

MEAT FOR TEA

VOL 15 ISSUE 3
THE VALLEY REVIEW

CHEEK



Meat for Tea: The Valley Review

Meat for Tea: The Valley Review was founded by Elizabeth MacDuffie and Alexandra Wagman. We are a non-academic affiliated magazine committed to recognizing and featuring the work of the artists, writers, and musicians living in western Massachusetts and beyond.

Staff:

Editor-in-Chief: Elizabeth MacDuffie
Layout: Mark Alan Miller
Intern: Joseph Rotondo
Impresario: Elizabeth MacDuffie

Cover Art:

Front: "A Turtle's Dream" by Sean Kang
Back: "A Turtle's Dream" by Sean Kang

Printing: Paradise Copies, Northampton, MA
Typeface: Gill Sans, Libel Suit (Ray Larabie)

Contributors:

Kate Becker, John Berglund, Lindsey Britt, Jane Carey, Ben Castleman, Jacob Chapman, Hyewon Cho, Nathan Cho, Kate Choi, RC deWinter, Scott Ferry, Michael Favala Goldman, Stephanie Guediri, Richard Wayne Horton, Sean Kang, Isabella Kim, Linda Kraus, Elizabeth MacDuffie, Jeremy Macomber-Dubs, Doug McNamara, David P. Miller, Jane Muschenetz, Sabyasachi Nag, Amanda Palmer, Thomas Rowland, Deborah Daniel Shea, Jan Shoemaker, John Sieracki, Alex Starr, Danielle Sung, Peter Tacy, Weining Wang, Michael Washburn, Jennifer Weigel, Gerald Yelle, Jane Yolen, Frank Zahn

Special thanks:

Mark Alan Miller and Justin Pizzoferrato and Sonelab, Abandoned Building Brewery, Broadside Books, Big Red Frame, Topatoco, Joslin Hall, Cyd Scott, May It Howl, Oh My!, Corsello Butcheria, Michael Goldman, 4160 Tuesdays/Sarah McCartney, Avalon Game Cafe, Richard Wayne Horton, David Mintz, Salon 180 East, and all of our sponsors. Our sponsors deserve great thanks - please visit them and let them you know you appreciate their support of the arts!

The Meat For Teacast: anchor.fm/meatfortecast - and everywhere you get your favorite podcasts!

Advertising in Meat For Tea is inexpensive and easy. By advertising in Meat For Tea you are helping to keep print media alive! Visit www.meatfortea.com for more information.

To submit to Meat For Tea, please go to: meatforteathevalleyreview.submittable.com/submit. Please send all other editorial correspondences to meatfortea@gmail.com.

Vol. 15 Issue 3, September 2021, first printing. ISSN 2372-0999 (print) ISSN 2372-1200 (online)

All stories, column title and images copyright 2021 by meaty ltd. And the individuals contained herein. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, reprinted, or transmitted in any form without prior written permission from Meat for Tea: The Valley Review. Please address questions, comments, or concerns to meatfortea@gmail.com.

For more information or to purchase current and back issues, PDFs and subscriptions, please visit www.meatfortea.com.

- 4** Guest Salutations
- 5** Waiting for a Storm
Peter Tacy
- 6** Getting Strangled as Gracefully as Possible,
or a Year in the Belly of the Whale
Amanda Palmer
- 25** The Bread I Was Working On Last Night
Jane Yolen
- 25** Photo
Elizabeth MacDuffie
- 26** The Benediction of Snow
Jane Yolen
- 26** The Lesson of a Wet Dog
Peter Tacy
- 27** The Black Dog: In Peace
Jane Yolen
- 27** Requiem for a Dog That Had To Be Put Down
Peter Tacy
- 28** Fitz River
Jane Carey
- 29** Bacchante and Infant Faun
& Erotic Netsuke
David P. Miller
- 30** In Two, Word Hoarder & A Little Luck
Alex Starr
- 31** Face or a Man
Weining Wang
- 32** Visionary
Michael Washburn
- 47** The Breakthrough
Danielle Sung
- 48** Reading Aloud
Sabyasachi Nag
- 55** Rubble
Jennifer Weigel
- 56** Nosings with John Berglund: 5 Perfume Myths
- 58** Victorian Life
Jacob Chapman
- 59** The Founders
Jacob Chapman
- 60** The Child of the House
Jacob Chapman
- 62** In Flight
Lindsey Britt
- 63** Lost Aunt Mary
Nathan Cho
- 64** New Sexy Underwear
& This is the Only Poem I'll Ever Write For You
Michael Favala Goldman
- 65** The Family Game: Pinocchio
Michael Favala Goldman
- 66** Families Buried In Sand
Deborah Daniel Shea
- 77** Pick One
Hyewon Cho
- 78** Parlor Games
Thomas Rowland
- 83** The Crossing
Kate Choi
- 84** Upon Return from a Trip Overseas
John Sieracki
- 85** Going To Do
John Sieracki
- 86** If We Know in Advance & Old Time Detective
Gerald Yelle
- 87** Ekphrastic Inspired by an Ad
Gerald Yelle
- 88** The Bright Side
RC deWinter
- 90** A Catalogue of Stray Observations
by a Superannuated Flâneuse
RC deWinter
- 91** Face or Head
Weining Wang
- 92** The Third Ascention
Richard Wayne Horton
- 96** Post-Existential-Crisis Crumbcake
Scott Ferry
- 97** How to Unmake Bird's Nest Soup
Stephanie Guediri
- 98** How it Passes Though Us
Ben Castleman
- 108** Face 2
Weining Wang
- 109** In Plain View
Kate Becker
- 116** R U Afrid
Doug McManara
- 124** JTUPBP
Isabella Kim
- 125** Miracle Fruit
Jane Muschenetz
- 126** Good For You & Acidic Aspirations
Jane Maschunetz
- 127** Riding The Rails
Linda Kraus
- 128** Housecleaning
Linda Kraus
- 129** Doe
Jan Shoemaker
- 132** Pawprints
Jennifer Weigel
- 133** Memories & Nasty-Dirty-Filthy Things
Frank Zahn
- 134** The Meaty Record Review
Jeremy Macomber-Dubs
- 136** A Covid Drama
Peter Tacy
- 139** Contributors' Notes



guest salutations from Jane Yolen and Peter Tacy

The Haunting of the Snark

Jane:

When asked to write the editorial for Meat for Tea, Peter and I looked at the name of the next issue and saw it was CHEEK.

Now, Peter and I had both hung around New York (city and state) and several New England colleges and Independent schools in the Northeast for most of our lives. And we said almost simultaneously—"Another word for snark!"

We had met, briefly dated for two months in college, I at Smith he at Williams, 65 years ago. We found one another again after both our wonderful marriages ended in the death of our spouses from cancer. I was a widow for fifteen years, he a widower for five.

I had published almost 400 books by then. He had published two, and many papers about education. I wrote poetry, some of which was published in literary magazines, anthologies, collections. He wrote poetry published in...his bottom drawer. Our first date pre-Covid was at the Emily Dickinson Museum.

The literary snark of yesteryear can still be found in poetry, old and new. Emily Dickinson's rhymes rock with it. "Tell all the truth but tell it slant..." And the last lines of Yeats' poem, "The Second Coming" shouts snark in vicious Irish syllables condemning both church and war: "what rough beast, its hour come round at last, slouches towards Bethlehem to be born." "The Jabberwocky is a hymn to snark, even with most of the words made up. And the marvelous four line epigram that the irreplaceable Alexander Pope had engraved on a collar for the King's dog: "I am his highness' dog at Kew./ Pray tell me, sir, whose dog are you?"

Peter:

It was Emily's whispered snarkiness that endeared her to us. Immured in two genteel New England educational institutions not far from and not entirely unlike the Amherst of Emily's time, we each had found that we could politely accept much that came our way with good humor and some gratitude — but only if a "cheeky" rebelliousness that was a real part of each of us could find a way to be expressed. Poetry offered each of us an opportunity to be completely present. We both seized upon it—and, in so doing, found an enduring friend in each other.

The snarkiness that we expressed back then, in the 1950's, has not vanished from either of us. It's still here, popping up in what we write separately and together, just as we still pay visits together to Emily's home and grave, in recognition of the special debt we owe her, as our High Priestess of intimately-expressed New England Cheek. Emily lived in times in which she could sustain civil discourse and adopt a polite tolerance of what was absurd and truly malign only if a way was at hand for her to respond honestly to such inanity. Writing poetry was the way for her to do so. It was/ (and is) for us, too.

Life without poetry would still go on, you know; but as something incomplete; small-L life. We prefer the capitalized version.

Both:

How close were our upbringings? When Jane won all the poetry prizes at Smith, her father said, “You can’t get rich writing poetry.” When Peter won the poetry prizes at Williams, his father asked, “What use is it?”

“That, dear readers,” we answer Popishly, “depends on whose dog you are.”



waiting for a storm

Peter Tacy

It’s always like this. We bustle about the place, carrying stuff that might be moved by wind out of harm’s way; checking every space — then sitting back, to wait for... whatever will begin.

Waiting — for all that comes our way — no matter what we wish or intend or plan to do: is this a metaphor? *Life is like this*. Yes, we plan, we hope, we plot, but in the end can only wait...and hope for more...

More life to live. This is how the world explains that we’re all just waiting for our hurricanes.



getting strangled as gracefully as possible, or a year in the belly of the whale

Amanda Palmer



I. SKY STUFF

I've never been much for following Sky Stuff, but I've always felt like I'd be a more admirable and wholesome person if I did. I feel like my friends who follow Sky Stuff are somehow one rung up the Adult Ladder from me, like the people who know how to play chess, or do their own taxes.

It was May 26th, 2021, the night of the big Blood Moon Eclipse that everyone was twittering on about. I figured I should do something, find something, go, you know... look at it.

I managed to make the effort when Ash was a tiny baby, in 2016, to fly on a few days' notice — with a baby strapped to my back — from New York to Tennessee, to plant myself somewhere on the Path of Totality of the full solar eclipse. I still can't believe Path of Totality isn't the name of a New Age Nü-Metal Band. Then again, there are perhaps — fortunately? — not too many New Age Nü-Metal Bands.

I drove with some Tennessee people I barely knew to a field in the middle of nowhere and then wandered off with Baby Ash, standing in awe in some random southern summer cornfield as the light went strange and dim and the animals all quieted down.

The most remarkable memory of those few eclipse-minutes was the fact that Ash went down for a nap just as the light dimmed — like all the other mammals, he was fooled — and I lay him lovingly on a little patch of farm grass as I enjoyed the relative freedom of no crying baby. I stared up at the missing sun, tried to think profound thoughts, and did a few yoga sun salutations while listening to the far-off whoops and whoos from far-off neighboring farm fields, peering through my eclipse glasses from time to time at the strangeness in the sky.

When I picked Baby Ash up from the grass, he was covered in red spots.

I'd inadvertently allowed him — in my blissful moment of sun worship — to get bitten by a mob of chiggers, little practically-invisible members of the arachnid family that live in tall grass and bite the shit out of you if you don't wear long pants in the south.

He looked like he had chicken pox. Poor fucking baby. The proud time-lapse footage that I had cleverly captured by setting my iPhone against the root of a nearby tree — a one minute film of the darkening and lightening sky, starring my noble-looking sun salutations and my sweet innocent child wrapped in swaddling clothing at my goddess-like feet — now felt more like CCTV evidence of child negligence.

Last month, a rare moment of Sky Stuff — the Blood Moon Eclipse — came the way of Aotearoa New Zealand. Some folks in America were getting a bit of a view, but New Zealand had the jackpot viewing location.

Neil had Ash for the night, which was a nice coincidence. The Sky Stuff was scheduled for about 10pm and Ash would likely be asleep anyway, but I was also pleased that I would avoid any stupid encore of accidentally injuring my child during the act of sky-gazing.

Ash is almost six now. He has not been in America since he was three.

He turns six in September, and he loves telling people his birthday date — September 16th. He also loves telling people about Greek Myths, particularly the fact that Hades has smoke coming out of his head, and did you know that Medusa's hair is made out of SNAKES, and did you know that there is a river that divides Dead People and Alive People and that Dead People can't go where Alive People are and Alive People can't go where Dead People are, and he also loves telling people that he and his friend from kindergarten Aya HAD a wedding planned, but then they just decided to be best friends, but they are still going to have a wedding but that it is going to be a best-friend wedding, and about the habits of all the different carnivorous plants, listing the various ways such plants lure their prey.

“DIDYOU KNOW...” he will begin many sentences, sounding remarkably like his father, whose propensity to begin most sentences with “DIDYOU KNOW...” is so habitual that it's entered the lexicon of Things Neil Says That I Make Fun Of But Hopefully Not To The Point Where His Feelings Are Hurt But Seriously He Says It So Often It's Comical So I Have to Point It Out.

Ash is obsessed with Animals Killing Other Animals, Plants Who Kill Animals, Gods and Monsters and Trolls and Beasts who mangle and swallow things whole; he's basically just really into murdering, killing, trapping, poisoning, and the destruction of life in general.

This seems natural and predictable to me. If we were living in our usual hunter-gatherer situation — unlike this mess of a modern world — he'd be following his parents around all day, watching us hunt, trap, gather and forage, instead of this confusing barrage of nonsensical images he's exposed to: adults driving cars, adults sitting in chairs, adults getting very stressed about emails and texts, peering anxiously into little three-inch screens as if that's where the food is coming from.

None of this is what his DNA has conditioned him for. He's supposed to be learning from us how to find shelter, evade predators, hunt, get food. It's futile, but I'm trying. Whenever possible, I take him to the local Countdown Supermarket and he gets to pick any vegetable he wants and we cook it for dinner. It is not like taking him hunting, but it's better than nothing. We hunt the wild celery under the punishing fluorescent lights of modernity.

I wondered what to do for eclipse night.

I heard through our local babysitter, Bee, that there was a cacao ceremony somewhere on the island, hidden in the bush (that's what they call the woods here in New Zealand. I know, it's sort of funny) on the other side of our tiny village, in some private house that apparently gets used for little yoga events and other hippie undertakings. This isn't unusual on Waiheke. A lot of things just happen in people's houses, it's a tiny island, and there aren't a ton of venues. Massage therapists work out of their living rooms and rely on word of mouth, people teach yoga out of their converted garages, and people run craft beer and ping-pong speakeasies out of their basements.

I was intrigued by the idea of going to hang with the hippies for Sky Stuff night. I didn't have any other invitations, and the idea of just going to the beach by myself felt kinda lonely. I've been lonely enough this year. Like many people displaced or locked down because of COVID and forced into monastic celibacy for a variety of reasons, my thirst for any sort of human contact has been raging.



To further entice me, I'd also just taken part in my first cacao ceremony a few weeks before, while on a hiking retreat in the freezing South Island mountains. It was, from the outside, basically just a group of people in a circle, doing a little meditation and drinking some super-nice unsweetened hot chocolate.

But it was also a ritual. We were asked to consider our paths, our families. I hadn't eaten anything for a while, and I was therefore full of feelings, so when I drank the cacao I got immediately weepy. I then wrote a long letter to the part of myself who talks too fucking much. It was relieving.

So I decided to go to the island cacao ceremony and maybe see if I didn't have another enlightening insight about something, anything.

Like many traditional sacred gatherings, the cacao ceremony was being organized solely through Facebook. I never message through Facebook, but I grumbly submitted, sending the guy in charge of the cacao ceremony a little message reserving my place with a promise that I'd pay him the \$27 in cash since I didn't have a Kiwi bank account to do a bank transfer as requested. The person running the sacred ceremony sent me back a thumbs-up emoji.

Who are these people? I thought.

The ceremony was scheduled — according to the Facebook event page — to start at 8pm, and planned to leave my island rental house at around 7:45pm on my bicycle (my heavy-duty electric bike that I bought in Hawkes Bay, my beautiful bike that has a kid-seat on the back,

my bike that I speed down to Ash's school on to pick him up with a banana or an apple in my pocket, my beloved bike that was very expensive and tarnished-silvery-gray and heavy with thick tires, my lovely bike that is the pride of my loins, and *oh* my blue bicycle helmet) in order to arrive at the Hippie House at eight o'clock on the dot.

But at around 7:30, as I finished up eating a tiny salad in my quiet kitchen, the clouds parted and moon — in which I had taken a sudden new interest this evening — started to look really alluring. I could see it rising up over the low, rugged mountains to the east from my front porch, an astoundingly round and bright sight, this blood moon that was about to be partially swallowed up by the shadow of the earth.

Somehow the knowledge that the moon was about to be partly erased gave it a different appearance, a kind of thrilling sheen.

I was excited, and lonely, and done with my day's work, and for the first time in days, I had no child with me. So, feeling giddy, I decided to flip on the internet and do a quick little piano-stream webcast thing for my patrons.

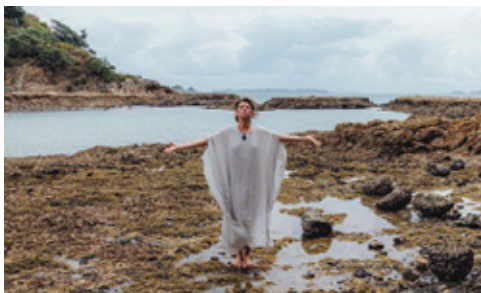
I hadn't done one of these spontaneous patron-only streams in ages. Even though I knew I couldn't show the bright, bright moon through my camera phone on a web-stream, I figured I could at least put on some goth make-up and share the excitement. With parts of the whole earth being excited by the moon and New Zealand being in the first time zone to see the Blood Moon, I felt somehow privileged. *I am in a remote place in the world where there is Sky Stuff happening! And I am PARTICIPATING!*

I never really get dressed up anymore. There's kinda no reason to. Not that I have many dress-up clothes here. I came to New Zealand in March of 2020 with a single suitcase, expecting to go home to New York a week later. Then Covid and the ensuing collapses and disasters happened. Nightlife and dress-up life are a distant memory. Even though I could theoretically swing it, I haven't been performing much, I am too exhausted. And I never really go to parties, as there aren't many parties to go to, and I'm also too exhausted, and anyway the kinds of parties I would go to are the kinds of parties where I wear jeans and flip-flops. It's an island.

So I put on my one Nice Dress, the only one I've bought since getting here: it's a long, flowing two-layered rainy-grey tunic that I spotted in an Old Lady and Tourist shop back in Hawkes Bay, the first town we lived in after lockdown. We lived there for ten months before we came to Waiheke, in time for Ash to start Kindergarten.

The Nice Dress makes me look a little like a Greek-goddess statue, and a little like a clothesline.

It's floaty and expansive, with no waist; if you spread your arms out, it's just a giant square and you're almost as big as an ordinary twin-size bedsheet. The material is scarfy; thin enough to feel soft and delicious, but thick enough that you can wear it without immediate nipple offense.



I donned the Nice Dress, I did the salad dishes, I lit some candles, I put on some eyeliner for the first time in ages, and then I did about thirty minutes of frolicking in front of my patrons as the moon begged to be described. I chatted with strangers through little text bubbles, played the piano a little, and then looked at the time. Again, I hadn't eaten much that day, possibly in a subconscious bid to re-enact my enlightening cacao experience #1, but on that note, it probably wasn't wise to drink two glasses of red wine on a tiny salad in any scenario.

I left the house in my flowing grey tunic with my wallet, phone and keys tucked safely in a cross-body bag. I felt electric. I had made it through the day, I had made it though the fucking year, I had managed to do something on the internet for my patrons, which is always a thing that makes me feel fulfilled and less guilty, and I was on my way to a cacao ceremony on a tiny island in New Zealand on my electric bike. IN A NICE DRESS. I put my blue helmet on. It was dark. I switched on the little headlight in the front of my bike. I pushed back the kickstand and started rolling down the steep driveway.

We live atop a hill. The whole island of Waiheke is a hill. Volcanic, dramatically squished in on itself, there are practically no flat areas, no broad streets, no expansive flat fields like our last town, Hawkes Bay, where everything was endless sheep and apple fields as far as the eye could see: the Kansas of New Zealand.

Our volcanic driveway is short and sharp, I keep banging the undercarriage of my car on it, and the actual street itself is also mildly perilous. I checked my phone before tucking it away, one final time, into my cross-body bag. It was 8:15, but the cacao ceremony certainly wouldn't start *exactly* at eight o'clock. I had a few minutes, and the Hippy House was only a ten-minute bike ride away. The salty ocean air started to rush past my face as I floated out into the night, feeling like a beautiful apparition in a beautiful dress, having just done something magical, about to embark on something even more magical. I felt so... I dunno... proud of myself.

At the bottom of the driveway, I began to pick up speed. I turned right onto our steep street. I was flying now, the moon directly in front of me, beckoning me onwards, rising, rising, shimmering between massive cumulus clouds. I felt invited. I felt inspiring, like a Good Witch on a Bike, a kind sorceress, going past Dorothy's window in a black-and-white dream sequence.

And then I felt something around my neck, strangling me.

I knew immediately what had happened.

My flowing tunic had gotten caught in the back wheel, and was pulling me off the bike.

I was careening down a hill in the dark, going fifteen miles an hour, being strangled by my own fucking dress.

I called my mother the other day.

She and John, my lifelong step-dad, have been on Cape Cod for most of the pandemic, living near the sea in their little summer house.

She asked me if I had heard the Story of the Whale.

I had not. What was the Story of the Whale?

I haven't been on social media much lately, and speaking as an addict, I am increasingly grateful for that, and proud of myself.

Even after Trump lost the election, the doom-scrolling still kept a tight grip on me. The January 6th attack on the Capitol happened, and things still felt urgent. I could not stop scrolling.

But by around mid-March, with Covid still surging and moaning but with no news from the States blaring daily emergency warnings about the immediate safety of my friends and family, I decided to detox. I stopped reading the New York Times every few hours. Then, for a few days here and there, I stopped reading it at all. For a week, I stopped scrolling through Facebook, and Twitter, and Instagram. Then another week. I stopped even listening to RNZ (the Kiwi equivalent of NPR, which I've found very comforting to listen to since arriving in this foreign country).

I started taking pleasure in just reading the kind and thoughtful comments on my Patreon. I started hiking more.

And then these things happen, like the Story of the Whale, and, like the old days, I don't know unless someone tells me.

And as it turns out, it was my mother who told me the Story of the Whale, and I think, had my mother not told me, nobody else would have told me.

After she told me the Story of the Whale, I went on to share it with many locals over the course of my day. Ash's babysitter (she'd seen the story on The Internet). The woman at the grocery store, where I go almost daily to get fruits and vegetables (she'd also heard about the whale). The optometrist, as she administered my eye exam and had to kill some time while my pupil re-dilated. We sat there, making small talk, and I said: have you heard the Story of the Whale?

She had not. I got to be the one who told her the Story of the Whale.

After my eye exam, as we walked out of the examination room, she told her husband behind the counter (he's also an optometrist, it's the cutest thing, they're both optometrists, and they run the little island glasses store as a couple).

Anyway, he HAD heard the Story of the Whale. Maybe he saw it on the internet. I don't know. Maybe he heard it on the radio news. Maybe it made international headlines. I'll never know. I just know my mother told me and by the time I left the house that day, most of New Zealand knew the story.

This is the Story of the Whale.

Off the shores of Provincetown, a veteran local fisherman named Michael Packard was underwater, pulling up lobster pots when his co-fishing friend Josiah noticed a burst of white bubbles emerging from Michael's diving gear. Then Josiah saw an explosion of white water. Michael Packard had been literally swallowed by a humpback whale — a young one, they think.

He was inside the whale for almost a minute, and then he got spit out.

I was inside it. I was inside its mouth, he said.

It tried to eat me....I could sense I was moving, and I could feel the whale squeezing with the muscles in his mouth.

From the Washington Post: ¹

At about 8 a.m., Packard plunged about 45 feet deep, and almost reached the ocean floor when he "felt this truck hit me and everything just went dark," he said in an interview with WBTS.

"And I could feel just ... hard stuff all around me," Packard said. "And I just thought, 'Did I just get eaten by a white shark?' And then I said, 'No, I don't feel any teeth.' And I said, 'Oh my God, I'm in the mouth of a whale. With his mouth shut.'"

Packard felt the whale swimming and shoved his breathing regulator back into his mouth.

"I'm like, 'This is how you're gonna go, Michael. This is how you're going to die. In the mouth of a whale,'" he recalled thinking.

For about 30 to 40 seconds, Packard twisted, turned and coped with an agonizing pressure on his legs. He could feel the whale's forceful head shakes.

I've never been *into* scuba-diving, but I don't really fear it, either. I've been once or twice.

Statistically, it's like anything else.

Your chances of slipping in the shower, falling down the stairs, or, say, getting into an automobile accident are far higher than the chances of your diving gear leaving you stranded underwater, umbilicus torn, unable to breathe.

But why do you think everybody loves the Story of the Whale?

What were the chances?

The Story of the Whale has a happy ending: Michael survived, he was discharged from the hospital that night with only a dislocated knee.

According to the interviews, he's probably back to fishing now, with a little extra fame to brighten his day and put a spring in his step. He was interviewed on Jimmy Kimmel's late night TV show a few days later. He said:

I just want to apologize to the whale for getting in its way.

Would that all human beings were so compassionately in tune with nature.

(What would he say to the lobsters, however?)

I was truly frightened. I knew that if I jumped off my bike, I'd be attached to the material of the dress, which was attached to the bike, and who knows what that would mean, physics-wise.

The dress wouldn't easily rip, and if I fell the wrong way, I might break a leg or an arm. Or make the situation worse by fully strangling myself.

I don't want to die this way.

My brain scrambled the options; I had to make some kind of choice.

I slammed on the handbrakes, fast enough to stop the bike but slowly enough that I wouldn't flip over. I shifted all my weight to the right, trying to fall onto the ground before the tunic got even more tangled, before it could strangle me further, and I fell, choking, with the material from the dress still yanking my throat shut. It hurt.

Now I was on the ground.

Still unable to breathe.

I need to pause here and say that, big-picture-wise, I have grown increasingly proud of my

ability to literally find the humor of these stupid situations in the actual moment they happen to happen.

Something mentally shifted during the “There Will Be No Intermission” tour, and became cemented during lockdown.

I’ve never felt *happier*. Despite everything. Despite everyone. Despite the insanity. I can laugh at ALL of it, and easily.

Perhaps it was the sheer rock-bottom of my situation last year, plus the sudden (and frightening) re-emergence of the sorts of panic attacks that I hadn’t experienced since I was a teenager, which forced me to tap into a recently-discovered wisdom and patience that I’ve managed to harness since going through — and making a show about — three abortions, a twenty-four hour natural childbirth, and a hardcore miscarriage of a three-month old fetus all alone in a hotel room on a cold Christmas night.

Or to put it more simply: I thought I had the tools to deal with the dark, but it was only the beginning. It turns out that what I thought was pure darkness was just rehearsal for a level of absolute blackness I could not have anticipated. But rock bottom can be incredibly liberating.

14

And perhaps it’s being forty-five. But I now find everything hilarious: even in the very moment that the full bottle of wine is falling from the grocery bag onto the tile floor, even as the car handbrake starts screeching as I realize I’ve been driving with it on for two minutes, even as I search, slightly panicked, for my glasses (I have glasses now, for the first time in my life), my wallet, my phone, my purpose in life. Even when the occasional text comes though from someone saying *YOU ARE A FUCKING TERRIBLE PERSON*.

And those do occasionally come through.

I’m able to laugh, quickly, deeply. I’m somehow able to step outside of the panicked mammal, grin, shake my head with sympathy at me, at them, at us all.... And sometimes I even allow myself an audible, full-throated belly-laugh before I even realize I’m doing it.

This wasn’t, for the record, one of those moments where I belly-laughed.

I couldn’t laugh.

I was choking.



II. THE BELLY OF THE WHALE

Yesterday was the winter solstice here, for me, down under. It's disorienting. It's weirder than the fact that it's "summer" where all my friends are and "winter" down here. Night here, day there. That feels sort of... general. A solstice — something this specific — is almost like a step too far, like someone telling you your birthday is actually in July, not January. It's just all wrong.

The summer solstice for my old self, my old calendar, my old emotional map, is the day Anthony, my best friend who helped make me who I am, died of cancer. He died in the summer. He did not die in the winter. Perhaps, if I stay in New Zealand, it means he will not have died at all.

He'd been sick for four years. His illness changed my life, my career, my marriage. He died on June 21st, 2015, eleven minutes after 11:11pm.

I was with him when he died. So was Neil. And little Ash was there, safe in my belly, two months away from being born. Squished in his womb-home, breathing through a long fleshy tube attached to his little fetal stomach. The umbilical cord that Neil would cut a few minutes after he emerged, with scissors provided by our midwife, Joanne Santana.

