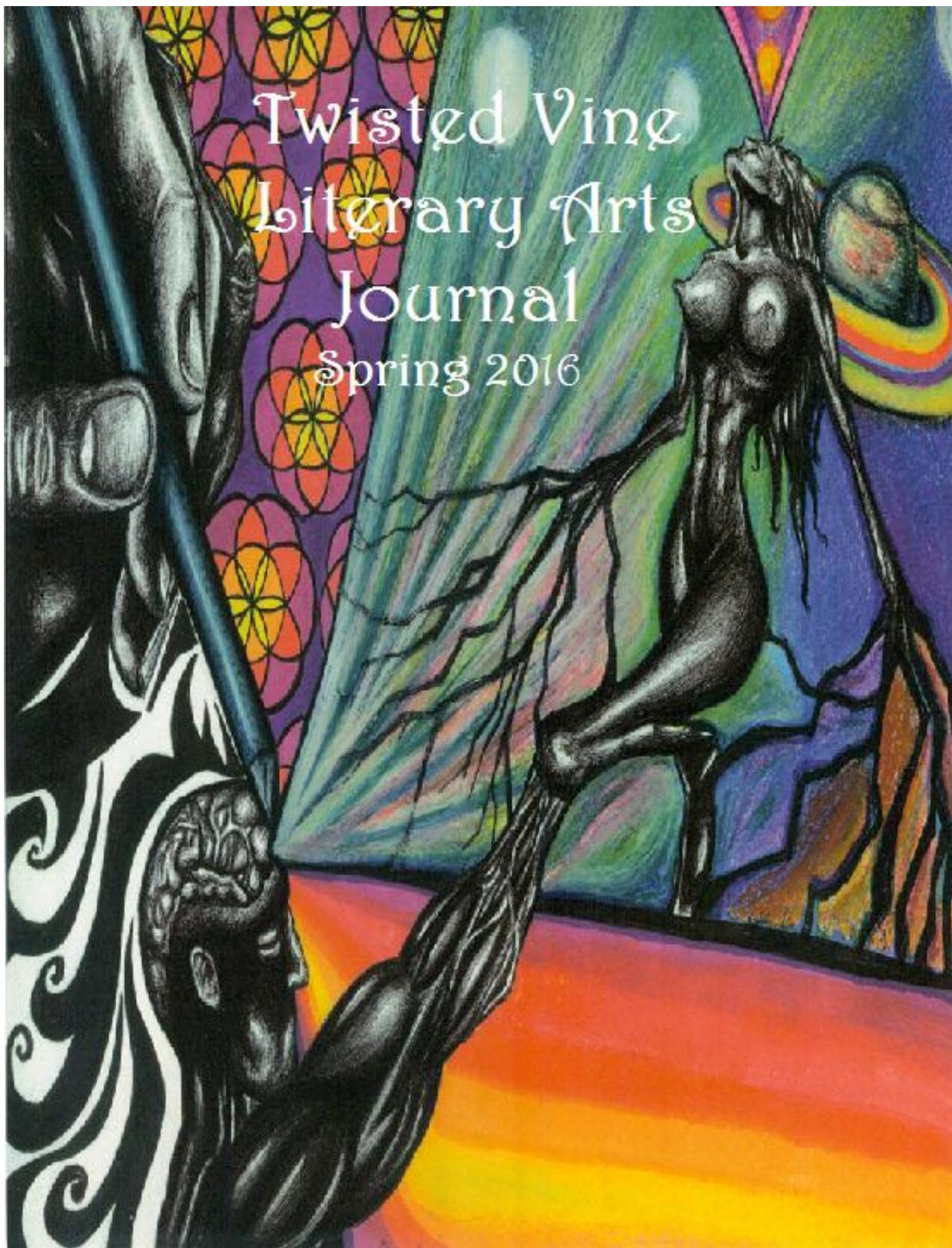


Cover Art:
Cosmo Planetary Morphogenesis
By Anthony Alvarez



Masthead:

Judy Riley | Chief Editor/IT

Mary Courtwright | Reader/Social Media

Rachel Selimovic | Reader

John Gist | Faculty Advisor

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Cover Art

Anthony Alvarez is a visionary artist originally from Indiana who currently resides in Colorado. His artwork is a direct reflection of his personal growth. He creates his work from visions channeled during a fasting state. His creations reflect oneness, spirituality, sustainability and the unity of all nations. He portrays an ancient story of creation throughout his work – a recreation of esoteric, symbolism and iconography. <http://zeravlaalvarez.ninja>

Letter from the Editor

Welcome to the 6th Edition of Twisted Vine Literary Arts Journal. We are proud to present you with an eclectic array of talented authors and artists. You can learn more about the contributors by reading their bios at the end of each individual's work.

The process of publishing Twisted Vine has been a wonderful learning experience, from reading submissions, communicating with contributors, designing layout and so much more. It is through the dedication of Professor Gist and Western New Mexico University we are able to receive this unique experience. It has been my good fortune to have worked with the entire Twisted Vine Literary Arts Journal staff.

A special thank you to our contributors who truly make Twisted Vine come to life with each unique story, poem and piece of artwork. Together they form a journey we are truly proud to present to you the reader.

It is our hope that Twisted Vine Literary Arts Journal be an inspiration to all! Enjoy!

Judy Riley
Chief Editor
Twisted Vine Literary Arts Journal

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The Solitude of the Planets

By Michael Dutton

It never ends, he concedes, turning from the dying light of the window and returning to the kitchen table. *It's always the same circular path, the same orbit around that fixed object of attraction.*

Sitting, he dips a level teaspoon of sugar into a cup of green tea and stirs, the sound of the spoon chipping the porcelain silence of the room. He sips, swallows, lowers the teacup back into the round groove of the saucer.

On the wall over the sink, the clock is a faucet that drips seconds in measured strokes. Each minute is a fluid ounce, each hour...

A half gallon? he calculates, adding: *How many ounces does it take to drown?*

Sometimes, when Sheila is attending her computer class or her painting lesson or visiting her friend, Marcy, down the street, he sits alone at the kitchen table, drinking tea and imagining her. He visualizes the staccato movement of her long, slender fingers, punching keystrokes into the computer, but fails in his attempts to decipher on the monitor what she has input. He pictures the graceful sweep of her hand, applying brushstrokes across the surface of canvas, though he cannot envision what she has painted. In the conversations between Sheila and Marcy, he imagines the exchange of mouths speaking, the volley of words between them and the rhyme of their facial expressions, but falls short when he tries to comprehend what they may have said to each other.

At other times he closes his eyes and pictures Sheila, seated in an ornate chair in the center of a room. The room is so large that its walls cannot be discerned. Its ceiling and floor are invisible, allowing her golden grace to illuminate all that surrounds her. In the chair that he encircles again and again, his fingers gravitate toward the blond tresses of her hair, toward the bronze complexion that highlights the flawless texture of her skin.

So enamored is he, so overwhelmed by Sheila, that he has charged memory with the impossible task of recording all the details of her features, which change constantly in the seasons, in the elements, in the swing of light and shadow from morning to night. The mental snapshot of her hair on a warm and humid June twenty-ninth is a world apart from the photograph on a cold and windy December third. The clusters of minute freckles, spread across the tanned sky of her cheeks on a beach on August sixteenth, are not the same constellations that appeared at a nightclub on February tenth.

The challenges to memory are endless.

In this room that he has constructed, in this room of indeterminate dimension, a phenomenon occurs with the same implacable precision as the clock over the sink. It is simple enough, and predictable, but he can neither manage nor control its persistence: seated in the chair, in the room—lustrous and radiant...*Sheila blinks her eyes.* She blinks her eyes, and in that sudden

deluge of darkness, in those brief ocular eclipses of eyelids closing, he is swallowed whole into the suffocating tomb of a black hole. In that fleeting, fractional ounce of time, it's as if he were...*blinked*...blinked out of existence.

The door to the apartment opens and closes. Footsteps. The flick of a switch and then a blaze of fluorescence floods into the kitchen, fragmenting the darkness into shadows that are swept like flotsam behind the toaster and the microwave, to the floor beneath the table and chairs, into the recesses of the cabinets.

"Why are you sitting in the dark?" Sheila asks, opening the refrigerator and grabbing the bottle of wine.

"I was thinking about things," he replies, lifting his cup and drinking, though the tea has cooled to room temperature.

"You think too much," she says, uncorking the bottle and pouring the wine into a juice glass.

She leans against the counter to face him, but looks at the disarray of newspapers, magazines, junk mail scattered across the table. "Did any of my catalogues come in?" she asks, lifting her glass to drink.

"No," he answers. "But your magazine came—the travel and leisure one."

She moves toward the table and fingers through the assortment of mail until she finds it. On the cover is the depiction of a romantic tableau: a handsome couple, dressed in elegant eveningwear, strolls along a seaside esplanade. Palm trees. Sands of a tropical beach, burnt orange. The horizon, ignited by the sun going down, is a dying furnace, its fuel dwindling in the advance of night.

"Marcy and I are going out for a couple of drinks," she announces, tossing the magazine back on the table and turning away.

"I thought we were going to the movies?"

She sips her wine, pushes a tress of hair away from her face. "We can go tomorrow night," she says, moving toward the bedroom to change, snapping the kitchen light off as she leaves.

Through the window, a star twinkles—*blinks*—in the evening sky. Measured increments fall from the clock into the sink.

That was three days—nearly...nearly forty gallons ago—that he saw her last. The cycle does not change. After more than a year of living with Sheila, it is always the same pattern of departures and returns, the duration of her absence ranging from a single night to as long as a five-day stretch. In the interim he knows: Sheila makes love with Marcy; or, in venturing beyond the gates of their private intimacies, Sheila moves from club to club and finds men with Marcy, the pair of them rotating their respective finds until their mutual appetites are sated.

Jealousy is a knife that he holds at bay with cramped, calloused hands. Sitting in the darkness of the kitchen, he squeezes the handle of the razor-sharp blade, selecting targets. There is Marcy, of course; and the nameless men that he watched from a distance as they approached Sheila to touch her, to take her away to their cars, their apartments; and faceless men (and women perhaps) that she called on the telephone as he listened through the bathroom door, her voice distinctly pleasant and playful.

With Sheila away, with Sheila...temporarily absent, he sits in the kitchen in the evening, drinking tea as he drifts between two seasons. In the season of memory he scans the archives, selecting one mental snapshot after another, casting each of them in dogged succession upon the projection screen. In this sequence he watches her from the bedroom as she stepped from the shower across the hall, dragged a white towel across the arches of her body, applied dabs of an ointment that she swirled across the surfaces of her skin and which glistened in the bathroom light like flares of sunspots. In another sequence he sees her in the lovely, cream-colored dress that she wore at his second cousin's wedding, and afterwards—after the reception—her eyes were a wispy aquamarine as they strolled along the beach, ducked behind a sand dune to strip away silk panties and cotton briefs.

In the season of fantasy he designs futures from what are becoming increasingly suspect pasts. He selects one photograph after another, cropping them, surgically removing images of Sheila and himself—like paper dolls cut from the pages of a magazine—to paste them against the background of another photograph. In this first one he imagines them swimming nude in a crystal lake that he had seen in one of her travel magazines. In another they are on the beach of a tropical island, exchanging vows that he had drafted three months ago. Her wedding dress is an eggshell crepe de chine that flows in the wave of an ocean breeze. A third scenario reveals them in the church of St. Ives where his infant nephew was baptized. He pulls Sheila down across the wooden pew to drink the luxury of her mouth and skin, her eyes changing in the colorations of light that are filtered down through the stained-glass panel of a figure, wingéd and angelic.

Sitting in the darkness of the kitchen, he remembers and he invents. But sometimes—often times—it is so difficult to recognize the order of the known universe. Shuffling through the vast library of images that he has consigned to memory, he inspects a photograph.

Was this real? he asks with somber illumination. *Or was it a fabrication, a collage, assembled yesterday or last week from shards of other photographs, comprised of other realities...of other fantasies?*

As hard as he might try, the spillage between memory and fantasy cannot be controlled. The failure to manage the diffusion of desire—the massive bleeding of images from the wrinkled Polaroids of memory into the wild choreography of wishful pantomimes—leaves him with the growing disillusion that, at some point in time, he will not be able to retrieve a single photographic frame which has not been manipulated, crafted into something utterly fanciful...thoroughly false.

Snows falling in summer.

Flowers blooming in the dead of winter, he imagines.

Seasons eclipse...and the cycle does not change.

He is in the park across from the apartment now. He is in the park, moving along the wide, circular configuration of its pathways, walking hour upon hour, until he is so exhausted that he collapses on a park bench.

A pair of senior citizens moves by, holding hands. In the setting sun their faces have the stained, pitted, luminescent features of full moons.

The same jogger runs by in what will be a dozen laps, a calendar of orbits. Stopping in a mid-summer month (July, one could speculate, since his body glistens with sweat), he catches his breath; drinks from a fountain; stretches the muscles of his legs before starting another lap (running toward August, one might postulate).

A woman on a bicycle, a man on a bicycle—riding by, they have the same black helmets, the same white sneakers. Clipped to the spokes of their bicycles, blue reflectors are spinning circles that are maintained by dual continuities of motion. The face of the woman reveals almond eyes and a field of freckles, reminiscent of Sheila at a dinner party on April thirteenth. The face of the man, flushed by his strenuous attempts to keep pace with his partner, is the color of a lipstick that Sheila used only once on New Year's Eve.

A young woman passes by, walking her French poodle. The dog tests the length of his leash as he sniffs about, burrowing his nose in a clutter of leaves, smelling the bark of a tree or a clump of grass, identifying a remotely familiar scent.

Chanel No. 5, he thinks, remembering that on her twenty-ninth birthday he gave Sheila a bottle. It wasn't the watered-down version of the cologne, but the good stuff—the perfume. She dabs it behind her ears, at the base of her throat, around the flaxen triangle that is framed by the creases of her thighs and the waistband of her panties.

"Marcy adores Chanel," remarked Sheila, applying the fragrance when she visits her friend, tucking the bottle into her pocketbook before leaving.

In the park now night is pushing the sun away. Long streams of clouds are polychromatic fingers, splayed against the darkening sky. As night shuts the prism down with the clenched tightness of a fist, he poses: *What if she doesn't return this time? What if she never returns?*

In the park stars are needle points that puncture the expanding darkness. Two planets, in measured patterns of orbit, are made visible by the reflection of solar light.

When he was a child, he would sit on the floor by his bedroom window in his mother's house. He would read stories of gods and goddesses from an old set of encyclopedias, flipping to the

cross-references listed at the conclusion of each story and consuming them with a hunger that rivaled the Furies. When he finished reading, he would turn out the light and gaze through the window into the night sky, picking out the planets and the constellations, picturing the heavenly deities for whom they were named.

Venus...Venus and Mars.

The Pleiades.

Cassiopeia's Chair.

In the bedroom of his mother's house, he would close his eyes and sleep in the solitude of the planets and stars, wheeling silent and serene across the night sky.

On the bench in the park, in the darkness, he constructs another room. Spacious as a ballroom, three of the walls are painted bright ochre though the color is barely visible by the sparse light that spills through the fourth wall, which is made entirely of glass. At the center of the room is an empty chair. On the wall behind the chair, a clock drips seconds that puddle across a tile floor.

Through the glass wall he sees that the room is perched on the edge of an abyss. Awkward convolutions of rock jut from the nearly imperceptible cliff on the other side, the length and curvature of the formations resembling petrified fingers that would snap at the slightest provocation, plunging into the void below. Veins, scribbled into the rock in varying shades, suggest a planet rich in mineral deposits. But without a sustainable atmosphere, with neither vegetation nor animal life, conditions on the dark side of the planet, Mercury, are wholly adverse to human habitation. And with only the snail's pace of a rotational spin, the planet...

