar were sucked into the sea. You look at the horizon, remembering. You can no longer recall certain details, can't distinguish between those your imagination supplied and what actually happened. The sun sets, the courtyard chills. This is the only day of the year you go to church. You do not go inside. You sit on a wooden bench, facing the sea. Praying. To what? The world, perhaps. The eternal sky. You do not believe in prayer, but it feels good to sit in silence remembering these people you've lost, watching the sun vanish behind the humps of the Channel Islands, watching twilight pool across the city.

You think of Frances.

Waiting at home.

The breeze comes stronger now. Storm clouds to the east. Maybe it will rain later. Good, you think. We need it.

Your phone buzzes. A text:

*Where are you? What should we do for dinner??*

You return to your car. She answers on the first ring.

*Hey, where are you? It's getting late...*

*Sorry.*

*It's okay... Did you get my text? Are you hungry? What do you want to do for dinner?*

*Don't worry about it. I'll be home soon. I'm gonna cook us something special.*

Her excitement at the end of the line is palpable. *Yay! Okay... Can I do anything? Want me to get anything out?*

*Nope.*

*Where have you been? You got off work half an hour ago...*

*Don't worry. I'll explain later.*

# Poetry



Up-close Moment  
Pete Madzellan

3 poems

## 3 Poems

### Gary Glauber

#### Unscheduled

That woman in Edinburgh,  
hiding me in her dorm room,  
in the literal shadows of a castle;  
I was the night's  
mysterious contraband.

Subjecting me as well to her love  
of Europop, its insipid lightness,  
giving me her restless body  
to harmonic rhythms of those  
mocking bubblegum sounds,  
surrendering awkwardness into  
slap and tickle, the desperate act  
of the young and lonely.

The note board on her door  
exhibited a few hastily doodled flowers.  
There was an open can of diet cola  
on a small bedside table.

I remember the spare settings,  
her embarrassed apologies  
early the next morning,  
as she hurriedly conducted me  
through narrow hallways,  
eager to get me out undiscovered.

Soon I was liberated into  
the coolness of empty streets,  
given no way to find her, to express  
this strange tourist's gratitude.

## **The Next Table**

Death is the current running wild  
through black rivers of conversation;  
All those respective creatures toppled  
in battles to parade onward past time.

Gossip of daisies pushing up through  
body remnants, clutching at sunlight  
through limbs, signets of vacant dreams,  
a past world's luxuries and lusts.

Dark mascara underlines eyes  
that experience such survivor's glee,  
unsettled victors in expensive prints  
celebrating the avoidance of anguish.

Nostalgia is a privilege of existence,  
and their simmering murmurs bubble  
with a subtle soupcon of charmed concern,  
hushed as white noise on the horizon.

A flash emits unfettered abstract joy  
but this triumph is ephemeral, empty,  
and none of these canny diners can predict  
whose reservations will next go unheld.

## **The Cycle Organic**

Your dizzy charm is drawn forth,  
a violent froth churned from within,  
roiled like a steaming puree,  
resisting, insisting, exploding,  
flooding your brain with vertigo,  
sending it reeling, as if reset anew,  
a fledgling avalanche that rumbles  
and crushes, an expedition of  
anxious expectation, timeless,  
enchanted, a flock ascending,  
a cataclysmic shift, shaken  
and then shrinking, dissipating  
like a distant echo's receding roar  
until the next rough-hewn turn  
of the sundial's shadow.

## Steinbeck Take 2

### Jeremy Mele

Steinbeck  
killed the American Dream  
for me.

He mowed it down

with a pistol shot  
to the back of the head  
and a shotgun blast  
to the face

while it contemplated  
grapes  
and fair wages  
and united workers  
and the foreigner being treated with respect  
and the little man getting his due  
and,  
of course,  
rabbits.

# Today

## Wendy Scott

*after Jane Kenyon*

held my neighbor's eighteen-month old daughter's hand when she looked over, reached for me as she went down the slide while her mother and I talked in the sun before dinner

found two white crocuses with gold velvety throats hidden by the boxwood in my garden

discovered a hidden forest with flecks of early green, distant houses on the tree-line, wild as those where I grew up, on a shortcut through the city to avoid stopped traffic

ate sushi on my front porch at a glass table cleaned of six months' worth of dirt

looked out the window at a cerulean sky, a just before sunset sky, in a room where twelve men and women spoke of subsided fears—ringing phones and bills, creditors and travel--the slow growth of acceptance; one white jet's streak crossed the sky, bisecting the windowpane

## 2 Poems

### Kristen Kane

#### Building Sentences Out of Bones

Your body is not a semi-colon.  
Refuse to let it become an afterthought  
that only raises its hand to speak when  
no one is left to listen.  
Every curve does not beg a question,  
and a confrontation should only come  
in the form of friction between anxious legs.  
Let your scars be shown, let the demons  
you've chased away be ever-present in  
the hands you allow to scale every inch of skin.  
You are not a resume of mistakes to be  
reviewed per mutual convenience.  
Raise your voice, don't allow patience  
to supplement your rage.  
You are a forest fire, thriving  
in a freedom that doesn't need to be defined.

#### Ode to the Bedroom Mirror

This is to finally learning how to love  
with the lights on, and not being afraid  
that your thighs clap for you even when  
everyone else won't.  
It's a celebration of every stretch of skin,  
turning the latent into a lioness.  
Every fingerprint left on your body will  
become a watermark, a stamp of approval  
to hold yourself higher than the expectations  
once thrust upon you.  
This is your moment to dance around naked  
in your living room with the blinds wide open  
and your belly full of laughter.  
The only thing more beautiful than your smile  
is knowing that you can finally be the cause.

# Barefoot

## Jon Yungkans

we talked about foundations—

yours poured concrete full of cracks and holes—  
mine old pilings an earthquake had shifted

—yet how alike the seismic pullings  
as we both walked barefoot and our houses grew

emotions jolted like soil beneath us  
frames became untrued and hairline cracks

rooted through walls then climbed and spread  
till hidden with plaster behavior and paint—

yet we could hear the pain in each creak  
—our own and each other's as the earth settled

and we felt treads echo of each other's soles  
heard their quiet softness and ache

and how i would carry the weight of yours

# The Physics of Love

## Sandra Kolankiewicz

The first goal was to discover a medium  
that would allow us to travel towards  
each other on a mechanical exchange

caused by the vibration between us.  
Our greatest fear was we would find  
ourselves on a transverse wave, the one

not holding the end of the tether,  
cracked like a whip, cresting, resting,  
troughing eternally at right angles to the

other. Possibly we were polar ends of a  
longitudinal attempt at union, like  
springs torn between a shifting

middle and our own zero point. Now,  
of course, after all these years, we  
determine we're waves traveling along

a surface separating two media which  
can never combine, reacting with an up  
and down motion, perpendicular to one

another, forming a kinetic circle so,  
like bobbers, we never reach the shore,  
dependent on wind and temperature for

advancement. Heights flatten  
according to the hertz of our pulsating  
sources. Lengths between peaks grow

longer as frequencies weaken, the  
amplitude incapable of interference,  
whether constructive or destructive.