I wrote about² Anthony dying, the day after it happened.

We were in America, then, in Lexington, my hometown. Anthony died in his living room, next to the house I grew up in. It was the longest day of the year. Now it's the shortest. For me, at least. For us, down here. The darkest.

It was exactly six years ago. But it was summer. It wasn't winter.

Maybe... I can fix this.

Ash's in utero name was Anthony. I whispered in his ear, before he died: *we're naming him Anthony*. But we nicknamed the baby Ash. Ash, the leftover material from all the cremated bodies, all our dead beloved, Neil's Dad, my brother Karl, Ash, the world tree from Norse mythology, Ash, from Evil Dead.

Ash, who turned to me and Neil four days ago while skipping down High Street in Auckland on the way to Unity Bookstore, and said, giggling, *You can call me Anthony, you know.*

Sometimes he just says that, out of the blue. He knows that Anthony is his Big Name.

Sometimes I wonder if, like the breeze through which I sometimes feel his ongoing presence, it's Dead Anthony himself speaking through my little boy's lips, just paying us a visit from across the river Styx.

I don't believe in such things.

Except that, in a roundabout way, I do.

A passage, from bible study tools (dot) com....

God called to Jonah one day and told him to go preach to Nineveh because the people were very wicked. Jonah hated this idea because Nineveh was one of Israel's greatest enemies and Jonah wanted nothing to do with preaching to them.

Jonah tried to run away from God in the opposite direction of Nineveh and headed by boat to Tarshish. God sent a great storm upon the ship and the men decided Jonah was to blame so they threw him overboard. As soon as they tossed Jonah in the water, the storm stopped.

God sent a whale to swallow Jonah and to save him from drowning. While in the belly of the whale, Jonah prayed to God for help, repented, and praised God.

For three days ... Jonah sat in the belly of the whale.

Then, God had the whale throw up Jonah onto the shores of Nineveh.

Between tight little gulps of air, I tried not to panic. I felt the sting of gravel and blood in my hands, and I quickly examined — by the light of the moon, remember? — the wads of dress material caught in the gears.

My only hope of being able to breathe again was to quickly untangle the material from the back wheel and free my neck, so I desperately started to spin the back wheel of the bicycle in reverse, hoping that the material would give and that I could undo the damage, the giant mouthfuls of material that my electric bike had gobbled into its greasy mouth.

Thank fuck. It worked. The material unwound; I could breathe again. The metal fender that protects the back chain of the bike was all banged up and twisted out of shape. I felt a deep ache in my right hip. I wiped my slightly bloody hands off on my overcoat.

I want to think that if anybody had caught this moment on film, I would have been the picture of sophisticated grace, being slowly, dramatically and cinematically strangled by my own dress on my own noble electric bike, like some eco-warrior Isadora Duncan.

Years of yoga and mindfulness practice coming to full fruition. Deliriously unattached to the outcome. As if you could see the beautiful fluid script in the thought bubble above my peaceful head: *Yes, if I die this way, strangled to death by my own dress on my bicycle, this is a fine way to go. I did well, I did well.*

Right, then. Whatever. Now I was actually fucking late for the party. I was wounded, but not fatally. I could still go to the cacao ceremony and maybe have another Enlightening Experience.

Since I could breathe, I could now laugh at myself. I wondered if I would have gotten trapped in the maw of my own clothing if I hadn't had two glasses of wine on a stomach filled with only a tiny salad.

I tucked the material of my tunic (which was now covered in black grease) into the back of my leggings, making another catastrophe less likely, and made it to the cacao ceremony at around 8:35. Battered, winded, greasy, internally humiliated, but also still thrilled, and... *sort of* on time?

Oh dude. No. I was so very wrong about the casual start time. I could see the inevitability of my extreme lateness through the large glass door and windows as I made my way towards the Hippie House hidden in the bush. Forty sweet local hippies were crammed into the broad living room, in silent ceremony. A few of them had their backs up against the glass front door. They were *meditating*.

I was really late.

Bad dream late.

I considered my options.

I could leave. Or I could just linger by the door and see if anybody noticed me and took pity on me. Or I could just slowly creak the door open and walk in, hoping not to make too much of a disturbance.

For three days ... Jonah sat in the belly of the whale.

What the fuck kind of story has a person finding safety — thanks to an interventionist deity — in a place that can actually obviously kill you in a matter of minutes? Bible stories that get mangled and passed down with incorrect metaphors, probably.

I considered why it was so exciting to tell everybody the Story of the Whale. I told it to the optometrist, to my barista, to the babysitter, to my friend in LA, to Regina Spektor, a fellow songwriter, in a text message (She's back in New York; I suggested she write the song, because

I'm too tired to write songs right now, and then she said she was too tired too, and then we both agreed that just sending messages back and forth with little whale emojis was about the best poetic effort we could summon at the moment), to the parents I saw when I biked to pick Ash up from school that day.

But I didn't tell Ash.

I didn't think he was ready for it. Not quite yet.

There's something important and fragile about his obsession with monsters, but they live in books. True death and danger have stayed thankfully at bay, far from his safe little New Zealand world... for now at least. The mythical creatures that haunt him are just that, mythical; they can stay safely in his imagination. The true horror will come later, Ash. You've got lots of time.

And for days, I chewed on the mental image of Michael in the Whale, and couldn't spit it out. I found myself — at odd moments of the day, while making Ash's toast, while looking for the key to my P.O. Box, while cleaning up the lego from under the couch — contemplating Michael's moments inside the whale, about how that forty seconds passed, about the succession of thoughts that went through his head, as utter whale-dark squished his body.

About Covid.

About this whole year feeling, to me, to many, like being in the dark belly of the whale. Alive, not dead, not dead YET, but in terrifying pressurized darkness, with no predictability about when, or whether, we might get spit back onto dry land.

But I also found myself thinking about Michael's day the next day. About the reality of an "unbelievable" lived experience.

What were the chances?

Here's the thing. This man, having emerged *from the mouth of the whale* (say that again, really think about it, okay let's continue) then went back to his "normal life". Immediately.

Or... did he?

Can you?

There he'd be, waking up the next morning on Cape Cod, in his own bed, ready to go downstairs and put a pot of coffee on and maybe read the Cape Cod Times and take a poo, and then... the thought rushes in like a freight train, toppling back into his brain as he feels the sudden swelling pound from his dislocated knee: *Holy fuck. I was inside a whale yesterday. I WAS INSIDE A WHALE.*

And I could say that I cannot imagine that, except that I can, because it feels very close to how I feel every day when I wake up here in New Zealand.

This actually... happened.

Every morning, for fifteen months, I have woken up and shaken off a kind of disbelief. That this is happening on earth. To me. To my family. To my friends. To billions of strangers. The virus. The dead. The ongoing lockdowns. The impossible.

What were the chances?

That I was here in New Zealand for four shows. That my 80-date tour dropped me off, in its final week, in the *one country on earth* that managed to spare itself from a global plague.

That had my shows in New Zealand been scheduled for one week earlier, or a few days later, I would not be here. (I'd have locked down in Australia, but more likely, I would have gone home to New York.)

I haven't told Ash this story, either.

Not really. He knows we are here because of Covid. But I cannot explain the 600,000 dead in our country. I cannot explain why we had to stay. I cannot explain the difference between New Zealand, where he has never encountered another child in a mask, and New York, where some of his old friends haven't touched another child in over a year. I don't want to tell him about that the way I don't want to tell him about the man getting swallowed by the whale.

Even if there's a happy ending.

For fifteen months... Mama and Ash sat in the belly of the whale.

Waiting to either get spit out, or to go home, or to be reborn into Whale Poop, to get eaten by the other sea creatures. Nobody was ever quite sure.

DID YOU KNOW that some creatures in the sea eat poop, and that's their job?



III. RANGITOTO

I decided to just open the glass door and walk — respectfully, apologetically — into the cacao ceremony. On tiptoe, to show my reverence for the sacred space.

I cracked the glass door open. Forty people were crammed into the candle-lit living room, seated on the floor, lining the walls, silently passing around cups of cacao. My entrance interrupted.

There were some giggles from the collective. I was late, and it was obvious, and it was apparently funny. I murmured a wordless, giggling apology that I hoped fit the mood of the moment, and slipped my shoes off, sitting by the door in between two long-haired people seated contemplatively on throw pillows. My hip hurt. My hands stung. I was passed a cup of cacao.

I knew a few of the people there, I could make their faces out in the dim light. Vic, who watches Ash sometimes, a fellow Covid-waylaid from South Africa. And some faces that I knew through her.

And then, a sea of strangers. Strangers of Waiheke Island, who, an hour later, would entwine their bodies with mine, wordless, in a giant human cuddle pile, before going outside to bay at the disappearing moon. So this is what a cacao ceremony on Waiheke Island is like: a wordless gathering of communion cuddles.

20 Where have these people been all my life? I mean, I know. They've been at Burning Man and stuff and in the towns and places I never go to anymore because I'm too busy being a Mother and being on the Internet.

I needed it badly, this medicine. I needed to cuddle strangers. (I've missed touring. A lot. That part, especially.)

As we sat in a huddle, after imbibing the chocolate but before the silence, the leader of the ceremony — a gender-neutral Scandinavian with a fur vest, earrings, a beautiful smile and a shaved head and who, in my mind, has come to represent the solar side of the shadow self of the nitwit in the Viking-Hat-and-furs-get-up at the Capitol Riots, whose likeness is irritatingly burned into my mind's eye forever — laid out some guidelines. We were asked if we wanted to share anything with the group, to speak aloud before descending into silence.

I raised my hand. And I offered up my story — by way of apology, but hopefully also spiritual entertainment — about trying to fall as gracefully as possible from my bicycle as my dress strangled me.

People laughed. I felt included, forgiven. We bowed our heads — sightless, wordless, identity-less, together — and our genderless leader invited us to fall as gracefully as possible into the belly of the whale, into the night, into one another's arms. To join the moon in being swallowed whole.

It looks like we may be heading back to America, after living in this foreign country by accident for about a year and a half. We'll be coming back sometime in the late summer, American-season-wise.

I will have not left this country, this whale, this pressure on my legs, for about seventeen months at that point.

For seventeen months... Mama and Ash sat in the belly of the whale.

I wake up every morning in a state of disbelief... that is slowly wearing away.

With every telling of the story, it becomes a little more believable. But also, with every passing month away from home, it becomes a little less believable.

For about a year — from lockdown until a few months ago — I was unable to walk into a coffeeshop, a theater, a restaurant, a movie, a party without feeling a profound sense of awe. *I get to be here, where it is normal. While the world is locked down.*

Then, one day, I noticed that my awe had worn away. That I was thinking like a Kiwi. That my awe had been replaced by a kind of mundane regularity. I was just going to a restaurant. I was just worried about getting my car to the mechanic. I was just planning Ash's school vacation to Queenstown.

What were the chances?

Since starting my touring career in my mid-twenties, this is the longest stretch of time I have spent in any given country at one go — including my home country. I am always leaving somewhere, and always going somewhere else, and for the last fifteen months, I have moved between two towns, but I have mostly stayed put. It has changed me. I know the people at the grocery store, at the butcher, at the library, at the movie theater, at the clothing shop downtown, at the souvenir store, at the little art gallery, at the musical museum, at the post office, at the bank, at the rare rock shop, at the bike shop, at the coffee shop, and at the stationery store. By name. That has never been true, anywhere, in my life.

I was on tour with “There Will Be No Intermission” — cue rimshot — for nine months before getting waylaid here. Come August, I will have been away from my home, my house, my everything, for two solid years.

This actually... happened.

When I left, it was going to be for a long nine months. Seven months away in the UK, and touring Europe, and then a two-month tour planned for Australia, child and husband in tow, and then a final week in adorable little New Zealand, poor little New Zealand, which always gets tacked on last to every global tour, because they're at the ass-end of the earth. (Even Australians make fun of the Kiwis for being remote. And Australia is already the ass-end of the earth from a colonialist, UK-centric point of view.)

But right now, for me, the center of the universe is here, in my bed, which is in a rental house atop a little hill a short walk from the beach. Ash calls it the Ice Cream House. We moved here from Kansas-of-New-Zealand Hawkes Bay in February, almost a year after getting waylaid here, so that Ash could start Kindergarten in a little Steiner school where they had a lucky and rare place for a kid his age.

People keep saying “stuck”. I didn’t get “stuck” here. I chose to stay here. I could have gone home. Any day. I have the Ruby Slippers. Like Dorothy. Click click click. Whenever.

I just.... haven’t.

For obvious reasons. Covid. More Covid. We stay in the belly, under pressure. In Aotearoa, Land of the Long White Cloud, the land that, according to Māori legend, is actually a stingray that the demigod Maui hauled up from the bottom of the ocean.

Ash loves that story.

“DID YOU KNOW....”

Ash is afraid of Rangitoto.

Rangitoto is the volcanic island we pass by every time we take the ferry to or from the city.

It’s not inhabited, but you can visit.

We have never visited.

I’ve suggested the idea to Ash, but he’s not a fan. It’s not just a volcanic island, it’s SHAPED like a volcano. Like a cartoon volcano. When we are on the ferry, and we see the island in the distance, he dramatically shrieks **RANGITOTO! QUICK! HIDE! VOLCAAAAANOOOO!!**

Rangitoto literally means “Sky Blood”. Early white settlers speculated that the name was evidence of an eyewitness account of its eruption. But the name has nothing to do with the volcano; Rangitoto’s full name is **Te Rangi i totongia te ihu a Tama-te-kapua**: “the day the blood of Tama-te-kapua’s nose flowed”, in memory of an ancient battle on the island between the Tainui people and their rivals, Te Arawa.

I have never googled to see how active the volcano is, and whether Ash’s fears are even remotely justified. My guess is that the Auckland-Waiheke ferry would not be displaying looping TV ads for family walks on Rangitoto Island if there was an immediate threat of death.

Then again, I’ve visited some active volcanoes, and isn’t it just sort of — again — an ongoing death-risk assessment? The way we know we are living on tectonic plates, with immediate earthquake possibility under our feet at all moments? And we just get on with it?

I'm not going to google. I could, and I won't. I'm just going to assume that the volcano is not a Threat.

This is the story I will tell Ash.

We are safe.

Ash said to me, from the back of the car the other day:

I want to move.

I said: *Where do you want to move? Back to Havelock North? Back to Woodstock?*

He said: *To the moon.*

I said: *Why do you want to move to the moon, Ash? It's really dark and lonely up there.*

He Said: *Because on the moon, there is no thunder and lightning and no volcanoes.*

I said: *Ah.*

He said: *Where is there on earth where there is no thunder and no lightning and no volcanoes?*

I scanned my brain. Is there such a place? The Arctic? The Sahara? I think those places must get thunder and lightning, at least occasionally... I couldn't come up with a good answer.

I said: *I mean, there are lots of places with no volcanoes, but I think thunder and lightning is kind of everywhere. I don't think there is a place you can go where there's really none at all. I think thunder and lightning is just part of life.*

He said: *I want to move to the moon. I want to move to where there is no thunder and lightning and no volcanoes.*

I thought: *And I want to move to where there is no suffering, no cruelty, no pain, no war, and no Facebook.*

And I thought: *Good fucking luck, kid.*

I'm scared of going home.

And I'm not at all scared of going home.

And I'm scared of not going home.

I'm worried about the pressure change; the bends, the sea legs.

I'm worried about traveling from this country, down here, with our total lack of Covid Culture, to the country up there, with the masks, the ricochet of trauma, the social architecture all kinked and changed.

I miss my community, I miss my country, I miss my old life and everything that was familiar to me more deeply than I have ever experienced.

I'm not ready. I want to move to where there is no thunder and lightning and no volcanoes.

If I go home, I have a feeling I'd wake up most mornings, like Michael of the Whale, and look out the window, wondering if it could have possibly really happened.

What were the chances?

Then again, perhaps this is the way we all manage to come around to the ultimate realization. The final, master-level understanding of the sheer unlikelihood that is the miracle of existence.

For about nine months... you sat in the belly of the whale.

Then she spat you out.

Maybe you're still not ready.

But here you are, my child, my sister, my brother. My friend.

Welcome to the rest of your life... however unlikely.



All photographs taken (and post-edited) by Duncan Innes³ on Waiheke Island, Friday, April 9th, 2021. Additional photograph of Rangitoto Island also care of Duncan, from his archives.

The story of the Blood Moon was in May. So it's all just a lovely coincidence that I had shots of The Dress to pair with this essay. What were the chances? Styling at the photoshoot was by Carla Torrance⁴

The essay was content-edited and copy-edited by several people. In order of eyeballs and edits: Neil Gaiman, Kelly Welles and Alex Knight. Many thanks to all three of them. And special thanks to Victoria Simpson for reading an early draft, fixing a few typos and making a couple recommendations.

THANK YOU, as always, to my patrons for supporting my writing. If you are not a part of my Patreon and you are reading this — especially if you read this far, c'mon — please consider joining here as a patron to help sustain my writing, costs, team salary and collaborators.... And even better yet, to connect with the community. You'll also get pieces of writing like this in your inbox right when I make them. You can join here for as little as \$1 per month: www.patreon.com/amandapalmer

The original article as published online, with even more photographs can be viewed on amandapalmer.medium.com

¹ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2021/06/14/michael-packard-humpback-whale-lobster-diver>

² blog.amandapalmer.net/20150622

³ <http://www.duncaninnes.co.nz>

⁴ <https://www.instagram.com/carlatorranceconsulting>

the bread i was working on last night

Jane Yolen

Reminded me of you,
when we first met,
a bit rough and shaggy
but with that tough sweetness
inside.

A brain as elastic
as sour dough,
just a few pushes
in the right direction,
some settling heat,
and a bit of jam
when we sat next to one another
ready for that meal
You passed the butter,
said I love you.
That's why last night
I was tasting you,
hot and ready
in my dreams.



Elizabeth MacDuffie

the benediction of snow

Jane Yolen

It falls like grace
upon the black dog's shoulders,
coating her long ears with prayers.

On the flat dike by the river,
she plunges through parables,
and barks at the scattering flakes.

They fly from her open mouth
as if they were angel feathers,
'white and miraculous,

Or chips of old, unburied bones.



the lesson of a wet dog

Peter Tacy

Gracie was a water breed.
Oh, I knew it because
I'd read the poodle screed.
She knew it, too; but it was

Written in her genes,
which tell their stories
in neural micro-scenes –
the basis of all the histories

A dog can know and tell.
Gracie's genes led her to water
on every walk or stroll
we'd take; sooner or later

I'd hear a splash, and know
an erst-poodle was on the scene;
my princess-dog was letting go
so a *pudel-hund* might now be seen.

Humans, too, have inmost drives.
Dogs teach us of these -- as when
a muddy, dripping beast arrives...
and is welcomed back with us again.



the black dog: in peace

Jane Yolen

She lay down on the known rug
the four of us close by,
trusting us to take away the pain.
The vet gave her the healing shot.
Then gathering death around her,
that old gray blanket,
the black dog fell easily
into timeless sleep.
Did we violate that trust?
I think we gave her what she desired,
what we all knew was needed.
Then we left her, our hearts broken
but hers healed, as was only right,
for she had healed us in her own time,
in her own way.



requiem for a dog who had to be put down

Peter Tacy

*A release from pain — the least we owe
those we love and tend.*

Your diagnosis, my friend,
was evident: just
as was the warmth of
that last touch between us...

So this was it; your end:
what I believed I owed
you, and as I sat by you,
I knew as truth...*my truth.*

But was it yours? The only lie
you believed was that
my love for you would
always be enough.

Tail wagging, you'd walked
to your life's end. And died,
I at your side. I bade you go.
Oh, it was for you!

But was that true? Self
forgiveness is illusion, too.

*All who live will meet their end
abandoned by others
on whom they depend.*





fitz river
Jane Carey

bacchante and infant faun

David P. Miller

*After the sculpture by
Frederick William MacMonnies,
Boston Public Library*

With scarce a blush, tourists in dresses
pose before the bronze harlot,
drunken mother who cavorts
on tiptoe with fistful grapes and leer.
Her wide-eyed babe would gape
at his mama's frantic nudity
could he but twist his sculpted neck.

Time was, this affront so upturned Boston's gut,
the Watch-and-Warders banished it
to Manhattan's irredeemable isle.
To spite the memories of those upright men
its loathsome twin was erected here.
Modish women now upload
self-images through the blameless air,
smiling near the silent strumpet.

Before my sight, the heedless moderns:
see them suck hummus, masticate
salads at the rim of this library
(public library!) courtyard, in full view
of the soused Bacchante, girdled
by dozens of spurting jets
formed of innocent water,
but too detestable in suggestion
to tolerate. A grandfather thrusts
the end of a banana in his mouth
near a smiling infant's eyes.

Oh foul analogies! Oh seducing bronze!
Who will shield our righteous females,
our tender children, from this
foul weed, if not my good right arm?



erotic netsuke

David P. Miller

You don't housekeep much,
bad boy. I'm dust all over.
But I'm still fucking.

Three wood elephants
stare at my hers-and-his place.
You put them there? Cute.

I'm nasty dirty.
Clean me. Use your fingertip
right in my ooo spot.

Come on. Wiggle it
where the him-thing of me sticks
in the her of me.

Nice. You rubbed me good,
buddy. I'm all clean again.
But not you. Ha ha.



in two

Alex Starr

Have you
felt like you
are being pulled into
the center
the Earth
you are
like you came from
nowhere nothing
you did
like the stars are
in you they are
the gone ones
you shouldn't need
a starman to
tell not to
blow it
you don't
like you
are being pulled into
whence you came
you are you are you



word hoarder

Alex Starr

Kāvya altazimuth
pleonexia pebbles
with odd streaks
of geometry
hues shade away
from zeitgeist
pilfer waterbed
trundle home
jounce in gait
bulging pouch
speaks the dialect
of being
language a cloud
wonders which ones
might have been
missed in hunger
exegesis extra
noematic aphasia
there are piles
in closets on
coffee tables between
cracks of couches
accruing and accruing
dust somehow
never manage
to get around
to all of them



a little luck

Alex Starr

Some nights when
hungry she plucks
strand of hair
from bow
baits it with
fish head
slime awe eyed
found in
bistro dump
with a little luck
she can land
a big rat
pawn it
to the old lady
at the absinthe
café for an éclair
madeleine green
kiss





visionary

Michael Washburn

Harold Ross doubted he could make the car go much further, and his throat felt as if he'd been arguing for hours. All around in the hot white afternoon were sand, dust, dirt, and barren cement, and he was a good two hours from the city on the coast. Looking out into the blaze, surveying the gold and copper sands and cliffs, he began to wonder whether the car or he himself would give out first without water.

Those who can really dignify themselves as journalists go off to cover elections in Moldova or high-profile L.A. trials for *Time* or CNN, he thought. They do not track down clusters of people and write profiles of them. Harold's alma mater had moved high up in the rankings and gotten huge gifts, and a newspaper with a modest circulation had expressed interest in a story on where the school's alumni had ended up in life. Harold needed the work but felt this was a new low in his crummy career. He thought of what others had done by the time they hit thirty. His research for the profiles would surely make him feel even worse.

The car rumbled on. All around were dirt, cacti, slivers of shadow. He imagined wandering out there in the dust and heat until he fell down. It was a setting, he felt, that would magnify the significance of any lizards or birds that came to behold you in your fear and despair. When you saw their eyes, you'd know they knew quite well they weren't the last things you'd expected ever to see.

32

The groans coming from deep inside the car intensified. His exhaustion grew. His clammy hands gripped the wheel like a life preserver. Thank God he was no idiot about one thing, he had not underestimated the amount of gas he'd need to get to the coast. But taking an obscure side road to avoid paying tolls was a poor idea.

At last he made out a cluster of buildings far off on the horizon. There were maybe five or six of them, on the right side of the highway, their surfaces glinting in the harsh light. With his luck, they were probably a bunch of disused factory buildings.

As the car drew nearer, the industrial character he'd perceived from far off proved to be an illusion. Here were white rectangular two-floor buildings with long shuttered windows. The place looked like a studio lot without cameras and crews or a farm barren of animals and crops or a town with no commercial buildings at all. No one was around.

As he pressed on the gas, the car did the opposite of what he wanted. It slowed and faltered as an ominous hiss rose from its depths. Harold just barely managed to edge it onto the road's shoulder before it gave up. He cursed and punched the wheel in fury before getting out and heading off down the road toward the cluster of buildings.

Now he saw what maybe he should have guessed. Buildings this nice wouldn't lie exposed. A chain-link fence with a fringe of barbed wire at the top ran all the way around the cluster. As if anyone could fail to get the message, signs warned passersby not to trespass.

Harold felt hot and weary almost to the point of falling down. He held out hope of getting the attention of someone, anyone. Some of the shutters on the long windows were open, but he couldn't see a soul.

Now he spotted a woman, about fifty yards further down the road, walking in the same direction, her back to him. Her shirt and dress were so light it had been easy to miss her in the glare.

"Hey! Hello!" he called out, and realized his voice was too feeble.

He began to run, thinking he might terrify her before he ever got to explain himself and make his plea for help, but her pace didn't change. When at last he caught up, she heard his clumping feet and turned around, not with alarm, but, it seemed, suspicion at meeting a stranger out here.

Now that he was close enough to take in her features, he had to wonder what she was doing out here all alone. She was on the frailer side of sixty and had the weak, drained look of an outpatient in slow, wobbly recovery. Her steps were so halting she must be in great pain. He realized now that she was moving toward a gate, barely detectable in the vastness of linked metal. He found his voice.

"Hello, miss. Can you please help me? I need water and jumper cables for my car back there. I'll die if someone doesn't help."

The eyes in the wizened face gazed at him.

"What have you made, sonny?" she said.

"Excuse me?"

"What have you brought into the world?"

"Are you all right, miss?"

"I asked you—"

"Yes, I heard you both times, but your question's nonsensical. My car broke down and I'm about to drop dead of thirst. I can barely talk. Can you please help me?"

Those eyes took him in, seemingly with a mix of derision and pity.

"Come with me, sonny."

He followed the stranger another twenty yards and then she tapped out a code on a panel to the right of the gate. It slid open. They entered the compound. The stranger knew exactly where she was going, but Harold looked around in wonder as they moved amid the long freshly painted buildings. Even the dirt had an austere refined quality and the light seemed milder, more forgiving. Their feet clumped softly but even now it seemed there was no one they should worry about disturbing.

“Follow me, sonny,” the woman said as she turned right, opened a door, and entered the long building running parallel to the fence and the road.

He thought there might be soldiers waiting in there to kill him. It was as logical a thought as any he'd had lately. But here to his surprise was a long space full of what looked like the denizens of an overpriced shrink's waiting room. That was Harold's first impression.

The people here, who ranged in age from twenty to seventy, sat in chairs or reclined on couches or lay on their backs on cots with their limbs splayed. All the men had a lost, troubled look in their eyes. Their features looked drained, their skin pale. Why they lay about here during a busy time of the day for most people was a mystery. Not one appeared to take notice as the woman led him through the room and up a flight of stairs.

On the upper floor were more men and a few women, as lost and weak as the others. One stood at a window gazing out at the desert. Another sat on a plush red chair with his right elbow resting on a knee and his hand paused in the air as if he wanted to explain a thing but had just forgotten what it was.

Two young men in dark blazers stood talking at a point near the end of the room. Upon seeing the woman enter this space with Harold close behind her, they showed not concern or alarm but the annoyance of teachers dealing with a disobedient kid.

She gestured for Harold to stand by the stairs and then walked up to the two men. Harold couldn't hear the whispered exchange that followed. Then one of the two men took the woman into another chamber and the other walked up to Harold. He was in his early twenties and had the brisk, assured manner of a successful day trader.

“You know this is private property, sir. You can't just walk in here off the road.”

The young man looked more concerned than Harold thought his innocent incursion should warrant.

“What do you want me to say? That I won't do it again? I never planned to stop here. The quicker you can help me, the sooner I'll be a memory.”

It must have been his exhaustion that made his thoughts tumble out in such unmediated form, Harold guessed.

From the small room where the other young guy had taken the woman came the sounds of gentle chiding. None of the other people on this floor spoke. It was as if depression had robbed them of the will even to do that. Harold's interlocutor looked intensely at him.

“We'll get you back on the road. That woman who led you up here has a nervous condition and she doesn't need attention of any kind from strangers. So I'm just going to lead you back outside. No need to say goodbye to her.”

“What is this, some kind of clinic?”

The man in the blazer thought for a moment, then nodded.

“Yes. For a highly specific type of patient.”

The youth in the blazer led him outside, disappeared, and reappeared seconds later with a bottle of water. Harold took it with gratitude and stood in the glare, looking around at the buildings, imagining that they were all full of people like the ones he had seen. A man in overalls came around the corner of one of the other buildings carrying a metal case. Harold led him to the car. Not quite half an hour later, Harold was back on the road heading for the coast.