How many gallons must the clock spew before the next sunrise?

On the horizon beyond the abyss, the red speck of the planet, Mars, is faintly illuminated. Staring into the light of the planet, he evokes a suspect photograph from memory, shaping its contents as he forges an image. Mars is a thin, pale man, he seems to remember, with large freckled hands and red hair that glistened in the sun as if pasted in place with a greasy substance.

Twenty-five? Thirty? he may have speculated about the man's age, turning the wheel on the binoculars, focusing on the red-haired man as he stops at a blanket and peels his shirt off. He looks toward the sea, lies down beside Sheila in her yellow bikini, his freckled hands sliding across the topographical highlights of her body.

It was a Saturday or Sunday in June or July, he seems to recall.

The tufts of clouds, raked across the surface of Venus, resemble the thick waves of hair that Marcy frequently pulls back into a tight ponytail. Or: the swift sweep of clouds across the planet might suggest the rapid movements of two women, struggling to disrobe each other, to embrace as he watches through the bedroom window of Marcy's apartment. Fog, lacquered across the

glass of the window, compels him to interpret, to magnify their passions and pleasures unbearably.

It is the unmistakable blueness of planet Earth that provokes the image of the doctor as he exited the tavern with Sheila, the two of them slipping down the alley to the parking lot. They climbed into the back seat of his sky-blue BMW, tugging at each other's clothes as if there were no tomorrow.

Funny, he may have thought afterwards. *Funny because there wasn't any—any tomorrow, that is*, because the doctor dropped her off less than two hours later.

On the sidewalk in front of the apartment, Sheila got out of his car, shouted obscenities to the man before slamming the door shut. The man—the doctor—stepped on the gas and sped away, the tires of his car screeching in the hollow night. For more than a week afterwards, the same car, with the same “MD TODD” license plates, circled the block, slowing down for each pass in front of the apartment.

“Is it someone you know?” he asked Sheila.

“No,” she lied without flinching. “I don't know any MD TODDs.”

The planets Jupiter, Saturn and Uranus are much deeper in space, but advance to the foreground as they are brought into focus. The large planets are frayed snapshots of three men, considerably older than Sheila, and substantially overweight, he seems to recall, their arms draped about her, their hands groping, grasping clumps of moist flesh. From the dimness of the booth in the corner of the barroom, he watched them as they bought her shots; lit up her cigarettes; kissed her bare neck and shoulders. Afterwards, in the wetness of the light spring rain, he may have seen the pointed hardness of her nipples, straining against the thin fabric of her summer dress as they assisted her back to their hotel.

Neptune and Pluto, stark moons, rogue celestial bodies roam through space at varying speeds, at indeterminate distances. A blur of images, they are a mixed population of suspects, having characteristics that suggest the mailman and the landlord, the art teacher and the instructor of her computer class, the minister at his second cousin's wedding.

In the park now a dog barks from the far street corner.

A falling star slices the skyline.

The hands of his watch measure absence in fathoms.

Sitting on the bench in the dark, night has settled like a damp blanket, pulled rough and woolen against an uncomfortable mattress. The planets swing across the black drape of the sky. They move in perpetual orbit, like cosmic heliotropes, around that fixed object of attraction, which—if one looks long enough into its blinding brilliance—evokes the same striking features that he remembers, or invents.

Michael Dutton is the author of “Christmasville” and “Finding Christmasville,” which were written in the genre of magical realism and represent the first and second novels of the Christmasville Trilogy. The novels trace the discoveries and experiences of three women as they attempt to unravel the enigma of “Christmasville,” which may perhaps be little more than a Christmas village, situated on a 4 x 8 model train platform.

Michael is currently writing the third novel of the trilogy, editing short stories (literary in genre) for publication as a collection later this year and continuing his “casino novel,” which is a fictional distillation of his employment as a controller/director in the hotel and casino industry. The novel incorporates characteristic nuances of Machiavelli and Franz Kafka, P. T. Barnum and M. C. Escher since eight of the “casino” years was spent in employment at Trump Plaza in Atlantic City, dramatically culminating in Michael’s firing of Trump as his employer (Indeed! – Who among many can make that claim?)

Michael presently lives in Newport, RI, with his wife and daughters, tends to his organic gardens and is part of a group, who – for the past several years -have been constructing the tall ship, “Oliver Hazard Perry” (for details: www.ohpri.org).

Losses

By Erika Price

“Unfortunately, there is no mistake,” she said, closing the file. “Miss Lilienfield’s death certificate was issued by our office three months ago. Let’s see...April second.”

Redge didn’t say anything to the coroner’s assistant. His hand was gripping the strange green laminate of her desk. The air smelled like winter despite the intense heat outside. It was the first true scorcher of the summer, and everything beyond the coroner’s dirty metal doors was wet and coming apart. The roads shimmered and everyone’s skin was damp. Here, though, things were frigid. The sweat in Redge’s armpits and in between his thighs had gone cold.

Mentally, Redge corrected the woman at the desk. Miss Lilienfield? No, that wasn’t right — neither was Ms. or Mrs. for that matter. In the winter, beside the hot tub, Lilienfield had said something to Redge about not feeling at all like a woman.

“You don’t strike me as being a man,” Redge had said.

Lilienfield’s eyebrows lifted, then, and a drunken giggle escaped her – no, their — mouth. Redge was relieved that his words hadn’t offended. “No, yeah, that’s true. I don’t think being a man would look good on me. I don’t need all of that. I don’t know.

Lilienfield gave a playful twist of the hand. Redge reached over the lip of tub to grab it. “I guess that just means you’re a person.”

And Lilienfield had smirked, said, “Close enough,” and padded on bare feet back into the stairwell and out of Redge’s sight. He’d seen them again, after that. But not often, and their meetings were never as significant as that one had been. Small conversations over barista counters and at bus stops, winking moments on dance floors or in barns while house music played and kept their voices separated. And now Lilienfield was dead and there would be no more of that.

“I can’t give you the certificate,” the coroner’s assistant told him. “But I can direct you to the obituary if you like.”

She was a freckled, gangly black woman in a worn, pilled cardigan. She seemed young. Too young to be here, with nothing but bodies and the aggrieved around her. She deserved to be standing on the sidewalk, sweating in a dress and leather sandals, cooling herself with a glass bottled Coke.

“Oh, that’s okay,” Redge told her. Already she was typing and staring off. Then she swiveled her monitor to reveal that she’d been Googling Willa Lilienfield’s name and date of death. Google. As it were some government bureaucrat’s tool that Redge had never heard of. She didn’t even

bother to click a result. And yet she looked up at him, dark brown eyes shining with goodwill and a practiced empathic sorrow. God she was young.

The first result was a two-sentence post in the Windsor Standard.

Willa Lilienfield, survived by mother Emily Lilienfield and father Joel Hernandez. In lieu of flowers, please send donations in Willa's memory to the Windsor Queer Youth Center, wqyc.ca/give

No mention of where or how Lilienfield died. No acknowledgement of her young age. Nothing about who she'd been, or more importantly, who she might have become, had she lived.

"I'm sorry for your loss," the coroner's assistant said.

Redge looked at her. "What's your name?"

"Sarita," she told him. She didn't seem bothered. All these cold bodies and sad survivors and doctors in scrubs; maybe she liked seeing somebody as young as her, someone who didn't know what to make of all of this death.

But Redge didn't say anything. It seemed too perverse to demand anything else of her, in this place of all places.

"I guess you weren't close," Sarita said with a shrug. "Or you would have known she...had passed. An old classmate I'm guessing?"

He smiled at her. "A coworker, but yeah. I just figured she-" his voice cut out. Failed him. "That Willa had just-"

Sarita leaned in and shook her head an amount that was barely perceivable. "People lose touch. You never expect that this is the reason."

"I'm getting a drink," Redge said quickly, jamming his hands into his pockets. "At that place down the street, Spago's?"

"Spago," Sarita said carefully. "It's not possessive. Only one S."

Redge nodded. Jingled his keys. "So it's uh, five thirty, I'm assuming you get off soon. Unless this is the kind of job where you have to wait around all night or something...I mean, I guess people die all the time."

She laughed a little, an airy chuckle that wrinkled the corners of her eyes more than it made a sound.

"Sorry. Oh my God I'm being such a fucking nightmare."

She shook her head. “No. It’s okay. Um. Only medical staff work here overnight. I go home.”

“Well,” Redge said, rubbing at the back of his head and stepping away so as to seem as non-threatening as possible. “If you want to swing by Spago’s...Spago. After you’re done. I’ll buy you a drink. And I promise not to talk to you about my, like, grief.”

“I’ll think about it,” she said, twisting the monitor and returning to her work.

“They – the deceased. They were my friend. We were the only queer people at my old job.”

Sarita looked back at him. “Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. At some point they got fired and things went south and we lost touch. But I feel like...it means something. I think it’s gonna mean a lot to me, when it hits me, now that I know it’s not a rumor.”

She took a sip from a straw poking out of a Diet Coke can and considered this. “I think that’s how it works for some,” she said. “It’s called ‘complicated grief’.”

“They teach you about that here?”

She looked slightly offended. “No, I read some books about it.”

“Oh, of course. Yeah.” He looked down. “Sorry. Okay. I’m, um, gonna go. But I owe you a drink and if you’d like to teach me what you know about grief...that would be really, um, lovely.”

Her eyes softened. “Maybe.”

Spago was a generic Italian restaurant with a long, dark bar tucked behind the hostess’ station. Redge had been sitting there drinking vodka and cranberry juice and reading Lilienfield’s blog on his phone for half an hour when Sarita came in, her drab cardigan gone, a bright green dress in a kinky print revealing the elaborate, feathery tattoos that were lurking underneath.

Redge stood to greet her, and found himself hugging her as if they were forty-somethings who’d been conned into going on a blind date. This was fitting, given the rest of Spago’s uncomfortable-seeming Thursday night clientele.

“My God, I can’t believe you weren’t terrified of me,” he said. It really did seem miraculous, her being here. Street parking was nearly non-existent for five or six blocks, and the thought of her walking there straight from the coroner’s office seemed wrong, somehow.

Sarita edged onto a bar stool. “Should I be terrified of you? Did you murder that poor girl?”

Redge wasn't aware of how his own face reacted, but he could see Sarita's expression quickly shift from winsome into horrified and then distant.

"I'm sorry," she said. "That was a terrible joke. I should really..,"

"Coroner humor." Redge offered. "I'm sure you get anesthetized to it. What are you drinking?"

Sarita fingered the laminated menu. The bartender was at her side in an instant, seeming already perturbed.

"I'll have this, um, Blackberry Fizz thing?"

"Perfect," Redge cut in. "So refreshing, so summery."

"I saw what you had and thought, I need some juice with my booze, too."

Behind the bar there was a mirror. They looked at themselves in it for a moment, heads hovering above rows of brown and green and clear bottles.

"I guess most of your visitors are like family members and investigators, huh," Redge said.

She shook her head, reaching for the drink as it was passed wordlessly to her, poured unceremoniously from a plastic pitcher below the bar. "No, not many cops. There's very few murders really. And not as much family as you'd think, either. Lots of funeral directors."

"Oh." Redge readjusted his coaster.

"But when something like that girl happens," Sarita said, "It has this way of waking you up. It doesn't disturb you, you know. If it did, you'd be wrecked all the time. So you don't get scared or grossed out or sad, after a point. You get numb and blasé. But when it's somebody young or it's sad or gruesome, you get woken up. And it's like you can remember what death really is, again, and how most people feel about it.

As she spoke, her eyes traced the ceiling. It was covered with dark wood and green lamps hanging from tarnished hooks. After she had finished speaking, Sarita leaned in, and directed the straw into her mouth with a dart of her tongue.

"Do you remember Lilienfield's case?" he asked her. "I mean, I guess that's a stupid question, you must get so many—"

"I remember Lilienfield's case."

Redge sat up, unsure how to proceed. If he asked, he'd be forced to know forever. He could forget all of this if he didn't. Let it pass on. Someday he'd be smoking in the back yard with the hot tub and somebody would ask what happened to the Lilienfield girl, and wasn't she so strange — and maybe, if he worked hard enough at it, Redge would be unable to answer.

Sarita was staring at him. Her gaze danced from one eye to the other, challenging him, sobering him.

“What happened to her?” Redge asked.

“It’s really not appropriate or ethical for me to say,” she told him. “I don’t even talk about this stuff with my best friends-”

“I’m sure your friends don’t want to hear about any of it.”

A smile. A sip. “That’s true. They get so uncomfortable. But just as friends...I could speak anonymously about a case, so long as I used no identifying information whatsoever.”

Redge placed his elbows on the bar. Sarita was staring at her reflection again, smiling into it. There was very little happiness in it.

“So as a friend, tell me about a case. Like, purely anonymously.”

Sarita took a drink. Smoothed her skirt and left her fingers there, playing at the hem. “There was a girl-”

“A person,” Redge corrected.

“A person who got very sick. She — they — had pneumonia. It got into their lungs. It was bad. But still, it’s pneumonia. Most healthy adults survive.”

Sarita gulped and stole a look at him. He shrugged a fraction, wanting to be nonplussed by the facts of it. Pus in the lungs was only horrific if you pictured the body laid flat and cut open.

“But she wasn’t healthy. The...patient had a lot of medications. Anti-depressants and anti-psychotics and blood sugar medication for Type 1 diabetes. They must have lost a lot of weight very recently, and perhaps not very safely-”

A look. Redge pulled the coaster out from under his glass, started folding its corners back and forth until the paper began to crack.

Sarita continued, “They did not see a doctor soon enough. They took some Dimetapp instead. And it, mixed with all of the, well, meds and the alcohol on an empty stomach-”

“Were they asleep?”

“Yes.” She nodded vigorously now, something catching in her throat. “The patient went to sleep and simply never woke up.”

Redge stood up.

“I’m sorry—”

He waved this away. “I’m just going to the bathroom. I’m not upset.”

Sarita watched him as he disappeared into the back of the restaurant, weaving slowly between tables and chairs and wait staff holding long flat stones piled high with piping hot pizzas.

Lilienfield had a lot of problems, sure. Redge knew that. They all had lots of problems. He was a grocery store barista with an Honor’s degree in Political Science. They nearly finished a Computational Philosophy five-year Master’s program before their health took a turn, at which point they moved back home and started bagging groceries. They and their friends spent a lot of time smoking in dirty living rooms and trying to score something more serious, something that would give them the insight required to move past their place, their routine.

Lilienfield was 98 pounds of sickly bitterness. Skin cancer. Manic episodes. Tremors that the medication gave them, which nothing but the exact right strain of weed could take away. They sat in the hot tub and drank till all the blood rushed to their heads and were flushed in the face and their tongue was thick. They crawled out and hit the snow on their belly, then remained there, alligator-like in their posture and movements.

On Lilienfield’s back Redge could detect the silvery shimmer of a long scar. Surgical probably, but maybe worse. Though who was to say which was worse? Paying to be cut open was nearly as traumatic as having it come out of nowhere.

“You need to go rest, girly,” he’d said, watching the ash floating among the pump-generated bubbles.

“I’m not a girl,” Lilienfield had mumbled into the cold earth. As they struggled to push themselves into a kneeling position, he’d actually laughed.

“Oh yeah? Then what are you? A squirrel?”

“I’m not a woman,” Lilienfield hiccupped. “I don’t know, dude, I don’t know.”