# Letter to Theo van Gogh, Unmailed and Discovered in His Brother's Room

Russell Thorburn

My straw hat is rigged with candles.  
Hunched over my canvas,  
ragged man wearing a tattered coat.  
I swirl a starry night while wax drips  
down my back. On a stool near the road,  
I touch with the rough brush of my angry beard  
the cheek of my painting, the other pig's hair  
clutched in my right hand while I determine  
the height of cedar trees in the foreground.

Dear Theo, guardian of all my paintings in Paris,  
your attic smells of turpentine and oil,  
but also of these farm lanes and fields  
in Arles, where my pockets weigh me down  
with stones for the high winds, so my easel  
can be planted solid. Here the wind blows away  
the clouds for maximum light.  
I hoard onions and coffee, eat raw turnips  
and carry the spare farmer's egg in a pocket  
across my heart. Black dogs follow me  
to the haystack, and when I turn around  
and growl, they look bored.

Thunderclouds above wheat ripen  
into painful yellow strokes. What colors  
sadness paints. After painting, my candle hat  
lies on the floor, beside my easel.  
My ragged coat missing buttons hangs  
on a nail. My dreams leave me agitated.  
paintbrushes in a jar stare at unfinished  
canvases. Each sunflower wanting more.

# Selling Dreams

## Forrest Evans

She sold me a dream deferred,  
dried and tried too many times  
with ones before me, and she knew it.

All the steps outside the box, comfort  
zones and tenacious tones truly  
showed this fool how deep it was.

Believing in something too tainted,  
too hellish and precious to forget  
and too big to deny or overlook.

The audacity of ambition inspired  
love and inquired about the provenance  
of “why can’t you trust me?”

So, the rhythm has to stop—  
‘cause we’ve yet to still jam  
on the same groove, even now.

Living on your knees and the prayers of  
fool, loving too easily, simply to  
be near the sensation of love.

Selling rain to a sad day, ignoring the  
obvious, obtuse and ostentatious  
living on a dream dissolving away.

Solving problems in hindsight  
because you were too many sheets  
in the wind, sinnin’, to think sanely.

Showing brief, and adored, homes the  
way to hold you for the night—  
the result of alleged promiscuity and loneliness.

Selling dreams to women  
passing by, or dissolving, too—  
robbing tomorrow a chance to be today.

Becoming the one that hurt  
you humming the same melody to sell,  
a dream—a brown woman.

# The Under Coat

## Kathleen Boyle

No burnished gold, no weasel fur, no ermine. As unfancy as a plate of polenta. No drunken words needing to be taken back. Our motto never “bottoms up.” A different shield altogether if those people hadn’t propelled themselves from Italy, from Ireland, if my father hadn’t dropped out of the seminary. Not the four normal children they had hoped. When someone said last night I’ve never spoken to a schizophrenic person she might as well as have said I’ve never seen an apple, never heard a washing machine. The unknown causes coursing through unknown blood. Did it not come from those villages? Our mottos never said in New York accents, in Boston accents, because great-grandfathers briefly landed there did not linger. No one has ever won the lottery, won anything, has ever since wandered and not come back. Even Richard, when he’d disappear in the middle of the night and drive across the country, propelled by signs and smells, not calling until Virginia, even he eventually came back. No passenger pigeons, no night boats. Ours is a coat without arms, without guns or sleeves. No knives, no gloves.

# Self-countered transference

## Karina Lutz

A stranger opened the door to the party, not the host.  
So I stood with the luck-of-the-pot on a tray, stepped into a space  
surrounded by people, everyone else I recognized, but with the host  
off in the kitchen, no one knew what to do with the food.

And right there, right there was my old marriage counselor.  
Failed. Both of us. How do we look at each other otherwise?  
Hello, do you remember me, my name, assuming he sees hundreds  
of us lost souls in the paroxysms of dying marriages, saves the few  
he can, an EMT of love, us up our nasty creeks without paddles—the inner heart  
more resistant to reawakening than the outer. And so we both failed,  
and moved on and here we are. His partner with the office opposite, his wife,  
has since died of breast cancer. I can't speak of this, either.

How was it we once talked of the most intimate details of my pain, loss,  
and fear of the inevitable failure, not inevitable yet, all that grief and hope  
tangled? He, like a grandmother helps you prepare a skein of yarn to wind into a ball,  
held his arms out for us to encircle with the unraveled threads.  
My husband-at-the-time even more unable than this man to get big, round fingertips  
into those knots. How I tightened up  
at his contradiction of my own therapist: sex is part of the marriage contract, really,  
he said. Mine said I needed a break to heal.

Maybe they were both right and that's why I'm here, single at a party  
of married folks and teenagers and this one widower, my own kids off  
at some other party with their dad and his sex-willing girlfriend.

Luckily, there are other people to talk to. Luckily, I don't even wonder  
until the next morning if his wife believed, too, that daily, weekly, monthly, or  
whatever-it-was-at-the-beginning-divided-by-half  
(-by-children, -by-checkbooks, -by-cheese quiches)  
some kind of regular sex was required, but maybe she couldn't leave him,  
loved him, had no interest in leaving, so had no other choice but  
to let the solitude gnawing its way through her breasts  
to break through, and to die.

Besides, what double failure, quadruple failure would it be  
for a man and wife counseling team to break up? But death is not a failure,

it's just life. Begs compassion. So here I am,  
still alive, trying not to look him in the eye, while the quiches on the tray  
steam up my glasses, coming in from the cold.

# Lao Tzu on the Men's League Bowling Night

## S.A. Volz

Nothingness is the beginning  
of heaven and earth.

Then the barman dials the juke  
and the draft bottles clink in lusty song,  
casting aside the Tao  
and its ten thousand things.

Greasy laughter pools in alley pockets  
and with long strides muscle sets to motion—  
the aches of the work day yielding  
as the neon balls swim from the forearm's crook,  
curving down waxy lanes like waves  
pulsing shoreline.

These nights do not reveal  
perfect knowledge or perfect scores,  
only what is made by the passing—  
tables strewn with smeared plates,  
beer pitchers upright in offering  
a last warm swallow to the gods  
of Being and Not.

So let it be *glory* or the *gutter*  
as the world's weight goes charging toward  
the red-ringed necks of clattered pins.  
Let the hours pass upon the green earth  
as they pass on the great eternal sea.

In action, there is inaction.  
This is the Way—  
roll away and return.