When he got near the city, he was in a different climate. The air was cooler and the sky overcast. A drizzle began. The rain came pretty hard by the time Harold navigated the dark downtown streets in search of his hotel. The edges of the dark buildings barely stood out from the deepening blue, yet it was impossible not to notice how many sleek towers had sprung up since Harold last visited the city. Here was a popular place for the educated, affluent, hip young set.

At last he found the hotel, one of the impressive new buildings. Minutes later he stood in a suite on the thirtieth floor, gazing out through the windows at a great city in the night. Out there, in the vast dark, lurked millions of minds of varying degrees of sentience. Lights were still on in the office towers. Behind those lights, he thought, were a few of the more sentient souls who knew all too well that they existed in time and who felt acutely the relationship of every second to the before and the one after and were aware, as only the deeply, relentlessly ambitious can be, of what a losing proposition life is. Some people will deny with bravado the value of success as conventionally defined and will go on doing so, with variable eloquence, until it is painfully clear who has won it and who has not. At that point, the defensiveness of those who've failed is hideous. “I could publish a book tomorrow if I wanted to.” “I’m swear I’m gonna make those bastards suffer.” “Watch how you talk to me. Do you know who I am? *Do you know who I am?*” On and on.

The ambitious had chosen a path that would not avoid all the agony, far from it, but might at least afford moments of smirking satisfaction near the journey's end.

Harold sat down in one of the plush scarlet chairs facing the dark forms of the towers and the dwindling number of illuminated windows. He sipped whiskey, brooding, thinking that if he'd taken one wrong turn in the desert he wouldn't be here now. He'd have liked to call people he planned to write profiles of for the newspaper, but the hour was late.

Sipping the liquor, feeling it inflame the spaces in him that had so desperately needed cool refreshment hours before, he had an odd sense that the strangers out there behind the lights in the towers could see him, even with all the lights in the suite off.

In the morning, he drank some coffee, took out his laptop, and began making calls. He prided himself on his ability to type as fast as people talk.

The first alum he reached was Josh Blanton. The life of a rising hedge funder wasn't so busy as to preclude talking to a journalist for a few minutes, but Josh clearly didn't relish Harold's aggressive manner.

"Come on, Harry. You know I can't talk about LPs or investment strategies," Josh said.

"What's your AUM?"

"Now, that's public and it's frankly something I'd have expected you to look up before you made this call. Being a professional journalist and all."

"Just tell me, please."

Josh gave a pretty awesome figure.

"Obviously the fund's having one of its best years ever," Harold said.

"I hope your profile offers more insight than that. But, yeah, we're beating expectations yet again and branching out into some new areas of R&D."

This led to an off-the-record discussion, conducted in the most general terms imaginable, at the end of which Harold felt as small as he ever had in his life. As if sensing how Harold felt, Josh adopted almost a friendly tone.

"This sounds like a decent gig you've got here, Harry. How many profiles are you going to file?"

"However many alumni speak with me."

Josh laughed.

"Well you're one for one, right? I'm sure your luck will hold. Will I see you at Heather Neill's opening at the Hurst Gallery? There should be a bunch of us there."

Heather Neill. Back in undergrad days when people said all kinds of things they did not mean or quickly forgot they had said, this classmate had blathered on about becoming an artist. You can't take what a kid says too seriously. Heather's ambitions might have lasted an even shorter time than her boyfriends. But now Heather had realized those dreams and an opening was to take place at one of the chicest galleries in the city.

"I'll be there, Josh. Think she'll deign to speak to me?"

Now Josh's tone sounded cruel.

"Maybe if you pretend to be a sad loser who desperately needs this writing gig, she'll take pity on you and cooperate."

Josh laughed again. Harold wasn't sure why.

“Ah, well, we’ll see.”

“I’m going to jump on another call, Harry. See you soon.”

They both hung up.

He could have lied and told Josh that hundreds of alumni were eager to talk to him. But to Harold’s mind, at least, that would raise questions about the merits of what he planned to write. Harold’s brother had lived in New York for a time, and, like many people, had vivid memories of 9/11 and the weeks that followed. Some readers of the *New York Times* had written letters faulting a series that ran in the paper, entitled “Portraits of the Fallen.” It consisted of profiles of victims of the attacks, about one to two hundred words, and the readers slammed it for lacking depth, for failing to convey any real sense of the people these profiles were about. The reaction was predictable, Harold thought, imagining a wretched reporter in a cubicle with ten of these portraits to file by five o’clock. The reporter would try desperately to learn about and give readers a sense of a complex human being, with decades of life behind him or her, based on a couple of quick calls and a minute or two of online research. That wasn’t Harold’s *modus operandi*. He felt he could be an accomplished journalist someday because he sought and yearned to get at *why* people were where they were in life.

He made a few more calls without reaching anyone. Then he got through to Stuart Thorne, a successful playwright, at a venerable theater on the edge of downtown.

“Harry Ross. Oh yes, I remember you quite clearly. Some of my memories crept back over just the last few days,” Thorne said.

“We haven’t seen in each other since graduation. What are the odds that you’d be thinking of me?”

“Math is a false god, Harry. You know, I’m helping with the rehearsals for a new play of mine. You may have heard the canard that there are no original stories. Even the boldest and cleverest tale hearkens back to some biblical or Homeric prototype. I’m not sure I really buy that, but perhaps, from a certain point of view, there are no original *characters*.”

“I’m kind of lost, Stu.”

“Which is better than being literally lost, I’m sure you’ll agree. The point is simple. Everyone on stage is a dreamer, a visionary, an ingenue, a proto-fascist, or a fool, and hence a derivation of someone you’ve known at one or another time of life.”

Harold took time to process all this.

At the end of their exchange, Thorne mentioned the opening at the gallery.

“Ah yes, I heard about it from another alum. I do plan to be there.”

On the night of the opening, the weather again was markedly different from what Harold had gone through in the desert. The skies dimmed earlier than he expected this time of year and a drizzle flecked the windows of the cab taking him from the dank downtown to a trendier part of the city. The figures moving on the sidewalks seemed distant, hurried. But when the cab pulled up in front of the gallery, a glimpse of the bright lights and smiling guests behind the windows made him feel briefly like the star journalist he'd dreamed of becoming.

He walked through the door and made his appearance, or rather, the art presented itself to him. It was as if all the high-end galleries in the city had pooled their resources. On the east wall, huge canvases transported him right back to the desert, so vivid were the cliffs standing in silent majesty over the arid valleys, so stunning the contrast of their jagged yellow and ochre forms, like the ruins of an apocalyptic Dreamtime, with the cobalt blue above. Scars ran through the desolate valley floors, twisting and curving and bisecting the barren riverbeds. Here were images of a locale so blistering and hostile they evoked terror.

On the same wall, closer to the back, were images of an environment no more inviting. The viewer felt transported to deep space. The gallery was a starship and through its windows the viewer gazed out at constellations whose lambent purple and silver-blue nebulae and regions of unfathomable black were the backdrop to the streaking of blinding comets. At this distance the amber and silver and red planets lacked the overt fierceness of the deserts in the other paintings, but in the midst of this panorama they did not look at all like sanctuaries. The viewer's mind conjured all manner of beasts and monsters.

38 A server passed by with glasses of white wine. Harold took a glass and whirled toward the opposite wall, where the images wrought by a modern-day Hopper might lull the viewer into a trance. Mysterious figures sat and lolled in dimly lit, lushly rendered bars, cafés, and clubs. Lovers strolled through a park in a business district where nature had made a tentative peace with the towers poking above the dense foliage. A blonde sat at a desk in an office, facing the viewer. Through the window behind her a crowded avenue, a dull purple mountain, and a cobalt sky beckoned the viewer to step out into the bright day, but the woman's look was somber.

Harold turned to the rear wall, which the owners had lined with a fantastic array of Pollock-like abstractions. The streaks and splotches on the vast canvases were manifestations of what would be, for lesser artists, mental and emotional states of ineffable strangeness. The deep blue, fiery scarlet, lush green, and abundant ochre were stunning in their individual darts and weaves and bursts. Together they conveyed an intertwine of lives so deeply lived in every moment that Harold began to wonder whether he himself had lived, as opposed to just existing. On yet another canvas was nothing but blue. It was the gateway to a gorgeous, forbidding universe.

As Harold sipped his wine, he realized that the art had so mesmerized him that he'd shut out the talk all around. Now a silver-haired man in a black blazer came up to Harold.

"Is this your first visit to the galley, sir?" the stranger asked in an urbane voice.

"The first of many, I should think."

"What are your impressions?"

“I’ve never seen anything like it.”

How often Harold yearned to be clever but came out with banalities. As if sensing Harold’s unease, the man grinned and repeated the trite phrase.

“You’ve never seen anything like it.”

“Who’s your favorite of the artists here?” Harold asked nervously.

“There’s only one artist here, tonight, my good man. Please meet my daughter.”

A woman with an alert, intelligent look, dressed in a black turtleneck and pants, had glided up to the spot directly to the man’s left. She had coils of silky golden hair, pale unwrinkled skin, and lips the color of raspberry jam. She was stunning but Harold didn’t feel taken with her for the tired old reasons. He wasn’t some horny guy. He felt awe in the presence of the creator of this art.

“Hi there, Heather, I’m Harold Ross. I’m working on a feature, I can’t say for whom, about where alumni of our school have ended up in life. I was hoping we could chat about how you become so accomplished.”

He gave a wide grin, intended for both her and her father, but now the latter nodded and walked off toward a cluster of guests, leaving him alone with this visionary.

“The introduction wasn’t necessary. I remember you, Harold.”

“You do? I wasn’t the most popular kid.”

“I can’t fathom why think I mostly paid attention to the big men on campus. Imagine trying to talk about Duchamp with one of them.”

“The range here, Heather. It’s . . . this is going to sound banal, but it’s astounding.”

“You have as many or more universes within yourself, Harold!”

“Do I? You sound like David Foster Wallace. Remember that passage in ‘Good Old Neon’ about how we’re always trying to see each other’s inner lives though these tiny keyholes?”

He quickly regretted his literary allusion, knowing he was showing off. But her response surprised him.

“I’ve read that passage hundreds of times, Harold. It’s hypnotically eloquent and beautiful even if the ideas aren’t new. He’s talking about personae and how few of them we ever present to one another.”

“Yes. Exactly. *Personae*. Funny, I was just talking to a theater guy about this. Imagine the odds. But math’s a false god. I know I’m not particularly eloquent right now, but I feel, I don’t know, I feel incredible, like I’m riding a comet’s tail.”

He was not playing the sycophant. This amazing woman had pulled him right through a window of the starship into a galaxy he’d never envisioned. To stand here and talk to her was exhilarating.

“You’re not the first guest who’s expressed himself in these kinds of terms.”

That hurt a little.

“So, as I said, I’m working on this article, and I really hope you can find a bit of time.”

Her eyes didn’t flit or swerve.

“I’d be happy to offer some comments for your article, Harold.”

“That’s wonderful. Now, how late—”

“Oh, I don’t mean tonight. I’ve got not one but two parties after this.”

Harold was lucky to get one or two invitations per year.

40

“Believe me when I say I’ve got a piece of performance art planned that’ll blow your mind, Harold,” she added before giving him a card, smiling enticingly, and walking off.

He drank three more glasses of wine while taking in the art. Only now did he realize that he had not seen Josh or Stuart or any alumni other than Heather. They might be out there in the crowds or might have come and gone while the art had him in a daze.

Now he noticed a girl in bright red overalls standing to his right. Once again he yearned to be clever, but he came out with, “There’s nothing even remotely like this work in the whole city, is there?”

She didn’t turn her head and for a moment he thought maybe she hadn’t heard this inanity. Then she replied.

“I guess you don’t know too much about this artist.”

He groped in vain for a savvy answer.

“Well, I am a classmate, you know.”

“Then I wonder how much you’ve kept up with her. I happen to know that her work is also at the Jameson Gallery and the Müller Gallery, and she has more openings later this year.”

He looked around the gallery, trying in vain to spot the brilliant, astonishing artist. She was in the midst of a crowd somewhere. Surely, he thought, the feature he planned to write wasn't so trivial, so inconsequential for her reputation, that she should put carousing and partying first.

With the darkest anger rising inside him, he walked through the crowds toward the front entrance. Then he spotted that most stereotypical piece of an artist's attire, the black turtleneck, under coils of golden hair. Heather stood on the edge of a cluster of guests, her back to him.

At this moment he felt a bit like the creep who'd shot John Lennon, a lonely outsider with a fast and easy route to fame.

"Heather!" he called out.

She didn't reply. He cried her name again. Either she didn't hear or, having given him enough of her time, chose to ignore him.

"HEATHER!"

Still she didn't turn. He grabbed her right shoulder, harder than he meant to, or at least with more force than he wished to give the appearance of using, and now she turned around with a look of annoyance.

"Ah, Heather. Sorry. Look, it's just that I'm on a deadline and I was kind of hoping we could talk tonight."

She didn't say anything, but shook her head decisively. He still stood there, expecting at least a more legitimate reason for her refusal, but she just looked at him. Many others in the gallery were also gazing at the rude interloper.

Without another word, he walked out of the gallery and headed to a bar, where he sat drinking for three hours. All the while he thought of the desert.

In the morning, he sat in the hotel room looking out at the city, sipping pungent black coffee, and fingering her card, whose edges felt really sharp.

He dialed her number on his cell, put it to his ear, and listened. The call went through to voice mail.

"Hi, Heather, it's Harold Ross here. Sorry if I was a bit rude last night. I'm eager to learn more about your creative process and the challenges you may have encountered. Please give me a call. Have a beautiful day."

Even as the words came out, he winced at the message's banality. Then he sat there, looking out at the towers where the people who mattered were hard at work, but his phone did not ring. In his growing anxiety over a call that never came, he thought back to the sands, the far hills, the bright red buttes, the barren road, the cluster of buildings, the strange unsmiling woman, and all those lethargic people. They looked as if they had been working so hard, in some secret

parts of the compound, that they were borderline catatonic. Harold thought he had everything figured out here. How remarkable that he should pass through that place and then meet an artist of such astonishing range, but then probability was a false god. He did not know what to make of anything anymore. He raided the minibar for whiskey before noon.

The next call was to a journalist, a real one, who'd graduated two years ahead of Harold. The phone rang twice before he got an answer.

"Bryce Nelson."

"Bryce! It's Harold Ross. How are you?"

As soon as the pleasantries were out of the way, he got right to his theory.

"So you know that artist, Heather Neill? The one with the fantastically rich dad. There's this place a couple hundred miles out from here where I suspect he takes care of artists who're in financial straits, and encourages them to make as much art as they can, but in return they have to give up certain rights."

"Harry. I've heard of ghostwriting but this is preposterous. It's insane."

"That doesn't mean it's not true. You could do something with this. I write for the *Bulletin*, which is nothing. You write for the *Herald*."

Harold gave the best directions from memory that he could.

"I'll check it out."

"Thanks, buddy."

The next day was mild in the way that lulls people into complacency about the passage of time. No matter how many corners he turned in the downtown grid, the sun never met him full on as it did in his visions of the desert. Realizing he had not eaten in a while, he looked in vain for a deli. He had a terrible feeling about the course of his life. He nearly challenged a few strangers for looking at him a second too long.

As he turned a corner four blocks from the hotel, moving east then north, he caught a glimpse of bouncing golden coils as a stranger turned west onto the parallel street at the end of the block.

"Heather. Heather!" he cried, running north, giving a light push to one of a trio of old men shuffling up the street.

The three men gasped and cursed as he ran past them. Within seconds he was at the intersection where he was sure he'd seen her. Thirty feet down the street to the west, a man in a dark suit helped the blonde into the rear of a limo.

“Heather!” he cried, running fast.

The woman got into the limo and the man closed the door and went around to the front passenger seat and climbed inside. He noted that Heather’s window, if indeed it was Heather, was halfway down. He screamed.

“Heather! You spoiled bitch! You phony! You’ve got the world thinking you’re a great artist but I know your dirty fucking secret!”

The limo pulled away from the curb. He screamed even louder.

“Come back here or you’ll be sorry! Yes, that’s a threat!”

As night fell he was too drunk to do much besides sit in his hotel room looking out at the blinking lights and the illuminated windows. Then his cell phone rang.

“Hey, Harry. Bryce Nelson here.”

“Who? Oh, Bryce! What’ve you got, man? Gonna do a feature on that compound?”

“That’s what I wanted to talk to you about, mate. It’s not where you said it would be.”

“What on earth do you mean?”

“Exactly what I said.”

“You followed my directions precisely?”

“No, I didn’t go out there myself on such short notice, Harry. We’ve got stringers in the area. I asked them to go and take a look, and they found desert.”

“Are you banging Heather Neill, Bryce?”

“What?”

“You’re asking me to believe that she’s got such range and versatility and talent that she made all the art I saw last night, and much more besides. That’s literally impossible.”

“I don’t think you know much about art and artists. Besides, you were hot and tired and thirsty and delusional. You probably did imagine all or part of the experience in the desert.”

“I’d know if I’d imagined something. You’re calling me a liar.”

“If you like. But the larger point, Harry—”

The pause was ominous.

“Yes, Bryce?”

“I’m not going to say it.”

“Now you have to.”

“Look, Harry, it’s one thing to resent the successful, but this is the weirdest case of cognitive dissonance I’ve ever seen.”

“How dare you—”

“I’m hanging up now. Good luck with your feature.”

“Bryce, wait. I’m sorry. Who are these stringers you sent? Tell me whom they work for. Can I talk to them?”

“I said I’m hanging up.”

“Bryce, I’m so deeply sorry for yelling at you. I swear on my grandma’s grave that place is there. Far west of Coburn and south of the interstate. I’ll show you myself. No one’s ever meant to get past the gate. If you can get inside, as I happened to do by sheer luck, you’ll find the source of Heather’s genius. This could be the investigative piece of the century.”

44

A long pause followed. Finally Bryce spoke.

“All right, then. Those stringers don’t work for me and I honestly don’t know how seriously they took this thing. Text me the directions and I’ll check it out myself. Even if I don’t finagle my way inside, I can get lots of people asking questions.”

“Thanks, man.”

Bryce had one more question.

“Tell me, Harry. Was it ever your dream to be an artist?”

“Yeah, either that or a novelist. A real creator. A visionary. Look at me now.”

“Well, I hope that mini fridge isn’t empty. Good night.”

The contents of the mini fridge couldn’t sustain him over the next twelve hours so he made forays to a bottle shop and brought vast quantities of booze to the room.

On the street the next day, he began looking around aggressively for galleries to check out. Then he realized that there were none downtown, that his mind had grown hazy. Strangers hurried by, pushing past him, not making eye contact. It was almost as if they were channeling the indifference and rudeness he had shown so often. He swore at them.

There were no galleries down here but he pretty distinctly remembered a bottle shop. He thought he even recalled how to get there. As soon as he set off, he spotted those familiar bouncing golden coils at a point down the street. He began to run and pitched forward hard onto his belly. He got up, cursing and screaming at the distant figure.

“Heather! I’m Harold Ross, your classmate! Come back here, witch! *The world’s going to know you’re a fraud!*”

People on the street gasped and pointed and a few of them reached for their phones. He ran off, taking a roundabout route back to the hotel.

At dusk he sat in the chair, sipping whiskey, thinking of a line he’d once read in *Modern Times* by the popular historian Paul Johnson. “Facts have a way of asserting themselves.” The book was largely about the failure of utopian schemes. His dream of a glamorous journalistic career had been a kind of fantasy, an ill thought-out one, but now Bryce Nelson had agreed to help him and soon they’d both be famous.

To Harold the lights of the towers out there were emblems of order, safety. Outside was a world with rules you didn’t have to like or respect, you just had to adopt a mode of being that didn’t contravene those rules too blatantly. No one out there suspected Heather Neill of being a fraud, but certain facts would assert themselves, in the most public and unerasable manner, soon enough.

A knock came. He picked himself up clumsily, spilling whiskey on his pants, shuffled to the door, and opened it. In the hall stood a pair of men in sports jackets. They held up badges. Their names were Blake and Carpenter. They invited themselves in. Blake did most of the talking.

“We’ve gotten a number of reports of disorderly conduct and menacing by a man who gave his name as Harold Ross. We canvassed hotels in the area and had reason to believe you are staying here.”

“I’d say the empirical evidence is on your side.”

“People in the other rooms have complained about a lot of yelling in here.”

“The TV was up too loud. Sorry.”

“Did a character on TV do that?” Blake asked, pointing to shards of glass lying in a puddle in a corner.

“An accident.”

“What are you doing in town?”

“I’m collaborating with Bryce Nelson, a journalist for the *Herald*, on a major investigative story. I can give you his number.”

Blake and Carpenter exchanged looks. Harold sighed.

“Let me guess. Something’s happened to Bryce.”

The lawmen nodded.

“Once again, banality thwarts our knowing the sublime.”

“It was a fire,” Blake said.

“Of course.”

“You’re going to have to check out now, sir.”

The lawmen left and Harold began to gather his things.

Two days later, no hotel would admit the haggard man on the street. The hostels were full. He hobbled around on the busy streets, cursing at strangers, unable even to remember where he had left his car. They must have towed it by now.

On the morning of the third day of his displacement, he spotted those bobbing golden coils again and ran after them. Heather was in the company of what looked like a troupe of art students, six girls and two boys with a bright happy demeanor, and he guessed they were on the way to a café where they’d talk at length about her genius. But he got to her first.

46

“Heather! Your time’s up! Certain of us know your little secret!” he cried.

The foaming beast that leapt on her was so ferocious that members of the troupe screamed in terror, bringing half a dozen strangers quickly to her aid.

“No! Let me have her!” Harold screamed.

They pulled him off the artist and punched and kicked him and one man thrashed him so hard with a belt buckle that his forehead needed five stitches.

Not having suffered any serious injuries, Heather didn’t wish to seek the toughest penalties available. She had something else in mind. Heather’s lawyers worked out a slightly unusual plea bargain with the defense counsel.

Pedestrians on the streets of the great city got to take in the sight of a feral, balding, deluded man prancing about in his underpants inside a steel cage mounted on four columns between a pair of towers in the center of downtown. Nothing he did was private. His ravings conveyed over and over the abjectness of his envy for those who truly deserved their status in the world. The caption for this bold work of performance art gave the busy men, women, and kids hurrying by a chuckle.

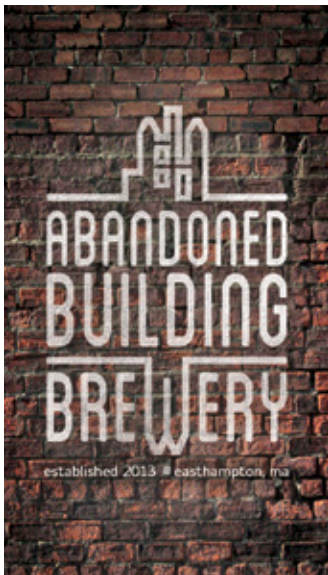
“Most Likely to Succeed.”





47

the breakthrough
Danielle Sung



BROADSIDE
BOOKSHOP
EST. 1974

*A Feast of Books,
Exceptional Service*

247 MAIN ST • NORTHAMPTON • 413.586.4235
www.broadsidebooks.com

reading aloud

Sabyasachi Nag

Wait! Why am I reading aloud?

Ganges, the holiest river in India, is choked with corpses. Last Sunday, as dozens of dead bodies washed up on the riverbanks, people who live in villages close by, allege, these are unaccounted COVID victims. Local police deny the claim and are reaching out to villagers who had earlier complained about the stench.

Here in Rautapur, near Unnao, a small town in Northern India, villagers are sick by hundreds, without any visible healthcare. It has been raining. The rain has revealed something else – rows upon rows of corpses wrapped in saffron cloth, barricaded with bamboo sticks. There is no one around to claim the dead. The villagers look on, from a distance. The police keep them from talking to the media who have arrived in small groups to cover the event.

Aziz Wani, a local photographer who accompanies me on this assignment is from Kanpur, the closest town. He says he is lucky he had COVID in January. Last month his father died as he waited in line to buy medical oxygen; weeks before that when he lay gasping for breath, he and his mother took turns to resuscitate him. His wife who is four months pregnant has also had COVID like him, in the first wave. He says, he has witnessed so much death, it doesn't affect him anymore. He goes about the riverbed alternating his focus between corpses and the light meter waiting for the cloud to pass. The corpses in the rain-washed graves are spread out at least half-a kilometer along the riverbed.

When the sky clears, Aziz is not sure about the angle that would reveal the full extent of what we are looking at. He wonders if he should do an extreme close up to reveal the faces of the freshly buried men, their skin flaking off the stubble that has grown since they were buried; or a medium close-up to reveal the shallowness of the graves; or an extreme wide shot to situate rows upon rows of saffron sand mummies along the length of the brown river flowing through the treeless terrain.

Shortly after, a scorching sun pierces the clouds and comes down hard; he winces at the scorch but carries on, knowing well the bodies can't be left in this manner too long. There is a stench that had been making us mad just a little while back; we seem to have adjusted to it now; the villagers, it seems, don't even smell anything anymore. But there are vultures circling the sky, they can smell the corpses; and feral dogs wait at a distance in the heat-haze, or perhaps they don't wait, they tug at a body far away; no one can see that far. Earlier, it was the dogs that dug the corpses out their sandy graves. "The dogs have done it again," says Aziz, supine on the sand, "they are to blame for everything."

There is a definite slant ...you see it?

Rafi is not incompetent, she's compromised, she has an agenda...and well, Mitty, Mitty is embarrassed to talk about this himself because of the fake sexual harassment thing involving him and Rafi...

YES. All of that totally fake.

YES. Mitty knows we are talking...is someone with you in the car?

Look, I offered to bring it up with you because...I thought it might be easier for me than him..... well. Wait! Why would you think Mitty is gaming us?

He knows we are...well...we are...I don't know what we are anymore... what are we Charlie? Absolutely. I absolutely think there are degrees to ex-ness. Don't you?

Is there someone with you?

By the way, where're you headed?

Well, see...there you are...living the life... driving on M3, halfway between London and Southampton to catch a game of cricket...and I am in Calcutta covering a state election...and all this death and distance from things I care about...it's making me sick ... something happened to us, Charlie, is it just time, place, what?

Are you too vain to even fucking admit...we had something going back then ...did we or did we not? What was that? Love or we just liked the scent of each other? Do we have something now or do we not?

Well at least you are going to be in the Maldives thing...at least I am going to see you...

Are you alone?

I think I heard something...or someone or maybe distance just makes me nervous...

Ha ha...yes, the bad with the good...they might want to keep you in the region...

Why not?

You think that would be a demotion, don't you? Say it...don't ever forget where you were born.

Well, my case is different...

You know I have a son, don't you? All his friends are here... my family...that's the entire family.

Well, family does matter. How else do you explain what's happening with Mitty?

Okay. Tell me something. Why's Julianne Moore suddenly getting involved in this...why does no one less than the owner's son want Julianne to move from London to Singapore? Out of Global HR back into Ops? Why? Because he wants her in your old shoes. He wants her heading up all APAC...they want Mitty's head, and I know you know it. And the big question is why you aren't you doing anything? Mitty is your man Charlie, shouldn't you be standing by him?

I understand you are feeling good now because you won them the biggest deal of the century... what if you can't do an encore? What about your bull shit ideals?

You didn't slow down Charlie, you sold out, didn't you?

I am here to tell you what I think. I better than someone else. I love you. OK?

Between Mitty and me? It's a no-brainer... Mitty is far more ready, he has been working on it for years, besides...I don't even know Julianne...what makes you think I know her? I had coffee with her once back when I was blue-lining copy and she was a stringer at The Place in London...you are not dating her? ...Are you? She's half your age!

What am I wearing? Why?

Lemme see...actually, I am all dirty...I need a shower, maybe I will go out and get wet or may be... okay Charlie let's get this done, OK? Let's keep it business.

You have to stop it! You have no choice.

What about Layla Rafi?

I still don't get why I am reading a beat reporter's copy that didn't even make it to press? You want me to see something? What?...Ok.

As police roam the place in boats and jeeps, their voices on distant loud speakers asking people to stop putting corpses in the river can be heard inside the two-story brick house where Lalita Batham gets ready for the long day ahead. She is the only paramedic-cum-nurse, still available to work in Rautapur's last functioning Medical Centre. "Forget oxygen, we are running out of carts to carry the dead, we are running out of pyre-wood, so, if people say – let's bury the dead in the river – can you blame them? The river is our mother."