They were shaking. As he spoke, Lilienfield teetered and gripped at the side of the plastic basin, rose and then righted themselves and squinted at his face.

“No, yeah, that’s true,” Lilienfield had said, struggling to speak but still desperate for understanding. “I don’t think being a man would look good on me. I don’t need all of that. I don’t know.”

A twist of the hand. A reach; a miss. Redge had said, “I guess that just means you’re a person.”

And Lilienfield had smirked, said, “Close enough,” and left him there to finish the bottle of Merlot, filched from the grocery store dumpster earlier that evening. They were both fired for it by the end of the week.

He’d gone on to a job in the casino’s buffet line and Lilienfield had gone on to...nothing. Last time he saw them, they were carrying a stack of philosophy and math texts to a used bookstore in a strip mall. It was early March and they had nothing on but a stringy t-shirt, damp Uggs and terrycloth shorts.

“Looks like you’re self-employed,” Redge had called from his car, handing them a bottle of Champagne hiding in a crumpled paper bag. It too had been stolen from work, this time the casino’s kitchen.

Lilienfield had seemed grateful. The Champagne went into a drawstring bag hanging off their shoulder, which threatened briefly to upend Lilienfield’s fragile body. Between the books and the bottle, it seemed Willa’s baggage weighed more than they did.

“I’m truly liberated,” they said as they shuffled back across the mud and onto the pavement. “I am the hedonic ideal.”

“Good luck with the books,” he told her, and then he drove away.

Did Lilienfield cough? Were the blue circles beneath their eyes telling, larger than usual or more vivid? Had they plead silently for him to help? Was death already playing on Lilienfield’s mind then, no longer an abstraction but an option as viable as which course to take? He didn’t know. He would never know. He suspected no, no, no, on all counts. There was no narrative in any of it.

When he came back, Sarita was eating a bowl of minestrone and holding a rocks glass of brown liquor like it was a life preserver.

“Lilienfield had an eating disorder,” Redge told her. “And was an addict. And bi-polar. And had cancer, once.”

She nodded and covered her mouth, letting the hot liquid flow down her throat with closed eyes. “That makes sense.” Then her eyelids parted and she seemed bashful. “I’m sorry.”

Redge sat down and ordered some breadsticks. The bartender dropped a dish rag and paced away.

“They were a good friend,” Redge said. He noticed the torn coaster had been cleared away.

“She must have been a hard friend to have. People like that are hard to keep track of. I know that.”

Sarita was trying to give him an absolution. Redge figured that she had delivered comforting, empty words to more people than she could count. But he had not lost a child or a parent. It was not sudden or violent or cruel. It was just a strange person he knew, slipping away more completely than most. All friends slip away, change, pass into unknowability. Here the change was only a bit starker. He said as much.

“Why did you try to find out what happened to her, then?”

Sarita’s hands were folded in her lap. While the rest of her was birdlike, from the daintiness of her shoulders to the actual plumage of her feather tattoos, her hands struck Redge as surprisingly broad and strong-looking. Her nails had no polish. Her skin was dry. He stopped thinking of himself long enough to admire that.

“I had heard a lot about what Lilienfield was up to,” he told her, “And I was worried because I knew it wasn’t going well. In the winter Lilienfield was messed up on drugs, and in March...they were poorer than ever, and living with this guy, Evan, everybody knew he’d done all kinds of stuff to his last girlfriend.”

Sarita winced.

“But so then they disappeared. Not a big deal necessarily. People get out of here with no notice all the time, like, everyone wants to do that. Coulda gone back to school. Could have gotten clean. Lilienfield’s parents live a few miles north of the city. They have a sister in Toronto. Anything. It could have been anything.”

“So nobody told you? It was just, what, a rumor?”

Redge found himself taking hold of her drink. She leaned away as he quaffed it. It was fragrant with peat and tasted mossy, with turpentiney notes that pulled Redge’s face into a scowl.

“Scotch?”

Sarita had swiveled her chair away from him. She nodded and gestured to a green pleather pocketbook in front of her. She had paid.

“So then I saw Evan at the casino and he was a wreck. Sweaty, motor-mouthing and trying to get me to drive him somewhere...and he just said it. Just, like, verbal diarrhea. ‘Oh my girlfriend’s dead.’ Like he’s telling me about a neighbor’s cat.”

Redge placed the glass before her. She pushed it away.

“I thought it was a mistake. You know. You know somebody’s in a bad way but you think they can’t be dead already, I just saw them, I could still help—”

“Death is most painful in its uncanniness,” she told him.

“Is that from something?”

A shake of the head. Earrings swinging and striking her in the cheek. “No. But I’ve noticed it.”

“I’m never going to believe that she’s dead, I don’t think.”

She looked at him. For a moment he thought she might offer to show him photographs of the body. But instead she frowned and said, “You will.”

He was drunker than made sense. He’d only had two, maybe three drinks and that meager sip of Scotch and yet everything was confused. Sarita was getting up, and throwing her pocketbook into her bag and saying something — and Redge knew he had screwed up, had scared her finally — but the dread that ate at him was the slippery, ghostly dread of the drunk who had not yet sobered. It was more a vague fear of future regret than it was the thing itself. And then he was apologizing, trying to hug her, blinking back tears and saying he could explain but she was too far away, and sad, and unwilling to be pulled back into the moment or his embrace.

“I made a mistake,” he said, dropping his arms at his sides.

She was at the door, standing ramrod, with the hostess’ stand separating them. Her palms came up in a gesture of pacification.

“It’s...fine,” Sarita told him. “This kind of thing...happens. I’m sure you’re very confused and sad but there’s nothing else I can do for you.”

“Ma’am, is this guy bothering you?”

A shake of the head. Relief. “It’s fine.”

“I’m sorry Sarita.”

She shrugged and pushed the door partly open. “People experiencing loss get a bit of a break.”

But just a little.

The door closed behind her.

Everyone at the casino is sad in some way. The newly arrived are fleeing a sadness that bright lights and cacophony cannot save them from. The losers are sad at hopes of wealth that they themselves have dashed. The winners are about to lose it all, but they don’t know it yet. The denial of their sadness is perhaps saddest of all.

Then there’s the casino employees like Redge. They come from old jobs in bars and hotels and retail to take on the crisp red uniforms and stand like furniture beside the tables, counters,

buffets, and machines. Their faces are waxy and placid as they watch everyone getting sadder and sadder around them. They are paid well, all things considered. There are free parking spaces, meal vouchers, and smoke breaks. The building is air conditioned and clean. When they catch a gambler cheating, they are rewarded.

Redge feels comfortable here. He watches people flutter by, a slim smile plastered across his lips. No faces are ever the same. The building is too big; five floors of opportunities to lose money, all told. Mostly it's tourists from the suburbs or Detroit. They stand on the red carpets and scan the bright lights and are dazzled. Some even dress up, order fancy drinks, tip him for their meals or coffee.

Nobody ever reaches out to him in their sadness. There is sadness in every corner of the place, in every living cell, but it's drowned out in lights and music and movement. So nobody sees him and asks for his help. If they are too badly ruined, too impoverished by their visit, they simply go away, down the central staircase and out into the light.

Erika Price is a writer and social psychologist in Chicago. Erika's work has appeared in *The Toast*, *The Rumpus*, *The Chicago Reader*, *Literary Orphans*, *Bacopa Literary Review*, and has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize. When not writing or teaching, Erika spoils her chinchilla Dump Truck. For more of her writing, visit erikadprice.tumblr.com

The Wish Jar

By Trevor Abbud

Some things are beyond our understanding.

My name is Liam Donald Murphy. But everyone calls me “Mac”. It’s the Irish word for son. My dad started calling me it when I was still in diapers and it has stuck with me ever since. I’m the oldest child of eight and I figure it’s only suitable that I finally write this down, on behalf of all of us. But most of all, I write this in memory of my father, Donald Liam Murphy.

I was raised in New Jersey where I grew up in a big Irish Catholic family. Like any big family things could get crazy at times. But nothing was as strange and unsettling as the time my little sister made her wish on New Years Eve ten years ago.

Ten years, that’s how long it’s been since Dad passed away. He died close to a year after my five-year-old sister made her wish. One year after the birth of a new millennium. It happened the same year as the birth of the youngest Murphy child, my sister, Ashling. What I remember most about that year was how we all loved Dad just a little bit more.

He was a good man.

In addition to being raised as a Catholic, the Murphy’s were devout sports fans. Missing Sunday mass or rooting for the Mets was forbidden in our household. We believed in the Bronx Bombers. In fact, that year the New York Yankees won their third consecutive World Series Championship against none other than, the New York Mets.

Yeah, life was good.

That year, football season was heating up around the same time that President Bush was sworn in as the 43rd president of the USA. The New York Giants would finish 12-4 and clinch a first-round bye in the playoffs that helped propel Big Blue straight to the Super Bowl. I had been away at college and I couldn’t wait to talk some football with my old man. Football was our thing.

It was my freshman year of college. When December arrived I flew from halfway across the country where I was studying for my BFA and MFA in creative writing at the University of Iowa. Yeah, I know why the hell did I decide to attend a college so far away, but believe me, growing up in a packed house where privacy and quietness was about as plausible as a soup sandwich, I looked forward to gaining some distance from the constant chaos of a huge family (no offense, everyone). I had made a promise to my parents that I would come visit for Christmas and the New Year. I made such a pledge because I planned on staying in Iowa during the following spring, summer, and fall break, which meant not visiting again till next winter.

This was before my mom read from the Wish Jar.

In the beginning of the school year I had hooked up with this online literary magazine called *Scared to Death*, who hired me as a part-time freelance writer. This was during my first semester. I earned enough money to pay for my books by writing a bi-weekly ghost/science-fiction short story. Next to sports, horror was my specialty. Although you'd never twitch a nerve or break a drop of sweat just by looking at me: total opposite of my father, I stand a looming 5'9", a massive one-hundred-thirty pounds—soaking wet—with glazed chestnut hair. But it's what's under that glossy red hair that is scary. The magazine was so impressed with my writing that they offered me a full-time gig in the summer working 30 to 40 hours a week to write a horror novella.

So with a busy summer of writing ahead of me and maybe just a bit of off campus partying too, my plan was to drink, smoke and write (and hopefully get laid).

Thus I did the right thing and flew back to the Jersey Shore for the holidays, even though a bunch of my friends were making a road trip over to Jackson Hole Ski Resort in Wyoming. I was bummed I wouldn't be joining them, but I quickly reminded myself that this would be my only visit to the family for an entire year.

I was wrong.

I can recall a number of times when during my holidays visit I caught my youngest sister, Keeva, listening to my mom's stomach. Initially I thought nothing of it. The first time I spotted this was on Christmas Eve when we were doing our Secret Santa gift exchange. I remember Keeva was laying down on the couch with the side of her head pressed up against Mom's belly, eyebrows scrunched together in concentration. This lasted until her name was pulled from the Santa hat to open her gift. Then she shot up like a rocket ship; the intent listening abandoned. I swear though, she was listening to my mom's stomach

Then it happened again on Christmas morning, even weirder this time. We all gathered around the miniature ceramic nativity scene and sang *Silent Night* (when the Murphy family sang we sounded like a kitten and a chainsaw playing Patty-cake). When the last verse was sung, the youngest child laid the baby Jesus in the cradle. After that all hell broke loose.

In the midst of gift opening carnage: green and red tissue paper scattered across the living room floor, open boxes of cardboard gutted and ravaged. The sounds of the shredding flesh of wrapping paper being ripped open to scraps and the *snap* of tightly sealed tape torn apart. With seven kids, and most of them still believing in the Christmas magic, there was no rhyme or reason to the opening of Santa's presents.

While most of the kids were on their third or fourth gift, I noticed Keeva was still working on her first. She worked on untwisting the twist ties to her sparkly pink plastic Barbie Singing Star Microphone. A pile of untouched presents assigned to her from St. Nicholas still sat under the glistening tree. I had just opened my second present thinking that Mom knew me so well. As I was skimming through the pages of Edgar Allan Poe's *Complete Tales and Poems*, Keeva had

found the recording function on the Singing Star Microphone and hurried to my mom, or rather, her stomach. She pushed the mike up against mom's belly and pressed the record button. I watched with a curious expression stretched across my face. Mom on the other hand—busy making sure everyone was getting the right presents and trying to keep things in order (almost impossible with an army of kids)—kindly brushed Keeva away. "I'll play pretend later honey." She said.

I disregarded Keeva's strange stunt, as one of those odd things kids will do. Heck, when I was a kid—I'm not sure what age—I can remember the man I thought I had living in my foot. I swore there was a tiny man chiseling away with a pickaxe inside my foot mining for hidden gold. I'm sure my parents caught me yelling at that annoying man plenty of times and scratching the sole of my foot frantically. My mom and dad just had the sense to detect it as the dry, scaly rash from eczema I suffered from. With my fair, dry, Irish skin I still have trouble with that little bastard. As for Keeva and her belly listening, I never thought into her odd tendency enough to come up with rational a diagnosis.

The only answer that comes to mind now is that she was pretending (or not) to use the microphone to listen to the baby living in Mom's stomach. Maybe she was just excited to be a big sister right? No. Because my mom didn't even know she was pregnant yet. At the time she would have only been one week into her pregnancy.

Some things are beyond our understanding.

The magic of Christmas Day left as night arrived, and with it came a soft blanket of snow. The half-moon shined from above with a big vibrant grin. Dad was smoking his new pipe he had gotten from Kris Cringle on the back porch with a face reflecting that of the moon. All the younger kids were asleep, (supposed to be asleep) which meant ten-year-old Ava and down. I'm sure seven-year-old Daniel and little five-year-old Keeva were upstairs playing with their new toys. Hannah, the oldest Murphy sister at seventeen, was listening to her new pink iPod Nano next to me on the couch in front of the dancing flames of the fireplace. I could hear Sean and Patrick, who were fourteen and twelve at the time, from their bedrooms making machine gun sounds as they killed virtual enemies on their brand new video game system, the Nintendo GameCube.

Mom was sitting across from me, her eyes pasted to a book. I put a pause on my own reading of Mr. Poe's tale, *The Black Cat* and asked her if she thought Keeva seemed to be acting a little strange lately. "I mean, with that Barbie toy. You notice?"

Mom looked at me from the top rim of her reading glasses that never failed to land at the tip of her nose. She glanced at me as if examining. "No, no. I know what you mean Mac. She's seen an ultrasound before hun, I'm sure on one of those television shows. She was just pretending to use the mike like that instrument they use. That little lady is quick as a whip I tell ya. She's just a clever little lamb Li." Mom said.

And that was that.

So I had no choice but to think nothing of it. Kids will do the darndest things. If you can come up with a better answer be my guest.

New Years Eve came, and at midnight we welcomed the birth of a new year with fireworks, horns and metal noisemakers. The world had made it through the new millennium without coming to its end as a large part of society predicted.

I remember going in the kitchen to get away from all the noise for a minute and take the hors d'oeuvres out of the oven. "Snacks are ready!" I yelled over the raining Roman candles outside and my screaming brothers chasing each other around the living room with Mylar blowouts.

It was up to Dad to settle everyone down. And with one loud, sharp whistle the Murphy children knew to stop and pay our father attention. Everyone listened, and we all huddled to the long dining room table. It was time for a family tradition. Mom and Dad stood at the head and the all us kids took a seat. Mom went to the mahogany cupboard that stood in the corner of the room. She reached up one tier above where her special Gaelic tea set sat, and brought down the glass jar filled with an array of different colored paper. Every New Years we took the glass Mason jar that had **WISH JAR** written on its transparent body down from its shelf and read from the strips of paper inside. Throughout the year anyone at anytime could write down a wish or a dream or something they were thankful for. Then fold the piece of paper and put it back inside the glass jar. We all chose a specific color of construction paper, which would be ours so that when we read the slips of paper we'd know whom they belonged to. The colored sheets of construction paper were stacked in the bottom drawer of the cupboard.