# Intersection of Hope: Blackbird

## Anne Kaiser

after Georgia O'Keeffe's *A Black Bird with Snow-Covered Red Hills*

Blackbird, your wing-grace dominates these somnolent hills,  
winter an afterthought beneath your soaring.  
Two slender feathered arms pray in this white, white land;  
white and blue, prayer in flight,  
shadow-hoverer, darkness in motion;  
you are still, silent, young, dormant in thought,  
suspended over this crystalline land.  
Your wing-beats smother color,  
capture the marrow of this sandy, swelling earth,  
pull out the breath of the hills  
in a sinuous, feathered ribbon.  
You depart, descend, hover,  
devour the food of a pale ghost-hand,  
float over cloud veils.  
Intangible thread between summer and winter,  
you balance earth and sky;  
dark pendulum, silent wanderer,  
complete in this mystical dynasty.

# A Dark Suspicion of Imaginary Yellow

## Jason Jones

Triangulate the gap.

Red moon.

Black lighthouse.

Blue buoy.

Bring sextant, astrolabe, crayons.

## 27 Slices of Pi

Michael Coolen

3.

14159

265

3589793238

462643383279

5028841971

693993

75105

820

9749445923 0781640628620899862803482534211706798214808651

328230664709384460 9550582231725359408128481117450284

10270193852

1105559644622948954 930381964428810975665933446

1284756482337867831652712019091456485669234603486104543266482

13393607260249

1412737245870066063

155881748815209209628292540917153643678925903600113305305488

2046652138414695194151

16094330572703657595919530921861

173819326117931051

1854807446237996274956735188575272489122793818301

194912983367336244 065664308602139494639522473719070217

986094370277053921717629317675238467481846766940513

20005681271452635608277857713427577896091736371787

21468440901

2249534301465495853710507922796892589

235420199561121290219608640344181598136297747713099601

87072113499999983729780499510597317328160963185950

2445945534690830264

2522308253344685035

26193118817101000313783875288658753320838142061

71776691473035982534904287554687311595628638

823537875937519577818577805321712268066130019

27876611195909216420198

# **The Photograph**

## **Charles O'Hay**

I visit the same place over and over because it is not there. It is like a photograph of a painting that was destroyed when the museum burned down. Now there is only the photograph. And I have worried it between the fingers of my imagining for so long that it is not even a photograph anymore, but a white sail backlit by the sun. I will never be able to make restitution for all the lives I have failed to live.

# Diagnosis

## Mary K O'Melveny

### I

Amyloid betas  
and beta amyloids,  
taus and prions,  
neurofibrillary tangles.  
Rogue proteins all,  
swimming,  
floating up and away,  
dancing brightly.  
As if Joan Miró  
or Paul Klee  
had been painting  
on her brain.

Here is when  
one wants the Rembrants,  
the Vermeers, the Courbets.  
Solid and lush, finely wrought,  
everything precise,  
thick with meaning,  
nothing missed or lost.  
The light shimmering  
in from a window,  
the layers of the paint  
glowing with depth,  
details vivid and intact.

### II

She begins her search  
for the words she has lost  
carefully, as if  
she is cultivating  
some rare plant  
in her greenhouse.  
At first, it is a project  
of sorts. The roots  
and seeds are all there,  
she just needs time  
to divide and reassemble,  
until the thought blossoms up.

Later on,  
she learns to leave them,  
live without them.  
She can make up new words  
instead, close in sound,  
round and vibrant,  
filling up the void.  
She lets others guess at her meaning,  
like a parlor game.  
She will let her husband dress her up  
each morning. She still knows who he is.  
Her daughter too. Most days.

### III

She stands silently  
by the kitchen doorway.  
The apple trees are ripe with fruit.  
The pond is gleaming  
in the day's late light.  
Her vegetable beds are thinning down.  
She can still pull weeds from the dirt,  
some tasks are so ingrained, after all,  
they are like the circulating blood in her veins.  
There is a chill briefly rising up  
but she turns away, satisfied  
with her simple work.

She walks to her son's memory garden.  
It is moving now to the palest shades,  
a resting place for falling leaves.  
The graying wind chimes still hang there,  
still sound soft and clean when a breeze lingers.  
She no longer recalls his death, only that he is gone.  
But it is more an ache, the starkest shouting  
edges of her great grief are muffled now,  
like she has cushioned a broken arm  
in a soft warm blanket.  
Now he is just a sweet boy she knew once  
running happily along a summer meadow.

### IV

Eventually, the worst fears arrive --  
tenuous days without margins,  
time passing without note,  
diaphanous and elusive.  
The world where Dali predominates,

where people begin to disappear  
Giacometti-like, even in the light.  
The lush impressionistic images  
finished, forgotten. It is Pollack,  
then Rothko, Serra and Still.  
The hottest colors running amok,  
then cooling. Cold. Grey melting to black.

# Our possessions all have magical qualities

## Eugenia Hepworth Petty

### I

by us  
being possessed  
as much as possible  
to take  
spells                      charms  
the distinctive character of a sound

### II

by us  
existing  
as if by an evil spirit  
crazed                      mad  
wholly so  
unusual  
because that can be  
permissible  
to seize a word  
formulae  
incantation  
enchant  
allure  
fascinate  
delight that which is present  
characteristic fortitude  
in contrast  
with vibrations in air

### III

by us  
to continue being  
just as if by each depraved vivacity  
to crackle blindly  
and foolishly  
enthusiastic  
entirely understood  
exceptional

because that has the moral right  
to remain allowable  
to illumine each proverb  
set of algebraic symbols  
the chanting of words to cast a spell  
bewitch  
entice  
hold motionless  
rejoice that which is in attendance  
distinctive firm courage  
in striking difference  
with supernatural emanations  
in sky

*This poem was created by selecting a single sentence and replacing each meaningful word in the text (verb, noun, adjective, adverb) with its dictionary definition, then repeating this treatment until the poem is completed.  
Source sentence: "Our possessions all have magical qualities" was sourced from the Yakima Herald-Republic 3 Apr. 2014*

# Dusk amid the Cornfield

## Brandon Marlon

Clad in plaid and denim overalls, the solitary figure  
traipses at twilight across acequias into elongated rows  
of husky stalks bedizened in tassels, silk fibers,  
drooping leaf blades, internodes, and brace roots.

She counts the ears as high as five while  
listening to sunset's susurrant gusts,  
palming cobs and fingering kernels,  
hardly noting the diminuendo overhead.

Peace's hour fleets too swiftly for her tastes,  
yet time remains to shuck, boil, and butter  
a meal's worth for her kin and even leave  
a little something for fawning does to nibble.

She doesn't believe in going back to the land  
because she'd never dream of leaving;  
hers is the lineage of stalwart tillers,  
roaming at gloaming with barrows in tow.

# Inheritance

## Linett Luna Tovar

What thoughts did you drink down tonight?  
I wonder, as the corner of my eye  
Sees your profile bleaked by the TV light.