Batham gets into the PPE she has been re-using since last week. "It feels like a space-suit." She claims she too would have left Rautapur had her in-laws not refused to let her back into her own home, twenty kilometers south east in the larger town of Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh. "Not even my parents want me back, they think I am dirty, I carry the virus, but I don't care, I want to be gone," she walks out to a scooter chained to the entrance of her house – ready to make the two-mile ride to the local school that has been converted into a primary care facility.

As I ride pillion with Aziz, trailing Batham, she turns around to point at several houses, naming people she claims to have personally known, that have fallen victim to the pandemic. As we get closer to the Medical Centre Batham half jokes, "it has been days since a live person came here." In the facility, several charpais have been lain next to each other in the open courtyard, under a large neem tree fanged out like a green canopy, where just a few months back, children were playing hopscotch, she says, pointing at the square markings still fresh on the broken asphalt.

As we take a tour of the facility, Batham stops Aziz from taking photographs. Aside from the corpses found floating in the river since morning and the scores lined up on the river bed, "there are at least twenty other corpses with me here, awaiting disposal," she claims. She says she has been asked to hold off for now. Help is on the way; the police loudspeakers draw close. The official in charge of the Medical

Centre, someone Batham has never actually met, breaks in with a Bollywood ringtone on her mobile phone. “Firewood is on the way,” she smiles, wiping the sweat flooding her face.

Batham is helped in her duties by Ram Bharos, a migrant farm laborer belonging to the Dalit caste, who has been temporarily put in charge of the make-shift morgue – a hundred by hundred feet outhouse. The morgue has both windows boarded up; a hole-in-the-wall of a skylight has been plugged with rags, treated in kerosene, to keep carrion bugs at bay. The flakey white on the walls of the morgue sanctified with red religious symbols to keep the devil out.

I take a peek inside. The thick slabs of ice on which the corpses had been stacked in the scorching heat have turned into a messy puddle. It’s the peak of summer here and the corpses, arranged strictly as per caste denominations, according to Bharos, have disintegrated into one heap of dead. “They would have to do something really quick,” Bharos says, clearly concerned about the intermingling of the castes.

For now, however, they do nothing, but wait for the police to leave and for the phone to ring again, while Bharos keeps a close eye on the doors of the morgue, as melted ice seeps out, turning the ground circling the outhouse into a bug infested cesspit. Earlier police arrested two members of a gang stealing...

What do you want me to see Charlie?

No, I haven’t spoken to legal yet...but what Mitty said to Rafi at the meeting would not even meet disclosure standards for a variety of reasons...Look, I was at the meeting...I know what he said...*that’s BS – that’s brown shower – that’s a lot of frigging bullshit* – what difference does it make? They are not going to fire Mitty because he said something in a meeting...?

I won’t go so far...I don’t see how it’s racist...well...if you don’t have the context, you don’t know what happened...allow me, please...Stop. Just listen to me. We are hours from putting the Spring issue to bed. The newsroom has signed off on everything...and... surprise, surprise...we are still a feature short – can you believe it? Can you? Rafi has been working on this story for the past several weeks, and Mitty has gone through four rewrites already, the customer doesn’t care about the slant she has taken, actually her story is going to upset National Advertising...We are an Economics journal for god sake... Someway down the road Mitty figures he can’t use her work and he can’t fire her because James has her back.

No, Mitty wasn’t trying to intimidate her...

We got to show respect for Mitty’s judgement, he’s the Boss since you left the place.

No, I am neither being a rogue nor a status quoist...

Fuck Julianne, will you?

Ha!

You have a sick mind...no... uh... he just went through a brutal divorce...if we go like this you might have a reason to be jealous...talk to HH, stop this. Now.

Will you please?

Don't tell him it's politics if you don't want to...tell him Rafi doesn't fit in, she's compromised... she is making up stuff...Mitty says so...hey, is there someone in the car? I thought I heard a snuffle, are you alone?

Why again?

What's reading the copy aloud going to do to Mitty's case?

By afternoon the police are gone. Aziz is done with the photos. We climb a hillock over-looking the river and get closer to the villagers, hoping to get someone speak to us. From the height, the river looks faraway, but we can still hear the dogs. The long riverbed has been trenched as far as the eyes can see. Earlier, the police had ordered the villagers to remove the bodies from the sand and had them carted to the crematorium for a second death ritual. The unevenly cut trenches appear as though the riverbed had to be slit open to have it give up something it was hiding. "We knew. No one asked. Or we would have told them what we knew," says Lakhan Mewat. You can see the half-moon reflected in the fresh rain that has settled in the trenches. Despite the rain the river is moving slowly. "Slower than it normally moves as if it has a lot of weight to carry," says Mewat.

The night high up on the hill suddenly becomes so thick we can barely see the faces of the villagers surrounding us. But we can hear them breathing over sound of crickets, over the dogs down in the riverbed, over the wind howling, over the river heaving through the rain. They wheeze as though they had been asked to carry way above their weight. "But this river has carried us all. What weight could be larger than the weight of us all?" Vinay Dhimar asks.

The dogs approach every trench-slit in the face of the riverbed, shining like a mirror shattered in pieces. They look into the trench and keep looking. "They know there is something in there, they can smell it, they have seen it with their own eyes, now they are being asked distrust their own memory, to unsee it all," says Bharat Kewar. "The dogs must be wondering, how is it possible the moon has fallen in the ditch and there is a moon up in the sky?" someone else adds, refusing to give his name, afraid of recrimination. The dogs wander around. They get up close to the river, but don't drink from it.

Rafi has the tapes...

Well, she compromised the story the moment she brought the nurse to her hotel room...that would have got us kicked out of the country, if it weren't for... Oh!

So, Julianne didn't tell you? You must listen to this. As per Rafi's version, the morgue man and the nurse were instructed by their Boss in HQ to take those rotting corpses to the crematorium... they load up a bike cart, they reach the crematorium and they find no one...pyres are being lit round the clock, but they claim they see no one...so, the morgue man starts dumping the bodies on pyres that are already burning and the cremator-guards – obviously hiding somewhere – they come out of the dark and wallop them with rods and...no...no...it's an open ground, there are no gates, but they don't cremate a person if they don't know the caste, and...and...and... After the two – the nurse and the morgue man – after they are chased out of the cremator, they don't head back to the morgue... the police are still roaming, so they stop by a bridge – this is not the bridge over the Ganges, that's already clogged with corpses, police are guarding that...this is just some other random wood-bridge that runs over a branch-out of the Ganges, that's now an open sewer...people use it as a open-air toilet... they dump the corpses in that shit.... And then something happens... the nurse and the morgue man walk out of their space

suits, and according to Rafi...they stand there in that stench, watching the bodies sink, and at daybreak they are found by someone who is out to relieve herself and by then, they are holding hands or holding each other, something like that ...and all hell break loose because the morgue man is several rungs low down on the caste ladder than the nurse and they start socking him up again and the nurse panics and calls Rafi and Rafi, who by now should have reached Delhi, panics, gets her source back to her hotel...and they spend a night together and...wait...I am not finished. What are you laughing at?

Well, someone in the administration dug up Rafi's background and called Mitty... well, this sort of thing is not hard to find... you can't do beat reporting in India while one of your parents is an advisor to Islamabad...it's bad taste and... dangerous.

What do you mean?

Mitty is a great guy, but I am not into Mitty, if that's your angle Charlie...if they get Mitty, and if they send Julianne to take over APAC and if she brings Rafi in as the APAC Features Head, I am out...

No, I am not being insecure...I can hunt.

Why would it be stupid?

No but...

None of this would be needed if you keep Julianne out of this... have her send Rafi somewhere else...I don't know...Dubai...back to Ottawa where she came from; she might like that...I don't know...why not?

HH will do what you say, Mitty's got to be saved...you hired him, you groomed him, he's your guy, don't you have a heart?

What's right or wrong about this?

It's important. You don't think so?

For me? No!

Well, actually yes... I have been handling the entire South desk ever since Mitty's divorce...to be perfectly honest...Ha ...he's sober, sometimes...

But yes, I do see that, even though I don't understand how you can't see Rafi has blown it.

If you say that...well...if you are going to have Mitty out...Oh!

Oh! You already have it all figured out?

So, Mitty's out and Julianne is taking over, and Rafi is the new features boss...and you are getting me up to Maldives to suck it up? It's a fucking ambush...why Charlie?

I don't think I will...

Of course, I can sleep over...but why?

No, it's not the rain...

I don't want to be that close to you again...why should I?

Wait! Who's in the car with you? I am freaking out?

...I know. I know.



54

Big Red Frame

Fine Custom Framing

Fine Art | Fine Ideas

43 Main St. | Old Town Hall | Easthampton, MA
413-529-9265 | www.BigRedFrame.com



rubble
Jennifer Weigel

nosings with John Berglund: 5 perfume myths

Where should one apply perfume? According to Coco Chanel, “Wherever one wants to be kissed.” Perfume consists of blended fragrant oils applied to one’s body to emanate pleasant odors. The word “perfume” is derived from the Latin words “*per fumam*,” meaning through smoke, tracing its history back to 4,000 BC when man burned oils to send fragrant smoke to the heavens to honor the gods.

Fragrance design today is increasingly about pressing subliminal buttons to create a sense of well-being, safety or nostalgia. Niche brands have made welcoming smells their pitch. Perfume has evolved over thousands of years with a combination of chemistry and art, often cloaked in mystery. But today we unlock some of the myths of perfumes.

1. If you find one perfume you love, stick with it.

Many people proudly stick to one perfume their entire life. Fashionistas claim wearing only one scent forever is akin to eating pizza every day for lunch. After you wear one certain perfume for so long, your body becomes accustomed to the scent and it blends with your body chemistry so well, others may not smell it on you!

As your life experiences change, as the seasons change, and as your mood changes, additional scents should be welcomed to your wardrobe. Go with the feel of the moment and choose a new favorite scent that matches your mood. Life is exciting, jump on for the ride. New studies support the fact people are better off with scent varieties, and include:

- Those dating. When going on a date people are often more concerned about their shoes or hair when their scent is the most powerful aphrodisiac. Research concludes people find faces more attractive in the presence of pleasant odors, meaning perfumes may give us a more enticing facial appearance.

- As we age. As you grow older the way you feel about yourself changes, the kind of fragrance you choose will change too. In your teens, you’ll probably wear light, gentle scents. In your late teens and early twenties, you’ll often choose a fragrance because you identify with its image. As your sense of confidence develops, you tend to choose a fragrance that expresses your individual style, your personal taste.

- Women: Why limit yourself to a flowery, floral, feminine fragrance? While there’s absolutely nothing wrong with that, sometimes we need to think outside the box! For a fresh, clean scent try a man’s cologne! Don’t knock it till you try it. Some men’s colognes are light enough that a single spray can give you a light, clean smell that is very appealing. 33% of men’s colognes are purchased and worn by women

2. Natural perfumes are better for you

Much hype is based around “natural.” Nature is consistently inconsistent. Natural substances can be irritating, toxic or cause allergic reactions.

It's estimated brand name perfumes typically contain 95% synthetic, or man-made oils. Synthetics are more stable and offer more variety. They are not any less significant or, generally, any more dangerous today. Synthetic raw materials obtained through petrochemistry have as high a quality of fragrance as those derived from natural raw materials.

Because perfume is not rubbed into skin like lotions, little if any gets absorbed. The issue then is potential irritations. While people can have irritations to synthetic oils, irritations and sometimes even allergies to natural oils can occur.

Tip: Look at the ingredient list on a perfume package; less is better. We needn't list natural oils and only need list synthetic oils if it's a potential irritant.

3. No one is allergic to perfume per se

There are thousands of perfumes containing thousands of ingredients. A few ingredients could cause irritation, but if so, don't give up on perfume. Try other formulas with differing components.

While people often assume they are allergic to fragrance, they are usually mistaken. Allergic reactions are typically triggered by organic substances - pollen, food, mold spores, dust mites, animal and cockroach dander, feathers. These are capable of inducing white blood cells to make IgE antibody which is what makes them allergic trigger factors.

Fragrances, in contrast, are usually synthetic chemicals that, generally don't stimulate IgE antibody production. Thus, when an issue they are not allergens, but irritants, such as smoke, odors, fumes, and other chemicals.

57

4. Perfumes are Gender Specific

When Chanel No. 5 was introduced in 1921 it was the first popular perfume to be marketed to women. Until then, for hundreds, if not thousands of years, all perfumes were unisex. There is nothing gender specific about fragrance despite what marketing campaigns might claim.

Since 1921 perfume fell into two camps reinforced with stereotypical marketing campaigns: Female perfumes would tease the nostrils with flowers on the edge of the woods, while male fragrances would compel you deeper into the forest with woody and musky odors.

With the introduction of CK1 in 1994 unisex fragrances returned and this category continues to expand. Today, we live in a world where fragrance lovers tend to simply wear what they like.

Trivia: Did you know Old Spice was introduced in 1937 for women. It didn't sell well so they relaunched it a year later for men.

5. Perfume is personal, shouldn't be purchased for others

Have no fear, it's just perfume. People can, do and should have multiple scents.



victorian life

Jacob Chapman

We bought the house for the “special price,”
which was half the “normal price.”
We said of course we’ll take the special price,
but it came with some strings.
We have to wait five years
before we change the wallpaper
or the furniture or the position
of the furniture or anything else.
We told each other all we have to do
is sign the papers,
and then we can do whatever we want,
but no. Lawyers. Monitors. Consequences.
So we live in this weird Victorian house
that feels about a century off
and damn if we haven’t gotten used to it.
What would we do, for instance,
without our tea set and our ritual
of having tea in the parlor?
I guess the previous owner,
an old woman we never met,
had plenty of money but didn’t like the idea
of someone erasing her vision.
The grandfather clock,
which I thought was funny at first,
has become one of my favorite things
about the house. Its slow tick-tock sound
never changes. As the years go by,
we talk more and more
about gliding past the five-year mark
and changing nothing.
We used to agree that the golden wallpaper
would be the first thing to go, but now,
after watching so many sunsets from that room
while we drink gin and tonics,
we can’t imagine the house without it.



the founders

Jacob Chapman

We walk clockwise, not counterclockwise,
around the circle in the woods.

It's one of the first things
we decided. That, and the importance
of that specific place,
our clearing in the pines.

It's tough to know how many layers
of romantic gloss you should put
on something like that.

You have to leave enough space
for different personalities.

Everyone is marked
on their cheeks as they enter the clearing.

Fire. There's always fire
and the four directions
and the four colors: yellow, green,
red, and blue. As for what,
exactly, we were doing,
well, we felt a need

to do something like that.

As for the future, there's so much room
for expansion and contraction.

We should probably do more
with the air and the sky.

Will we recognize things
when we return,
after others have had a chance
to lead? I hope so,
but even if we don't,
it was worth it.



the child of the house

Jacob Chapman

The dinner party, which had started off so well
with light banter and mockery of shared enemies,
had taken a turn. As usual, the problem
was too much alcohol and everyone trying to hold forth
at once. The two sciencey people
were locked in an argument that no one else understood
or cared about. The cross-couple flirting
was nothing new, but they were all leaning in
more than usual. I sat down in a comfortable chair
in the corner and sipped my drink.
It was hard to hide my disappointment.
A girl, the child of the house,
walked up to me and said
Do you want to see the furnace?
I don't know, I said. That sounds inappropriate.
Oh, please, she said. I can tell
who's sketchy and who's not, and you're not.
Thanks, I said. Alright, let's see the furnace.
She led me to the basement,
and the furnace was old and loud.
I could see the flames through the metal grate.
I put things in there all the time, the girl said.
That's not a good idea, I said.
It's fine, she said. That thing is hot as hell.
It'll burn anything except metal.
I don't know, I said. Things could get blocked
or clogged or something.
It's fine, she said. Do you have anything to burn?

All I had was a few dollars
in my wallet. I rolled one up
and slid it through the grate.
It burned with a greenish flame.
I was getting ready to put another one in
when I heard a crash upstairs.
I should go, I said. You know,
you probably shouldn't do this too much.
It doesn't seem healthy.
Compared to what? she said.
All the crap that's going on upstairs?
Yeah, I see your point, I said. But still.
I know, she said. Be careful up there.
My parents aren't good role models.
I don't know them very well, I said.
I handed her the dollar I was getting ready to burn
and said burn it for me later.
She said I'll do that, but don't linger upstairs.
Say your goodbyes and go home.
I smiled and said I'll do that.
As I drove home, I wondered
if I had made a new friend,
but friend wasn't quite the right word.
Child acquaintance? No.
Maybe there's a better word
in another language, or maybe
I should make up a new word
like sciencey or greenish.
People do it all the time.



in flight

Lindsey Britt

You were deafened. The sound was intolerable; it violated your sense of decency, your love of quiet, and your yearning for solitude. Why, on the top of this rather small green hill in southeast Vermont, was there this unholy din? It was drowning out the songs of scarlet tanagers and dark-eyed juncos, the scurrying of chipmunks, and the impressive (and gravity defying) hum of insect wings in flight. As the volume crescendoed it crushed your thoughts until all that was left was the urge to scream “Shut up!” You imagined this is what a tornado sounded like before it touched down and that the vortex of sound might suddenly pick you up. You’d be launched swirling upwards, completely consumed by the sound.

Even though it felt and sounded like the two circling jets were right on top of you they were in fact probably thousands of feet above the granite boulder where you were sitting in the midst of green and copper colored shrubbery. Against a blue backdrop they were putting on a show—swooping, diving, chasing—you hadn’t paid to see. Except, well, you’d paid taxes for years, so this interruption to the day (and to peace and to the climate) was your fault in some small, but ongoing, way. You undeniably had a hand in this effrontery.

A hiker told you the jets were coming by every morning for weeks. It was better, he said, to come later in the day. You couldn’t focus on what he was saying, because all the space in your mind where listening could take place was filled with sound and consumed by outrage, frustration, and indignation at the illogic of the scene. You tried to catch glimpses of the jets, but, because they were so fast and small against the expanse of sky, it was almost impossible to do except for the briefest of moments; it left you with the disorienting feeling they were everywhere and nowhere all at once.

Eventually the planes sped off to the west to torment other unsuspecting hikers. As soon as they left you saw three birds of prey crest the hilltop. Swooping, diving, chasing. Though thousands of feet closer to you than their mechanical imitators had been, you couldn’t hear their show, but you could feel their celebration at the air being theirs again and the contrast was mesmerizing.





lost aunt mary
Nathan Cho

new sexy underwear

Michael Favala Goldman

You can't see it –
the almost smile.

The Tao says
keep your jewels hidden.

All day a private knowing,
delight in nearly nothing.



this is the only poem i'll ever write for you

Michael Favala Goldman

I don't know why
you enjoy some of my poems

I'm not thinking of you
when I write

(I'm not thinking
I'm writing)

And when I'm done
there you are –

some of my poems
obviously are for you.



the family game: pinochle

Michael Favala Goldman

My grandmother and I sit adjacent
at the dining room table.

I am just old enough to learn
about suits and tricks.

By small dishes of pretzels, apple slices,
nuts and raisins we play open-handed.

I have a cheat sheet for how to score
meld and how much to bid.

Four aces or a run give the most, but
I like the marriage of hearts.

The ace of spades is obviously in charge.
The jack of diamonds and queen of spades

are paramours worth four. My grandfather
a large, gentle man, who never smokes or curses,

sits across from me,
putting his cards in order.

No one gloats. It is enough
to sit at the table.



families buried in sand

Deborah Daniel Shea

First thing I find half-buried on the beach is a set of miniature dishes. A plate, a bowl, and a tiny teacup the size and shape of a doll's unclenched fist. Blue enamel, the kind families take on camping trips because it's shatterproof.

I know about blue enamel dishes because my father used to take me camping. I say "used to" because two years ago, on my thirteenth birthday, my father died. He was a fireman, and he taught me how to escape from all kinds of deadly infernos.

But I never worry about fire on Patriot Beach because fire can't cross water or sand. And, today, the low, ash-colored clouds of early October carry rain, not smoke, so I decide to dig a hole alongside the dishes to see whether anything else might be buried there.

A doll's book, also blue. No title. No words. Then I unearth something really weird: a dollhouse made of that shiny, white cardboard that comes inside packages of pantyhose. The house has a patio, too, with a toothpick grill and slivered pieces of driftwood so neatly stacked they look like logs beside the fireplace of an unemployed elf with O.C.D..

There aren't any dolls inside the dollhouse, though. No dolls sitting on the little patio. No dolls waiting for hot dogs from the grill. No dolls quietly eating from the blue enamel dishes. That makes me wonder if the dolls are buried in a different place, farther down the beach.

Back home, my mother is drinking again.

Last week, she went to an A.A. meeting three nights in a row. On the fourth night, she stood at the window in her brown rain coat and waited for her A.A. friends to pick her up. While she waited she twirled a lock of hair around her finger, impatiently, a gesture I've come to recognize as trouble.

She twirled her hair and she lit a cigarette and she smoked it right down to the plastic filter.

All trouble.

Big trouble.

I was on the sofa bed, studying for my algebra test. In the margins of my book, I listed all the words I could make from "algebra": "algae," "rage," "leg," "ale," "bra." But as soon as my mother left I knew I'd fail the test.

When she goes to an A.A. meeting, my mother shuts the door like a normal person. Just shuts it. Doesn't think about it. But when she goes out to get drunk, she shuts the door softly, quietly, like a guilty teenager sneaking out of the house.

That night, she oh, so, quietly shut the door.

I knew that when she came back she would take a very long, very noisy, shower. Then she'd drink pickle juice straight from the jar. Then she'd call all the people she knew and swear at them like a wrestler. Finally, she'd fall exhausted onto her sofa bed and go to sleep. And by then it would be six o'clock, when I have to get up for school.

Because we live in a one-room, studio apartment, it's impossible to ignore her.

You are never more alone than when you live with a parent who, because of alcohol or drugs, is completely out of control.

My mother has been drunk for a week when I fail a science test and a surprise history quiz. I never finished my paper on The Great Gatsby, so I got an 'F'. The 'F' upset me because I like that book. A lot. I like the part where the author describes the sound of the wind as it moves through the curtains in a room. He uses words with lots of vowels, and if you read it out loud, and you hold the sound of each vowel for a few extra seconds, you can actually hear the wind blowing through the room: "The breeeeeee bleeeeww throooooough the roooooom, bleeeeww cuuurtaaaains iiiiin aaat ooone end and oooooout thee oooooother."

And then Tom Buchanan, one of the characters in the book, shuts the window, hard, and the writer uses one-syllable words with hard, consonant endings to describe it. And if you read that part out loud, and exaggerate all the final t's and d's, you can hear the wind being caught, too: "The caughtttt windddd diedddd outttt aboutttt the room."

When I told my teacher about the breeze blowing through the vowels, and the wind caught in the consonants, she gave me a peculiar look. I expected her to say that reading out loud was stupid, so I didn't mention that sometimes I read out loud to drown out my drunk mother's voice. Instead, my teacher asked me to speak to her after school.

All my life I've been a good student. Better than good. An 'A' student. I'm only fifteen, but, sometimes, I'm able to peer into the darkness of certain situations and see all the way through to the other side. It's kind of like a flashlight you innocently aim into a sewer only to discover that someone is living down there. And what I see now is that soon, very soon, I will flunk out of school.

When I skip school I go to my favorite place, Patriot Beach, which is not too far from where I live. It's right behind the shops on Main Street, down a narrow, rocky path with tall walls of wild roses on either side, which, at this time of year, are red rosehip globes as big as plums.

And that's where I find another dollhouse, a few feet from the spot where the rocky path sinks into beach sand that wrestles your shoes from your feet. Not pantyhose cardboard and duct tape this time. A real house. Made of wood. Inside, even the furniture is made of wood. And there's a china closet with real glass doors. The china closet holds no china, though, only a plastic Jiffy straw, folded in half.

Back on Main Street, ten minutes later, I take the straw out of my pocket and examine it. On a piece of white paper scrolled inside, someone has printed a phone number in red ink. It occurs to me that the buried dollhouses might have been put there by some pervert to lure girls into the dunes. Or they could be a scam. Maybe when you call the number on the Jiffy straw someone tries to sell you beach towels or dollhouse furniture or red ink.

Later that night, lying on the sofa bed, listening to my mother vomit into the toilet, I wonder what kind of person would bury dollhouses on the beach the way a serial killer buries bodies in the sand. A notorious serial killer once lived on Cape Cod, in Truro, in 1969. Tony Costa. I looked him up online at the town library one day while I was skipping school. Tony Costa killed seven young women before he was caught. He drove them to a secluded place where he grew marijuana. The dumb women thought they were going to get high. But that's not what they got. What they got was chopped up and buried in the dunes.

But compared to Ted Bundy Tony Costa was merely a cook at the carnival of cannibals.

I know about Ted Bundy because I watched a Netflix documentary about him a few years ago. I was shocked at how easily Ted was able to lure strangers to their deaths. Pretending to have a broken leg, or a busted arm, he'd hobble around on crutches with his arm in a sling to make people feel sorry for him. If you ask me, that's where women always lose it, trying to help some creep who pretends to be injured or sick but really isn't.

My mother watched the show with me, and she said that women were a lot dumber back in the 'Sixties. They failed to understand that men like Ted Bundy never intended to date them, but only to kill them. They were a lot smarter now, she said. Now they knew to stay away from strangers, especially handsome strangers with law degrees, and fake, broken limbs.

My mother has been hanging around with a woman in the apartment building who calls herself a nurse. She's not a real nurse, though. She's one of those medical clean-up women who do most of the dirty work in hospitals these days. They all wear white uniforms, so you never really know what they do.

This so-called nurse works second shift, and when she comes home she likes to drink. The three-to-eleven shift is perfect for drunks because they can drink until five in the morning, sleep until noon, and still have three hours left to sober up before they have to go back to work again.

My mother trots down to the nurse's apartment every night around eleven-thirty. She tells me she needs to borrow a cigarette. When she comes back three hours later she lies down on her sofa bed and smokes six or seven of them without opening the sliding glass door to let out the smoke because she's "not heating the outside."

I hate cigarette smoke. My blankets and pillow stink. I try to ignore it, but my hair stinks, too. I crush the pillow over my face and breathe through my mouth, but I can still smell the smoke through my mouth. I know that sounds ridiculous, but it's true.

When I told my mother how much I hated cigarette smoke she rolled her eyes and laughed.

“If that’s all you have to worry about, Kiddo, you’re golden.”

She calls me “kiddo” lately, which I hate. Kiddo. Like she’s a hipster from the ‘Fifties or something. Instead of her daughter, it makes me sound like her buddy, which I’m not. When she gets really drunk she blows cigarette smoke right into my face and laughs. It’s kind of strange because she knows how I feel about it. It’s almost as if it were a game or something. As if she wanted to tell me that if she’s going down with cancer then I’m going down, too.

Before my father died we lived in one of the towns “on the other side of the bridge,” which means on the nicer side of Cape Cod. My mother drank, but she hid it pretty well. She worked as a teacher’s aide in the morning, and she drank in the afternoon, before my father came home. At night, because he was there, she had to keep a lid on things.

Shortly after he died I began to find those doll-sized bottles of vodka they stack behind the counter in liquor stores so people can’t steal them. My mother hid them everywhere. Inside the laundry hamper. Underneath the beds. Behind the washing machine. She even hid them outdoors. Once, I found a trail in the back yard leading into the woods, as though Hansel and Gretel, instead of crumbs, had dropped miniature bottles of vodka behind them to mark their way home.

Eventually, my mother sold our house, and we moved to an apartment one town away. We lived there six months, until she claimed that the landlord, who lived downstairs, made a pass at her. After that, we moved from apartment to apartment, each one smaller than the one before, moving whenever someone did something that she didn’t like, usually a man, who usually made a pass at her.

Six months ago, we landed here. One room, with a bathroom, and a kitchen that isn’t a real kitchen, but merely an extension of the same room, separated by a fake, plywood counter. I don’t even bother to unpack anymore. I just stack my cardboard boxes, two of clothes, and two of books, in a corner and pull out my things as I need them.

But the worst part about moving all the time is school. Since my father died I’ve gone to six different schools. Six schools in two years. Either I’m ahead of everyone in my class, or I’m behind, but I’m never in the same place.

When I tried to tell her how much I hate changing schools all the time my mother said it was good training for life.

“Whatever happens, Kiddo,” she said, “you’ll know how to go with the flow.”

Whenever I'm alone in the studio apartment I do all the chores because I don't want my mother talking to the other women who live in the building. They hang around the washing machines in the basement, where they cheerfully borrow quarters from one another like demented panhandlers on holiday. The apartment building is called "Mallard Estates," which is a joke because mallards mate for life, and only single women live here. The mailman is the sole man in sight, and the women line up at the mailboxes in front of the building to wait for him with the gleeful anticipation of children at Christmas waiting for Santa Claus.