My dad got dubbed black and my mom white every year because, let's be honest, no kid wants to get stuck with those dull colors. The rest of us picked a color. Keeva picked green that year, "Because it look like Christmas tree color," she said with a glint that sparkled in her golden brown eyes. I thought that was cute. But if you ask me now what I think, I'd tell you that yes, she picked green for a Christmas tree, but also—although she didn't know it—because an evergreen tree is supposed to symbolize hope and life.

That's what I like to think.

The wish.

It was one of the first slips of paper picked. And little did we know that when Mom reached into the glass Wish Jar she would unfold a mystery beyond the grasp of our comprehension.

I remember Mom reading the words from a black piece of paper. "The snow", She read, and then, "The moon." My father enjoyed the simple things in life.

Next Mom pulled out two pieces of green paper that were folded into each other. "Oh Keeva." She said with a soft laugh and a thin smile. She separated the two stripes of paper. We all waited to hear what little Keeva came up with. Mom read, "Daddy don't crash. What is this supposed to mean?" She asked. A confusing frown hung from the corners of her mouth.

I can't say for sure, maybe I've made myself believe this over the years, but I could have sworn that when my mom questioned Keeva, "What is this supposed to mean?" Keeva pointed right at my mom's stomach.

Mom read the next green piece of paper to herself this time. What she read caused her eyebrows to droop. Her frown twisted into a grimace.

Dad quickly recognized the scowl etched on his wife's face and before she could jump to any conclusions he reached into the glass Wish Jar. "Me next." He said saving his baby girl from getting any more stern questions. Dad used his thick index and middle fingers as tweezers and pulled out a blue scrap of paper. He read, "Giants win Super Bowl."

Neither Keeva's nor my wish came true that year.

Later that night I had to look at it for myself. There was no denying the handwriting belonged to my baby sister. One green slip looked like this: **DaDDY DOnT CraSh** and the other: **DOnT dIE**

One thing I'll never figure out: How could she have guessed the crash? This will always remain a mystery.

Three weeks later my mom found out that she was one month pregnant and—having a real ultrasound done with a real transducer probe rather than a pink microphone—recalled Keeva's little stunt. She laughed about the whole thing. When she told my dad he thought it was pretty funny too.

None of us made the connection with the Barbie microphone and the Wish Jar.

Almost a month after the Wish Jar "incident" I came back to New Jersey. Yes, I know, OK so I broke the promise to myself and visited before the next winter. Those two scraps of green paper might have had something to do with the infringing of my college vow. I just had to watch the Giants in the Super Bowl with Dad. Unfortunately, Big Blue got their butts kicked by Ray Lewis and the Baltimore Ravens. It cost me half my savings to make the trip out but I'll never regret it. Would I have made the visit if not for those two green pieces of paper? I can't say for sure. But I'm sure as hell glad I spent that time with my father. We laughed, and we cried and best of all, we did it together. It was money well spent.

"Maybe another year Mac." Dad said.

How I wish he could have watched the Giants win that Super Bowl.

It was the year we loved Dad just a little bit more.

Time passed. The holidays turned into candy hearts and (my family's favorite) St. Paddy's Day. We all slowly began to forget about Keeva's stomach-listening antic, and the wishes on those green slips of paper were moved to the back of our minds.

What my dad thought of everything I'm not sure, but I think towards the end of his life he understood.

In fact, he must have.

My sister Hannah helped my mom plan a surprise twentieth wedding anniversary gift for Dad. Come that June they drove down to Cape May for two weeks. I'm so thankful that they had that trip together; it would have been a lot harder on Mom if that second honeymoon never happened. Mom will never forget that trip. Hannah had also created a slideshow for my parents to watch on Dad's laptop while vacationing. It had their wedding song playing in the background as the collection of photos slid, faded, and appeared in and out from the screen. I remember Dad telling the kids that Mom cried when she heard Etta James singing "At Last" in their paradise, beachfront suite, conjuring up memories from their past.

That was the year that Sean and Patrick finally gave in to Dad's wish and joined a bowling league with him. Why that year? Well, I bet they had two strips of paper float up to the surface of their minds when they signed up. They didn't win one game all season—Dad averaged a 215, so that shows you how bad the two knuckleheads were—but they had a bunch of fun and made memories that time can never steal.

That was also the year that seven-year-old Daniel asked Dad to coach his spring little league team. The Yellow Hornets finished 7-1 and went to the championship where they tied the Brown Beavers after the nine-inning limit. Both teams were crowned Little League Co-Champions. Because Dad was the head coach he got to keep the big gold trophy with a giant glove and baseball on top. He gave it to Daniel in July for his eighth birthday. I thought that was real neat. Now, ten years later, it's crazy to think that little Danny is all grown up. He got a baseball scholarship to play at Rutgers University. Dad's birthday gift stands atop his desk in his dorm room.

My sister Ava, who was in her "Wonder Years", turned eleven that year. From what Mom told me she started asking my father to tuck her in to bed and tell bedtime stories again. There had been a two-year drought. It was their thing when Ava was still in single digits and hadn't become a "woman". Dad began telling her, and Keeva too, his adaption of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* by Mr. Mark Twain each night. Dad would substitute and add his own scenes and make up characters. He had done the same rendering with Tolkien's *The Hobbit* when Hannah and I were kids, replacing orcs and ogres with dinosaurs and adding fairies to the fantasy mix.

Guess I got my storytelling gene from Dad.

With every chapter read each night, a loving kiss was placed on Ava and Keeva's forehead. It's the little things that count in the end.

Ava will swear till her face is as red as her Irish locks that the night before Dad's business meeting, (this would've been at halftime during the Giants Monday night game) they finished the

last chapter of Tom's adventures. We might have lost Dad, but I count the finishing of that book as a little miracle.

Coincidence? Providence? I can't say for sure. But what I do know is that finishing the last chapter helped them cope with the arduous time that waited ahead of them. And more importantly: each having their last kiss good-night meant the world to them because in their hearts they can still feel the warm, tender, love of their father's last goodbye.

Dear little Keeva. For her, it was the year she kept on loving her Daddy the same as always. She continued to welcome him with a running hug and kiss to his scruffy cheek as soon as he stepped foot in the door from work. I know he cherished those warm welcomes after a long day of work and the commute to and from the Big Apple where he worked for the New York State Department of Taxation. That was the year she continued to ask for piggyback rides around the living room and den. It was the year she cut her knee when she tripped playing hopscotch on the driveway and went running to her Daddy, "kiss it better!" and he did. Donald Liam Murphy always kissed it better.

In March my brothers and me joined our Dad on a camping trip during my spring break. Dad had been trying to get us "city boys" to go for years. We finally gave in. We went camping at up at Cranberry Lake in New York State for a weekend. We fished and hiked and told ghost stories around the campfire. On the last day of our trip Dad and I got poison oak in the last place you would ever want an orangey, blistering rash; it didn't look very pretty. Dad used one of his many Irish sayings, swearing we had been cursed for bringing a tent and not sleeping under the starlight, "We've been afflicted with itching without the benefit of scratching Mac!"

Sean and Pat got a kick out of it. Dad and I didn't see what was so funny, but by the time we were halfway way home we could only laugh. And you know what, I'm glad we took a leak on that tree. Sure the bubbly blisters itched and burned like hell, and I just about wanted to cut my manhood off, but I'll always have that memory.

I've learnt in life that sometimes you happen to be driving down the wrong road; sometimes you're in the wrong place at the wrong time—sometimes you just pick the wrong tree to piss on.

God, I love you Dad.

Ten years ago, in June, I had taken a job with a food catering company, *Toast the Host Catering*, working three nights a week to start making some extra cash. It was also around this time when I began writing the horror novella I mentioned. I had gotten the idea for my story while on the camping trip in March. It came to me when my brothers and I were hunting for frogs and toads at night. I was writing about a lonely woman who lived in the woods and would do just about anything to find true loves kiss. She eventually comes upon a puce colored toad with yellow and orange spots juxtaposed on its slimy skin. She'll kiss the ugly toad in hopes of freeing the charming prince trapped inside that gooey, poisonous amphibian. But there's not always a fairytale ending.

The printing company wanted a minimum of ten thousand words by the end of each month. No problem. I got paid fifty-dollars with each monthly quota completed. Between the catering job and my writing gig I had earned enough money to make an important trip back home to New Jersey in September.

What was so important? The New York Giants season opener. They were playing against the Denver Broncos. After Big Blues pathetic performance in the Super Bowl, Dad and I were pumped for the start of a new season. The game was on a Monday night. What's better than Monday Night Football in America! I arrived back home Friday night and spent the weekend with the family.

I *wish* so much that next I can tell you that my visit to New Jersey saved Dad's life; that because I decided to come home, Dad never went on that plane. I wish I could tell you that Keeva's wish came true.

But I can't.

September 10, 2001, Monday night. The Giants lost to the Denver Broncos. Dad and I stayed up all night for the game. Big Blue disappointed us, but nothing can ever take away the beers we shared, the cheers chanted, or the yells barked at the television screen. I'll always remember the laughs, the cries, and the high-fives. I can still picture my father. He was so happy. Sipping a cold brewski, shoving a handful of chips in his mouth and screaming at the Giants defense to, "Stop playing like a bunch of sissies!" and cursing the entire offensive-line with an Irish swear, "May the cat eat you, and may the devil eat the cat."

After the game I joined Dad on the porch while he smoked his pipe. My nose can still summon up the pleasant whiffs of that apple and cherrywood blend Dad smoked. I don't know how else to describe it; the smoke was a cozy smell. We spoke little as we stared back at the giant chrome colored moon and watched the dark clouds that had a hue of purple roll across the sky. I'm glad Dad got to fly in those clouds before he died.

At some point before we went inside to bed, Dad wrapped an arm around my shoulders and gave me a tight squeeze.

No words were spoken.

No words were necessary.

I'll never forget how that hug felt.

I woke up Tuesday morning to my cell phone buzzing. Outside the sun was bright and blue blanketed the sky. I was nursing a hangover from beer and defeat. It was Dad on the line. He spoke to me softly but his voice kept cracking as if he was crying. I was confused and scared. I heard women and children screaming in the background, but Dad spoke calmly to me.

He started with my mom, "Tell your mother I love her Mac."

I heard a man yelling in the background but I couldn't understand any of the words. He was screaming in another language. I can't explain why, but that foreign accent made me feel sick.

Then Dad spoke her name. I could tell by the eerie tone of desperation in his voice that he needed to her name one last time. "I love you Anna."

A sharp pain pierced my neck. I sat up and winced. I worked on gathering my thoughts while I rubbed sleep out of my eyes and mind. *Dad is on his way to a business meeting ... San Diego? No, it was San Fran. I offered to drive him to the airport, but he said he was hitching a ride with Bob or Rob from financing.* I remember thinking.

Dad was flying out of Newark Airport. The barking and screaming was getting louder from the other side of the phone. That unfamiliar voice sent needles of ice down my spine. Static was making it hard to hear my dad. He told me to listen. I did. He said to tell all the kids he loves them. Then I heard him say, "Ashling ... tell mom to name her Ashling."

I couldn't comprehend what he was saying. It happened so fast. I can't remember for sure but I think Hannah was screaming downstairs in the living room at this point. She must have turned on the TV, which would have been set on channel 7 because the last thing we were watching was the football game. ABC must have been on.

I'll never forget what Dad kept on saying. It hit me like a heavy black anvil later on. "Crash! I've got to try and stop them. We're going to *crash!*" The word *crash* wrinkled my flesh with goosebumps.

Then his final words were spoken in the mist of static and chaos. "I love you Mac!" Those words hit me like a double-fisted punch.

Dad died on September 11th, 2001. He was on United Airlines flight number 93 en route to San Francisco. There were 33 passengers. The aircraft collided with the ground near Shanksville, Pennsylvania. There were no survivors.

Dad had died in a crashed.

Did our yet-to-be-born baby sister tell Keeva that our father was going to die? Should we have listened to her and those green strips of paper from the Wish Jar? That I'll never know. Maybe we could've stopped it from happening? I don't know, but I doubt it. I really doubt it. You see if Dad skipped that business meeting he would have never crashed in that airplane but instead would have been on the 86th floor of the North Tower of the World Trade Center in his work office. He would have never been able to call me. He would have never been able to tell me he loved us.

Some things are beyond our understanding. Maybe some things God only intended Himself and the angels to know. All I *know* for sure is that time may have healed the loss of our dad, but it will never take away the year we loved him just a little bit more.

Mom gave birth to a beautiful healthy girl ten days after the attacks. Ashling Donnalda Murphy. She has beautiful sapphire eyes like her daddy.

The New York Giants won the Super Bowl this year, their second championship since Dad's death. I know my good luck charm up in the sky was with me for both those games. Like I've said, it's the small things that count in the end

Oh, one more thing I'll never figure out. When did my dad decide on the name?

The Irish name Ashling means "a vision" or "a dream".

Some things are beyond our understanding.

Trevor Abbud is a first-time author writing speculative fiction. Developing a taste for literature as a young child, Abbud took a serious interest in writing. His work has been published by Short-Story Me and has placed in the Sixfold Fiction Contest. Working as an at-home writer, Abbud is currently developing a novel and a collection of short stories.

Red Velvet

By Karen McGee

When the doorbell rang, Ella was frosting the last of six-dozen cupcakes for the annual church bazaar. She switched on the ceiling fan in the living room, grunting at the ache in her muscles, and moved to the door. Her hand shook as she reached for the knob. She flashed on the night before, when she'd opened up to discover a leering drunk, but she forced a smile and made herself open the door without checking first. Twin Lakes was a small town. Nobody used peepholes.

Two men stood on the porch. The one in uniform was Tom Aker, a beefy fair-haired police officer in his late twenties. Ella didn't know the other one, but he was black-haired and lean, with a tan, creased face.

"Good morning," Ella said.

"Miss Ella." Tom nodded, addressing her as her students did and making her feel decades older than him rather than a few years. He shifted awkwardly on his feet. "You mind if we have a word?"

"No. Of course not." She swung the door open and watched Tom make way for the stranger.

"This is Chief Brandon," he said.

"Cam," Brandon said, extending a hand.

"Nice to meet you." Ella shook his hand and did her best to smile past his scrutiny. So this was the man the council had hired to replace Chief Tompkins when he retired. Tompkins was a big, blue-eyed man who would have made a convincing Santa if he'd grown a beard. She'd heard his jovial exterior hid a streak of brutality, but his besetting sin was laziness.

The new chief was an entirely different animal. He looked fit enough to run a marathon, and his deep-set eyes and jutting jaw gave him a cruel look; she thought he might be one of those cops who enjoyed the power that came with his job a bit too much.

"Have a seat." She gestured to the sofa. "Can I get you coffee? I just brewed some."

Tom nodded just as Brandon answered, "No thanks."

"Has there been some kind of trouble?" she asked.

"Why do you ask?" Tom said.

Ella let out a laugh that sounded high and shaky, but everything sounded off this morning. “You don’t usually show up on my porch at eight o’clock on a Saturday morning, so unless you smelled the cupcakes . . .”

Tom blushed and looked down at his feet.

Brandon continued to watch her, his gaze moving down to her shoes, then up to her hands and arms. She was wearing a long-sleeved linen shirt that covered the bruises, but she wondered if that was enough.