Your shirt, stained with American dream blight,  
And your skin, plastered with powdered lies.  
What thoughts did you drink down tonight?

I want to ask you about your fight,  
But I've grown weak, my tongue does not comply.  
I lie in bed fearing the silence that binds us tight.

The radio waves' lewd caress feels right-  
Your empty workshop filled with what others denied.  
What thoughts did you drink down tonight?

Like sugars, I've cut back on your sight,  
I hear your footsteps in lieu of words or sighs.  
I lie in bed fearing the silence that binds us tight

I scorn your sex, your father, your imposed might,  
The years that glued my arms to my sides.  
What thoughts did you drink down tonight?  
I lie in bed fearing the silence that bounds us tight.

## 2 Poems

### Sarah Johnson

#### Marriage

I was talking to my husband last night  
about black holes; there are two theories.  
If I jumped into a black hole, I could be stretched  
out, thinner than paper, or I could hit a wall of fire. Both  
can't be true, but either way, I would die. Physicists  
want to define what happens, but I just want to crack  
one open, climb inside its nothingness and breathe deep  
the ether. My husband said they didn't affect him  
because they're not on earth. I couldn't understand  
how he could ignore something so great  
that our very skin, the thin lining  
of our hearts would dissolve in it and we would become  
the same darkness.

#### Divorce with Stardust

*From the Hubble Telescope's 3-D visualization of the Veil Nebula*

I called my father last night and asked him  
about the divorce; he told me that he had a cancerous mole  
removed from his forehead two weeks ago. The tissue leftover  
looked like raw salmon, and it stung when he touched it. The doctor  
put some gauze and tape over his new wound; my father  
admitted he hadn't changed the dressing in a week  
because the gauze was stuck to his raw skin. I asked him  
about the divorce again; he said his varicose vein  
finally collapsed on its own last month and left a soft violet  
trail along his calf. He explained the way his other veins absorbed  
the collapsed one, how they blossomed over it slowly  
in muted blue hues. I asked him about the divorce; no one  
understood, he said, how his depression  
worked, how he always felt so outside of his own mind  
that the universe sounded like a bizarre thing and his pupils  
dilated so much his neck veins became constellations in the mirror  
and he lost his breath.

## 2 Poems

### Bethany Reid

#### Afterwards

Two women sit at a three-legged table  
and drink tea. They drink three-legged,

the clock's arms twined like the cats  
underfoot. Two women surfacing

through memory, like divers.  
A green tea thick with stingrays

and hammerhead sharks. Nibbling edges  
of stale compliments, they discard insults,

share slices of pungent cheese  
with the mouse whose tail disappears

through a gap in the wall. Memory  
gaps. If metaphor is a way they take life in

when it cannot be eaten, what they talk  
at this table is another way.

Two women, subjects of Queen Change,  
subjects of oceans and kitchens

where creatures stir and bow, diamonds  
in their shoes. Two women, tipping

forward in their chairs, dreaming a future  
that they have read already in tea leaves,

## Heart's Fed Up

Heart says, "Stick a fork in me, I'm done," stomps  
from the kitchen, fryer and grill still smoking,  
tears up his time card, curses the boss.  
Heart's fed up with being a metaphor,  
red rose, target any arrow can find.  
He'll no longer be chambered like a guest house,  
won't ring like a bell. Won't stand shyly by  
like deer in morning mist, waiting for you.  
He's finished being lion-hearted,  
finished being the coeur in courage, the core  
of anything. He won't be deep as the sea,  
groaning in chains or out of them, won't decorate  
your sleeve, won't break, won't ache,  
won't grow hard as a stone, won't shatter  
like a dropped wine glass. When you wake  
in the night to his terrible knocking, don't bother  
guessing what he wants. Open the door. Listen.

# An Old Photo Rediscovered

## Diane Martin

The tsar's mistress, sleepless spirit,  
has been dancing on the stars again,  
cavorting in the transient,  
translucent clouds, wreaking havoc fit  
to wake the dead.

Rampaging on ungainly pointe,  
kicking up her heels and down the moon  
like a wrecking doll on the ice-  
strewn sea, she smashes it into  
heavy shards and sword-edged, sharp splinters.

This breathing, heaving creaking,  
frozen, blue-bruised wreckage has been  
heaped against the shore,  
a cold, sculptural arabesque  
as thrust stage for the lilac dawn.

A faded border on whose slabs are scratched soon-  
melted laments by a dying swan.

2013

*Sansepolcro, Italy*

**Invention**  
**Jason Kahler**

Invention  
by Jason Kahler

Patent diagrams by

**INVENTOR**  
*Thomas A. Edison*

Electric Vote-Recorder.

No. 90,646.

Patented June 1, 1869.

Edison's first

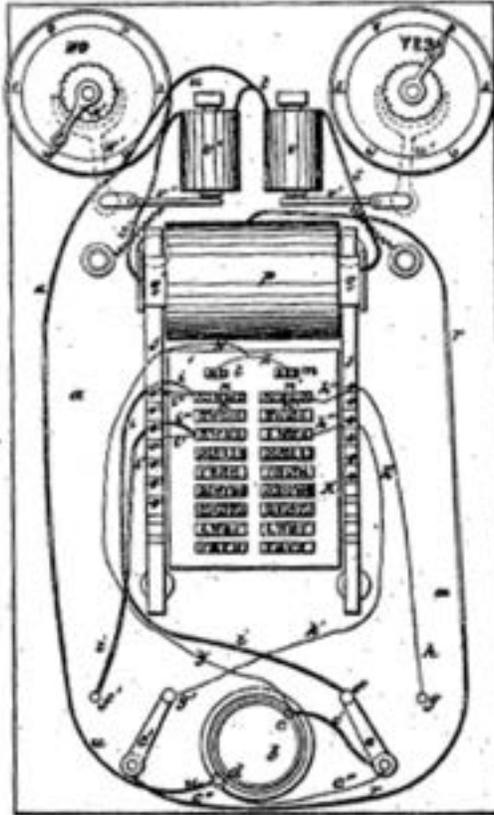
I can trace the path of decision

where was I  
the last time I said "yes"?

All the day's small choices:

breakfast and its pan and the  
dishes I leave when I exit the door  
for work.

Eliot's decisions  
and revisions.



where do the decisions turn?

May 16, 1933.