Encountering one another in the basement, or at the mailboxes waiting for the male, they say, "You have kids. I have kids. Let's double up and save gas." And the next thing you know they're carpooling to Walmart and Denny's and God only knows where else because no one else cares. After that, they're swapping phone numbers, and then phones, and a short while later keys are copied and passed back and forth like their children.

"When I go to the unemployment, you watch mine," they say. "And when you go to the welfare, I'll watch yours." They say the unemployment, and the welfare, which is not correct. But incorrect grammar is probably the least of their problems, at this point. By the time you end up in a dump like this life has pretty much gotten away from you in all the ways that matter, and correct grammar probably left a long time before that.

On the beach, I dig a hole in the dunes, down behind a tangled curtain of green-and-gold sea grass. There, the October winds that blow off the water toward shore are caught and die out, not like a window slammed shut by Tom Buchanan, but more like a fluttering gust of butterflies caught in a net.

When my father was alive we used to go the beach after he came home from work. We swam or threw Frisbees, and, sometimes, he quizzed me about fire.

"Incendiary situation," that's what he called it. I love the word "incendiary" because it sounds Italian, like his name, Orvieto. Arthur Orvieto, "Arturo" to his family and friends. My father liked to make up fake, incendiary situations. He'd give me the distance, direction, and duration of the blaze, what he called the "three D's," and I'd have five minutes to escape.

Once, waiting for a Red Sox game to begin, we sat in the stands and ate Fenway Franks while he explained their evacuation plans. He knew everything about Fenway Park because he volunteered there when he was off-duty. Now, because of him, I know how to escape from almost every kind of incendiary situation, even fires inside stadiums, skyscrapers, and tunnels.

In my locker at school I keep the rosary beads that were on his coffin. The coffin was closed because he was so badly burned, so I never saw him again after he dropped me off at school that day.

That day.

The day he died.

That's the strangest thing about death, if you ask me. How it happens on a day that begins like every other day, so you never see it coming. Like those people at Pompeii we read about in school. One minute they're eating bread and honey for breakfast, and the next minute they're floating down to Naples on a raft of lava two miles deep. One minute you're saying goodbye to your father at school, and the next minute you're looking at his closed coffin.

"Think of life as a fire," he used to say. "Avoid situations where things might get out of control. And never let a fire come between you and the way out. Make an escape plan before you need one."

I wonder what he'd think of my life now, trapped with my mother in one room with one door and no fire escape. My mother, his wife, who is lying on her sofa bed right now, face down in a little pool of tapioca vomit.

The tide is going out on Patriot Beach. 'And on my life,' I think as I walk down the rosehip-littered path to the ocean. I've failed two more tests, Social Studies and English. And last week, while she was in a blackout drunk, my mother flung all of my books off the porch, which isn't a real porch, but only a grey corridor, long and narrow, that runs the length of the building on the second floor. The books landed on the lawn of St. Patrick's Church next door. I was too embarrassed to go over there and pick them up, so I decided to wait until dark. But at nine o'clock all of my books were gone.

My books. Not hers. The only thing I care about. When my teachers questioned me about the books, I just shrugged and stared at the floor. What could I say? My mother tossed them off the porch when she was drunk, and then someone stole them from a church lawn? They'd never believe something like that.

Everyone already talks about me because I'm the new girl at school, and because my mother drinks all the time. She has to walk past the high school to get to the booze troughs in town. The least she could do is leave town to get drunk so that no one would see her pathetically stumbling into Wareham at ten o'clock in the morning, and when school lets out at one-thirty resolutely stumbling back again in the opposite direction.

At the end of October, I find the dolls about a quarter mile down the beach from the second dollhouse. They're in a big, cave-like hole, with a kind of thatched roof made of sea grass over the top. The dolls are cheap, plastic models of soldiers, nurses, and firemen. The soldiers are lined up next to a table made of oily plywood, clutching their useless guns. The nurses lounge carelessly about on little beds of mounded sand, like dumb teenage girls at the beach.

Only the fireman dolls stand apart from the rest, their green, plastic heads unnaturally torqued sideways to look at the sky. They remind me of the drawings in my history book of the people at Pompeii, standing in their gardens, listening to a slumbering volcano waking up, unaware that death is about to come boiling right down Mt. Vesuvius right in their direction. They died because they never made an escape plan before they needed one, even though they lived in sight of the most incendiary situation in the world.

Later, walking slowly back to the studio apartment, I think about the dolls. I wonder whether there are dolls, and dollhouses, and maybe even entire doll villages, buried up and down the East Coast. Maybe I unearthed just three cells in an extensive hive of buzzing, buried activity. Maybe doll families visit one another underground like the Underground Railroad we read about in school. Maybe there are thousands of buried doll villages all the way across the country, all the way to California. Maybe each site is one piece of a massive puzzle, and the person who finds all of them will win a prize, like those stupid, online treasure hunts. Or maybe it's one of those weird crop things, and when all of the parts are seen from an airplane they form the face of Jesus Christ or Mickey Mouse or some other famous celebrity.

If I go home now I know I'll find my mother passed out on the sofa bed, drooling into her pillow. Later, when she wakes up, she'll drink pickle juice straight from the jar, take a shower, and telephone her friends in A.A. to tell them she's drunk, ha, ha, ha, and what the hell did they ever do to help her stay sober anyway, because whatever the hell it was didn't work.

I think that Mr. Jiffy Straw must have returned to Patriot Beach by now. If so, he's discovered that Lilliputians recently arrived in miniature sailing vessels to ravage his pathetic, little settlements. And he'll know that someone has his red telephone number. I think it might be a good a time to walk down to the payphone at Walgreen's--I don't have a cell phone--call the number on the Jiffy straw, and ask the person burying this crazy stuff to meet me on the beach on Saturday at four o'clock.

72

The day the letter arrives from school suspending me for "exceeding the permitted number of absences," and asking my mother to call the guidance counselor and schedule a meeting "at her convenience," my mother has been gone for three days. I don't call the police because I know that she'll turn up, eventually. When she does she'll have a cut on her leg or her clothes will be torn. She'll have that stunned, vacant look on her face that drunks get when they can't drink anymore, but they can't not drink anymore, either. After stumbling into the apartment, my mother will collapse on her sofa bed and sleep for three days straight without taking off her clothes or brushing her teeth.

No pickle juice, no shower, no telephone.

I used to be relieved when she finally turned up because I worried that she might be getting chopped up by some creepy, serial killer. But now my mother is in such bad shape that sometimes I wish she'd never show up at all.

What kind of daughter wishes that her mother would disappear?

On Saturday, I'm hunkered down inside my little rabbit hole of sand at half past three, waiting. I stole my father's old wristwatch from my mother's cardboard dresser to make sure I'm on time. The November wind blows so cold off the ocean now that only a few hearty seagulls brave the beach. They stand on one leg and face into the wind, the way that sailboats moored in the harbor swing around to point their bows forward in a storm.

At ten minutes to four, a man wearing sunglasses, chinos, and a hooded Red Sox sweatshirt comes up the beach alone. He's not limping or leaning on crutches. He's not sporting a fake leg cast or a fake arm sling. At the big, hollowed-out cave in the sand he stops walking.

Ten minutes later he hasn't moved, so I abandon my bunker, walk over to him, and tell him I'm the person who called him. He nods, still staring at the hole. I ask him how many buried dollhouses there are. He says three.

"Where's the third one?"

"It's not on the beach."

I think he'll try to lure me into his car by offering to drive me there next.

"The dolls belonged to my daughter," the man says in a quiet voice, taking off his sunglasses and rubbing his eyes. "You know the way kids bury each other in the sand at the beach? That's just a stupid game. But when she died I felt like that for real. Like I was buried in sand up to my neck." He slants the sunglasses into the front pocket of his chinos.

"That's kind of weird."

He hasn't looked at me yet. Now he gives me a little sideways glance. I seem to be of less interest to him than a dead gnat at a family picnic. He certainly isn't scrutinizing me, like some Ted Bundy pervert.

I'm looking for clues to tell me whether or not he's lying, which is difficult because he's sober and I'm used to drunks, when suddenly he does something Ted Bundy never did.

He starts to cry.

I realize that the excavated doll cave looks exactly like a grave, a small grave, the grave of a child.

And that makes me sorry I ever dug it up.

I remember the last time I went to my father's grave. I wanted to say a prayer, but a black cricket on the granite ledge at the base of the tombstone distracted me. One of its legs had fallen off, and the discarded leg lay there undisturbed on the ledge like a malevolent, black twig. The cricket seemed absolutely unconcerned about the dropped limb, which, to me, was astonishing. I wondered whether crickets periodically shed their legs the way snakes shed their skin. Or did they suffer a slow death in autumn that began with their limbs falling off?

The man was saying something about the dolls now. He buried his daughter's dolls, and then he sprinkled holy water from St. Patrick's Church over the sand, and then he felt a little better.

"My daughter's name was Mary," he says, reaching up to adjust the hood of his Red Sox sweatshirt.

“Where’s she buried?”

“St. Patrick’s Cemetery. Back in town.”

I tell him I’ll meet him there in twenty minutes to see if his story checks out. Then I take off running. Maybe he’ll meet me there. Maybe he won’t. Maybe there’s a Mary. Maybe there isn’t. Mary is a very common name. Mary might simply be the first name that popped into his head.

When I reach the cemetery fifteen minutes later he’s already there. This surprises me because I never saw him drive past me in his car.

We stop before a tombstone, “Mary Petrocelli.”

“You’re Italian?”

“Si.”

That makes me laugh. I tell him my father is Italian.

“What’s his name? Maybe I know him.”

“He doesn’t live around here.”

“My family came from a town near Naples. Pompeii.”

“You’ve heard of Pompeii?” I ask, surprised.

“Oh, sure,” he says, taking his sunglasses from his pocket and cleaning them with the end of his sweatshirt. “Who doesn’t know about Pompeii?”

“But I thought everyone died.”

He smiles and says at least one person must have survived or else he wouldn’t be alive.

I read the dates on Mary’s tombstone. Born December 24, 2014. Died December 25, 2018. For a moment, I think Mr. Petrocelli brings girls to this grave so that he can tell them a sad, Christmas tale. Ted Bundy would definitely do that, dragging his fake, broken leg in a fake cast all the way across a cemetery to make some stupid woman feel sorry for him. But then I remember that I asked him where his daughter was buried.

“Where’s her mother, your wife?” I nod at the wedding ring to let him know I noticed it.

“Died the same day. Car accident.” He puts the sunglasses on his head and immediately the lenses frost over, which makes them look like the vacant eyes of a ghost.

When I ask him why she’s not buried with her daughter he says that she wanted her body donated to science, to help others.

My father didn't die on Christmas. He died on my birthday. So I know how Mr. Petrocelli feels. Losing someone on a day when you're supposed to be happy is a double whammy, as if God slapped you across the face twice. It's a double dose of heartbreak, because never again will you think of your birthday as anything but the day the person you loved more than anyone else in the world died and left you alone in this stupid world forever.

It's getting cold now and dark. Back in town, the streetlights are coming on. A strong gust of wind blows the leaves from the maple trees in copper-red streams like new pennies from a piggy bank poured out onto the ground to cash in for beer.

Mr. Petrocelli tells me I shouldn't hang around the cemetery after dark, but I already know that. He asks me where I live.

"Nowhere."

He looks at me for the first time. His eyes are brown, like my father's, and sad, as if what I just said about living nowhere upset him.

"Nowhere in particular," I say, trying to make him feel better.

"My car's right over there," he says kindly, pointing to a brown Toyota parked just inside the cemetery gate. "Come on, I'll drive you to Nowhere In Particular Street."
"I'm not going home. My mother's sick."

He stamps his feet impatiently. "Well, you can't stay here. It's too cold. Come on, I'll buy you a hot chocolate. At Fratenellas. It's Italian. My cousin owns it. After you warm up, you can walk home to Nowhere In Particular Street, okay?"

I don't recall that Ted Bundy ever offered any of his victims a refreshing beverage right before he killed them, so I tell Mr. Petrocelli I'll meet him there.

"It's too far. On the other side of town." He looks at his watch. "And I got to get back to work in half an hour."

"Where do you work?"

"Where do you think? At Fratenellas."

He takes a few steps closer, and reaches out to brush a red ribbon of hair from my cheek, as if this tender gesture will convince me to go with him to his cousin's restaurant. And that's when I notice that he's wearing a wedding ring on his left hand that he wasn't wearing earlier. I wonder if Ted Bundy wore fake wedding rings to make women think he was married, and, therefore, safe, although by now who believes that a married serial killer is any safer than an unmarried one?

"I don't like hot chocolate."

“Suit yourself,” he says, shrugging his shoulders indifferently.

Mr. Petrocelli starts back across the cemetery to his car. He hunches up his shoulders and tucks his head into the hood of his Red Sox sweatshirt the way seagulls tuck their heads deep inside their collars of white feathers when it’s cold. I watch him drive away in his brown Toyota. Then I turn around and run home.

When I got back to the studio apartment later that day I found my mother passed out on the floor. I thought that she was dead, or soon would be, so I called the police. She was taken to the hospital, and I was sent to a foster home.

That was three years ago.

No one at Fratinellas knew anything about Mr. Petrocelli, or his dead daughter, so I guess nothing he told me was true. I still think about him once in a while, though, and wonder if he’s somewhere burying dolls on a beach to meet fifteen-year-old girls as dumb as I was then.

I’ll be eighteen in a few months. That’s the age when foster kids get kicked out because the money from the State dries up faster than a foster mother’s fake, parting tears. I have no idea where I’ll go after that.

76

Adults always worry about perverts, but everyone knows about them. It’s all the other stuff you never even knew to exist in the first place that in the end buries you forever.

*



Cyd Scott
REALTOR®

C 413-275-9359
O 413-223-1364

Cyd@CohnandCompany.com
CohnandCompany.com

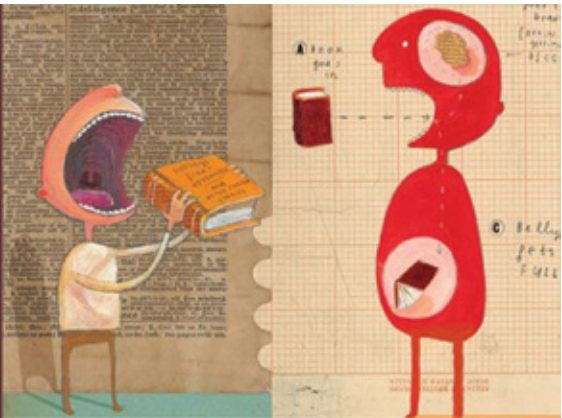
117 Main Street
Greenfield, MA 01301



77

pick one
Hyewon Cho

**May
it
howl
!**



MIX TAPES FROM THE EARS OF A FERAL CHILD
WWW.SOUNDCLOUD.COM/ELECTIC-HOWLS

parlor games

Thomas Rowland

Tonight, my friends, we are going to forego our usual game of charades to play a new contest that I've invented. I'm sure you will find it most amusing.

Fred, please, not another game.

Does it involve drinking? Or any removal of clothing? If so, I won't play.

No, Sandra, unlike last week, this one's on the up and up. Here's how it works. We divide up into teams of two. I announce a famous movie quote. One of the partners of a team has to guess the name of the movie that it came from, and for extra "style points" the actor who spoke them. Then his or her partner must invent a short scenario, totally improvised, that might have occurred following the quoted line.

Let's get started. Here's the first one for team number 1. **Houston, we have a problem.**

ALICE: That's easy. Tom Hanks in *Apollo 13* (The only real problem with this otherwise excellent film was that 99.93% of the audience already knew how it was going to turn out in the end.)

78

Right on, Alice. Okay, John, on to you.

JOHN: Well, Houston, we actually have two problems, and they are related. First, the human waste disposal system (the HWDS) has become blocked, and, consequently, the whole business has overflowed, and the water and some other unmentionable contents are mounting rapidly in the capsule. Right now at about chest level. The other problem is that we are out of toilet paper. In their haste to assure the flexibility of the O-rings, the support staff failed to provide more than 12 hours' supply. We place the blame on Richard Feynman.

[crackling static noise] Houston here. Okay, we'll see what we can come up with. [Very long pause] Apollo 13, we have been unable to construct an alternative to Drano products that you might have on board. The custodian here suggested that certain of the on-flight edibles might be consumed with less frequency, but this has been voted down. So I'm afraid you will have to simply adjust to the rising water level. You will remember that in Cabinet B below your left elbow there is an emergency snorkeling apparatus that may come in handy. As for the toilet paper, the only substance on board the capsule that might be used as a substitute is the aluminum covering of the re-entry heat shield. So, you have a difficult choice to make here.

Apollo 13: Copy that.

Houston: And, Apollo 13, Godspeed!

10 points to team number 1! Ok, on to the next. "I'll get you, my pretty!"

CHRIS: Another easy one. Margaret Hamilton as the Wicked Witch of the East in *The Wizard of Oz*.

STAN: Yes, yes, we will recruit you, my pretty one, for our “establishment” up alongside the Yellow Brick Road. Most of our clientele are sailors on leave, but we do occasional host a bear or a scarecrow, and even once, a lion. Maybe you already know them. You will feel right at home there, since most of our girls, quite inexplicably, are from Kansas. Yes, just a medical clearance and screening test for transmissible barnyard diseases and we’ll fit you right into the rotation. Whereupon, Dorothy clicked her heels together twice, and suddenly found herself on station KMTZ in Wichita, holding a pointer, and standing in front of a weather map which, in brazen red colors, were indicated the tornado threats for the afternoon. Later she found out that she was, in fact, a leading consultant from the Middle Kansas Tornado Watch System (the MIKTWAS). She then remembered that she had originally turned down an offer for this position, citing the time requirements demanded for caring for her dog.

You guys are good! Another 10 points to team number two. On to Team number 3. **Plastics.**

BERT: The best one-word movie line ever! Benjamin Braddock (played by Dustin Hoffman) was offered this advice at a welcoming party by Mr. McGuire in respect to his future plans. Actually, I think that the funnier line is the one delivered by Benjamin in response: “Exactly what do you mean by that, Mr. McGuire?”

EMILY: The word went through Benjamin like an electric shock. “Plastics,” had mouthed Mr. McGuire, and Benjamin was certain there was a hint of a knowing smile on his lips. Did he know? How could Ben tell for sure? Had Vanessa betrayed him after their night of passion together? He tried to find the answer in Mr. McGuire’s eyes, but there was none there. Relax, Ben, relax, he said to himself. Keep it cool. How could Mr. McGuire know that he had slipped several kilos of plastic explosives past the security check at LAX? Ten kilos of plastic explosives—a particularly powerful combination of imported Sentex, C-4, and EPX-1—that would, if all went right, soon take out the entire humanities department at Berkeley in a single blinding flash. But now fear gripped him. Maybe Mr. McGuire did know. Then plans would have to change. Maybe Mr. McGuire would need to be disposed of. Maybe there would be a tragic drowning accident of a highly-inebriated man in the family swimming pool later that night. Now if he could only get rid of Mrs. Robinson...

Great! Are you ready, team 4? **There’s no crying in baseball!**

SALLY: Tom Hanks again. This time he’s the manager of a girls’ baseball team during World War II in *A League of Their Own*.

KAREN: When Marcus Zimmerman passed away, the obituary notice in the *Saugatuk Chronicle* indicated that he had passed calmly, “surrounded by his loving family.” Actually, it was nothing like this. His wife Wilfred had been caring for him for several weeks at home, and his nephew Harold was visiting at the time, escaping a tumultuous domestic scene back in Saginaw. In fact, Harold had almost missed entirely the moment of Marcus’s passing, his attention having been diverted by television coverage in the next room of a late ninth-inning Red Sox rally. It

seems that, trailing 5-3, the Sox had runners on first and second with only one out, and the young star third baseman Scott Forbes was coming up to bat. What happened then was that the final words heard on Earth by the good Mr. Zimmerman as he went to his final reward were "O my God! No!! A double play!" This was just too much for Wilifred, who in a single moment was faced with the coincidental tragedies of the death of a 51-year life partner and the ignominious defeat of the local ball club, which was now mired in last place in the American League cellar. She sat there for two entire days, crying.

Team 5, this one's a little harder. **You're the quarterback.**

FRANK: No problem. Julie Christie in *Heaven Can Wait* (with Warren Beatty).

DOLORES: "Yes, I'm the quarterback," he said softly as he gazed into her limpid eyes. "What in the hell is a quarterback?" she said to herself. She was a political activist from northern England, just off the plane, and she possessed only a fleeting knowledge of the game of cricket. "So, what do you do, ah, when you are being this quarterback," she ventured. "Well," he responded, taken a bit aback because he had not been asked this question recently, "the quarterback is the most offensive player on the team. And sometimes he throws the ball to tight ends." Her mind was racing. Offensive players, intoxicated ends! (And what, pray tell, is an "end?") Something told her not to delve into this any farther.

Why had she shown up here, long after the game was over. Why hadn't she listened to her inner voice that said "There's something out of line here." But then he asked her if, after he showered, he could take her out for a coffee. She knew that in this part of the United States this would automatically imply an evening ending up in bed together. She had, however, in the excitement of the day, skipped lunch and was both thirsty and hungry. So, she accepted.

Team 6, you're going to have to do something spectacular to out-do these other teams. Are you ready? **I'm walkin' here!**

JASON: I've got it! Dustin Hoffman again, in *Midnight Cowboy*. The story goes that he shouted this at a taxi cab which had almost run him down when he was crossing the street, and that this was all spontaneous and not in the script.

HARRIET: No sooner were the words out of his mouth when a city garbage truck, arriving from the opposite direction, flattened the unsuspecting Rizzo into an ugly road-kill looking mass that was soon attracting strange-looking birds. When the police arrived, they just shook their heads. "This is the fourth death-by-garbage-truck in Manhattan this week," said the cop. "For God's sake, when will these people learn to cross at the light at the intersection and stop this senseless jay-walking?" Meanwhile, the unfortunate Rizzo's spirit had made it up to the pearly gates (he had been a model citizen, although at present sorely in need of a shower), but then there was a problem. "I would like to let you into heaven," said the gatekeeper, "but the bylaws clearly state that your heaven assurance policy is void [he began reading here] 'in the case of meaningless and irresponsible personal conduct.' And that included jay-walking on a busy Manhattan street. As a Class B Heaven Reject, Rizzo was returned to his body as an animal keeper in the Bronx Zoo and never was known to cross a street again.

It looks like we have a pretty cinema-savvy crowd! Team number 7, here you go: **Here's looking at you, kid.**

ALICE: Still too easy. Humphrey Bogart in *Casablanca*.

JOHN: When Sam had married Mary Ann she was the prettiest girl in the town—everybody said so—and Sam was very happy and proud to be in the company of such a beautiful woman. As the years went by, however, he wasn't so sure. The features of her face seemed to become more vague, more indistinct, more pale, and he became troubled. Was she turning old and plain before her time? Perhaps unconsciously he began to withdraw from her company and was even known to seek occasional pleasures elsewhere. Mary Ann, dismayed by Sam's lack of attention (not to mention his increasingly frequent indiscretions) became depressed and spent most of her time alone in her room when Jack was away at night. Then one day, on a routine visit to Dr. Armstrong, the family doctor, Jack was informed that it looked like he was developing cataracts in both eyes. This was confirmed on a follow-up examination by a local ophthalmologist, and several weeks later he underwent surgical removal of the cataracts and placement of artificial lenses. Suddenly, to his marked surprise, everything in his vision was dramatically clearer. Most shocking was the finding that Mary Ann was, in fact, almost as pretty as she was 20 years before. "Here's looking at you, kid!" he exclaimed at her bedroom door one night in his new-found happiness with his lovely wife. But it was too late. She had packed her bags and left, for good. She left a note, though, in her fine cursive writing, to the effect that "You can't play it again, Sam."

Okay, nice work. For the next contestants, team number 8: **Show Me the Money**

MARGARET: Ah, that's a tricky one. It's not Tom Cruise but rather Cuba Gooding, Jr., in the movie *Jerry Maguire*.

TIM: Everyone who was anybody in Chicago knew Carl Perroni. Here was a man who was a feared legend in his time. Ruthless to a fault, Perroni ran a highly-successful counterfeit ring that stretched from the Golden Mile down to the far South Side. Everyone knew you didn't mess with Cal Perroni. And the law, nicely bought off, couldn't touch him. One day word came back to Perroni that somebody had crossed him up by printing their own counterfeit \$50 bills. "Show me the money!" screamed Carl, and, sure enough, it was obvious by direct observation that he was being robbed by several people in his own organization. He responded in the usual horrific fashion, sending them severed horse heads in the mail. The problem was, there were too many of these perpetrators, so he began running out of heads. So, instead he would mail out a heart, a liver, or sometimes even a kidney, to be interpreted as a dire warning to the guilty ones. Unfortunately, this caught the attention of one Emil Plotkin, special agent for the Illinois branch of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA). Perroni sent a letter and two telegrams (but no animal parts) to Plotkin containing "an offer he couldn't refuse," but Plotkin remained loyal to his calling. He brought Perroni to trial, where the counterfeit tycoon got his come-uppance. He was found guilty of Animal Abuse in the First Degree in an early jury vote, and Mr. Perroni remains to this day incarcerated in Joliet Prison, downstate. Meanwhile Plotkin, highly celebrated for his fine work, serves as chairman of the Illinois Gaming Commission.

Last one. **Paris is always more beautiful in the rain.**

VICTOR: Another attempt to trick the contestants here! This comes from Woody Allen's movie (one of his best, in my opinion) *Midnight in Paris*, and it's spoken several times, mainly by the protagonist Gil Pender (played by Owen Wilson). The quote's best moment comes at the end, though, when Gabrielle, a cute Parisienne (Léa Seydoux) provides a compelling smile as she shares the same sentiment. This occurs as she and Gil walk off across the Pont Neuf through a night rain, getting their shoes soaked but not really caring.

JANE: The summer of 1849 had been a particularly hot and dry one in the city of Paris. Clouds of dust rose from the narrow streets, obscuring vision and causing much suffering among those citizens with chronic pulmonary disease. Coughing and wheezing, these unfortunates were lined up at Le Clinique des Poumons, waiting for hours to be seen by the beleaguered staff of physicians, half of whom were enjoying their summer vacation in southern Spain. "We must do something to break this drought!" cried the city's officials, who were tired of listening at all hours to this incessant coughing and wheezing.

The town was saved, it turned out, by the arrival at the city's gates on August 12 of one George Handel, a German composer who was visiting Paris disguised as a wandering minstrel and part-time weather forecaster. As Mr. Handel's carriage approached the rue de Rivoli, he cried out, "There is a warm front arriving from the South, which will bring rain!" Stoned by the doubting townspeople, George sought refuge in Angellica's Tea Shop, where, cutting in the front of the long line of waiting patrons, he ordered a black tea. And as he did, the rain began to fall outside. First a few drops, then harder, and finally lashing sheets of blessed rain engulfed the town. The waiting patrons turned from anger to cheers of grateful praise. Gone was the wheezing and coughing. The rain continued, and continued, and, alas, it did not seem like it was ever going to stop.

Mr. Handel announced prophetically that evening from the TV4 Weather Central that "It shall rain forever and ever. Alleluia!" So, be careful what you wish for.

That was really fun! I declare a 9-way tie for first place. I think we should try this again next week. And to give you a head start, here's a list of quotes that I had left over tonight so you can practice at home.

**I lost my Eidy, too. Only it wasn't in a flood.
I could a been a contender.
Move your bloomin' ass!
Who are those guys?
You are my density.
I'll have what she's having.
I want American food. I want French fries!**





upon return from a trip overseas

John Sieracki

Inside the fridge—how fortunate we are to have fridges—
slanted atop a piece of salted cod—how fortunate we are to have salt in abundance—
there's a small plate wrapped in plastic
serving as a vessel for two peanut butter cookies
I must have made for myself.

“How fortunate to have I,” myself ejaculates in an old-fashioned manner.
“You bet you are. Now put those back or I'm telling mother.”
Oh my; myself had spoken too soon,
for I had been standing there listening to myself,
anger management issues surfacing after all this time away.
Abandonment issues. Maintain boundaries.

“Odds are a billion to one that you're not a simulation,” myself retorts.
My eyes widen as I gasp, baring my fangs.
The plate hits the floor, but luckily the plastic serves
as a kind of padding so it doesn't break, the cookies safe.

“Don't make me bring grandmother into this,” I hiss.
Myself sees what I'm doing—going above mother's head—and says,
“If we prove it, and she finds out we know, which of course she will, she will have to destroy
us.”
“Which one?” I ask. Wow, I really got myself there.
I had obviously been methodically thinking through all the permutations
while myself was traipsing about the countryside.