“It’s a little dark in here, isn’t it?” Brandon said. His voice was slow and sleepy-sounding. A Southerner. “You want me to raise the blinds?”

“Leave them,” she said quickly. “If you don’t mind.” She produced another stiff smile and then wondered if she was smiling too much. “I’m trying to keep the place cool so the frosting doesn’t melt.”

“Can you tell us where you were last night, Miss Ella?” Tom asked

“I was right here, baking those cupcakes so I could frost them this morning.” She waved at the kitchen table. The gesture hurt and she turned toward the table to hide a wince.

“No company?” Brandon asked.

She shook her head. “Friday nights I’m usually too tired for company. The kids wear me out.”

Tom nodded and glanced at Brandon.

“You sure I can’t get you some coffee, maybe a cupcake?” she asked.

“Tom, you go on out to the car,” Brandon said, “check in with dispatch. I’ll be right out.”

Tom frowned, rose to his feet, and glanced longingly in the direction of the cupcakes. “Guess I’ll see you at church tomorrow, Miss Ella.”

“Bring your wallet.”

After the door closed, Ella turned and looked at Brandon. “Well?”

“The job I’ve got, sometimes I have to ask uncomfortable questions.”

“I’m sure you do.”

“Just so you know,” he said, “if I don’t need the answers for a case, I can be as forgetful as a man twice my age.”

Ella nodded.

“You ever been out to Doug Forester’s house?”

“Doug Forester? Has something—”

“—go ahead and answer the question, if you please.”

She looked down at her feet, took slow breaths, and tried not to think about Doug pounding on her door last night and everything that came after.

“Why are you asking?” she said.

“Some kids saw him in the parking lot of Twin Lakes Elementary last night.”

She nodded and closed her eyes for a moment. “I’ve had to chase him off a couple of times. But no, I’ve never been out to his house. Not that it’s any of your business.” She glared up at him, feeling heat spread over her face and neck. She wasn’t used to being rude, especially to police. “What’s this all about?”

“You weren’t there last night?” he asked.

“Last night I was here baking, like I said.”

His eyes narrowed.

“Has something happened to Doug?” she asked.

He rose. “You might say that. He’s got himself killed.”

“Killed?” She bit her lip hard and stared up at him, wide-eyed, trying to look stunned.

The flat, straight line of his lips softened. “You don’t seem too upset by the news.”

“Well, of course I’m shocked, nothing like this happens in Twin Lakes. But I didn’t really know Doug.”

“You wouldn’t mind giving me a DNA sample and some fingerprints, would you?”

She shook her head. “No, not if you show me a warrant. Otherwise, I’m afraid I’d rather not contribute to your database.”

“I’d destroy the records if they weren’t pertinent.”

“That’s nice to hear, but how can I know it’s the truth?” She felt her heart begin to pound as she realized she’d just insulted him. “I mean, I don’t know you and . . . well, I’ve read things about people going into the system.”

Her answer brought a deep silence that seemed to spread around them. She knew she should return his gaze, show him she wasn’t afraid, but she couldn’t manage it.

“I see,” he finally said. “Well, guess I’ll see you in church.”

Ella waited until the patrol car had pulled away to move to the bathroom. She inspected her face in the mirror and then switched on the light. The makeup muted the bruises on her temple and jaw, but it didn’t cover them. Not under bright light. And the bruises on her arms were even darker. She was going to have to wear long sleeves to church tomorrow. She’d wear her red hat, tipped to shade the side of her face. She didn’t know how long she could fool Chief Brandon—he was already suspicious—but she wasn’t going to give up. She loved this town, her job, the kids she worked with, and the truth would take all of that away.

She crossed to the kitchen and looked down at the cupcakes, inhaled the sweet scent of her favorite recipe—her mother’s recipe. “The secret for this recipe is sifting everything twice before you start,” her mother used to say, “especially the powdered sugar.” Ella would never be able to eat red velvet cake again, not without wanting to vomit.

There used to be three churches in Twin Lakes, but a couple of decades ago the shrinking population of Methodists and Lutherans had combined forces, and now there were only two: Catholic and Protestant. Religion divided the town for services, but the concerts and festivals drew everyone. There just wasn’t much else to do in Twin Lakes.

The gym was loud, with youngsters running among chatting adults, booths displaying baked goods, donated clothing and household items, and games such as ring toss and balloon pop. A free throw contest was being held at the other end of the gym, and the sound of basketballs hitting the floor added to the din. The cakewalk was always the last event, and several people hovered near the long display table, inspecting the numbered cakes and pies. Ella shifted her weight and counted the remaining cupcakes in front of her. She was so tired, she felt like she was watching the world from under water. Sixteen cupcakes to go. Once they all sold, she could turn in the money and make an excuse to leave.

The elderly Mary Bylund and her sister Emily had deserted the Needlework booth—their rightful domain—and had been lingering for the better part of an hour, glancing frequently in Ella’s direction. Liz and Robert Ely joined them.

“You heard about the fire at the old Sutter place Friday night?” Liz said. “I hear it was kids.”

“Lucky they spotted it in time to save the barn,” Robert said.

“It was the Acker boy out on patrol who saw it,” Emily said. They glanced toward Ella, including her in the conversation. Mary and Emily moved off, leaving the Elys in their spot, like the next shift in a cupcake watch.

“Wow, you wore your red hat, and it’s not even a holiday weekend!”

Ella turned to greet Sylvia, her best friend and town pediatrician. “Thought I’d match my cupcakes.”

“I’ve got to have one of these before they’re all gone.” Sylvia dropped four quarters into the shoebox and picked up a cupcake.

“They’ll make your teeth red,” Ella said.

Sylvia took a big bite and let out a moan of ecstasy. Then she grinned at Ella. “What do I care? I’ve already got my man.”

“Oh. Right. Go ahead and eat the rest of them then.”

“Well, I do want to fit through the door when I get home,” Sylvia said. “Speaking of men, have you met the new Chief of Police yet?”

Ella scanned the crowd and spotted Chief Brandon near the free throw contest chatting with a couple of boys. He looked up and nodded at her before she could look away. “Yes,” she said.

“Hmmm, so I see. Quite a hunk, huh?”

“I don’t know,” Ella said. “He’s okay, I guess.”

“Just okay? All his hair, no sign of a beer belly, great butt and just okay? This is Twin Lakes, Ella. You have got to lower your standards.” Sylvia laughed and Ella tried to join her. “He’s from Atlanta, did you know? I guess that explains the tan, huh?”

“I thought he sounded like a Southerner.”

“Oh, you’ve talked to him?”

“Briefly. Why would he move to Minnesota?” Ella asked. They looked at each other and both laughed.

“I don’t know, Ella, why are *we* here?”

“He’s in for a shock come winter,” Ella said.

Sylvia nodded. “He’s not married, you know. I think he’s been watching you.”

“Oh?” Ella forced herself to take a slow breath and reached down to arrange the cupcakes. Sylvia grabbed her arm to get her attention, and Ella let out a hiss.

“What’s the matter? Are you hurt?”

Ella looked across the gym, towards Brandon, but he wasn’t where she’d last seen him. Was he still watching? “I’m fine. I burned my arm taking the cupcakes out.”

Sylvia’s face filled with sympathy. Too much sympathy? She leaned forward and spoke in a hushed voice. “Are you sure it’s okay? You want me to look at it?”

The last thing Ella wanted was comfort from Sylvia. Not in public. Not when there was a chance Ella would throw herself into her friend’s arms and weep just as the new police chief walked by. “No, it’s not that bad, just a little tender. But if you’re done at the jumble booth, would you mind taking over here? I didn’t sleep much last night, and my head is killing me.”

“Sure, no problem. Up late grading?”

“How’d you guess? I could really use a nap.”

Sylvia tilted her head to one side. “Ella? You sure you’re okay?”

Ella nodded as she picked up her purse. She hated lying, especially to Sylvia.

Ella always did classwork and homework before she asked her seven and eight-year-olds to do it. She’d discovered countless flaws in assignments that way. This morning she was rearranging arithmetic problems on a worksheet when three brisk knocks on the front door made her jump.

She’d been expecting another visit from Chief Brandon, and when she peered through the peephole, sure enough, there he was. Alone this time. She didn’t want to be alone with the man, but maybe coming alone meant he wasn’t ready to arrest her. Maybe he was just going to show her a warrant and take a cheek swab. Should she run out the back and throw herself into the lake? Stay quiet and hope he went away? Open the door and brazen it out, then pack and run?

“I know you’re there,” he said, his voice quiet, as if there were no door between them. “I just want to talk for a minute. I won’t keep you.”

Won’t keep you. So no arrest? If he was telling the truth. Well, she couldn’t cower forever, and he didn’t look like he was going away. She let out a long shuddery breath, stepped away from the door and pulled it open.

“Chief Brandon,” she said, crossing her arms.

“Miss Ella. May I have a word?”

“You don’t have to call me that. You’re not one of my students.”

He shrugged. “Everybody in town seems to.”

“I was just on my way out,” she said.

“This won’t take long.”

She hesitated another second and then stepped back. “Well, okay then, come on in.”

The bruises had faded and Ella knew they were no longer discernible under her makeup. But nightmares and lying and feeling watched had taken its toll. She wasn’t sure how much longer she could pretend to be calm for this sharp-eyed man.

“Can I get you some coffee?” she asked. “Or some iced tea?”

“No thanks.”

He sat on the sofa and she took the easy chair.

“Did you hear I won two cakes at the bazaar last Sunday?” he said. “Seems to me that contest may have been rigged.”

“Oh? No, I had to leave early, so I . . . I missed the cakewalk.” Why was he talking about the church bazaar? Shouldn’t he be showing her a warrant?

“I just thought I should let you know about that trouble last week. There has been progress of sorts.”

“Oh?” Was he playing with her? “You have a suspect?”

“You know Al Paulson?” he said.

“Al? Sure, I’ve had his grandson in my class for two years now. Al’s helped me out on field trips.”

Brandon nodded. “He came into my office last Monday and confessed.”

“He . . . Al confessed to killing Forester?”

“Said he waited until Forester was asleep, slipped into the house and killed him.”

“He . . . but why? Why would he—”

“—he had some story about a long-held grudge,” he said. “Claims Forester hurt an unnamed lady friend of his. I haven’t been able to check much of Al’s tale yet. Been a little busy. See, Tuesday I got a call from the Bylund sisters.”

“Mary and Emily?”

“Appears occasionally when they can’t sleep, they take a drive at night in that old Buick of theirs. They were out the night Forester was killed and witnessed the murderer leave the house covered with blood. Had a pretty good description too.”

Ella licked her dry lips as she remembered dashing out the back door of Doug Forrester’s house. Had they seen her? But Mary and Emily rarely drove anymore, even during the day. “So who did they . . . who was it?” she asked, her voice hoarse.

“Well, it wasn’t Al Paulson. According to Mary and Emily, the man they saw had an eye patch and a limp. And he was considerably younger than Al.”

Ella felt a pain in her wrist and realized she was clutching the arms of the chair. She let her hands fall open. “I see. So are you . . . have you been looking for him?”

“Oh sure. But the thing is, I’m a bit spoiled for choice. See, during the week I got two more confessions—both from that coffee klatch of Al’s that meets at the Copper Kettle. You know the one?”

Ella nodded. Most mornings Al and three of his buddies could be found at the local diner, drinking coffee and flirting gently with Susan, the fifty-year-old waitress. None of the men were under seventy.

“Also, three more witnesses have come forward about this drifter the Bylund sisters told me about. All of them saw the eye patch, but otherwise their descriptions cover a pretty wide terrain. They can’t even agree on size or hair color.” He shook his head. “I suppose it’s possible there was more than one stranger in town with an eye patch, but I tell you, I don’t care for the odds on that.”

She blinked at him, trying to decide if he was joking or a complete idiot. He had to be kidding, but he looked perfectly serious. Would a cop joke about a murder?

“This week I’ve been busier than a one-legged man in a bucket kicking contest, but I’ve learned a few things,” he said. “I had no idea Twin Lakes had so much traffic in the wee hours. Shame the vision of the average night owl here is so unreliable.”

Emily had a sudden image of Main Street crowded with elderly, insomniac drivers.

“Myself, I’m leaning towards the drifter the sisters saw, the one with the limp. At least two witnesses agree on that one. Anyway, I thought I’d let you know where things stood, in case you were worried.”

Ella nodded and peered out the window at the street, not tursitng herself to respond. What would he do if she burst into laughter?”

His voice was software when he continued. “I hope in the future you’ll feel free to work with me, if anything comes up. I know the last chief wasn’t always real quick off the mark about resolving problems.”

Ella clamped her jaw tight. That was one way to put it; spineless bootlicker was another. Tompkins should have dealt with Doug Forester, town terror, years ago. “Chief Tompkins tended to avoid confrontation,” she said.

“So I’ve heard. Not really my style.”

Ella imagined Chief Brandon facing off against Doug Forester. Even without a gun, she’d put her money on Brandon; He was big city, and he probably fought dirty. “So Doug’s killer is still . . . I mean, are people worried the killer will come back?”

“Most people around here think Forester needed killing like a rabid stray needs putting down. I’ve read his file, and believe me, he hurt a lot of people.”

“I believe you.”

He leaned toward her and his voice dropped. “Something a little strange . . . when I got the ME’s report today, there was evidence of sexual activity, but they also found powdered sugar on the sheets.”

“Powdered sugar?”

“There wasn’t any in the kitchen. I guess Doug wasn’t the baking kind.”

She stared down at the floor.

He stood. “I’m not going to worry too much about that, so long as whoever killed Forester doesn’t make a habit of killing. But I don’t think that’s likely, do you?”

She shook her head, closing her eyes against the image of a blade slicing through the soft flesh of a throat, the gush of blood, like hot, red velvet splashing her hands. “No.” Her answer came out as a squeak. She cleared her throat and tried again. “No, I don’t think that’s likely.”

“Well then.” He turned and moved to the door. “See you around town, Miss Ella.”

Only Allies

By Rab Berry

Some unseen force was tearing the sky apart. Powder blue shards no doubt bombarded the ground, crushing whatever lay below and dragging the clouds down with them. As far as she could tell, that was the only explanation for the terrifying roar and eerie fog that engulfed the woods. A nauseating rumble and trees shattered, or heaps of earth burst from the forest floor. Sharp pops and biting, projectile whistles cut through the constant row of metal meeting metal and the cries of her pack mates. Her hearing was meant for subtlety: a rabbit's footsteps in the woods at night or better yet, the ring of cookware from across camp. Sound had never been so brutal. It was even worse than the thunderstorms she'd weathered beneath the supply wagons or the screaming whistle of the locomotive that brought her to this place.

She might have cursed the man who took her there; far from the humid city she could barely remember now. But resentment wasn't in her nature. Instead she pressed herself to the ground beneath the knotted roots of an oak tree, trying to burrow her way to safety and hoping it would all end soon. She wished she could see the Cook to gauge his fear and maybe better control her own. And even if he were as afraid as she was, he would still know what to do. For a moment she considered venturing out into the chaos to find him, or any of her other companions. Like the stern old man who rode the stately horse, or the boys who couldn't hear well and always came back to camp covered in soot. They called her 'Dixie' and tossed her scraps of salt pork and moistened hard tack while they ate at the fire. They made space for her on their oilcloth blankets at night, and when they ran out of such luxuries they made her small beds of hay or pine needles. The pack had grown gaunt and tired together, but still shared everything from their warmth to their fleas. She leaned toward the mouth of the den and peered outside, hoping to see someone she recognized. Indistinguishable men ran in every direction through the brush and smoke, their faces obscured by dirt or blood. Their voices wove together as they passed. She couldn't even tell their scents apart. Pipe tobacco and brass polish, manure and iron, coffee and sweat- every identifying odor was swallowed by sulfurous, acrid smoke and upturned soil. A sudden hiss and roots above her splintered. She pushed herself back into the den, powerless to do anything but tremble and wait.