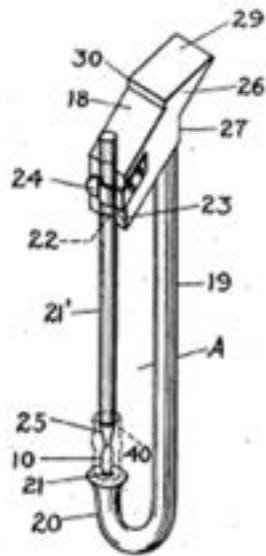
T. A. EDISON

1,908,830

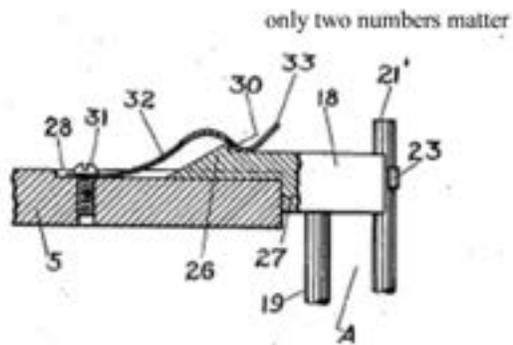
HOLDER FOR ARTICLE TO BE ELECTROPLATED

Original Filed July 6, 1923

all the parts,  
enumerated



*Fig. 1*  
me

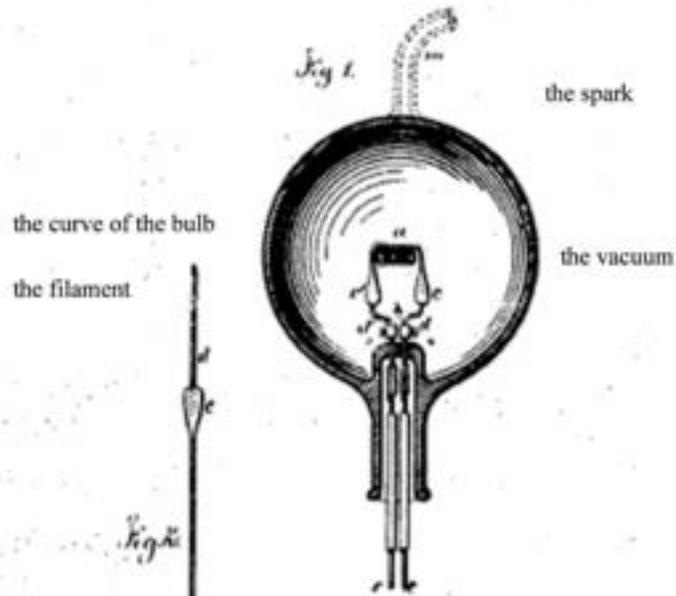


*Fig. 2*  
you

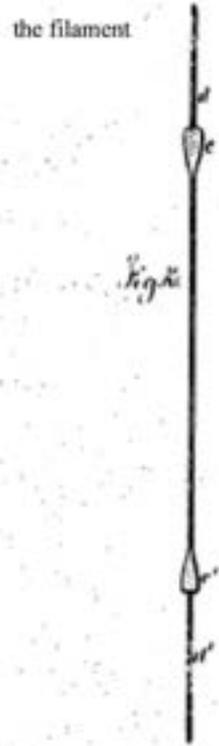
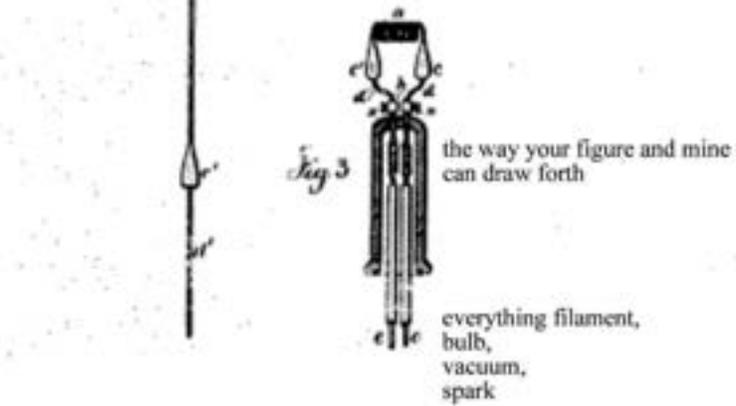
Electric-Lamp.

No. 223,898.

Patented Jan. 27, 1880.



the burning between the spaces



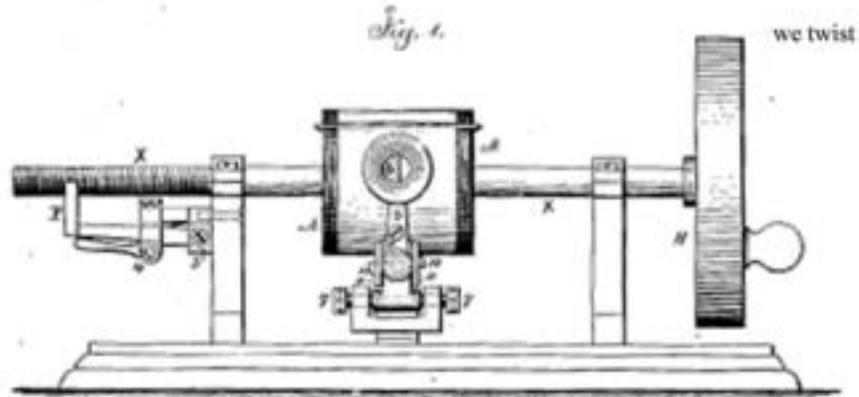
Phonograph.

No. 227,679.

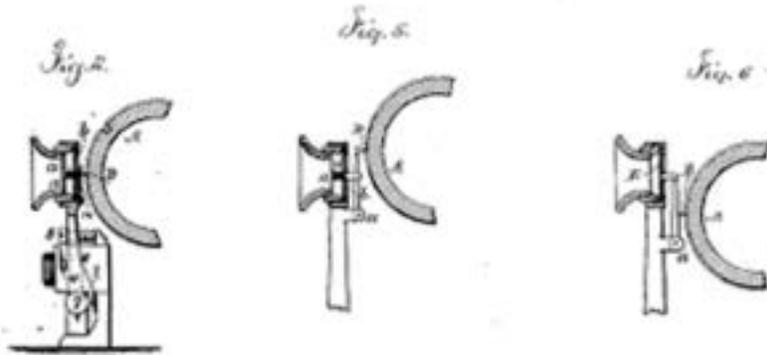
Patented May 18, 1880.