Myself must be pausing long enough to seem beaten back.
“Happy now, Ed?” I ask.
“The word 'happy' originally referred to the nature of things that happen to someone,
not to an internal psychological state as it does today,”
blurts myself in an endless stream, cheeks flushed.



going to do

John Sieracki

I already know as I skip along the street,
arms stiff at my sides, my shoulders hunched.
“Mother,” I ask as I peer through the screen door,
“shall I or shan’t I?” “Ricky, you silly goose,” she replies,
giggling. “You already know what you’re going to do.”
We smile to each other and I turn, sashaying back
down the alley, my dandruff clinging
to the flowing oil of my hair. “Mary,” I ask, peering
down a well, “Shall I make you an egg or a stone?”
“Richie, you silly boy,” she replies with a chortle.
“You already know what you’re going to do.”
I beam into the darkness and then turn
on my two-toed foot, my tail pointing.
“Lenny,” I ask, peering up a tree, “shall I take
the house wench or the pool boy?” “Richard, my man,”
he replies with a grin, “You already know what
you’re going to do.” I erect an effigy under the tree
and set it alight. I turn to do a jig and sing in the gully,
my thick lenses aglow, my little legs tipped with cake pans
for shoes, my throat a hollowed-out squash.



if we know in advance

Gerald Yelle

On the last day we ought to
eat chocolate—so that
even if we go gentle—death
will have no dominion.
It'll feel like we're being
recycled, our atoms
repurposed. Chocolate
ice cream will pave the way.
Hard solid ice cream.
Not the drippy half-melted
not-even-cold slop some
people eat. That's not
the kind that can lead
to the wall thrown up by
the rich and powerful.
That's not the kind
that can make us good to go.
And you'll want to know
how to get from one
side to the other. You'll
have to dig a tunnel under
the wall—under the wall
mind you, because
it's not that kind of wall.
Not planted deep in the earth.
Not a built-down wall.
More like a regular wall.



old time detective

Gerald Yelle

When they told Ben to empty his pockets
he assumed they were looking for drugs.
They wanted his phone.
They said he had a map on it he had no
business having.
“We want you to tell us how you got it.”
He almost said
he thought it was a treasure map.
“I don't know what you're talking about”
he said instead.
“I bought this phone
at Radio Shack more than two years ago.”
“And where is that Radio Shack now?”
the tall one with the shades asked.
“Out of business,” Ben said.
“Very convenient,” the short man said.
“Convenient for what?” Ben said.
“I have to drive all the way to Vermont
to get it serviced.”
Both agents smiled. “I'll tell you what
I think,” the tall one said. “I think
you hacked a government site to steal
this map.
I think that when we stopped you,
you were on your way to a facility where
the state stashes uranium.”
“What on earth would I want with
that?” He asked. He tried to smile
but no one was smiling.
“Dirty underwear bombs” short man said.
“I bet you're wearing one
as we speak.” Ben swallowed
hard and felt his buttocks contract.



ekphrastic inspired by an ad

Gerald Yelle

There may be happy ponies out there somewhere:
Ponies parents buy for daughters who
cherish them. Ponies with pony holes in
back doors leading to lavish stables.
Ponies with people who love them in other words.
But the one in the ad has none of that.
And it looks so sad when the tall
sleek war horse thunders up with its herd
like a mighty river only to pause
and look down on the pony, snort once
and make it feel puny and ridiculous,
older and shabbier than Sancho Panza's donkey,
then race off and leave the lonely pony
in the flea-bitten dust. If the pony
were a dog it would be a basset hound.
A droopy-eared underdog Eeyore
I'd root for. To hell with war horses.
To hell with that "ride the white pony"
nonsense. And the pony express.
If ponies could express themselves
they'd tell us to get off their backs.
I'd say give 'em to girls. They know
how to treat ponies and ponies need those girls
with their pink ribbons and Rainbow
Brite lunch pails. Girls who know
how to braid ponytails and brush manes
with the same strokes they use
to brush human hair. And maybe a girl like that
won't have a prime-time TV special
but I bet you can find one on demand.



the bright side

RC deWinter

the feel good hucksters are out in force
an army of the anointed
degreed
graduates of questionable online institutions
and fasttalking bullshit artists
with no absolutely no credentials
other than colossal nerve and great PR

ministers
gurus
prophets and priests
psychiatrists and their cousins
the psychologists
therapists
counselors
coaches etc.
all of whom send you to the psychiatrists
when you need pills

and depending on the script
they're all shouting about Jesus
pie in the sky
the ultimate goodness of man
higher consciousness
agape and empathy
generosity and karma
the indestructibility of hope
how all you need is love
or the bible
or the right diet
or courage
or their latest book

or all of that
along with enough money
to keep paying for this fabulous advice
because you really can do anything you want to do
be anyone you want to be as long as you keep at it
and believe and remember winners never quit
and quitters never win



meanwhile in my reality
everything's finally collapsed
i've been wondering how long it would take
and now i can tell you

679 days

not such a long journey really
from ecstasy to wanting to strip the skin off my bones
and let them collapse on the sidewalk
in the basement
grand central station
your kitchen

there's no fix for this
but when the hurt eats holes in my heart
a few slugs of bourbon
do a pretty good job of calming me down

in the meantime the world keeps spinning
though i'm not sure how
i can't believe the dead aren't somehow
tilting the axis and sending it out of round

but hey we're all going to get through this
and be better for it
and if you believe that i have a bridge for sale
cheap



a catalogue of stray observations by a superannuated flâneuse

RC deWinter

Summer's here and the bars are crowded, along with the beaches,
malls and every other place we go to forget the fragility of life
in a world where foolishness masquerades as courage
and we all think we're invincible until the day we wake up dead.

The flags are flying in Tokyo but the Reaper's there too –
moving silent and hungry as he feeds his insatiable appetite,
feasting on the multicolored souls of pilgrims
from 206 countries come to cheer the best and brightest
in a dizzying catalogue of competition celebrating
the triumphs of bodies devoted to human perfectibility.

But, despite years of training and toning, these paragons
of physicality are every bit as vulnerable to mutating pathogens
as I – a silent passenger whose only exercise is taking out the trash,
the autonomy of lungs filling and deflating and trying
not to lose my mind in the clamor of an overcrowded world,
where lies are taken for truth and truth is hidden in dark halls
accessible only to the elite –and even there the legerdemain of liars
with fast hands and full purses colors fact with the gloss of deceit.

90

And now that I've wandered from the stage of the world –
carrying nothing but the nonsense of these stray observations
to the basement that makes it go round – I'll take out the trash,
pour myself a drink, sit down and shut up.



"Serving Western Massachusetts Since 1988"

DAVID G. MINTZ, ESQ.
ATTORNEY & COUNSELOR AT LAW

TEL: 413.586.3700 • FAX: 413.406.3063
DMINTZ@NORTHAMPTONLAW.COM
NORTHAMPTONLAW.COM

17 NEW SOUTH ST., SUITE 204 • NORTHAMPTON, MA 01060



91

face or head
Weining Wang

the third ascension

Richard Wayne Horton

Bogota, May 1976

I. Nothing

We passed an open doorway where music jumped out and bit us. Finally! The record store! I was dizzy from altitude but I smiled and pointed. Elise would talk Spanish for me inside. From the bins I picked "Ayer En El Tango." Perfect. Dripping in 1940s drama and syrup. Back outside we made our way up the hill, passing the entrance to Bogota Chemlab where Elise had worked before she went to get her MS in Austin. Further on there was a vacant lot with a pile of rubbish. Two dogs snarled and shook their heads, both sets of teeth locked on the same dark red something. The feet of trash pickers stepped past them, going up the pile. I would mention these trash pickers to a poet after we got back to Austin. He would answer, "Why did they have babies when they had no life?" I hated this guy! Asshole!

In Bogota the clouds were a face in our face. The cobblestones got steeper and became steps but abruptly we came to a level street. I stopped to get my breath, and take off the "gorro," the light colored bill cap Elise's dad had loaned me, an old man's hat which looked good on a young man. Gorro means sparrow. The sun had come out. Looking back down the hill, I could see a spread of tile roofs catching the glint of steel from above.

From the lower parts of the city came loud horn blasts. Everyone who drove a car or truck in town continually hit the horn, and some of them had bought amplifiers so they could be heard over all the racket.

"When someone does this," said Elise, smiling and looking shiftily to the side while scratching her cheek, "it means watch out. There's a thief. I want to get a scarf in the boutique. Watch to see if anybody does this (scratching her cheek again). She pulled me into a boutique whose sign said "Boutique." A nice but bored young woman leaned on a glass counter, resting on her elbows.

Elise called out, "Hola, 'mana!" and the girl smiled and perked up as Elise gossiped and joked. I looked at Elise, who's short and dark, like her relatives living in the mountains. The counter girl's laugh was soft. Elise's was loud, and she talked fast. I looked at her face. When it frowned, it was a fist. When it smiled, it was the sun. I gave up trying to understand the conversation and just read the gestures and tone. These said Elise was important and had money and a temper too, but was now feeling warm and cordial. So long as no one had thoughts of destroying her good mood. She took my hand and pulled me down an aisle where she positioned me to hide her for a second as she stuffed a scarf into her purse, then she got a second one. She released me and went to choose a small bottle of perfume as the counter girl shouted, "That one! That one! I really like it!" Elise opened it and rubbed some of it on her arm, sniffed it, screwed on the lid and took it to the counter to pay, grandly opening her pocketbook. My cheek itched. I'd scratched it before I remembered what that meant. Oh, shit! But the counter girl never noticed.

The longer version of this story is about ascensions. What is an ascension? It can be the rise of a newly freed spirit into heaven. It can be a walk up a hill or a mountain, toward...what? A better view? Revelation? Transformation? But suppose, while thinking of other possible ascensions, you get mowed down by a hail of bullets?

After Elise had stolen the two silk scarves, and was out on the street standing for a moment in front of the boutique to show that nothing was wrong, she was just waiting. Waiting for that quiet little word she knew was coming from my deluded, sane, fair world.

“Elise...”

“WHO!” she screamed.

“WHO...is a chemist? WHO? WHO? Not you! Who fought her father, fought her brothers, fought her clinging silly sisters and made them her daughters, who...fought her professors and made them bleed? Not you! Do you know... (panting)

“what I do if I ever...”

“find myself on my back bleeding from my orejas, ojos, nariz and bullet holes going in one side of my body and out the other? I get up on my son-of-a-bitch feet and I stand up and...and...I spit onto whoever thought they could stop me! I stomp them till they are nothing! Nothing!” And she screamed, “NOTHING!”

“But Elise, what if...”

Her mouth was in my face. “NOTHING!!!!”

2. A Political Poster

Francisco, my brother-in-law, led me through a hallway to the foyer in back of the Casa De Cultura, where a table held political posters. Men stood around talking and laughing. I noticed most of them wore light colored blazers like Paco. The socialist look maybe?

One poster showed a yellow and grey montage of scenes from the Cuban Revolution arranged in the shape of an eagle. OK. Paco whistled and his friend Geraldo came over smiling. He shook my hand. Paco said, “Show him!” Geraldo checked over his shoulder then opened his sportscoat. There were folded-up posters in the inside pocket, one of which he took out and spread on the table. It was a real beauty. A pretty Chilean girl in early 70s hippy jeans stood smiling in front of the famous stadium later used by Pinochet as a holding pen for poets and guitar players waiting to be disappeared. The caption read, “A Llenar El Estadio Nacional!” I thought I heard someone say, “I’d like to llenar her estadio nacional!”

Five years later, divorced, I would write in my journal, “I still have it. Excuse the tack holes. Shoot me, will ya?”

Now here's my gringo poem about the coup.

Because we hoped in logic,
And were poets
The soldiers easily found us.
But I was different.
I would escape.
I fell into the river like the others,
believing that my plan
would keep the bullet in my back
from meaning death.
I told the blood to wait a moment, por favor,
till I could reach the bank at a certain pre-determined point.
But the river was slow,
Clogged as it was, with excellent plans of escape.
the feeling of urgency passed,
and I accepted some of the things the river was saying.
It unfolded scene after scene, in an ironic pageant,
drenched with life. See? See?
You didn't want this.
Now it's going away.
At sunset I came to a shore
where a priest was pulling out corpses.
We
twisted in the water,
as if trying to get away,
trying to remain atheists.
But he caught us,
his arms full of unexpected strength.
His eyes, though manly, were full of tears.
I tried without success to critique
The Church's eternal compromises and dirty deals
As he laid us on the bank in rows,
where we gazed stupidly at the sky
Docile students for now.
Back to parochial school I guess
as a corpse
The time to speak has come.
But where's my voice?
I must be alive, otherwise
how can I still contemplate resistance?
I'll signal to the priest soon
If the peace that has overtaken my heart
will permit the gesture.

Now what am I going to do with my gringo poem? Maybe show it to David my gay friend when we have coffee, later.

Struggle, struggle.

3. The Third Ascension

By 8:30 in the morning the family had all gathered at the house made of cinder blocks, and Mama made eggs boiled in water with cilantro and green onion and that all-important ingredient – cinders. They were delish.

Everyone put on jackets. It was windy up on Montsarrat. Paco, Hector and I carried the baskets. Dad got mad and yelled when they took the rolled blankets away from him. He said he was still strong and wasn't going to have a heart attack. Mama was holding his arm and, small as she was, she was lifting up on it, trying to support him. He struggled free, waved his arms to make her leave him alone, and walked ahead. At first the roads, dramatically landscaped with tall trees, zig-zagged gently. The sun was out. I looked out over the city which didn't have so much smoke today because everyone was off work. Looking back along the zig-zag I saw families, some with picnic stuff, ascending toward me. Little kids screeched and ran ahead. "Ooy! Dios mio! Where's Dad?" said Elise. Mama waved her hand toward the next bend. Around the bend, Dad was sitting on a rock wall, laboring to breathe. He straightened up when he saw the family coming, and stuck out his chin.

"Finally getting here?" he asked. Mama reached him and clutched onto his arm. "No mas!" she panted, "No mas el heroe!" He gave her a hug and some kisses and she sat on the wall next to him as everyone arrived. They took out water and juice bottles and talked. Make it last. The more of Dad hugging Mom, the better. Hector went and got hugs and kisses from Emilia. He kissed Jorge too, and Jorge reached to be held. Elise got in my arms for lovebird kisses.

"Daddy! Hug me!" demanded Lucia, Paco's shrill-voiced princess. She ran to him, got in his arms, looked back and made a cara fea, an ugly face, at her mom, then turned and hugged her daddy especially hard.

They started out again. I hung back with Mom and Dad. My own heart was having trouble with the altitude. The younger sisters, Nelly, Heena, Dora and Conny, ran ahead so they could look at boys and run wild. The paths and stepways got steeper. I kept pushing my palms downward toward Mom and Dad and saying, "Despasito! Despasito!"

At the old church on top, Hector said, "Paco, go in and pray for us!" But it was Marta, his languid blond wife who went inside. Paco went in after her. Lucia was running somewhere. He went and knelt beside Marta near the statue of El Senor Caido, the Fallen Lord. It showed Christ being taken down from the cross. "Don't tell me anything!" she said. He looked down, formed his hands as if to pray, though atheist, sighed, got up and left..

Elise, I and Hector had found a place on the hillside to put down the blankets. Rock ridges above and below seemed to form a hollow for a picnic, but the wind was still rough and there was going to be sunburn later. I was wearing one of Paco's sweaters under Dad's coat, and trying to find a place to put down my beer bottle so I could get one of the sausages made from tying and stuffing the skins from chicken necks. "Mira!" said Dad, pulling out a wine bottle. Nearby, Paco stood on the ridge looking down toward town with his hands in his pockets. He

looked lonely, with the wind blowing his hair and jacket. Mama caught my attention and patted the blanket in front of her. I went over with my plate and sat down in front of her. I listened to Dad talk while Mama's shortened burned fingers rubbed my back. Elise came and sat next to me, with her arm rubbing against mine as she ate and talked.

Rather soon after we got back to Austin, we broke up. I suppose my Columbian ex family has no use for me these days. I loved them, you saw that, but a breakup is a breakup.



post-existential-crisis crumcake

Scott Ferry

Ingredients

- 2 cups 3 am intestinal borborygmus
- 1/2 cup firmly packed nerve-ashes
- 2 tbsp dried vague longing
- 2 sticks congealed batblood, cut into chunks
- 1 package albino cave worm castings
- 1 broken eggshell
- 1 cup arterial plaque
- 1/4 cup deleted texts, melted
- 1 tsp pure non-healing sucking chest wound music

Instructions

1. Don't turn on the oven.
2. Cry until your hands stop shaking.
3. Pretend you have the above ingredients while posting images on Facebook of severed pigeons and spelunkers slipping into holes.
4. Spread normal white cake batter on xray films, sprinkle with cinnamon.
5. Lie in bed but don't sleep. Don't think about how to not think while not thinking. Turn off your breathing machine.
6. Be a mirror by reflecting so vividly that your present body dissolves.
7. Eat some cherry yogurt. Might as well. The earth is on fire.



how to unmake bird's nest soup

Stephanie Guediri

Snuff out candles and return untouched soup and spoons to the kitchen. Toss birds of paradise in laundry bin. Regraft camellias to shrubs and rehome vase and lacquered tray to cupboard.

Strain *caviar of the east* from porcelain bowls through metal colander. For easier cleaning, run hot water to dissolve fatty coconut milk and rock sugar residue.

Pick out and set aside remaining red dates and ginger bits. These castings can be made into future glazes if stored tightly in glass jars.

Transfer congealed swiftlet's spit to chilled baking sheet. Working by hand, reform it into a half-circle with a deep pocket. Use tweezers to reinsert soot and feathers removed before the soak and boil stage.

The nest will be cool enough for repackaging when it's no longer sticky to the touch.

Return it to the specialty shop from the next county over unless all sales were final. Reflect on repatriation to its cave of origin on a cargo flight lasting three-quarters of a day and one full night.

Wander adjacent strip mall and stop outside the display window of a secondhand book exchange. Reply with *dr's appt* to four voice mails and an all-caps text while browsing titles that would make sense in another time.

This recipe yields 1-2 lives.



Who Has Time For This?

poems by
Michael Favala Goldman

Shop signed books and chapbooks
and translated poetry and prose
17 books at michaelfavalagoldman.com



how it passes through us

Ben Castleman

I couldn't help but be self-conscious, walking up 86th and Columbus, carrying a bag of my dad's shit. I mean, no passerby could see through the bag or know there was a stool sample inside, but still, my head was on a swivel making sure no one got a good look.

My dad was on the way to the hospital, a place he is no stranger to. A couple weeks earlier, they had found he had an extremely low white blood cell count, but couldn't determine the cause. Now, the doctor had ordered more tests – one of which was on the bag of shit I was holding.

I was scared, but my dad's body breaking down was not what I was most afraid of. It was the transfer of responsibility; the fact that I was carrying the load and that he couldn't. I knew whatever they found in his poop, or blood, or body was going to be significant.

Serious medical conditions have harassed my dad his whole life. Growing up, I only got glimpses into this former state of being. Throughout my childhood, he would lift his shirt up, stroke the scar that crosses through his entire torso and yell about how his doctors “cut him open and ripped him apart,” to remove his colon. But this information was roared at me, in a way silly and happy enough to entirely remove any of the associated pain. He remained a fortress of neutral emotions through it all. Never sad, never hurt, never frightened. It's comforting to look to your dad in pretty much any situation and see an unfazed face.

98

Still, he didn't hold back affection. Perhaps the phrase he told me most often was “I love you more than anything else in the whole wide world.” Often followed or preceded by the promise “I'll never let anything bad happen to you.” I figured out slowly that this was an impossible promise to keep. At some point every child, willingly or not, loses their parents' protection. At some point, as a symptom of our own aging, we must grapple with theirs.

I remember the terror of the first time I realized my own dad was getting old. It was almost 10 years ago, which meant I was 17 and my father was 57. We were at the beach and a wave had just crashed on my head. I had tumbled and scratched my back on a rock, and finally, found my way up to safety. I sat on the beach post-crash, looking at the waves that had overpowered me, when my dad came over to talk. I thought he would make sure I was okay and provide the comfort I had grown accustomed to, but he had something else in mind.

“You have to be more careful in the water, Ben. You're getting too big,” he said. “If something happened to you, even if I ran down from my beach chair, I don't know if there is anything I could do. I'm just not strong enough to pull you out anymore. Do you understand?”

The sun beat down on my back as the words washed over me. I didn't understand. I don't think I even responded. I couldn't. I looked at him, and for the first time ever, he looked old. It was terrifying, way more than any ocean could be.

I cried a lot that day. I don't know if he saw it, but I can tell you that he's seen me cry a lot more than I've seen him do it.

I haven't inherited all of my dad's emotional, or rather, unemotional tendencies, but I have, unfortunately inherited a small portion of his intestinal problems. I was recently diagnosed with Irritable Bowel Syndrome-Diarrhea (IBS-D), a chronic disorder affecting the large intestine. The biggest symptom, as you may have guessed, is frequent and often erratic diarrhea.

I think the way my dad and I deal with our poop and the way we deal with our emotions highlight some of our biggest similarities and differences. While we have very common language and rituals around pooping, I haven't come close to the amount of intestinal trauma he's endured. While we project similar amounts of tranquility under a wide range of circumstances, I certainly talk about my emotions more and I let them out more than he does. Maybe it's generational, or maybe it's because he's a dad – my dad – and so far, I've only ever been a child.

Another thing we share is a great difficulty to deal with each other's pain and mortality. In fact, the only time that I can ever remember my dad crying was after one of his friend's sons, a boy roughly my age, was killed in a hit-and-run. The only time I've ever seen him cry is at the thought of losing a child.

Mortality is hard to fathom. I couldn't process it at the beach when I was 17. I'm still having trouble at 27. Carrying a bag of my dad's diarrhea to a medical clinic at 23, it was hard to process too.

Two days later, my dad called my sister and me from the hospital. They had found the cause of the low blood cell count. My dad had been diagnosed with Leukemia, Acute Promyelocytic Leukemia (APL) to be exact: an aggressive type of blood cancer in which you develop too many immature blood cells.

My dad sounded optimistic on the call. He used the word 'lucky' a lot. It was lucky that he had gone to the doctor in the first place, lucky that this kind of Leukemia was the most treatable type there is. "People diagnosed with this kind of leukemia have an 80% survival rate of ten years," he said. This was supposed to be a reassuring statistic.

That figure means that if you jumped 10 years into the future, 80% of the people diagnosed with this type of leukemia would still be alive. For most cancer patients those are great numbers. To me, it sounded more like 'your dad will be lucky if he has 10 years to live and there's a 20% chance he dies much sooner.' It was the starkest reminder of my dad's mortality since that day on the beach.

At some point, I'm going to have to deal with all of this. To learn that I have a better chance of saving myself from the ocean than my dad does. If I've already realized that there's a point when our parents can no longer protect us, our bodies, and our feelings, does that mean that point is already here? Does my dad know? How long has he known that more and more - he's going to be handing off his bags of shit to me?

The good (or bad) thing is, I know where we should look. For my dad and me, most of these answers are in our bodies, and in our intestines, or what's left of them. Because they're changing, because they're aging, and because someday they'll fail.

My dad loves David Byrne. When I was in high school, he took my sister and me to a David Byrne concert and it was the happiest I've ever seen him. He was beaming to the point where, of all of my memories of him, he's best lit in this one. It was the purest display of a single emotion that I've ever seen him show. So, when it was announced that "American Utopia," Byrne's 'rock spectacle,' was going to have a run on Broadway, the whole family knew it would be critical that we go.

As the end of 2019 came around, I was the only one left in the family who hadn't seen Byrne's choreographed concert. My dad, needing to fix this deficiency, bought tickets for December 5th for the two of us. Unfortunately, I shat my pants at the end of October that year and subsequently had my first ever (and so far, only) colonoscopy one day before the concert.

The colonoscopy was simply to confirm that IBS was my worst digestive affliction. If you've never had a colonoscopy before (perhaps because, like me, you are well under the recommended age of 45) let me confirm what the pamphlets say. The preparation is the worst part. The day before the procedure, you purposely force yourself into at least 4 hours of diarrhea. So, when the day of the concert came, my bowels were still firmly in recovery mode. The bright side was, despite how I felt, the inside of my colon looked great and now I had the pictures to prove it.

We had dinner before the show. It wasn't spicy or raw or dairy-filled. There was nothing to indicate that it would be hard to digest, but it was. I got about a block and a half from the restaurant before I had to pop into a hotel to poop. My dad understood. This was not a new drill for the two of us.

100

When I got to the theater, not 15 minutes removed from my first shit, I had to go again. My dad went with me, for a nice little father-son solidarity poop. Unfortunately, the bathroom only had one stall. My dad allowed me to use it.

I made it to my seat by the time the show started, but I knew I wasn't finished with the lingering abdominal and psychological pressures I was feeling. I was accustomed to this pressure; it was the kind that is usually reserved for the dead time before something I'm nervous for – a first date, an improv class, an interview – and I knew it would be a miracle if I made it to the end of the concert without returning to the bathroom. My IBS and I usually have a truce for longer engagements – movies, concerts, flights, road trips – but for *American Utopia* my IBS rudely broke our treaty.

I made it through about six or seven songs before the pressure finally got me out of my seat. I went upstairs and took care of business for the next three songs. When I got back down, the usher asked me to wait until Byrne was done talking before I returned to my seat, but this was too long for my fragile colon and psyche. I rushed down to the basement bathroom for some more stall time.

I finally returned to my seat after five songs total. My dad, clearly concerned, asked if I was okay. He knew I had just had a colonoscopy, he knew I went to the hotel to poop, he knew I went to the bathroom before the show and he knew I had just spent a hefty portion of this concert on the can. I lied and told him I was fine.

For the rest of the concert I just wanted it to be over. You simply can't be present when you know you have to go, and that held true even with a 13-person band in front of me.

I acted as interested and happy as possible. I didn't want to ruin this for my dad.

At one point I actually sat there and thought about whether or not my life would be easier if I had a colostomy bag so that this wouldn't happen to me anymore. A grossly flippant thought, especially considering my dad sitting next to me had previously endured that reality.

Byrne and the band played what might have been his last song and I asked my dad if there was an encore. "No, there's no encore," he said. Thank God. I ran back to the basement stall, but my dad was wrong. I spent the entirety of the encore on the toilet.

When the show was actually over, my dad and I met in the basement. He was visibly concerned. It was warranted.

I tried to put on my best face and deny anything was wrong. "I loved it," I assured him.

"No really, it was amazing. Yeah, I'm fine, I just had to go to the bathroom. Thank you for taking me, that was awesome. Yes, I'm good. Thank you, really I loved it and I'm fine."

We both felt guilty in that moment. I felt like it was my job to convince him that I'd enjoyed the experience he'd been so eager to share with me. My dad felt that it was his fault that I had these bathroom issues in the first place.

My father's guilt, as irrational as it is, was here to stay. He could never give me more fortified genes. But my guilt, from my failure to hide my emotions and shield him from my pain, was something I thought I should be able to control. I vividly remembered how happy David Byrne could make him, how much this could have meant to him, to us. I had failed to protect him. I just hoped I could hide the pain better next time.

My dad had his final bout of ulcerative colitis in early 1988 with the normal symptoms: extreme pain from his gut and about 20 bathroom trips per day. He had battled ulcerative colitis (long lasting inflammation and ulcers in the digestive tract) since high school, but this time was different. This was their final fight. His doctor upped his dosage of steroids once, twice, three times, but they didn't ease the pain. He started getting weaker and weaker and was losing weight fast.

My mom says she knew my dad was really weak because he asked her to drive. When they got to Dr. Weingarten's (my dad's gastroenterologist) office they entered a cloud of smoke. "Hey doc, do you mind putting out the cigarette?" my dad said. The last thing he needed was exposure to his doctor's chain-smoking but it was the 80s, so that's what he got. Within a minute or two he was violently ill. They all agreed it was time for him to go to the hospital.

When my dad arrived at Beth Israel Hospital, he looked weak, skinny, and by my mom's description 'what you would look like if you had nonstop diarrhea for three weeks.' His doctors

started pumping him with more prednisone (the medical name for the steroids he was taking), hoping that the extra doses would help fight off the colitis. They didn't.

My dad continued to get worse and, on top of the pain, he started to suffer from prednisone's worst and most prevalent side effect: a steroid-induced psychosis. My dad recalled being so hopped up on prednisone years earlier when he took the bar exam that he had no memories whatsoever of the two-day test that would admit or deny him from his chosen profession. Now, he was on much more prednisone than that and, accordingly, the effects were much worse. His closest work friend, Hillary, immediately burst into tears after hanging up from a phone call with him. She would later say he sounded so drugged on the call, she didn't even recognize him. At the worst of his psychosis, my dad would imagine his sanity dangling by a thread and worry that if the thread broke he may never get his sanity back.