The light slowly changed. She watched the shadows grow longer as the percussive rumbles that echoed in her ribcage became less frequent, like thunder passing into the distance. Eventually she stopped shaking but remained tensed to flee. The shrill ringing in her ears was a painful reminder of what she had endured, and what could return at any moment. So she kept waiting, noting every change in her surroundings, every potential warning that her battered senses could still register. The pall of silence that had fallen over the woods accentuated any new sound. Volleys of distant, loud pops echoed out from deeper in the forest, but otherwise there were little left to hear. No birdsongs, no rustling of leaves. Even the wind had fallen still as if the land was holding its breath. A horse with no rider galloped past the oak tree and disappeared into the fog beyond. Then the quiet returned.

Eventually the foul mist dissipated. The setting sun finally pierced through the unnatural fog, blasting through what remained of the tree line before ricocheting orange-gold off the trampled buttons and bayonets facing skyward. Unfamiliar shapes littered the forest floor. What little motion she perceived was weak and erratic. By instinct she recognized it as the throes of the wounded. They called out, but not to beckon or scold her. Some simply howled at nothing.

She longed to be found by her pack, to get some proof that the world would be safe again before venturing out. She could leave shelter and go on without them, but the instinct to survive alone was buried deep in her mind. Too deep to be trustworthy. She depended on her companions for so much- it was better to wait for them. And for a while she did, until her tongue succumbed to the dust and heat. Each time she tried to swallow it threatened to stick to the roof of her mouth and choke her. She could no longer ignore the weakly gurgling brook that flowed somewhere in the wilderness nearby. Necessity rather than courage finally broke fear's hold over her body. She cautiously crept out of her hollow, wondering if her movement would somehow trigger another barrage. She felt the air grow warmer as sunlight hit her nose. She braced herself for the worst, but the chaos didn't return. Not even when she stood fully out in the open.

She shook off the dirt from the tree roots and cautiously made her way toward the stream, delicately stepping over the woolen carcasses that littered the ground. The brook was still running- she half expected to find it razed like everything else she believed was indestructible. She sniffed at the water despite her thirst. It was murky, almost black to her eyes, and it smelled odd. But she and her companions had drunk worse. Further up the creek other motionless forms lay facedown in the stream, as if to slake their own thirst. She began to lap up the corrupted water. It flowed so easily down her throat that she drank longer than she could, finally sputtering for air and heaving back up some of the precious liquid. The flavor was familiar but strange in her mouth- she had tasted blood before. But never men's blood.

She leaned down to drink more but paused, ears raised. There was movement nearby. Steady footfalls shuffled through the brush and two ragged men in dark coats appeared through the trees, encumbered by the weight of exhaustion in their limbs. She strained to recognize them from a distance, unsure if she should approach. The men didn't notice her as they limped closer. Their eyes swept across the ground aimlessly; from their path to a shattered tree trunk, from a torn overcoat to a fresh crater, from cannon to snake fence, flag to rifle, corpse to corpse, never focusing on anything at all. But they moved with purpose, even if their gaze had none.

The ringing in her ears began to die down, only to be replaced by another, lower drone. She turned back to the brook. In her haste to drink, she didn't notice the cloud of blowflies gathered slightly downstream. They swarmed in and out of a man's open mouth, crawling beneath his clothes and invading his wounds. She looked back to the living men still walking with weak resolution. She lowered her eyes and walked toward them, ears submissively pressed down against her head. She had to know who they were, and if they could take her back home.

Finally one of the men noticed her. They weren't from her pack, but they didn't chase her away. Instead they began murmuring in language she couldn't understand.

"I'll be damned."

One of them knelt down to look her over. On one side of his head dried blood bridged the skin between his hair and his beard. The crimson stain and the dirt on his face made his eyes shine out from the greyed flesh surrounding them. There was life in his gaze again.

“You don’t look hurt...”

He patted her head and it put her more at ease. She didn’t fully trust them, but they were survivors like she was. And they were so much like the people she trusted before.

“We have to take her back.”

The other man just stared. One arm hung uselessly at his side.

“It’s a dog, Ephraim.”

“It’s been through hell.”

“We all have.”

The first man got to his feet and whistled.

“Come on.”

Finally a message she recognized. But she didn’t move. These strangers could possibly keep her safe, but there was still a chance that someone she knew would come back for her. “So help me, I will drag you back if I have to,” snarled the second man. The first stranger ignored him and looped his rifle strap over his shoulder.

“It’s alright.” He reached down and picked her up, cradling her over one shoulder. They began walking away from the patch of carnage she had come to know so well. But everywhere she looked, other bodies littered the ravaged landscape.

“We leave her out here the bastards’ll eat her.”

“I wouldn’t put it past the Pennsylvania boys at camp either.”

“They’ll love her. Lord knows the unit could stand an addition for a change.”

They walked for a moment in silence. She rested her head on the man’s shoulder, finally allowing herself to rest. He watched her fall asleep, grateful to avert his eyes from the carnage that surrounded them.

“We’ll call her Sadie.”

Her ears flicked up. It wasn’t exactly what her old pack of tired men in grey used to call her. But it was close enough.

Yahola! Rebekah and Itcho and the Watchers of the Silent Ones

By Camille Collins

I remember her sitting by the window in the small, dark house in Birmingham, the burnished tones of sunset making a reddish glow against the half drawn shade, enveloping her in devil's light as she chewed her tobacco—a walnut jutting from her still taut cheek—told her stories, and spat, quite elegantly mind you, into a tin cup.

“*Yahola, Yahola,*” she murmured softly, speaking the name of the wolf, the name of her great-grandfather, or was it her great, great? She seemed to forget, or grow confused more frequently, leaning back in her chair, eyes suddenly fastened shut, she nodded out with a dense impenetrability, as though seduced by smack dreams—leaving me the unpleasant task of wrenching the cup away before it fell to the floor in an ugly mess.

We learned to call her she, even though she was born a great uncle of mine. Subtly, the real person we'd known she'd been all along, began to emerge, until we could no longer remember her any other way. Over time she began to clutch a pocket book to her chest, or dangle it from her slender arm as she went about her business; filling a church pew with her narrow hips and tall, tall legs; buying okra to fry, beauty store talc, or policy numbers—all for the price of a dream. Her mouth was neat when she spoke and ate, her words intelligent and authoritative, and this innate dignity—her straight back, legs crossed at the ankle—gave her, she, who eventually took the name Chantal, an undeniable authority we could scarcely argue. And so, she was Chantal, and we never flinched or bothered much about it from then on.

While our other aunts plotted their seduction with honey baked hams, pound cake, and the embrace of warm arms as soft as velveteen, Chantal charmed with her ability to weave a tale, to transport us from the mundane with one clever narrative after another, none more unforgettable than the legend of Rebekah and Itcho. Like a prairie dog with a secret stash of bluegrass, I was selfish about my time with aunt Chantal, and preferred to call when I knew I'd be her only visitor.

“To begin the story Otis,” she said to me, waking suddenly, perhaps a half hour after she'd abruptly fallen off, “you have to begin with Rebekah, the girl child, and the days of the first Seminole War.” And here she'd lilt into the uncanny voice of the young girl. Oh, I didn't know it to be certain, but it sounded just as I'd come to imagine her, after hearing her story again and again all throughout my childhood and even now as a grown man—Aunt Chantal brought the voice, the spirit of the child alive.

“I was just a child one day, innocent and free, and the next, without warning or ceremony, it seemed I could smell nothing but the acrid, choking smoke of deathly fires, as I witnessed the inflamed limbs of royal palm and great pine, falling like slain beasts in the throes of a treacherous fight between heaven and earth, black and white, mortality and the incinerated

dreams of the unwanted, as their screeching cries lived on in echo—*reverberate, retreat, reverberate, retreat*—ad infinitum.

Rebekah and her mama went to live amongst the Seminoles when Rebekah was four. She could scarcely recall anything before that, such as her life on the big land in Alabama, where her mama worked inside the colonial mansion of Mr. Kelly, while her father labored in the fields. Rebekah routinely failed just about every question when her mother Mary quizzed her about their old life; the names of her little friends, what they ate, or what the trees looked like back west. Who knows, but maybe she wanted deliberately to forget. What she couldn't recall was a time when she wasn't running wild with Itcho and his sisters. Scampering freely into his Chickee, the one closest to her and her mother's, sitting at his mother's feet while she wove and sang to her, or lay her down in the late afternoons when she grew sleepy, waiting for her mother to return from harvesting the fields.

“Rebekah was the daughter of *Yahola*, meaning wolf cry, the name the Seminoles gave him for the terrific, charging sound he made in battle. It was the sound of a man putting his entire heart and soul into his slayings—and the heartbreak and regret that followed, because Yahola was not an innately violent man. Yahola, or Joseph as he was known in Christendom, was a standout hero of the first war of 1816, but he never gained the fame of a John Horse and such because they say ole Yahola was a crazy man. I suspect they didn't understand his passion, and the fear, the terror and uninvited evil that spurred him onward. The specter of hate is a ferocious thing to have at your back.” Here she paused to light a cigarette. Yes, Chantal was a tough woman given to extremes, such that she sometimes chewed and smoked her tobacco, *both* at the same time. “Huh, I ought to know,” she said, shaking her head.

My ears pricked and my back straightened at any intimation of Chantal towards her own life and hardships. I heard she'd run away in her early teens to New Orleans and had made a living as an attendant to a woman who'd attempted to reestablish the quadroon balls, and had done so successfully for a time. Beyond this, I was never courageous enough to pry, so I sat back with a glass of lemonade—cold, frothy, and sweet, the greatest feat of Chantal's culinary ability—and listened, sometimes with my eyes closed, as she went on, recounting the earthly days of the girl child Rebekah.

“I only knew I was a child, a little girl,” she resumed in uncanny imitation, “I never thought about my parents having been slaves, or that Itcho, the boy I loved and had loved from the first I'd known him at six years old, was an Indian. These are some of the things, the evils of a certain kind of knowledge and what it can do, that were forced upon me while I was still innocent.”

Chantal warbled on in the voice of Rebekah, as if the resurrection of the little girl in memory was a thing solemn and divine, and I suspect for Chantal that perhaps it was; that like a great love or narcotic, she needed her—the legacy of the once thriving young girl, running wild over Florida wetlands, to help her live out what was left of her own days. “I liked my little brown legs,” she went on, “because they were strong and limber, and I could tramp through the mangroves and climb the sturdy trees of willow and cypress when the rains stopped and the waters receded,

exposing the bottom of creeks in large dry patches of red and purple earth, which I understood to be squares of magic carpet.

Mother gave me my own little yellow chick to raise, and I adored him. I kept him in the first basket I ever managed to weave, poorly, and pestered Itcho's grandmother until she gave me fistfuls of grain for him to eat.

At night I dreamt of saber tooth tiger cubs, and wanted more than anything to capture one of my own. Itcho had once given me a small, hard porcelain object of yellow and white, which he claimed was the tooth of a saber his father had wrangled. Mother said she wouldn't tolerate him lying to me, so she threw my cherished talisman into the placid waters of Lake Okeechobee, giving rise to days of inconsolable weeping because of the great meaning I'd attached to the gift, and my grand pride in being its chosen recipient.

This was the life I lead, that of a carefree child, with a home and a community, and a rudimentary understanding of my place in the scheme of things—before the quiet of our lives was disrupted and made chaotic by the assault of white men and rifles.

II

The night I first met my father I awoke to the sound of a great thunder clap, which I later realized was the voice of my mother and the voice of my father, blazing like fire, only to commingle in a burst of combustible rage. Startled awake I was instantly sober. I crept to the edge of our open air dwelling and witnessed my mother embroiled in a heated fight with a man with hulking limbs and a dark skin that glistened under moonlight like molten sugar. I wanted to run to mama's side, to protest and defend her, but some innate directive told me to hang back and keep quiet.

'Mary, you don't know all I've done to keep you safe.' The gigantic man spoke in pleading, sorrowful tones. 'I've run through forests with blood hounds on my trail, waded through crock infested waters, slept under cover of nothing in the rain, and caught and roasted small animals with my bare hands just to survive another day—all so that you and Becca would be alright.' Much later I would remember the chilling nights, under cover of dark skies and scintillating starlight, when Mama and Papa had trailed a band of Creek Indians fleeing Alabama, ultimately settling in Florida during the Creek war. Of seventeen negro children to embark on that journey, I was one of only three who survived.

Even before that night when I heard the clash of their voices, Papa had all along been in close proximity at another camp a few miles away, but hadn't come to live with us because mother had abandoned him. Like many slave women she was traumatized by what she'd seen and known, thus eschewing the company of men from that point on, seizing a freedom and autonomy more real than most women anywhere would ever know.

'I wish you ain't have bothered with it Joseph,' Mama said. 'Me and Becca are safe here now, we've found a place among these people—they peaceful and kindly. And they find value in my

work—how I harvest my beans, plant my pumpkin, and tend to the mulberry trees belonging to the chief and his wife. Only time I get vexed at all is when they ask me to speak to these here white traders that pass through from time to time. My English is better'n theirs and I done learned some words in Creek and Miccosukee too.'

'Mary, you've got to listen now, and listen well! You and Becca got to be watchful. You can't walk around carefree without looking over your shoulder any more than you ever could on old man Kelly's place. It's even more dangerous here, because back on the plantation you was already owned. Jackson's men will be trooping through here in no time, ready to chase these Indians off this here land, and kill us or drag us back to some homestead somewhere. But killing is likely to be their prettiest option cause it will run a lot cheaper than hauling us back to Bama, Virginney, or some other place.'

I couldn't see my mother's face, but I sensed her despair. 'No, no!' she shrieked. 'I'm free now, and I ain't never going back. I don't want to see the face of Ian Kelly or no man like him ever again! They'll drag me back dead!' At the mere thought of encountering the slave master who was also her father, mother began to tremble and sob, and I wanted desperately to run to her side. But I knew I had to remain invisible and silent because this talk between my parents did not involve me, so I stood alone against the darkness, weeping and shuddering as my identity—as understood by those much more powerful than me, began to reveal itself—and I was shocked and desperately disappointed to find that I was not at all who I'd thought I was, all along.

'That's why I'm warning you Mary. You can't give up. You can't relax or take it for granted that you'll ever be free. You're a colored woman and the mother of a colored child. The fate of constant captivity is your cross to bear.'

My mother fell to her knees and remained this way, sobbing into her open palms until my father scooped her up in his strong arms and began to carry her towards the cover of our modest home. I scampered back to my pallet, laid myself down quick, and feigned a deep sleep."

Chantal paused here to reach inside the pocket of her housecoat and retrieve her pouch of tobacco into which she dipped her long fingers, and gathered a fresh wad to tuck into her cheek, as if the stuff fueled and energized her. "Listen careful now," she said. "Because the Watcher of the Silent Ones is coming."

I asked Chantal if I could have a break, and I shuffled into her kitchen where I felt quite at home. I stoked the stove with more coal so I could warm some left over cornbread and make a fresh pot of coffee. As a bachelor and railroad man, I'd spent many hours in solitude and knew of necessity how to care for myself. I wanted to savor my buttered cornbread and sip my sweetened coffee, then set my plate down and settle in nice and cozy to listen to my aunt speak in the haunting voice of Rebekah with my eyes closed—because I knew the story well, and could foresee the tremulous, chilling things that would soon come to dominate the narrative—a gripping passion play comparable to the cold pangs brought on by Satan, seconds before the vice grip of death and reckoning take hold.