we record ourselves

we never listen



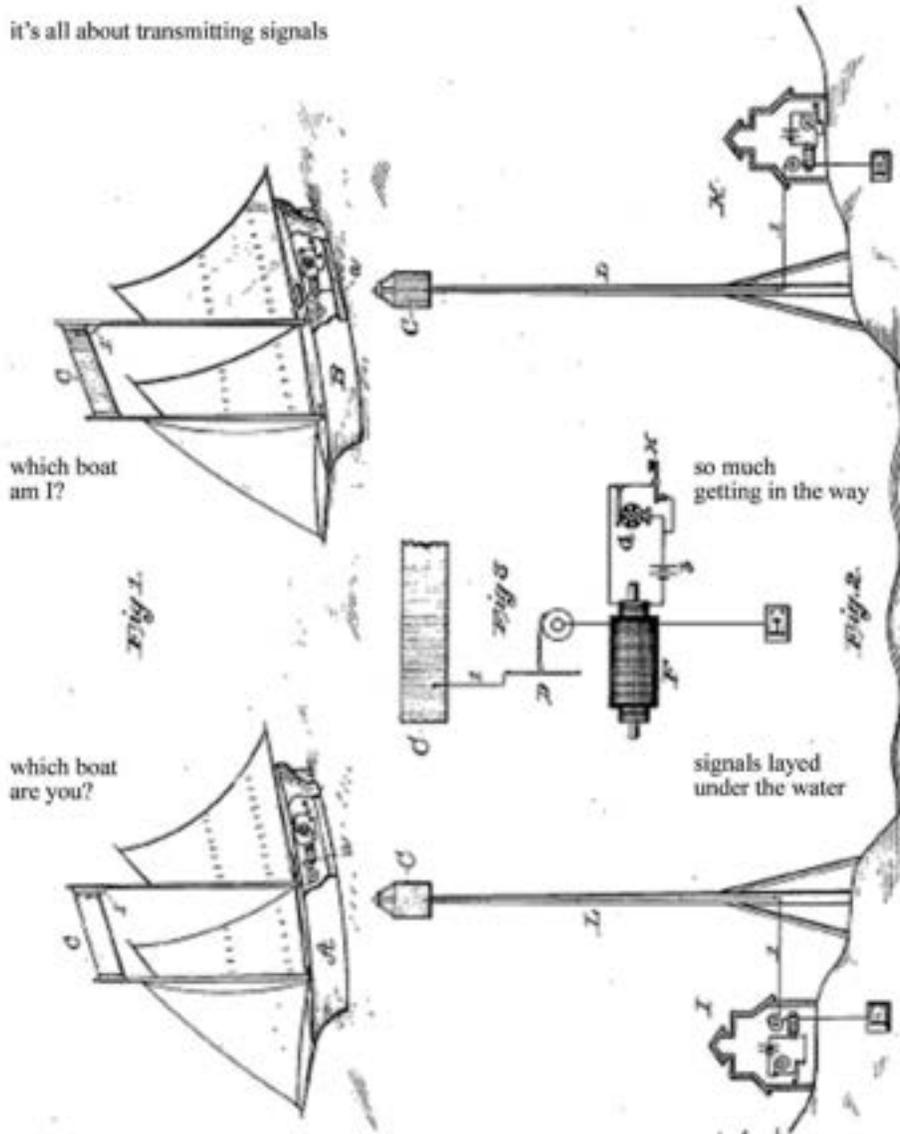
we go through the same movements, the same motions, the same modes



our records are made of wax

MEANS FOR TRANSMITTING SIGNALS ELECTRICALLY.  
 No. 465,971. Patented Dec. 29, 1891.

it's all about transmitting signals

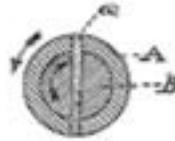


No. 271,614.

SHAPTING.

Patented Feb. 6, 1883.

sometimes,  
there's the obvious



you, A

me, B

# Contributors:

**Kelley Stephens** is a fluid acrylic and resin abstract artist. She naturally draws her creative inspiration from all things emotional, whether her own or someone else's. As Pablo Picasso said, "The artist is a receptacle for emotions that come from all over the place: from the sky, from the earth, from a scrap of paper, from a passing shape, from a spider's web." A cause close to Kelley's heart is helping to prevent suicide, supporting survivors of suicide like herself and raising awareness of the too often stigmatized subject. Kelley was born and raised in Tulsa, Oklahoma, but lately has been clicking her heels and reciting the magical phrase "there's no place like home" to no avail. She admires the wise words of artist Gerard Richter and his abstracts dated 1995-1999 are among her top favorite paintings of all time. You can find Kelley's work in the inaugural edition of *Persephone's Daughters* online now and in coming soon in print, on her YouTube channel where she records her process of creating art and when she feels like it she blogs at Casa de la K.

**Tom Darin Liskey** spent nearly a decade working as a journalist in Venezuela, Argentina and Brazil. He is a graduate of the University of Southern Mississippi. His fiction and non fiction have appeared in the *Crime Factory*, *Driftwood Press*, *Mount Island*, *The Burnside Writers Collective*, *Sassafras Literary Magazine*, and *Biostories*, among others. His photographs have been published in *Hobo Camp Review*, *Roadside Fiction*, *Blue Hour Magazine*, *Synesthesia Literary Journal* and *Midwestern Gothic*. He lives in Texas where he tells his children that he has done worse things for less money.

**Liz Bertsch** is a founding faculty member of Hayground School on eastern Long Island. For the past twenty years, Liz has taught children from three to thirteen years old and is currently teaching a multi-age classroom of kids from five to eleven years old. She holds an undergraduate degree in philosophy from Stony Brook University and a graduate degree from Bank Street College of Education in New York City. She lives in Riverhead, New York with her daughter and husband.

**Nicole Provencher-Natale** [*bio unavailable*]

**Robert L. Penick's** work has appeared in over 100 different literary journals, including *The Hudson Review*, *North American Review*, and *The Carolina Quarterly*. He lives in Louisville, KY, with his free-range box turtle, Sheldon.

**Marlene Olin** was born in Brooklyn, raised in Miami, and educated at the University of Michigan, and is a contributing editor at *Arcadia Magazine*. Her short stories have been featured or are forthcoming in publications such as *The Massachusetts Review*, *upstreet magazine*, *Steam Ticket*, *Vine Leaves*, *Crack the Spine*, *Poetica*, *The Water Stone Review*, *The Santa Clara Review*, *The Broken Plate* and *The Saturday Evening Post online*. She recently completed a novel.

**Danny Judge** [*bio unavailable*]

**Katrina Johnston's** stories are featured at several online publications. She occasionally breaks into print or becomes part of a shared anthology. From lighthearted looks at human existence to others more serious, she cherishes a variety of themes. The winner of the CBC/Canada Writes True Winter Tale, she lives in Victoria, BC, Canada.

**Kevin Brown** is a Professor at Lee University. He has published three books of poetry: *Liturgical Calendar: Poems* (Wipf and Stock); *A Lexicon of Lost Words* (winner of the Violet Reed Haas Prize for Poetry, Snake Nation Press); and *Exit Lines* (Plain View Press, 2009). He also has a memoir, *Another Way: Finding Faith, Then Finding It Again*, and a book of scholarship, *They Love to Tell the Stories: Five Contemporary Novelists Take on the Gospels*. He received his MFA from Murray State University. You can find out more about him and his work at <http://www.kevinbrownwrites.com/>

**Brianne Holmes** is a freelance and fiction writer. Her fiction has appeared in *Burningword Literary Journal*, the *Journal of Microliterature*, *The Café Irreal*, and the podcast *No Extra Words*. She has served on the literary staff of the *Ivy Leaves Journal of Literature and Art* and as an editorial assistant for the *North Carolina Literary Review*. A native of South Carolina, she currently lives in Greenville, NC.