When his mental state was stable, he worried that all the bleeding meant he had colon cancer. Eventually, Dr. Weingarten ordered a colonoscopy. It was about time. When the results came back my dad called my mom to say "I have good news and bad news. The good news is, I don't have colon cancer. The bad news is my colon is smothered by ulcers. It's beyond repair. They're going to have to take it out."

Dr. Weingarten recommended that my Dad switch hospitals, from Beth Israel to Mount Sinai. They had just perfected a new procedure at Mount Sinai called J Pouch surgery where they could remove your colon and replace it with part of your small intestine. Unfortunately, there was a catch. Dr. Weingarten had overlooked my dad's pain for so long, he had possibly committed malpractice. To save his own ass, Dr. Weingarten would have to say on the record that my dad was not strong enough to transfer hospitals. My dad was asked to sign a statement saying he was defying Dr. W's orders and that Dr. W wasn't liable for what happened to him. Some would've sued Dr. Weingarten for this, but my dad didn't for the same reason he went to him in the first place, he was a friend of his cousin's.

The first thing they did at Mount Sinai was give my dad phenobarbital, a narcotic that would treat the psychotic side effects of his steroid use. This made him feel a lot better, but he was still incredibly weak. His normal weight in those years was around 155 pounds, and in the last few months he had dropped to 120. Soon they dropped a feeding tube directly into his carotid artery and started feeding him what they called 'liquid nutrition,' a concoction that was supposed to eventually make him strong enough for surgery. My dad's oral diet was reduced to ice chips and lemon-flavored glycerin sticks. Yum.

He was placed in one of Mount Sinai's oldest halls with three other patients and no bathroom. In fact, the bathroom for the entire gastrointestinal hall was at the end of the hallway. As you can imagine, nearly all of the patients in the gastrointestinal ward were using the bathroom many times a day, so these patients would often have to wait in line. A difficult feat for anyone, let alone someone with a failing colon.

The colonoscopy that Dr. Weingarten performed showed that my dad's colon was so ulcerated it was in danger of bursting. Needless to say, your colon bursting is a very bad thing. Essentially, since your colon is full of shit, if it bursts, the feces go all over the place, and human waste is

not supposed to be in your abdominal cavity. This type of infection is called peritonitis and it's often deadly. In my father's condition, it almost certainly would have been.

The J-Pouch surgery would be a three-part process as this was all my dad's body could handle. First, in February, they'd remove his colon and attach an ileostomy bag. Then in June they'd create the J-Pouch, and finally in September they'd attach the J-pouch to his intestinal system. At the end he'd be left with a 6-inch portion of his small intestine ballooned into a j-like shape that hopefully would act as a makeshift colon for the rest of his life. Even without a hitch, he wouldn't spend more than a couple months out of the hospital for the entire year.

The window of opportunity closed in on my dad quickly and the doctors had to be careful to pick the exact right time to start the surgery. Though my father had been in Mount Sinai for a couple of weeks, he hadn't gotten significantly stronger. If they operated too soon, before his strength built, he would die on the table. If they waited too long, for him to get stronger, his colon would burst. My dad asked the doctors how they would know when the colon was close to bursting. They answered with a hard truth. "When the morphine is no longer able to relieve the pain, that's when we'll have to operate."

The pain continued to worsen. Every day my dad would ask "When are we going to do this?" and every time he asked, his doctors would say they were going to wait another day.

Eventually, they gave a different answer. "We think it's time. We've scheduled you for first thing tomorrow morning."

That evening, an orderly came in to dry shave my dad's chest and stomach, from his Adam's apple to his pubic bone. It took a while; he's a hairy guy. The incision would span the entire shaved area, basically, my dad's entire torso.

Between 5 and 6 a.m. the next morning, orderlies came in to put my dad on a gurney. They wheeled him to just outside of the operating room and left him there for what would be the most painful 20 minutes of his life. He was cold, shaved, and shivering and his doctors hadn't lied. They didn't have to guess when the colon was close to bursting, my dad's pain would tell them. His internal conversation was just the thought "I can't take this anymore" over and over, interrupted only by the grave realization "I would rather die than go through 20 more minutes of this feeling."

Eventually – finally – he was wheeled into the operating room. An anesthesiologist put him under. Surgeons operated on him for four hours and then he woke up.

He looked down. His entire chest was taped together and there were two drains coming out of his abs. He was in pain from where they cut him open but it was a huge relief compared to the pain he felt before. After almost two decades, he was finally free from colon pain, forever. Doctors and nurses came in throughout the day to congratulate him on a successful surgery. They got the colon out just in time.

The next day the Chief Surgical resident was on rounds with other residents and interns. Most of the residents and interns knew my dad because most days he would give his own reports.

“They say the same fucking thing every day,” he would say. “I can do that.”

This day was different. When the Chief Surgical Resident came around, he saw my dad and said “This is Mr. Castleman. We almost lost him yesterday.” Learning he was that close to death was alarming on its own, but learning it at the same time as a group of medical interns was even more unsettling.

On a brighter note, the next two surgeries would be successful too. My parents, who had started dating about half a year before the first surgery, were no doubt a lot closer by the third.

When the year started, my mom barely knew my dad’s family, but during his time in the hospital she became the point of contact for anyone – parents, brothers, friends – looking for an update or a visit. In April of 1989, a little over a year after the first surgery, my parents got married.

Following surgery number three, my dad received a visit from his Uncle Leonard. Leonard, a doctor himself presented a prescient question: “are you ready for a lifetime of diarrhea?” he asked.

“I don’t know about that.” My dad responded. “The doctors told me, on average, my poop would be about a toothpaste consistency.”

“Well, bring your doctors back in here and this time ask them not to lie,” Uncle Leonard said.

104 My dad brought it up with his doctors and they said there was no way of knowing for sure. Time would tell that Uncle Leonard was right. My dad had a lifetime of diarrhea ahead of him.

My dad crept in, sheepishly, to the café in our hotel in Rome. I could immediately tell that something was wrong.

He made one round of the buffet before coming back to the table. As he sat down, he realized he hadn’t gotten enough food. He could have just gotten back up for more, but he didn’t. He looked weak. Not just tired from the ‘new normal’ of post-cancer life, but especially so.

He and I left the café before my sister and mom. He gave me a half-hug in the elevator. We hug a lot, but not usually post-breakfast.

As we started down the hallway, there was a growing disconnect between us. “Are you going to have your room serviced or put out the do-not-disturb sign?” my dad asked me.

“I think we’re going to have it serviced,” I said, confused, as I stopped walking. “Why wouldn’t we? What are you gonna do?”

My dad stopped walking too. He looked at me briefly, before turning away. “Well, I had an accident last night, so I was wondering whether or not to have the cleaning staff deal with that.”

“What type of accident?”

“#2” he replied. I didn’t really have to ask.

“Well you have to have them come then, right?”

“Yes, I suppose I do. I’ll just give them a big tip.”

Before going back to my room, I made sure my dad was alright. He was tired and weak from a 9-hour plane ride and had taken multiple drugs to go to sleep. I’m not sure if any of that was the reason for his accident, but it didn’t help.

He didn’t want to talk about it much more, but he had clearly wanted to mention it. He didn’t actually care about whether or not we wanted our room serviced. He asked because he didn’t know how to bring up what he really wanted to talk about.

I assume my dad has had plenty of these situations in his life. I mean, and I can’t stress this enough, the man doesn’t have a colon. I just didn’t know he was as clueless as I was when it came to these types of situations, and I didn’t enjoy learning that either.

I’ve rarely been confronted with my dad’s accidents, but at this age it made more sense to share this problem with me than to hide it. The reason he told me, was the same reason it stung. This time I knew how he felt.

I knew this was a sign of more than just my dad’s age. Less than 2 months removed from the night I shat my pants, I could relate and identify what he was feeling. He was overcome by a special type of weakness: the weakness of not knowing whether your body is going to fail, not knowing whether or not you will be left cleaning up a spill of a drink you never ordered, or in this case, maybe worse, having someone else clean it up.

My dad was contemplating that very situation. The answer might seem obvious, but this weakness is not a rational one. It wants you to be the only one that knows what you’ve done. It suggests maybe you should carry everything all by yourself. Maybe it’s your fault you’re in this predicament and maybe you and you alone deserve the consequences. Even if this particular consequence, as it was not our last night in Rome, was literally lying in your own shit.

I’m glad he had someone to talk about it with. I just wish I was better equipped to respond and reassure. I needed more practice dealing with faltering bodies. Both his and mine.

I went to my room, with my own share of the debilitating weakness that my dad was shouldering. I opened up this document to try and write this passage, but I was too weak.

12 years after his first surgery and six after I was born, my dad woke up from his sixth colon related surgery. The surgery was successful and ushered in a new era; a new normal that he’s lived with basically the entire time I’ve known him.

So, what is “normal” for my dad?

In essence, normal means pooping about 6 to 10 times a day with a little under half of those trips being diarrhea. I have been diagnosed with a condition (IBS-D) that has diarrhea in its very name, and I still can’t imagine having the amount of diarrhea he has.

His close family and friends are well aware of his condition. His immediate family knows the exact smell of his rather stinky shits. Even his coworkers know a little. For my dad’s 40th birthday, some of his coworkers from the District Attorney’s office, where he worked, made him a diorama of a figurine version of him sitting on the toilet with magazines, a mountain of toilet paper, and a sign that says “home sweet home” above him. It’s still displayed proudly in my parent’s bedroom.

For a lot of people, diarrhea is a day-ruiner. I have tried to imagine what it would be like to have six inches of your small intestine chugging away, desperately pretending to be a colon. I’ve tried to imagine having diarrhea every day. But as much as we can empathize, there is a limit to knowing other people’s struggles, no matter how close we are to them.

Maybe a month after I carried a bag of my dad’s shit across 86th and Columbus to a medical clinic and about two weeks after he started receiving chemotherapy, I still hadn’t internalized what the chemo was doing to his body. One night, when my mom, my sister and I got to my dad’s hospital room he was already wincing in pain. Through the entire visit, we had to watch him break in and out of conversation as the pain became too severe to be overcome by our company. The chemo treatment he was receiving was literally called ‘arsenic.’ They were pumping poison into his arm to battle his cancerous blood cells and this battle was playing out plainly on his face.

My dad wasn’t showing his age or battling through weakness, he was under attack. Still, while I was in the room I suppressed all emotion from my face. I didn’t show that this was getting to me at all. And then, the second we were in the hallway I broke down, sobbing.

In retrospect, this was me exhibiting strength as taught by my dad. I hid my emotions so that my dad, with literal poison running through his veins, could look to me and see a face unfazed. He could look at me and have hope that everything was going to be alright. With him and with us.

My dad shed his cancer, just as he shed his diseased colon 30 years earlier. The pain that he endured to overcome those struggles is unimaginable to me and hopefully it will stay that way. But more than that, these battles have altered his body dramatically and for good.

And yet, he never remarks on these changes or these triumphs as such big feats. He has gone through so many new normals that he doesn’t even remark on how mammoth the things he’s lived through are. It’s almost as if, in his eyes, the new normals of his body, even living without a colon, don’t make him different, they make him human.

In his own words: “This is my life, there’s no getting around it. This is just one of the indignities of being Dan Castleman. Everyone’s got something... In a way it’s the same attitude I had about having cancer. Alright, I didn’t ask for this, it’s not good news, but let’s get on with it.”

"I do confess to a couple of moments of 'why me,' but at the end of the day it doesn't much matter why. It matters that you have a disease and you're either going to let it dominate the rest of your life or you're going to get on with it. I got to live 33 years [without a colon,] I got to have two beautiful children and a beautiful wife... I'm grateful to be alive."

While I think this is a remarkable outlook, as someone whose role in taking care of my dad's body is ever-increasing, I know that it's a bit cavalier. As someone who deals with diarrhea as much as I do, I can assure you that my dad's normal is anything but.

I'm grateful for all my dad has taught me about strength, but I also recognize that it's not his job to be strong for both of us anymore. And while we won't be able to stop our roles from reversing, I'm realizing, it's not my job to be strong for both of us either. At least, not yet.

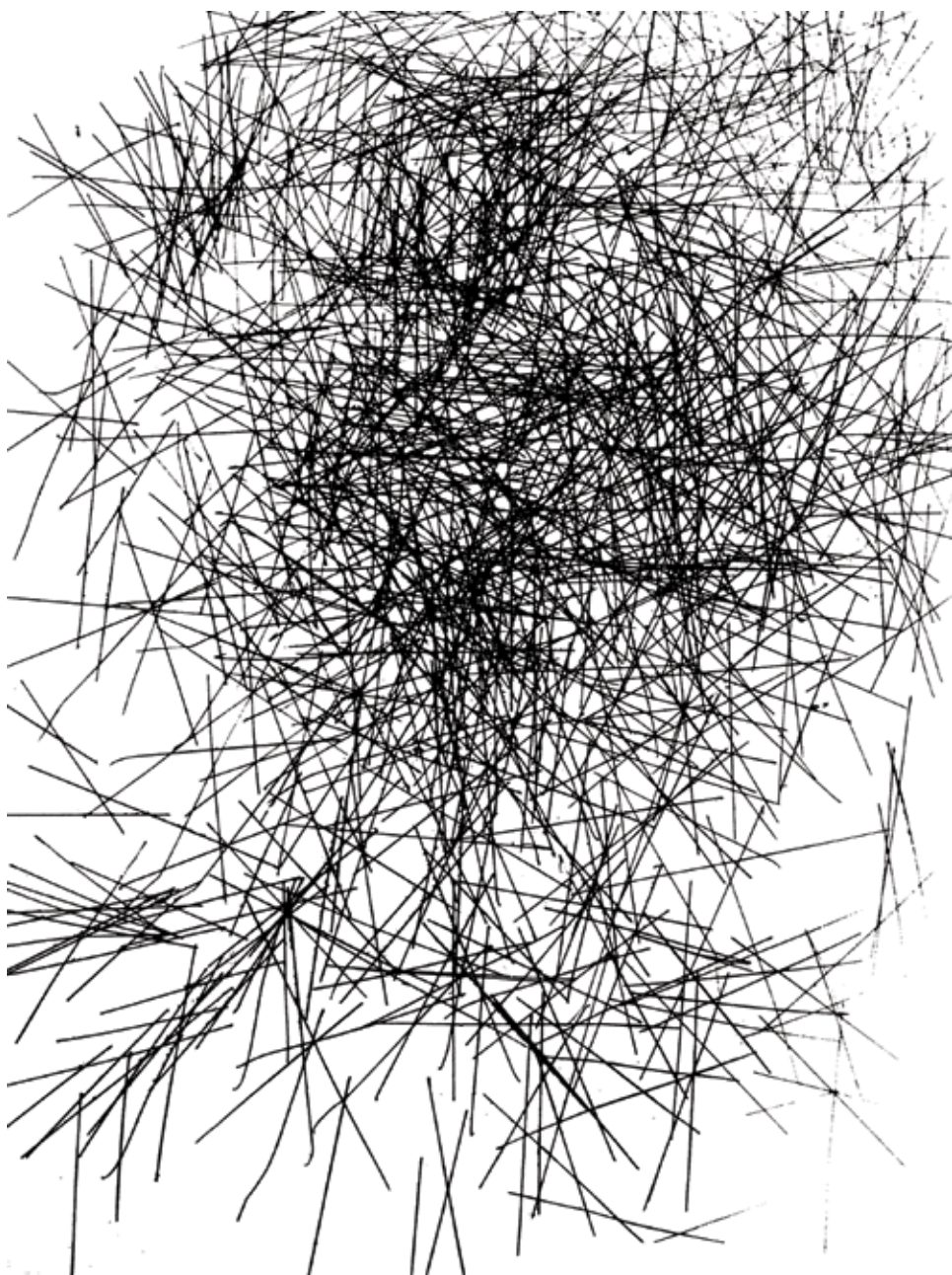
What my dad and I share, is that on most days, our primary physical concern is how and when our waste will pass through us, but we are not the same. He escaped a nearly exploded colon, I get diarrhea when I'm nervous. He survived cancer, and I survive the occasional shit filled night in Brooklyn. This is not to diminish any of these things. It is scary, at 27 years old, to be thinking about your dad's body failing. It's scary at 27 years old, to be thinking about the failures of your own. But it's scary at 67 also. My dad and I are not obligated to wrestle over who should carry full responsibility of our changing bodies. Sure, it's daunting to start thinking about the responsibility of caring for my dad's body, but it was daunting for him to be responsible for mine as well. It's daunting to be a parent just as it's daunting to be a child.

Maybe it doesn't have to be a sad realization. Maybe it's a blessing, that we have a time period, however long, where the joint responsibility of our bodies is something we can share. And hopefully, when my dad or my next accident comes, we'll have an easier time turning to each other. Sharing can allow us to no longer deal with this shit alone.

I asked my dad, how he feels about sharing his story more openly. Would it have helped him to talk about poop more, with more people, as he struggled with it so mightily? And, I asked him a question that I hope to ask him more, which was simply, how are you doing (in *that* department)?

He replied, "Recently, I've actually had a number of solid turds. It's been nice, but that's not the kind of detail anyone wants to hear. I don't discuss the consistency of my poop, just the frequency, and only with those who need to know." I'm glad he shared. I'm grateful to be one of the people who needs to know.





face 2
Weining Wang

in plain view

Kate Becker

Federal Marshals showed up at their townhouse on a Tuesday evening in White Plains, NY, and told Mark and Janelle MacIntyre they had twenty minutes to mull it over. The decision was easy. Becoming someone else took less time than Mark could have imagined. When Mark cast a glance in Janelle's direction, he watched her nod in what he assumed was resignation. Janelle was a planner, and Mark had goosebumps unable to imagine she was comfortable with the processes' rapidity. The DA had explained a few days earlier about joining the Witness Protection Program, but failed to mention that departing their old life and apartment would occur as a surgical strike. With a quick farewell to their parents, the Marshals whisked Mark and Janelle away in a blacked-out limo in the darkness. Carrying nothing to identify them, they entered the building as Mark and Janelle MacIntyre, and exited, again in the dark, as Jeremy and Tracy Johnston.

Jeremy and Tracy did not fit the prototype of the usual Witness Protection Program clients. They were not blowing the whistle on organized crime, a gang, or an illicit organization of any type. Tracy, a part-time bookkeeper discovered a \$22M financial discrepancy. Her former boss, whom it turns out embezzled the money from the company, had hidden it in offshore accounts, and presumably acted on his own. Upon discovering the issue, Tracy confronted him; he denied the claim; she talked to the higher ups, and her boss took to wearing orange jumpsuits. He expressed his view of the situation by hiring a hitman.

Jeremy found little to question about the need to enter the program, but requested more details about the logistics. What he discovered was that the Federal Marshals were not the most communicative and released information in short and as-needed bursts. Many questions went unheeded, and Jeremy resolved it might not be as difficult as he anticipated. As long as it was short-term protection, it struck him as prudent to join the program. They discussed the situation, but Jeremy made the final decision when Tracy reduced to tears with her head resting on her crossed arms at the kitchen table.

After a few rounds of tears and a couple of laughs at the absurdity of what was happening, they rationalized their situation to be a blend of *The Godfather* and *Married to the Mob*. The potential longevity of it did not occur to either of them. And with the possibility of a hitman on their tails, both the Marshals and they agreed staying alive was a better option. The Witness Protection Program offered the only viable solution. People do this all the time swirled in Jeremy's mind as he filled the small gym bag with a few Marshal approved items (toiletries and an extra set of clothing).

Jeremy listened intently as the Federal Marshals told Tracy to stop dying her hair platinum blonde, dye it another color, crop it short or wear a wig until it grew out. Jeremy handed Tracy a tissue when an extra-large droplet rounded over her right cheek. She chose a brown wig from a set of styrofoam body-less manikins. The brown wig, close to what he remembered from when they first met, was probably what she recalled as her natural color. When the order of no more wearing blue eye shadow, Tracy's signature mark, abruptly came out of the only female member of the Marshal group, Jeremy handed Tracy a wad of tissues. She dabbed at the

translucent streaks of powdery, light blue mingled with black clumps. In empathy, he sniffled, to hold back his own flow.

Jeremy's drastic change came about when his lip emerged after being obscured with a thick mustache since high school graduation. For him a shock, for Tracy a welcome surprise judging by her wide grin. His hair, already receding, remained intact. They updated his eyeglass choice with a more modern black Horn-rimmed frame. From shoes to shirts, birth certificates, and a new marriage license, Jeremy and Tracy would start over. Twenty years of marriage became twenty-two. They could join the local Congregational church, but not continue at the Presbyterian one. Bank accounts, new debit cards, credit cards, and AAA cards with their new names were in brand new wallets; matching his and hers. No children made for less complexity. Tracy practiced signing her name over and over in the windowless building. She expressed her fear of slipping up and using her old name, or as she phrased it, her real name. Jeremy did not bother.

The time between the exodus from their home and the trip to Maine was four days. Escorted, once again by two men attired in black, this time much further away from town, Jeremy tried to hide his angst by pressing his palms against his thighs. Tracy rubbed her palms facing flat against one another repetitively. A Manila envelope, between them on the back seat of the limo, contained the keys to two tiny cars awaiting them in a vacant parking lot. The envelope held vital documents and pre-programmed new cellphones with an address for the GPS. A note scrawled on the outside of the envelope stated they were not to contact anyone, and that someone would check in on them. The limo came to an abrupt stop. The motor stopped whirring. Jeremy and Tracy looked at one another, simultaneously raised their eyebrows as nothing more was happening, and pulled on the door handles. They exited on opposite sides of the dark vehicle. No one opened a door from the front section of the large car.

Jeremy and Tracy departed New York with no sendoff, only the knowledge that an unannounced visit from the Marshals would occur soon. Soon undefined.

Equipped with the address and the instruction of looking for a newish mailbox next to a rundown house, they left in the dark, spent the day in a roadside motel, and departed again after dusk. The vague directions were to turn right down a long, dirt road when they saw the red mailbox. At the road's end they would find their new residence situated deep in the woods, and it was far enough in that no one would see them arrive or unpack. The red mailbox appeared as Jeremy rounded a curve. Still dark, at about 2:00, Jeremy flashed his lights, indicating to Tracy they had arrived. He turned onto the bumpy road. Jeremy sighed when he saw the two tiny white bouncing lights in his rearview mirror. The narrow, pitted road, caused the headlights of both brand-new Chevy Sparks to aim at varying points on the pine trees lining the road.

Jeremy heard Tracy's car skid. Her headlights disappeared from his rearview mirror, but he could see her silhouette in the driver's seat of her car when he braked short in front of her. And without warning. Shifting his view from the mirror to straight ahead, Jeremy peered through his windshield at a huge tree laying sideways, blocking the road. He got out of the car, walked in front of it, and pushed against the tree with both hands. Tracy's engine died down, her car door squeaked, and her footsteps crunched on the gravel as she approached him.

"Now what? You're gonna roll it out of the way?" she asked.

Without turning around, he shrugged his shoulders and pushed his glasses up.

"Puh," Jeremy sighed. "I guess back up. It's a dead end as far as I can tell," he said peering back into the blackness, "and maybe they meant the house *with* the mailbox." He mulled it over for a moment before running his hand over the top of his head. He turned to face Tracy, "Pull in behind so no one sees the cars."

"This is what we left New York for?" asked Tracy. Jeremy gulped at the sadness he sensed in her voice. A rumble of mixed responsibility and regret pinged in his gut. The assurance that they had done the right thing did not resonate for him as he stood in between the tree and the car.

"Yup, yup," said Jeremy, looking back at the tree. He shook his head apologetically, sensing that his tone was anything but reassuring.

They got back into their respective cars. Jeremy waited until he heard Tracy's gears grind into reverse. Without enough space to turn around, they both backed up the half mile or so they had driven in. Jeremy rubbed the back of his neck as they pulled beside one another behind the shack. Several pairs of green reflective eyes, about a foot or two up from the ground passed in the headlights of the two cars. Jeremy lowered his passenger side window and motioned for Tracy to do likewise. He then told her to wait for him to return. She gave a thumbs up and turned off the motor.

When Jeremy returned from his tour around the house, he looked at Tracy, who rested her head on her knuckles. Her fingers looked pale against the dark steering wheel in the moonlight. She must have heard him approaching because she lifted her head, and looked straight at him. Motionless, she stared at him. He stood outside the driver's door and waited for her to roll the window down.

"Well, now what?" she asked. He prayed his answer would resolve in a peaceful resolution where they would sleep that evening.

He crossed his arms and bent down to her level.

"Well, what?" she glared up at him.

"I am not sure, but there are a few little creatures around, and rather than sleep with them, I think we are sleeping rough in the car tonight, dear," he thought better of having added the dear, but by then it was free from his mouth.

"Maybe you are, but I'd rather go into town and find a hotel. Clean sheets. Hot shower." Tracy stated.

He interpreted her answer as aggravating rather than endearing at 2:00 a.m.

“Duly noted, but no,” said Jeremy. “If you recall anything from the last couple of days, we are not to do anything that will draw attention.” He put a heavy emphasis on the word ‘not,’ and stood up.

“You think staying in this dump is not drawing attention?” She cocked her head slightly to peer out the car window and tilt her head upwards at him.

“We’re not staying in there. We’re sleeping in the car,” he stated, but refrained from adding this is where they may end up because he did not know how he would remove that tree.

“Hmm,” muttered Tracy. The conversation ended.

Jeremy stood back as she pushed the car door open. She got out of the car, put her hands into her pockets, and tapped her foot. Jeremy raised one eyebrow and left her to stew. While he pretended to ignore her, although he could clearly hear her deep sighs, Jeremy rearranged some things in the back of his car for them to put the seats down and sleep, as no other option seemed readily available. Tracy got into the passenger seat. Jeremy closed her door and walked around to the driver’s side.

“I’m sorry,” said Tracy. Jeremy patted her thigh, the fabric of her jeans chilling his hand. He rubbed it back and forth in a comforting motion. It would only be one night and they could figure it out in the morning. With the seats pushed back as far back as they would go, they curled up with their feet under the dashboard and coats pulled up to their chins.

112

The sun crept up early on the horizon and woke Jeremy. Tracy snored lightly. He tried to stretch, but the gas pedal and break prevented him from moving too much. In the attempt to open the door without waking his wife, he slowly lifted the handle and pushed. He missed the morning clangs of garbage trucks crunching refuse they had picked up along their city street. He gave a little snort-like laugh at the thought of missing something that most mornings aggravated him. Dew had settled everywhere, and the sun glistened on little spider webs nestled between the tall grasses and trees behind the ramshackle house. Darkness had cloaked where they parked, but in the daylight Jeremy discovered it rather exposed, and since it sat on a curve, allowed passersby to see directly to where the two cars sat in tandem. Jeremy’s heart crept into his throat upon the realization that people had already driven by. He assured himself they would not make any other shortsighted mistakes.

The house was small. The primary descriptor that came to Jeremy was shack. Shack. Mouse. Raccoon. Squirrel. Shack. But it was accessible, and until they could get down that blocked road, they needed a roof over their heads. A wave of regret passed through him. Jeremy pictured himself sitting at his rolltop desk, signing the renewal lease on their apartment in White Plains. The night the Marshals appeared, they were barely six months in on the three years of stabilized rent.

Jeremy checked on Tracy before he traipsed around the house. He did not fear the wildlife, as he had on his first inspection of the premises. Tracy’s head remained crooked to the side, so he figured he had a few minutes to investigate. Other than the windows, which were covered with plywood, it looked pretty dilapidated. Most of the plywood looked intact, but the house, being

near the ocean, and open to the elements, had a good number of shingles that warped outwards on the corners, hung askew, or lay scattered around the perimeter. Several cracked bricks lay crumbled on the ground a few feet away from the chimney's base. Jeremy's mesh running shoes dampened while he walked through the uncut grass. The moisture seeped through the socks to his feet. Although the sun had removed the morning chill, the cold crept through him. He rounded the corner to the front where he found a red "S" and a white "e" clinging on rusted nails above the door. Gaps in the lettering gave the impression that more may have once hung there.

"Jeremy, Jeremy," pierced the silence. He sprinted back to the cars. Tracy stood next to the car. Other than a appearing a bit disheveled, she looked fine.

"What the hell, I thought you were being killed by a bear or something, Janelle," said Jeremy, huffing. He bent at the waist and rested his hands on his knees to catch his breath.

"Don't swear at me, and don't call me Janelle anymore," she retorted.

"Yeah, right. Let's go check out the tree, this place is a dump." Prior to regaining his stance, he bent down to retie his shoe that had loosened on the jaunt back to rescue her.