“What Yahola, what *Joseph* said, proved absolutely right,” Chantal went on now that I was satiated and warm inside like a bear cub sheltered against winter inside its mother’s den. “In a matter of days a pair of British traders managed to spread the word about the coming attack, and like John the Baptist bringing news of the imminence of Jesus Christ, these tidings prepared everyone for the American soldiers who would soon follow close behind. Joseph was one of those who bought arms from those traders to help defeat the encroaching onslaught of men who intended to reduce him to an animal, and redact his God given rights without mercy.

A group of men, Indians and African-Americans, sat in conference beneath the generous shade of a flaming mahogany. “Quiet!” Itcho’s father Hachi iterated in stern tones to silence a smattering of individuals who’d begun to speak over one another, each one vying to press their ideas on the group, “Joseph is speaking!” he bellowed. Joseph had quickly become appreciated and sought out for his intelligence and skills of reason during strategizing sessions with Hachi and the other men—a group comprised of Creek, Oconee and Seminole, mixed with a smattering of fugitive blacks. They hunkered down to map their plans, relying on sketches in sand to help overcome their lack of fluency in one another’s languages, only to discover that in war—particularly a cruel one such as this, in which the conflict exists for the sole purpose of exacting evil and taunting justice—there can be no plans, and that the only thing left to hope for is the grace of God, and the often limited benefits that come with being on the right side of reason.

The fated moment arrived, and the boots of the Georgia militia hit the ground outside our camp at nightfall. The only thing keeping us from having already been killed was the fact that we heeded the directives of my father, and stayed away from the neighboring forts, where the majority of fugitive slaves had sought refuge and were now all dead. Joseph’s ingenious plan to keep my mother and me and the rest of the blacks hidden in plain sight, is undoubtedly what saved us.

Mother and I had hunkered down against the warm bosom of mother earth, large fronds of pumpkin leaf shielding us from view. We listened with trepidation as the footfalls of the militia men drew nearer, and trembled in terror as we heard the war cries of a cadre of men leading the charge of battle, while another troop of warriors approached stealthily from the back, circling the militia men, slaying them one by one, until there was nothing left but tufts of smoke, fallen bodies, and the residual trauma and weariness that comes with killings of any kind, even murder enacted in self-defense.

In the aftermath of battle, my parents were able to reconcile to the extent of looking out for one another, but were never able to mend the breakages that conquer and divide in the face of the kind of dehumanizing events that brought them to the Florida wetlands in the first place. So we lived on, constantly on the move with a small band of other blacks and Indians, a tense sort of friendship between them, as my father continued to lead the skirmishes, keeping soldiers and militia men at bay for a number of years to come.

But it was not until the last stand, when Joseph slew and skinned a wolf, and donned the wolf’s pelt, laying it against his back, dancing ferociously in order to build his psyche against the encroaching interlopers—blood from the still warm animal trickling down the back of his legs, his face and chest, as he prepared to slay a pair of enemy soldiers—that all and sundry—the

fugitive slaves, black freedmen, Seminoles, and whites, finally grasped with full appreciation the kind of madness borne of these wars, of our decidedly ‘new world’ brand of hate.

Here Chantal shuffled off to her bedroom, and I knew that for the first time she would take the story of Rebekah and Itcho to its high point in a way she’d never done in telling the tale before. I leapt up from my chair and began pacing the floor—anxious, excited and fearful of the revelatory truths set to unfold.

Chantal, tall and slender, the elegant creases in her face belying the exhaustion of her years, returned from her little room, stacked with clothes and mementos, and tiny receptacles of recrimination and sin—and placed a worn leather suitcase down on the floor of her miniscule sitting room without ceremony or triumph. “The Watchers of the Silent Ones are ever changing—passing in and out of the shapes of great blue heron, stoic owls or young rabbits at play. They record history for the annals of humanity, written on the leaves of summer trees, on clouds whose imprints are more lasting than you’d think, on the insteps of beetles, and more importantly—onto the hearts of men. Come closer now,” she beckoned, “get low and lean in, so the spirits don’t dissipate.”

I gulped, swallowing so hard it hurt. I wasn’t ready. I hadn’t had enough time to right myself—and I knew there never would be enough time. Not in all the eons lined up straight and marching towards infinity. Chantal had never taken the story this far. Here she used her long fingers to throw open the small suitcase, and there, tucked into the corners, were the shrunken, mummified bodies of the young girl Rebekah and her beloved playmate Itcho. Their mutual affection, like their bodies and minds, suspended in time, not permitted to mature or naturally flourish. Like all mummified creatures, the faces were distorted and strange, but it was the size of their small frames and the lingering aura of innocence about them that struck me, and I couldn’t stay the flow of tears that fell from my eyes as their remnants met my gaze.

“Yahola, that is Joseph, had fought valiantly and led his men on numerous triumphant raids, but eventually the two children were cornered alone, playing along the banks of the ‘*Pahaiokee*,’ The Lake of the Holy Spirit, and gunned down like animals, their bodies coveted like trophies. Yahola was determined to get them back. The retrieval of the body of his daughter and her young friend his last triumph. Feverish rage at their killings is what prompted him to don the bloodied wolf skin, and dance about madly, his mouth foaming like a rabid animal’s before the white men who’d perpetrated this predictable, yet heinous act.”

I’d long heard rumors that I hadn’t believed, about the mummified bodies, kept in stealth and passed down along Chantal’s maternal side, preserved without the knowledge of any tribal authority, law, or museum. And here I was making the discovery that she indeed had been their proud and faithful keeper.

Of a sudden, Chantal regarded me intensely, with the rheumatic eyes of a sickly cat. It was almost a look of hatred. The shutters on her modest apartment began to rattle, and the air inside her front room grew thick and cloying, and the thrill of the dramatic I'd been anticipating took a sinister turn, and by my inability to breathe normally, I could not be sure I'd retreat from her modest rooms alive.

“The Watchers of the Silent Ones wage their battles in stealth, unrelentingly,” she declared. “What you're experiencing is but a small sample of the pain, the discomfort and wrenching heartache of the damned and embattled—the victims of the lynch mob, the mothers who bear children despised from birth, hated for the assumption of their future blight upon us all. The Watchers of the Silent Ones despise the learned who cling to every word of the false prophets of hatred. With every depraved injustice, such as the killing of the children Rebekah and Itcho, the bodies of the egret, deer and panther, quake and tremble in untold pain. The minnows, bluefish and bass feel their gills closing in as they struggle to move inside water. The primrose willows and floating hearts are sorely chagrined and ashamed by the ways in which the cruelty and untruths of humanity wax on, even the molecules with their pained memories witness in disbelief the cowardice of the Silent Ones who fail to speak—who fail to challenge wrongdoing—these are in their eyes more culpable and bear more blame for worldly injustice, than those who know no better than to see their ignorant convictions through to the end.”

I tried to tap my foot or wriggle my fingers to make sure I'd be able to regain control of my body, but I could not move. The velocity of an invisible force kept me pinned against my chair as I struggled to regain my breath. When I could finally force a few words, I spoke in desperation.

“What's happening to me aunt Chantal? I don't understand what's happening or why you've done this to me.”

I was too depleted of strength to stand, or run or flee, so I fell to my knees and attempted to crawl towards the door. At that moment, I realized I should not have spoken or moved, for I felt as though the very floor beneath me had shifted, and I was no longer girded by any foundation. I had the terrifying sensation of falling over and over again, my stomach dropping, my knees like jelly—gusts of wind heaving towards me, giving me a frigid chill, as I experienced the terror of tumbling from a great height again and again and again. Oh, the agony! The frightful drop of the bottom of my belly each time I swooned down at speed. I trembled fearfully, terrified that next would come the fall preceding my final end.

Everything I'd expected—of the recounting of the story of the girl Rebekah, of Itcho, Yahola and Mary as I'd heard it told a dozen times before—was not to be, and I felt now as though I was paying some unforeseen ransom for thinking I could be a mere bystander, that I could hear this

sad tale without suffering, as though it were only a mere legend or remnant of some long ago history that scarcely mattered anymore.

Chantal frightfully floated up from her chair—an unholy ghost. Her head crowned with deer antlers, her back draped in Yahola’s bloodied wolf skin. She shot up right before me, growing to a ferocious height—until she loomed enormous and imposing as a great cabbage palm. We were no longer inside, but hovering then above black clouds, flocks of hideous grey vultures encircling our heads. The horrific falling sensation continued to hit me in waves, as again and again I felt all structure fall from beneath my feet, even as I remained motionless and captivated by Chantal’s sudden transformation. Her eyes were sickly as ever, brimming thick with yellow puss, as though the bile of the hatred of days had been housed inside her, transfused into her body against her will, and visited upon her mercilessly—she seemed to be succumbing before my very eyes to the agony of every wrong and evil thing that brought us all, at our lowest hour, to the groveling level of beings with less nobility than flies.

“I was but a young girl, a burgeoning princess, walking a New Orleans alley way on important business,” Chantal trembled as she spoke, and the ground shook and the trees shed leaves like tears in solidarity. “Over my arm I proudly carried thousands of dollars in exquisite gowns, freshly collected from the renowned seamstress Marie, which my mistress Elodie had entrusted to my care. I was to take those gowns to Elodie’s salon, where her charges were in the throes of preparation for the most important ball of the season—the one that would secure their placement with suitable gentlemen, and payment of Elodie’s fees for the coming year. I knew the import of my errand, for Elodie had even promised me a debut ball of my own at sixteen, if I consented to listen well and work hard. Everyday life then, was nothing short of a dream.

I was so consumed with the careful transport of blue taffeta, emerald silk, and blushing satin, I scarcely noticed the two men following me from behind. And in any case, I was so naïve and trusting I would have thought nothing of their presence had I noticed anyway.

As I came to the end of the alley at Dauphine street, these men suddenly accosted me in hateful words and brutal fists, jumping my body with the ferocity of wild animals. “We seen you flitting around here boy. You think you pretty, don’t cha? Well, let’s see just how pretty you really is.” I was thrown down against the pavement like a paper cut-out harlot, the two men bearing down on me with the weight of their large bodies and strong arms, cursing, spitting and stomping me all over at the hour when day lays down in surrender to night. Before that awful moment I’d been an innocent—unaware of the terrific degree of hatred too many human beings find themselves capable of summoning.

When it was over, and the men had run off, I sat still on the ground for some time after, so lost and broken inside my soul, as if every dream I’d ever had, had not even been *my* dream, but were the aura and fantasies of someone else entirely. Minutes before the attack I’d been so proud of the responsibility I’d been charged with by my dear Elodie, and now, as I looked at those dresses, once fine—now soiled, bloodied, and torn by the muddied boots of evil incarnate—I knew a despair and sadness no mortal eye should ever witness. I was so ashamed to disappoint my mistress, and to have failed to succeed in the first important task she’d ever entrusted to me.”

It happened then—I fell. My body went hurtling through space and time, and I felt myself free falling, crashing into flocks of black crows, their dark, sinister feathers sticking against my body. My back hit tree limbs, my forehead became punctured by rocks and debris until my head was spotted all over by small wounds and droplets of blood. With a great slam I fell back to my place on the couch in Chantal’s sitting room, by body wracked, aching and bloodied all over.

Chantal was hideous and terrifying in the wolf’s skin and deer antlers, her eyes still jaundiced and weeping puss, wolf blood streaming down the sides of her face. Her voice issued in a low bass growl, as she weakened before my very eyes.

“You can’t just get by, dancing on the periphery Otis,” she whispered in the low moan of a viper. “Whether you know it or not, whether it’s conscious or buried deep inside, you will feel pain, intense, excruciating pain, even if the next lynching happens to another, and you live all your days safe and contented as a piglet sucking lard. You have to stand up against the savagery of others and call to mind Rebekah, her father the brave Yahola, her courageous mother Mary, and her best friend Itcho. Remember how their blood soaked the ground and nourished the roots of the trees. Take it now,” she shoved the suitcase containing the remains of Rebekah and Itcho towards me, and I knew then, that what I felt at that moment, mirrored exactly the fear she must have felt, as she sat sprawled, stunned and alone in that New Orleans alley way with a broken heart—inadequate to the weighty responsibility she’d been assigned.

Camille Collins was born in Gallup, New Mexico. She has an MFA in Creative Writing from The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and been the recipient of the South Carolina Arts Commission Fiction Prize in 2009. She currently lives in New York City.

“THE HOLLOW OF THE GREAT WAVE OFF KANAGAWA”

Katshushika Hokusai

By Sarah Brown Weitzman

This mountain
of water dwarfs
Mt. Fuji placed
dead center within
its great curl like
a tiny wave itself
Its ice cap white
as water foam
In reality that
mountain rises
far above the level
the sea could achieve
even in tsunami
Almost indiscernible
two small boats
and their crews are
about to be drawn
into the mouth of this
water beast suspended
forever in time motionless
momentous moving

Great Spangled Fritillary

By Brad Garber

How you captured me, your command,
the landscape of flowers pale beneath
your brilliant body, your confidence.

Lesser denizens moved away from you
into the depths of your flowery perch
to hide beneath your brilliant cape.

You were a statement, as you should be,
a red scarf around the neck of the boy,
rainbow colored hair on a naked dancer.

And as I watched you take to wing
my resolution to change into something
more eloquent in my life rose with you.

Brad Garber has degrees in biology, chemistry and law. He writes, paints, draws, photographs, hunts for mushrooms and snakes, and runs around naked in the Great Northwest. Since 1991, he has published poetry, essays and weird stuff in such publications as Edge Literary Journal, Pure Slush, Clementine Poetry Journal, Sugar Mule, Barrow Street, Aji Magazine and other quality publications. 2013 Pushcart Prize nominee.

Inktree

By Jon Yungkans

first day of spring
I keep thinking about
the end of autumn
—Bashō

wind blows through
bone and thought
sews fate's threads
to bind pages that
fill time to time with
April rain and tears

a book's lost words
May's flowers with
December's ghosts
hidden chapters of
language you hoped
might be understood

inktree your sorrow
runs deep as magic
the earth feels your
words and mystery
knotted in soil holds
you tight and listens

a book of love from
which layer by layer
cold has stolen as
you shivered hangs
in the air from your
heart to my dreams

a wandering heart
rooted in a rock's
cleft yet tottering
a twist of smoke
amid fresh air and
dying memories

forever catching
your wild breath in
a haunting winter
paradise of melody
now at a threshold
and again to write

Jon Yungkans is a Los-Angeles-based poet, writer and photographer who has so far maintained his sanity despite freeways, over-the-top antics of some of his roommates and all the paranoia which life in the land of Nixon would seem to suggest. He still loves dogs; cats love or at least tolerate him as long as he feeds them; and coyotes who have stumbled onto his front lawn from nearby hills have so far maintained their indifference, preferring pizza from the college campus across the street while he drinks his coffee in relative (and thankful for it) quiet. In the midst of all this, Yungkans' love of music in language sometimes overcomes his hesitation about who exactly reads poetry these days anyway and spills over to pen and laptop. He hopes that the heart and mind which his words drag with them resonate in turn with the ears and thoughts of those who read and listen to them. His works have appeared in *Poet Lore*, *Poetry/LA*, *Twisted Vine Literary Journal* and other publications.