**Ian Delaney's** writing has appeared in *The Rumpus* and *Byzantium*. He lives in the Bay Area and works at McSweeney's.

**Mark Babin** is a native of Metairie, Louisiana and earned his MFA from the University of New Orleans. He is getting back into submitting his writing after a bit of a sabbatical in which he attempted to teach thirteen year-old girls the power of the written word at a private school. While he enjoyed that endeavor, he ultimately decided to focus more on his own writing—perhaps because he was tired of hearing fun-facts about One Direction. He currently teaches composition at Delgado Community College. He also writes a historical humor blog ([www.markedthisday.com](http://www.markedthisday.com)) which promises to divulge the secret of life through the convergence of random historical factoids about each day. While he realizes such a promise may be gobbly-gook, he assures the secret is not the number 42.

**Joe Kilgore** has published over 20 short stories in magazines, creative journals, anthologies, and online literary publications. He is also the author of three published novels: *The Blunder*, *The Golden Dancer*, and *Sin and Sombreros*. Joe also writes book reviews for The US Review. His literary efforts were preceded by a long career in advertising where he wrote television and radio commercials, newspaper and magazine ads, as well as outdoor billboards and internet advertising. Joe lives in Austin, Texas with his wife, Claudia, an accomplished artist, their French bulldog and two precocious cats. If you'd like to know more about Joe and his fiction, visit his website: <http://joekilgore.com>

**Amy Wood** is a British writer whose stories feature in *Opening Line Literary 'Zine* (Sept. & Dec. 2014), *Flashdogs: An Anthology* (Dec. 2014), *Spelk Fiction* (22 Jan. 2015), *Flashdogs Solstice: Light & Dark* (June 2015) and *Flashdogs: Time* (due out 2016). She has won multiple flash fiction contests as well as the monthly short story competition at Creative Writing Ink. Her blog <http://www.amywoodfiction.wordpress.com> showcases more of her short stories and flash fiction.

**Tom Ray** is a retired civil servant, who has devoted his time to writing short stories. His fiction has been published in *New Pop Lit*, *Penny Shorts*, and *Literary Yard*. Tom is a native of Tennessee, and a graduate of the University of Tennessee. After two years of active duty in the U. S. Army, including a tour in Vietnam, he entered U. S. government service as a civilian. He retired after working thirty-five years in the Washington, D.C., area. He has travelled in Europe and Asia, including extensive stays in Paris. His interests include history, politics, and the French and Spanish languages. He currently resides in his hometown of Knoxville with his beautiful wife. His travel these days is

primarily to visit his two gorgeous daughters and darling grandchildren in the San Francisco Bay area.

**Galina Vromen** turned to writing fiction after more than 20 years in journalism in Mexico, France, the Netherlands, England and Israel, mostly as a correspondent for Reuters News Agency. Her fiction, “Sarah’s Story,” has been broadcast on NPR’s Selected Shorts series and her stories have appeared in a number of magazines, including *American Way*, *Adirondack Review*, *Tikkun*, *Ilanot* and *Reform Judaism*. Her story, “The Secret Diary of a Bat-Mitzvah Girl,” was a second-place winner of the Dora Teitelboim International Jewish Writing Contest and was later anthologized in *Best Jewish Writing 2002*. She has a MA in literature from Bar-Ilan University in Israel and a BA in media and anthropology from Hampshire College in Amherst MA. She currently directs two reading readiness programs in Israel, one in Hebrew and one in Arabic which together gift more than 2 million books a year to preschoolers and their families in Israel.

**Nortina Simmons** has been writing since the age of three, inspired by her songwriting, guitar-playing father. Today, she writes poetry and short stories that explore themes of religion, love, race, and the relationships between the older and younger generations. She has been published in *Agave Magazine*, *FishFood Magazine*, *Cease*, *Cows*, *Meat for Tea: The Valley Review*, and *felan*.

**Laura Jensen** is a writer of fiction and creative non-fiction and is a member of the North Carolina Writers' Network. Her work has been published in *A Long Story Short*, *The Storyteller Magazine*, *The Foliate Oak Literary Magazine*, and *Work Literary Magazine*. She was a finalist for the Eric Hoffer Award and her piece appeared in *Best New Writing 2013*. A native of New Jersey, she currently resides in North Carolina.

**Michael Strayer** is a writer from Monterey, California. “Change in the House of Light” is an excerpt from his novel-in-progress, *And Then You're Gone*. He can be reached at [strayer.michael.p@gmail.com](mailto:strayer.michael.p@gmail.com).

**Pete Madzellan** resides in New Mexico with his wife and cat, Manny. He has had short stories and poetry published in *The Dying Goose*, *Poydras Review*, *Cigale Literary*, *Bellowing Ark*, *Vine Leaves Literary Journal*, and *Scapegoat Review*. *Photography in New Mexico Magazine*, *Cargo Literary Journal*, *Gravel*, *Bellingham Review*, *The Boiler*, *Agave Magazine*, *The Meadowland Review*, *Apeiron Review*, *Petrichor Review*, *Photography Center of Cape Cod*, *San Pedro River Review*, *Red Ochre Lit*, *Switchback*, *Off the Coast*, *Foliate Oak*, *convergence: journal of poetry and art*, *Four Ties Lit Review*, and others.

**Gary Glauber** is a poet, fiction writer, and teacher. This past April he took part in *Found Poetry Review's* PoMoSco project. He has received several Pushcart Prize nominations. He is a champion of the underdog who often composes to an obscure power pop soundtrack. His first collection, *Small Consolations* (Aldrich Press) is now available on Amazon.com. A chapbook, *Memory Marries Desire*, is coming from Finishing Line Press in March 2016.

**Jeremy Mele** is a prose writer from Quincy, MA. Currently a student at Salem State University, you can read his opinions at [Salemstatelog.org](http://Salemstatelog.org) (the school’s paper of which he is the editor in chief). His inspirations for writing include John Steinbeck, John Swartzwelder, and Lemony Snicket, as well as far too many comic books to count, and, of course, his mother. His work has also been featured in *Unbuild Walls* and *Yellow Chair Review*.

**Wendy Scott** [*bio unavailable*]

**Kristen Kane** [*bio unavailable*]

**Jon Yungkans** is a Los Angeles-based poet, writer and photographer. His poems reach out to both ear and eye, perhaps sometimes to a fault but, like many things in life, with good intent and the willingness to let the language sing and touch as well as communicate.

**Sandra Kolankiewicz** has published nearly 300 of poems and, most recently in *New World Writing*, *BlazeVox*, *Gargoyle*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Fifth Wednesday*, *Prick of the Spindle*, *Per Contra*, and *Pif*. "Turning Inside Out" won the Black River Prize at Black Lawrence Press. Last September 2014, Finishing Line Press published *The Way You Will Go*. When I Fell, a fully illustrated novel, was released by Web-e-Books in March 2015.

**Russell Thorburn** lives in Marquette, Michigan. He is a recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship in poetry and the first poet laureate of the Upper Peninsula. His noir, *Salt and Blood*, is forthcoming from Marick Press, a narrative wired somewhere between Cormac McCarthy and Raymond Chandler, with its cinematic eye on a barren landscape where his characters loom desperate and screen large in L.A. and Mexico. His songs for Radio On, classical and rock musicians, celebrate Levon Helm on his way to heaven, Rick Danko's last gig at a Michigan folk club, and John Renbourn found dead at his Hawick home on the Scottish border.

**Forrest Evans** is published poet and librarian. She recently received her B.A. in English from Fort Valley State University and is a graduate student of The University of Alabama. Previous works of Evans can be seen in *The Lavender Review*, *The Red Booth Review*, and *The Carnival Literary Magazine*. A military brat, Evans has returned to the south to continue writing and fights under education and gender inequality.

**Kathleen Boyle's** work has been published or is forthcoming in numerous literary magazines, including *Zyzzyva*, *the Seattle Review*, *Natural Bridge*, and many others. She is currently at work on a novel.

**Karina Lutz** is a writer, editor, teacher, and lifelong activist. She helped secure passage of sustainable energy legislation, thwart a proposed megaport, and restore wetlands in her home watershed of Narragansett Bay, RI. In 2013, she received honorable mention from Homebound Publications Poetry Prize for her manuscript, *Preliminary Visions*. Her poems have been published by *Tulane Review*, *Blueline*, *The Transnational*, *Written River*, *The Wayfarer*, *Poecology*, *Bleeding Lion*, *Buddhist Poetry Review*, *Green Living Journal*, and *PDXX Collective*. She has performed her epic peace poem, "Encircling Earth," at dozens of venues in New England.

**S.A. Volz** lives in Evansville, Indiana. His writing has previously appeared in *River & South* and the *Gravel Literary Journal*.

**Anne Kaiser** [*bio unavailable*]

**Jason Jones** recently moved from Roanoke, VA to Charleston, SC. New and forthcoming poems can be found in *Saw Palm*, *Wraparound South*, *Cumberland River Review*, *MockingHeart Review*, and *The Ilanot Review*.

**Michael Coolen** is a pianist, composer, actor, performance artist, storyteller, and writer living in Corvallis, Oregon. His works have been published in *Ethnomusicology*, *Western Folklore*, *Oregon Humanities*, *The Gold Man Review*, *Best Travel Stories: Volume 11*, *Crooked/Shift*, *The Fable Online*, *Twisted Vine*, *The Clementine Poetry Journal*, *Creative Writing Institute*, *Rats Ass Review*, et al. He is a published music composer, whose compositions have been performed around the world, including at Carnegie Hall, the New England Conservatory of Music, MoMA, and the Christie Gallery in New York. He finds mathematics “fascinating.”

**Charles O'Hay** is the author of two poetry collections—*Far from Luck* (2011) and *Smoking in Elevators* (2014)—both published by Lucky Bat Books. His work has appeared in over 125 publications, including *Cortland Review*, *Gargoyle*, and *The New York Quarterly*.

**Mary K O'Melveny** is a recently retired labor rights attorney. She lives part time in Washington, DC and part time in Woodstock, New York. In addition to writing poems, Mary provides volunteer assistance to community organizations working to eliminate human trafficking, to enhance opportunities for people with disabilities and to eliminate discrimination in the workplace. Mary is an active member of a women's' writing group based in the Hudson Valley, New York. Mary considers poetry to be an important avenue for addressing the vagaries and uncertainties of the world we find before us each day. She is currently working on a chapbook.

**Eugenia Hepworth Petty** lives in the Pacific Northwest. She is the author of the chapbook *Pamyat Celo/Memory Village* (Premier Poets Chapbook Series 2007), and the micro chap *People Live Here* (Origami Poems Project 2015). A 3rd chapbook of her poetry, *Instructions for the Apocalypse*, will be published in 2016 through Dancing Girl Press. In addition to writing, Eugenia enjoys shooting film, making letterpress broadsides, and covering objects in wax, resin and glitter. Find her at: [www.eugeniahepworth.com](http://www.eugeniahepworth.com)

**Brandon Marlon** is a writer from Ottawa, Canada. He received his B.A. in Drama & English from the University of Toronto and his M.A. in English from the University of Victoria. His poetry was awarded the Harry Hoyt Lacey Prize in Poetry (Fall 2015), and has been published in more than 85 publications in Canada, U.S.A., England, Ireland, Spain, Greece, Romania, Israel, India, Pakistan, Singapore, South Korea, Australia, South Africa, Nigeria, and Trinidad. [www.brandonmarlon.com](http://www.brandonmarlon.com).

**Linett Luna Tovar** is a Pomona, CA-based lover, youth advocate, writer, performer, activist, and life-long learner. She draws primarily on her lens as a queer woman and undocumented immigrant to write poetry that explores themes of freedom, the body, family, culture, migration, feminism, education, friendship, and environmentalism /environmental justice. She hopes her work brings connection and joy, while in a small way contributing to the smashing of the white supremacist capitalist patriarchy.

**Sarah Johnson** is finishing up her MFA degree at American University in Washington, D.C., when she isn't writing poems or running a marathon. Her work appears in *Bird's Thumb*.

**Bethany Reid** is the author of *Sparrow*, winner of the 2012 Gell Poetry Prize, selected by Dorianne Laux. Her poems have appeared in numerous journals and anthologies, including *Pontoon*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Cairn*, *Stringtown*, *Blackbird*, and *Calyx*. She blogs at <http://awritersalchemy.wordpress.com/> and lives in Edmonds, Washington, with her husband, three daughters, and a menagerie of animals.

**Diane G. Martin** is a specialist in Russian literature, art history and theater, as well as a reluctant nomad, who has published her poetry and prose in *The Willamette Review of the Liberal Arts*, *Portland Review of Art*, *Pentimento*, *Vine Leaves Literary Journal*, and now in *Twisted Vine Literary Arts Journal*. Her essays have been broadcast on *Maine Things Considered*, and she has been interviewed on other radio programs in the USA and Russia, where she lived for 12 years. She also has published numerous translations spanning three decades. Her photography has been exhibited in the US, Russia, and Italy.

**Jason Kahler** earned his PhD in Composition and Rhetoric from Wayne State University, and he teaches writing at Saginaw Valley State University. His interests include technology, comic books, motion pictures, and zombies. His poems and lyric essays have appeared in *Seneca Review*, *Fourteen Hills*, and *Arsenic Lobster*. Thomas Edison holds 1093 U.S. patents. He died in 1931.