The German in Me

By Mary Brown

We talk about grammar, gender,
how *Madchen*—*girl*—is neuter,
not feminine in German,
ein, not *eine*,
 das, not *die*,
nothing at all to do with body
parts, nothing sexy about it,
 all syntax and philology, just
doggedness (*der Hundheit*?)
 and simple parts
 of speech.

 This is new to you,
but something I have known
since I was one of those
neutered girls, *ein Madchen*,
the jiggers of German in my
granddad's sermons, gutturals
swallowed easy, no one
concerned about gender,
no one mouthing
jerk,
 just taking it
 in for what it
was—the mother tongue,
die Jungen (*boys*) masculine
from the get-go, girls relaxed,
each waiting to get feminine,
 to move
from *ein Madchen* to *eine Frau*.

Recall

By Chad Lutz

I'm not falling asleep.
I'm waking into memories;
of my childhood, my teenage
years, my twenties; in a dream
that lasts forever.

I'm kissing girls on the lips,
hugging turns, trading smiles,
lying still on sandy beaches to
listen for the sounds of my heartbeat.

And after the school dances are over,
the rich meals are through;
the fleeting images caught
in the miraculous patchwork
webbing of my mind
illuminated like reels of sacred film,

that's when I'll fall asleep.
I'll be thirty and write content,
avoid caffeine, floss, flush and wash,
hope no one approaches me at the gym,
and always take my medicine.

I'll fall asleep into life
because the present moment
is never quite the same as what I
intentionally remember
in my dreams.

Chad Lutz was born in Akron, Ohio, in 1986 and raised in the neighboring suburb of Stow. A 2008 graduate of Kent State University's English program, his writing has been featured in *Diverse Voices Quarterly*, *Kind of a Hurricane Press*, *Haunted Waters Press*, and *Sheepshead Review*. Chad still balls hard in his hometown of Stow and currently works in North Canton writing content for an online job resource site. He also manages an online magazine called *AltOhio.com*. Chad runs competitively and won the Lake Wobegon Marathon in May 2015, setting the course record by nearly three minutes in a time of 2:33:59. He aspires to qualify for the Olympic Trials.

KLAMATH RIVER AUGUST

By Marc Janssen

Full color clippings of salmon and trout lined the walls
Snipped from the pages of *Field and Stream*, some of them beginning to curl and fade.
He gripped the pole with his old hands, his fingerprint crossed with deep running valleys.
The skin hung on him worn, sun dried, hardened and alive.
Finally left the house and walked into the late summer morning.

It was already hot
As startled grasshoppers flick themselves skyward clicking out the song of late August
sunrises and the song of long dry grass
On telephone poles cicadas cackled like mid-winter transformers at his passing.

Down the crumbly loose rock path, hidden behind the scrub locust and cottonwood trees
the Klamath glided
With the swift assurance of a ten year old:
Still able to peel away the bank as a knife peels an apple;
Still able to pluck up one of these runt trees as easily as the old man could pull a weed.

Back under a high crag the river stopped for a second to catch its breath.
He found a comfortable rock and tied a hook onto his line.
Looked into the current and thought about fly fishing, he even remembered when you
could still find people with gold pans out here, not the weekend prospector with
dredges who ply the rivers sandy bars, but gold men who dredged with boats, and
pans, and cradles, and anything they could get their hands on.
He tied a lead weight taken from his tire years ago.

One slow movement put the weight into the slow moving current.
Before him the river moved
After him it still does.
But for a brief time he sat on the bank and practiced patience, courage.

Rebecca Morgan: Raising the Hammer

On May 20, 2016

By George Perreault

Sure, I raised it up there in the south pasture, that sign
how love will break the hardest heart, an it weren't a week,
six days, since my boy Jacob drove hisself head-first
into that railroad bridge over toward Fort Sumner.
An I put it up where that little bitch would see it
ever time she drove from Elida or slipped in through Bethel.
Ain't no way she could miss it, comin north or west either,
kitty-corner like it is an facin both roads, an it'd be
in the rearview headin back, if'n she ever looked back, like
maybe she does now, thinkin what's come her way.

Lord, that poor boy – well, no, I guess he warn't a
boy no longer, was he? Not after what he went through
over in the desert – all them kids, cuz they weren't no more'n
kids, mosta them, least when they got shipped out, an they
sure as shit weren't kids coming back. Not men neither, I spoze,
not whole men anyways, their folks tellin how they'd
wake up screamin, then drinkin an shakin in the sunlight
over what they seen, and, dear Lord, what they had to do.
Hardly one of 'em aright after that, not completely.
Well, the Parish boy, he don't seem no different, but then
he was, what, 12, 13, that day he walked in on his momma
doin it with the football coach, his daddy off buildin fence?
Hard to be right after something like that, but the desert,
the desert didn't seem to bend him much.

Acourse the old days, that's who you sent, folks that needed
a place to be or the ones done somethin pretty bad,
an the judge'd say Army or jail, son? An if they was
young enough, they'd give the service a shot.
That ball player, the one over Portales – that Joey Moyer? –
oh, Lord, he was some player, wasn't he? An he did okay
when he had license to hit folks, just when the season's done...
you recall how he beat that other feller near to death?

An that was his momma too, you know, bringin a different
uncle home ever night from the bar, an Joey sleepin
out in his truck or in the laundromat if it got too cold.
That was earlier, acourse, Viet Nam, but war is war an I guess
he had his fill of it after a couple tours. Kinda straightened out
when he got back. Well, he got real quiet, maybe scary quiet,
but still, he ain't been any major trouble, far as I know.

Boys like my Jacob, though, it was a real rough patch, an then
he come home to that little tramp, hearin bout everbody she done
while he was over there gettin his ass shot at, an then the way
she put his face in it somethin awful...wonder he didn't kill her instead.
He'd just sit up nights long as he could, fightin sleep, tryin to
write them songs as if they'd see him through. Seems like
in the quiet now, cattle all asleep, I still hear that mournful tune:
 She's out all night just running round
 what used to be, dammit, my home town.

Well, Dermot, the state cop, he wrote it like an accident,
sand on the road an Jacob skiddin off, but, hell,
that's how mosta them do for a local, you know, just to help
with the insurance an all, but Jake he was clockin 80 an sure as shit
that's what he meant to do. An he ain't the only one, you know that.
Up Alaska, they'd just crawl out on the ice.

Speakin of, she's got a cold ride now, her own self.
But her poor little girl, you sure hate seein someone go through that.
Anyone, really, but a kid...it's just pitiful. Saw them over to the
Town an Country t'other day.... You could count her bones an her
skin all white an waxy, big ol' eyes starin like some soldier
just shipped home. An there's no doubt she loves her baby,
bitch that she is, an I've wondered – does she study upon that sign,
her own heart broken to bits, like maybe I put a curse on her?
Well, I surely would've, you know I would, but not like that.
Lordy, Lordy, I'd never do her like that.

George Perreault has a new collection of poetry, *Bodark County*, featuring poems in the voices of characters living on the Llano Estacado due out Fall 2016 from Grayson Books. He has previously published three books of poetry, including *All the Verbs for Knowing* (Black Rock Press). He has received a fellowship from the Nevada Arts Council and an award from the Washington Poets Association, and has served as a visiting writer in New Mexico, Montana, and Utah. His poems have been selected for nine anthologies and dozens of magazines; recent work can be found in *High Desert Journal*, *Wildcat Review*, *Literature Today*, *Twisted Vine*, and *Sleet*.

Bury Me Face Down

By Jim Richards

Back to the world,
eyes to the fiery core,
hand at the curtain of clay,
and ear to the door.

A slow journey, dark.
A seeping, really, slow.
Not step by frozen step,
but drip by drip I go.

No box to nail me in.
No balm to keep me fresh.
A faster, fetid form
to speed my running rest.

May enemies discover,
if they disturb my land,
a vanished soul's impression,
a shadow made of sand.

Jim Richards poems have been nominated for Best New Poets 2015, two Pushcart Prizes, and have appeared recently in *Prairie Schooner*, *South Carolina Review*, *Juked*, *Comstock Review*, *Poet Lore*, *Texas Review*, among others. He lives in eastern Idaho's Snake River valley, and in 2013 he received a fellowship from the Idaho Commission on the Arts.

To read more of his work visit www.jim-richards.com.

Mad Marie Magdalene

By Sofia Lago

At the fringes of Cour des miracles,
a man shouts for God, for His
select few chosen, and
all those sinners, amen.

Inside, there's a mad woman
who kneels in prayer,
dressed in unwashed rags, and says,

“Dear Mother,
I should have been a nun.”

Mother's dead, and Mary gives no answer.
Not Mother Mary, but Marie.
A graceless Magdalene.

Mad Marie, with her dress torn ragged,
accepts a rich man's coin,
and strips until she's naught but skin.

All the while,
a man shouts for God in aristocratic French,
and Mad Marie's lowly prayer
is pressed hard against tightly shut lips.

The brothel is her parish,
and smells thickly of the human body,
and masculine completion.

Outside, a man speaks of predestination and sin,
and Mad Marie thinks,

“Damn you, sir, and all your words of wisdom.”

He exhausts himself by night, as priests do,
but rich men's appetites are insatiable.

Jesus and God have a list of sins to last for days, but
one can never claim that the residents of
Cour des miracles have succumbed to sloth.

Morning breaks pale and bleak
over the streets of Cour des miracles,
where Mad Marie Magdalene
sleeps away the sunrise.

Sofia Lago recently graduated from Stockton University with a B.A. in historical studies. She previously published her poem “Yard Sale for Dreams” in Folio, and intends to name her future cat Toulouse.

Taking Over

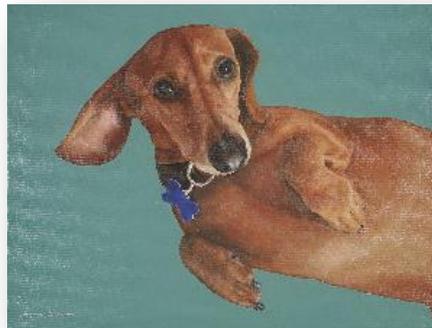
By A.D. Hurley



A.D. Hurley lives the mountains of North Georgia with her husband, five children, and dog. She takes inspiration for her photography from the gorgeous landscape and local foliage. When she isn't snapping pictures, she can be found tapping away at her keyboard working on the next great American novel. Her photography has been published in Under the Hat magazine, *82 Review's December 2014 and March 2015 issues, Sonder Review, Brain of Forgetting, Vine Leaves Literary Journal Issue #14, and their "Best of 2015" Anthology.

Whimsical Animals

Suzanne Edmonson



Suzanne Edmonson is a California based artist and a native of Texas. Her interest in art was sparked at an early age and she started taking art & painting lessons to unleash her creativity on canvas. Her early work was recognized and led to several art honors in high school. She continued to study art in college at the University of Texas at Arlington, where she earned a BFA, and Southern Methodist University in Dallas. Her art education and expertise led her to a professional and successful career in advertising as an Art Director where her artistic sensibilities and vision were critical to creating ad campaigns for major brands.

During her advertising career, she never abandoned her love of painting and always found time to create, finding inspiration in the art of Claes Oldenburg, Andy Warhol & Jasper Johns. Their visions of ordinary things, scenes, etc. in life were transformed into extraordinary works of art and Suzanne's work reflects that inspiration as it looks at objects, scenes, and animals, and gives them an important statement in life, sometimes with just a whirl of whimsy.

A Forensic Forage

By William Crawford



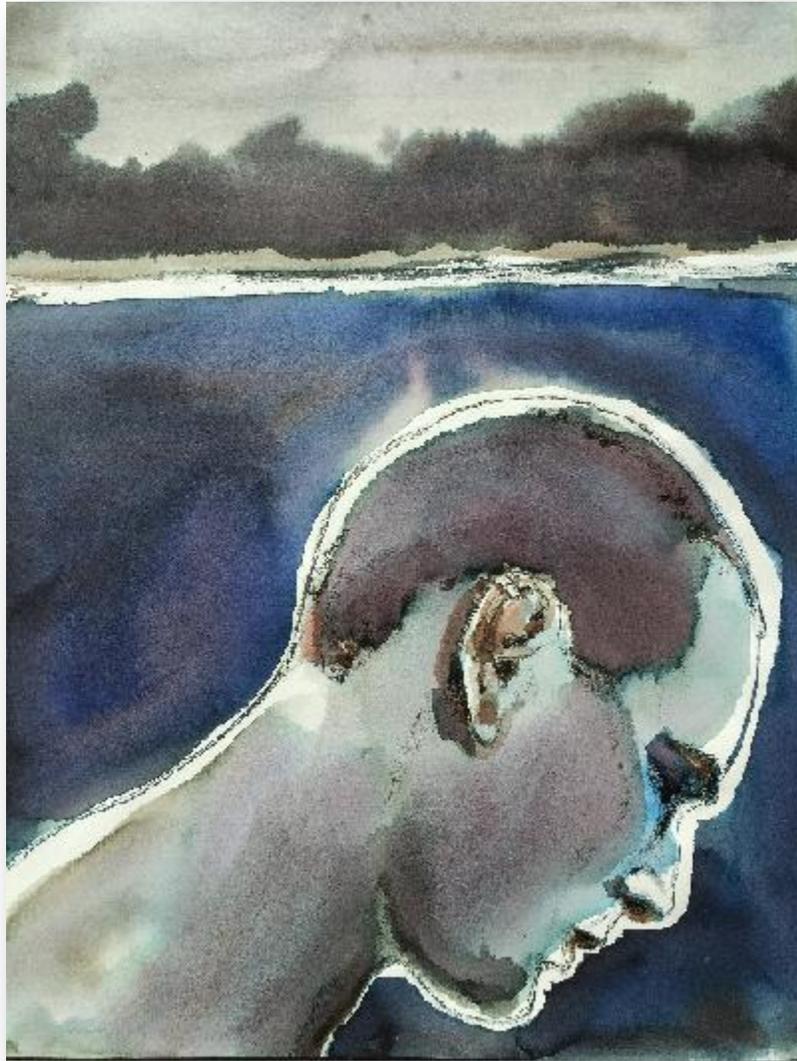
William C. Crawford is a writer & photographer living in Winston-Salem, NC. He was a a combat photojournalist in Vietnam. He later enjoyed a long career in social work. Crawdaddy also taught at UNC Chapel Hill. He photographs the trite, trivial, and the mundane. Crawford developed the forensic foraging technique of photography with his colleague, Sydney lensman, Jim Provencher.

His photo here embodies this approach. They feature extensive shooting of everything encountered. The images are then selectively presented with heavy contrast & saturation. Their technique borrows heavily from Stephen Shore and his color post cards from Amarillo. Main Street Americana (and elsewhere!) comes alive in its most base, everyday state. The photographic DNA of Walker Evans on the move (foraging?) also leaves its indelible mark. The genre uses minimal computer manipulation. Forensic foraging also accentuates funk which is easily identified because it just looks funky.

Crawdaddy's writing for decades focused on hard hitting editorials on behalf of the powerless. His written advocacy tracked his long career in social work. More recently, he branched out into fiction and memoirs. His first book is due out in May, 2016. The working title is: "Just Like Sunday On The Farm: Crawdaddy Remembers The Nam After 50 Years".

Man Profiled

By Richard Vyse



Richard Vyse Internationally collected artist Richard Vyse has shown in galleries in Manhattan and Honolulu. He has studied at the School of Visual Arts in New York City and taught at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn. His art has been featured in the Art of Man #19, Noisy Rain magazine Winter 2015, Assaracus magazine #21 and Mascular magazine #15UK to name a few.

Visit – manartbyvyse.blogspot.com “Celebrating modern man with an edge in line and spontaneous brush strokes to create an imagined moment and mood.”