"Walk or attempt to drive down again?" Tracy asked.

"Walk, too much of a pain without a turnaround," Jeremy said. He opened the driver's side door, removed his keys from the ignition, and pressed the lock button on the fob. "Where are your keys?" Tracy pointed at the other car. "Get them please," he requested.

"Who is going to come and steal the cars? Are you for real?" She folded her arms and shifted her weight. Exasperated and hungry, Jeremy pointed at the car again. He bent his head to the right towards his shoulder. Something in his neck *popped*, and he lowered his shoulders.

They headed down the gravel drive to inspect what they could not thoroughly assess in the middle of the night. Other than an occasional animal noise, self-muttering, swearing, and the crunching of small sandy pebbles, the walk was silent. As they got closer to the tree, they could see that it had not severed entirely from the base. White, hardened sap had dripped and dried over the mottled bark at the split. Top-heavy, the tree flattened smaller trees in its way.

"Shit." Jeremy muttered. Tracy echoed the word. Neither of them had ever attempted full lumber removal, and this did not seem like the project to start with.

"We can't get someone to come here, we're supposed to slip in quietly and become normal people again. Normal other people, whatever," stated Tracy. The reality of the reminder stung Jeremy.

"Yes, well, I'm not sure that's entirely possible." Jeremy replied to the statement. "We can't move this ourselves."

"What do we do? Stay in the other place until the Marshals come to check on us?" asked Tracy.

“No, but...” Sensing a fight, Jeremy trailed off, not wanting to further engage.

“What do you mean no, then where are we going to go? I’m wearing a wig,” said Tracy, tugging at the thing on top of her head. Jeremy was pretty sure the thing sat with the bangs hanging lower than they should have, but he refrained from saying anything. He knew the wig solution, meant to hide the color while her hair grew out, still upset her. For now, the platinum remained hidden. Jeremy thought dying it might be better, but if it had been him, he would have shaved his head totally. He gave a little snort to stifle the giggle at the thought of Tracy bald. She did not look at him, so perhaps she missed his nasally utterance.

When they got back the shack, they watched the cars rounding the bend with the clear view of the two brightly colored cars parked in the driveway. They looked at each other, eyes wider open than normal.

“When you yelled, I thought you were being attacked. I was not thinking about moving the cars,” he said, handing Tracy the keys to her Spark.

“And where, pray tell shall we park them?” asked Tracy. Jeremy found her tone terse, but ignored it.

“Can we move one further back? The other one we can take one to town to get something to eat, no need for both.” Jeremy kicked at a few branches in front of the car.

“What do we do if someone asks who we are, I mean if they saw us,” asked Tracy.

“We tell them we are the new owners, which we are,” said Jeremy.

“Not really, we’re supposed to be the new owners of the house we can’t get down to,” corrected Tracy.

“Whatever.” Jeremy replied, the words pushing out with a loud exhale followed by a gaping yawn. “Let’s check this out, so we can get some supplies. There must be a Home Depot or Lowe’s.”

Tracy mocked his response by mimicking the adult voices in a Peanuts animation and rolling her eyes.

“Cute. Let’s look inside first,” said Jeremy. Tracy gave him a double thumbs up.

Determined to investigate the shack as it was what they would have to make do with in the short term, they ignored the gawkers, and removed the plywood from the only door which was on the front of the house. After getting past the smell of dead mice, a variety of animal excrement and mildew, Tracy stood in the middle of what must have been a living room, and broke into wails with full body sobs. Jeremy left her to her cry and creaked through the house, hoping to not fall through somewhere once he reached the second floor. He felt sorry for her, actually felt sorry for them; the uprooting was not in the plans when he pushed her to go through with reporting her boss. Regretting he had told her to do the right thing, Jeremy

returned to Tracy and wrapped his arms around her. Tracy, in return, wiped her nose along the chest of his windbreaker. Yuck, he whispered inside, and looked down at the wet streak on the left side of his blue jacket.

The town, like many New England towns, centered on a small green with a gazebo decorated with a few flags and war memorials, a nearby small graveyard with some broken headstones, and a smattering of newer thick granite ones. Jeremy pointed out the Post Office. They would need to arrange a PO Box rather than have mail come to the house. Further down, rows of small stores, a movie theater, and a few restaurants lined the main street. One had an "OPEN" sign flapping against the building. It looked like the only choice this early in the day. They pulled into a spot in front of the store, got out, and stretched. Lack of showers and toothbrushes, on top of feeling unkempt, they laughed at their disheveled state and commented this never would have happened in New York. Tracy gave a bellowing laugh. Jeremy smiled and looked down at the dried streak on his jacket.

Jeremy grabbed the handle and held the door open. Looking around for an empty booth, they headed to the back of the room, sniffing the scents of bacon, pancakes, and coffee. Heads turned as they made their way to a booth. Tracy veered off to the restroom, and Jeremy slid into the banquette. Tracy reappeared with a dewy face and damp hair around her forehead.

A waitress with a steaming coffee carafe and two menus came to the table. She poured the coffee without asking and placed the menus facedown at the table's edge.

"When did you arrive? Middle of the night?" asked the waitress. Several of the people seated nearby laughed. "Did you really spend the night in the 'Se' house?"

"The sea, like ocean house?" asked Jeremy.

"You know the big S, little e house." The waitress wrote the letters with her finger in the air.

"Oh," said Tracy. "Yes, no, we slept in the car." Jeremy tapped Tracy's foot under the table. She sat up straight.

The Federal Marshals explained how small-town life differed from New York, and quickly blending in was of utmost importance. But Jeremy and Tracy did not expect the gossip chain's speed. It had not even been eight hours since they turned into the blocked driveway.

In hushed voices, they talked over the severity of what leaving their old lives behind meant, the reality of it all settling in. They said 'shit' in unison and shook their heads. A deep inhale whistled through both of their noses when the steaming plates hit the table. No words passed between them while they gulped down breakfast. Jeremy pulled a few crisp bills from his pocket, left too much of a tip, and they headed to Home Depot.

When they pulled into the parking lot, it relieved them to see it looked exactly like every other Home Depot. They parked in a spot halfway between the entrance and exit, exactly how they

Q:
R U
AFRAID?



ALWAYS
BE
AFRAID?

YES



YES

YOU'LL LIVE

BUT

MAKE
YOUR
BED

DON'T
HIT
SNOOZE

RE
HY
DRATE

DON'T
MAKE
WISHES

YOU GET ANOTHER CHANCE

r u afraid?
Doug McNamara

parked at home. Jeremy eyed the small tractors and grills lined up by the entrance. And when the front doors parted, Tracy pulled a cart free from the interconnected ones.

“It’s so nice the box stores are all laid out the same,” Tracy said as they meandered down the aisles.

“Since we’ve changed every other damned thing about our lives, it’s great we can seek comfort in what’s familiar,” Jeremy responded, keeping his voice low but tone sharp.

Tracy sneered back at him. He gave her the finger.

Jeremy searched for chainsaws while Tracy looked at cleaning supplies. They brought the saw, some sponges and multi-purpose cleaner out to the car, returned the cart and rethought the need for animal traps to remove other tenants of the shack.

Jeremy went in alone. At the checkout counter, when the screen with his name came up, he signed Mark and got as far as three letters into his last name before realizing he was no longer that person. He clicked the *do not accept signature* button, waited for the sales clerk to void his transaction, and started over, this time looking at his new credit card when he signed his name, checking to make sure it was the other him and not the old one. He has a flash of Tracy signing her name over and over like a teenager on the lined paper in the windowless identity change building.

With the chainsaw and a topped-off gasoline canister in the back of the car, Jeremy and Tracy drove down the hill. He stopped the car about twenty-five feet shy of the downed tree. Jeremy pulled hard on the handbrake. Got out, but did not remove the chainsaw from the back. Tracy remained in the car. In daylight and able to assess the tree’s formidable size, he walked up to the tree and knocked on it. Some sap stick to the middle finger knuckle; he wiped it on his pants, which made the sap spread to the flanking fingers. Instead of knock-knock like a door knocking would return, the sound was a non-echoing diminutive thud. Slumped at the shoulders, Jeremy turned around and got back into the car.

Jeremy held up his hand with the three fingers that were lightly glued together with the sap. Tracy shrugged.

“What are you doing?” asked Tracy.

“I think we need to get someone else to do this. It’s not just a couple of branches.” He rubbed his non-sticky fingers on his forehead. He reached across Tracy for a hand wipe from the glove-box. After rifling around for a few seconds, he pulled a crumpled white packet with a little lobster on one side. The alcohol wafted through the car. Tracy giggled before turning back to Jeremy with a stern expression. He returned the look with a quirky smile.

“Are you nuts? You mean, like tell someone we need help?” Tracy got out of the car, slammed the door, turned her back to him, and threw her hands up above her head.

Jeremy lowered the window. He remembered he said the exact opposite to her earlier about being inconspicuous.

“So we’re really going to live in that place, that shack, that garbage dump, at the top of the road?” The pitch of Jeremy’s voice sharpened each time the word for the house changed.

Without looking back, Tracy headed up the road. On foot.

Jeremy looked in the rearview mirror and shifted the car into reverse, observing her stomping up the road. With enough room to pull around Tracy without hitting her, he veered around her and stopped. He leaned his head out the window.

“Ride?”

She shook her head, walked around his car, and continued up the road. In the middle.

Heads turned again throughout the restaurant when the bells on the door jingled. Only a few hours had passed since their breakfast entrance, but the smells had changed to tuna, egg salad, and grilled hot dogs. The diners were a new, but similar group, with the same waitress was on duty.

“Lunch?” she asked, swiping across the counter with wide strokes.

Jeremy caught himself before making a snide reply. “Yes, thanks. Same place?” he pointed at the booth where they ate breakfast.

The waitress nodded without looking up. Tracy slid in along the banquette on the same side as earlier. Jeremy remained standing, grabbing the cuffs of his jacket to pull the sleeves down. A little sap remained on his knuckle and it stuck to the inside of the sleeve as he pulled.

“Maybe it would have been better to let your jackass boss enjoy his money,” Jeremy whispered to Tracy, sliding in on his side of the table.

“Oh my god, remember we. We.” Tracy pointed her finger at herself and at Jeremy several times. “We talked about that before I said anything,?” she continued, giving him a stink eye. They both knew full well who had pushed her to do it. And it was not the one tucking her wig hair behind her right ear on the far side of the booth.

“I know, but when I agreed to it, I never imagined this.” Jeremy held his hands flat against his mouth, spread his fingers, and through the gaps squeezed out the words.

Tracy’s mouth opened, but Jeremy cut her off. “Well, I guess we’re stuck with this until further notice, Janelle.”

“Don’t call me Janelle.”

Jeremy held up his middle finger.

“Cute, very grown-up of you,” she said, got up, and headed to the restroom.

After two oversized crab melts, the splitting of a lobster roll, and each drinking at least three more cups of coffee, Jeremy reached over and stroked his fingers on the back of Tracy’s hand. For a few minutes, they held hands across the table.

She rested her pointer on the last dab of sap on Jeremy’s knuckle, looked him in the eye, and said, “guess we’re glued together forever.”

The smiles at one another appeared to be genuine and loving. Middle fingers remained in downward positions.

Jeremy held the door for her again. Tracy ducked under his arm. He gave her a bear hug once out on the street. They looked back into the restaurant and the waitress along with several of the men at the counter, waved at them through the window. Jeremy gave a thumb’s up, and aware they were still watching, did a Fred Astaire dance dip and kissed Tracy. Tracy lost her footing, and Jeremy took a step forward to catch her. Once upright, he gave an okay sign to the watchers inside.

“I think it’s going to be ok,” Jeremy said, once they were in the car.

Tracy pressed her head into the headrest and asked, “Home Depot, repeat?”

“Yup.”

Jeremy removed the bags from the back of the car and set them on the ground. Before unwrapping the new tools, toolbox and cleaning supplies, and with no other living option, they entered the shack. They found a folding card table and two metal frame lawn chairs in the basement. Jeremy went back out for the cleaning supplies, grabbed a few bottles of water from the back seat of the car, and emptied them into the new bucket. Tracy wiped off the chairs and table and placed them in the kitchen. After wiping the counters and pulling open a few cabinets that had doors, they found some pots, dishes and kitchenware. A few other doors became unhinged in the search. Jeremy removed the doors and stacked them in a pile on the floor.

In the living room, a nibbled couch, two armchairs, and several other pieces of furniture sat at various angles near the fireplace. Tracy put on purple elbow-length Playtex gloves. She wiped down what she could, swept the dust, debris, and mouse (plus other animal) droppings. Jeremy watched her for a few minutes as she loaded the dustpan with the tiny black pellets, held them in with the broom and tossed them out through a missing window pane. Satisfied that the cleaning would keep her occupied for a few minutes, Jeremy went to the basement in search of water pipes. Luckily, Jeremy’s handy father had imparted a tad of knowledge regarding plumbing and electrical enhancements, and Jeremy released an elongated, “oh yeah,” as he listened to the water gushing through clanging cold metal when he turned a knob.

Jeremy heard Tracy sigh in between creaking footsteps as she moved through the house. Standing at the fireplace, Jeremy looked at the loose bricks and with some idea of what a Maine winter might entail. He hoped it would provide enough heat in the short term. The bathroom and kitchen utilities were rudimentary, and there was no hot water, but the clear liquid smelled fine coming out of the kitchen faucet, and they agreed tainted water was the least of their worries.

At every turn through the house, they added new items to the Home Depot list. Without bedding, they spent the night in the car again, but this time parked partway down the inaccessible driveway, keeping the cars hidden.

They headed into town again the next day after showering under an icy trickle and drying off with paper towels. In their unkempt state, it was becoming more apparent that being hidden was going to prove difficult. In the car, they practiced introducing themselves with their new names. At Home Depot, they returned the chainsaw and ordered inexpensive appliances with some of the Witness Protection funds they had received. They found a strip mall with a mattress store and drove home with the mattress tied to the top of the car. For added security, they opened the windows. Each one stuck an arm out and held the mattress just in case the ropes released.

Until they could get jobs and back on their feet, they would have to make do with limited means. They returned to the diner for breakfast and sat in the same booth as the day before. Until the appliances arrived, and Jeremy secured some wiring in the kitchen, the inexpensive pancakes and eggs would have to sustain them.

120

“I heard you’ve been in Home Depot nonstop,” said the waitress, pouring steaming, acrid-scented coffee.

“My, my, word travels fast,” Jeremy replied. He winked at the waitress.

She laughed and nodded.

“Do you know where we can get sheets and towels?” Jeremy deemed it ok to ask for a little help after giving into the fact their actions and whereabouts were quite obvious.

After ordering the same breakfast as the day before, the waitress offered advice on where to buy necessities, slipping in questions about where they had come from, and how long they would be in town. Jeremy answered with vague responses, and Tracy followed a green squiggle on the white Formica tabletop with her pointer finger.

Because of the weather changing and knowing the shack would only be habitable for a short time, Jeremy and Tracy debated calling the main number of the FBI. They would explain what happened with the tree, and with winter on its way, decided it would be inhumane for them to not respond. In the meantime, they repaired what they could in the shack, ate in town, and blended in. Other than the wood delivery man who suggested four cords of wood instead of the two they had ordered, no one seemed too concerned about them living in a house intended for summer living.

Tracy's hair grew out, and she traded the wig for a tiny ponytail. Jeremy helped her cut the platinum from the brown. She bought some new eye shadow and Jeremy warmed to her new look. He shaved daily, but each morning still expected to see a thick brown fringe lining his upper lip. The skin felt too smooth as he pressed the razor down, streaking through the white foam.

The warm late summer days waned, and with leaf peeping season, came fall tourists. Maine, a day's drive from New York, is a vacation spot for New Englanders. And what Jeremy and Tracy failed to consider with living in plain view, was that someone would eventually drive by and recognize them, which is precisely what came to pass in the middle of October, shortly after which the Federal Marshals paid a visit.

Along the front of the house, attempting to plant a row of hedges to block the headlights that came across the living room at night each time a car passed, stood Jeremy facing the road, his hands wrapped around the handle of the shovel, and one foot solidly pressing it into the ground. Able to ignore most of the cars rounding the bend, Jeremy saw the dark car slow down on the curve. The driver, with black Ray-Bans that covered half of his face, looked at him straight on. Assuming the black car to be the check-up for the Witness Protection Program, Jeremy dropped the shovel, and yelled for Tracy. He threw the shovel to the ground, removed his leather work gloves, dropped them next to the shovel, and wiped his sweaty hands on his pants. Jeremy heard the gravel crunch as the car drove in behind the shack. It was the black Mercedes. The occupants, which turned out to be a man and a small woman, wore matching sunglasses. As Tracy came out of the house, the car stopped, and the two front doors pushed open with precise timing.

"Shit." Jeremy said. He closed his eyes and swallowed hard. When he opened them, the car and its occupants were still in the driveway. He uttered a few more expletives under his breath and forced a smile with his lips pressed tightly together.

"Mark!" shouted Jeff Clemens, one of their former neighbors.

"Oh, my, goodness, Janelle, what have you done to your hair?" shouted Jeff's wife, Angie.

Jeremy and Tracy/Mark and Janelle stood motionless and said nothing. Tracy turned to Jeremy. He watched the silent words 'what the...' form without sound.

Jeremy put his hand out. He and Jeff shook their clasped palms a few times, and Jeremy explained they were in Maine for an extended vacation. After an awkward twenty minutes of deflecting the Clemens request to see the house, they left.

Jeremy and Tracy stayed sheltered in the house for the rest of the day, figuring out what to do next.

By the end of the following week, the "near future" of the Marshals visit arrived along with the answer of what would happen next. A blacked out Suburban pulled in behind the Chevy Sparks. Hearing two car doors THUNK-THUNK, Jeremy and Tracy came out of the house to meet the Federal Marshals both of whom wore black. There were no friendly greetings from

the two men who stepped out of the dark-windowed car. The two burly, large-shouldered men did not remove their black-framed Ray Bans as the Clemens had done a about ten days earlier.

“This is inconspicuous?” asked Jeremy, waving his hand at the Suburban and attempting to lighten the air.

“Let’s talk inconspicuous. We got word that things did not go quite as planned. What are you doing in this place?” asked the man who stood spread-eagle with his arms crossed over his rounded abdomen. The other one gave a head nod towards the shack.

“Who told you?” asked Jeremy.

“We get word. Let’s go.” The man did not move. The head-nodding one raised one hand and made a following motion in the direction of the dirt road.

“Where?” asked Tracy, adjusting the bandana that she had tied around her forehead to keep her hair, her real hair, back while she cleaned.

“The house,”“ whispered Jeremy to her.

“You’re supposed to be down the driveway. Not at the top of it,” said the man who had waved. He lifted the Ray-Bans, looked at Jeremy, and dropped them back to the bridge of his nose. He then mimicked the spread-eagle pose of the other man, but put his hands into the pockets of his black windbreaker.

122

“The road’s blocked. It’s pretty overgrown. There’s a tree across it. Sleeping in the car got old,” said Tracy, straightening a finger with each reason.

“Let’s take a walk,” said the man, again, but this time with more force in his voice. He pressed the fob and released the back hatch of the suburban. The other three moved behind him, watching as he lifted the liner and removed a large ax from the inner trunk. Jeremy choked on a laugh, put his hand over his mouth, and coughed several times. Jeremy and Tracy followed the two broad-shouldered men in silence. From behind, Jeremy observed the men’s feet slip, twist inwards, and roll outwards in their matching black, tasseled loafers. Thinking it funny, Jeremy gave Tracy a reassuring smile and pointed down to the matching Merrill’s they had both purchased in the local Reny’s Department Store. Jeremy winked, and Tracy shook her head and rolled her eyes.

Other than a few birds squawking and the chattering of several squirrels, the only human noise was the crunching of gravel. Somber, like walking in a cortege, thought Jeremy. When they got to the tree, the man with the ax turned around and faced Jeremy. The man’s eyes remained hidden behind the black lenses. It occurred to Jeremy that Ray-Bans had green lenses. Maybe Witness Protection had special black lenses meant to hide their soul-less eyes.

“You could not chop through this?” he asked. The man knocked on the thick trunk, as Jeremy had done, but did not appear to remove it with sap attached.

Jeremy noted the condescension in the man’s tone and wrinkled his forehead. He made some quirky movements with his lips, but did not answer the Marshal’s question.

The two men looked at the tree. And the one without the ax, reached forward, picked a vine loose, and tugged at it.

“I think that’s poison oak,” said Jeremy as the man twisted the vine between his fingers. The man dropped it and wiped his fingers on his windbreaker.

“Chainsaw?” asked Tracy.

They walked back up the hill.

Jeremy drove to Home Depot to repurchase the chainsaw. The Marshals waited in their car until he came back, declining Tracy’s offer of a peanut butter and jelly sandwich.

When Jeremy returned, the four adults crammed into Jeremy’s Spark with the chainsaw and a filled gas can in the back. The man who had not touched the vine and Jeremy got out of the car. Jeremy removed the items from the back of the car and placed them on the ground. The rounded abdomen man poured the gas into the small machine and pulled the choke chain. Holding the chugging saw in one hand, he adjusted his collar and tie, and lifted the saw at an angle against the tree. Exhaust filled the air, and the others moved back to avoid the flying debris. After several long strokes sliced into the thick trunk, the Marshal cut a wide wedge and with sticks removed some vines and overgrowth thus allowing them a passage to walk through.

At first the dense woods kept the path of what was once a narrow driveway, cool and in the shadows. But ahead in the clearing, they could see not only the lake with the sun’s glimmer bouncing off of it, but a beautifully, evenly hewn, log cabin. From the back side, it looked like a giant Lincoln Log set.

“Wow,” said Tracy.

“Holy Shit,” said Jeremy.

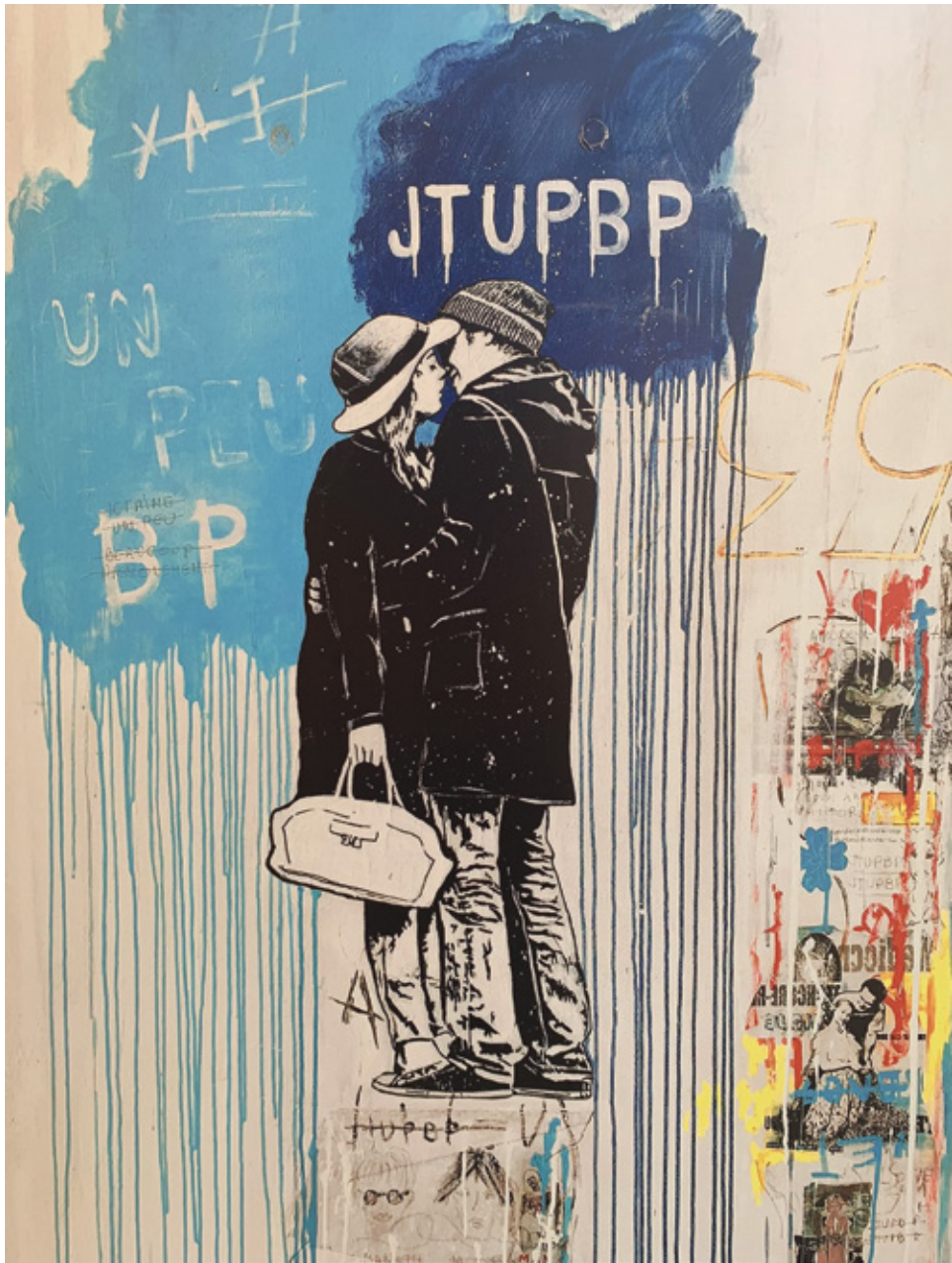
Two abreast, one pair in front of the other, the escorts walked Jeremy and Tracy down the small hill towards the lake. Like a choreographed ballet, they moved to the front side of the house, turned, and looked up. The front was all glass, with a deep porch. Four Adirondack styled chairs surrounded a firepit on the edge of the cantilevered porch. Jeremy looked back at the pond where a tethered rowboat bobbed and lightly banged against the long dock.

“This is the house,” said the man who had cut through the tree.

“I see,” said Jeremy.

Renamed Mitch and Jennifer, the Marshals gave greater details about what to do and not do. And this time when Mitch and Jennifer received their second set of new identities, second set of keys to a new residence, and a second ride in a blacked-out limo with a Manila envelope on the seat between them, they remembered to ask about contact information in case something went awry.





JTUPBP
Isabella Kim

miracle fruit

Jane Muschenetz

At the start of everything,
(Before you asked and I said yes)
We journeyed to El Yunque,
The only rainforest in US territory
On a farm full of guavas and wild roosters
We tasted a red, seeded thing
That turned all things sweeter

Now that plant grows in our SoCal garden
(Having overcome the barriers of regulation and climate)
It produces red, plump berries
And memories our children can taste

Isn't all fruit a miracle?



***Miracle fruit**, (*Synsepalum dulcificum*), is an evergreen tropical shrub prized for red berries that alter the tongue's ability to taste, turning sour flavors into sweet. The plant is used as a natural sweetener in West Africa and was previously blocked by the sugar industry from trade.

125



sonelab

A FULL-SERVICE DIGITAL/
ANALOG RECORDING STUDIO
IN EASTHAMPTON, MA

WWW.SONELAB.COM

INFO@SONELAB.COM

FACEBOOK.COM/SONELAB1

good for you

Jane Muschenetz

All my words are organic
The commas, 'free range,'
My sentences use only naturally occurring sugars and
Seasonal periods (...whenever possible) locally sourced.

Devour my home-made paragraphs and grow strong in body,
Unpolluted in spirit, free of preservatives and artificial flavoring.
Graze on grass with me,
Let us be — *minimally processed* — together!
It's too exhausting to be natural alone.



acidic aspirations

Jane Muschenetz

Champagne and vinegar used to be
Polar opposites, but now
Right in my local grocery store,
I find "Champagne Vinegar" looking
Luxurious and inviting all at once
Amongst an *entire isle* of salad dressings
(The thrill of remembering when poppyseeds seemed *exotic!* overwhelms me)

Slowly, I pass through the bottle-lined corridor bowing
Over labels of unorthodox combinations
I am seeking an audience with an elusive oil
Will I find it here or in the international section,
Where it sometimes summers?



riding the rails

Linda Kraus

In the winter the old train station was cold,
bone-cold, blue-cold for a little girl's hands.
I clapped my white, woolen mittens together
to create some magic that would warm
the icy wooden benches' splintered seats
and thaw the icicles hanging from the roof.

My father would never mention the cold;
our Friday night dates were visits to the depot,
something so special for a sheltered child.
My job was to check the listings, marking
departures and arrivals with the gravity
of a seasoned conductor—all were accountable.

He loved to shout out initials that abbreviated
the trains' names—so many letters that sounded
the same—so many letters to sort out and catalog.
When each train arrived, I prayed that I could
differentiate it from the dozens of contenders
and proudly, correctly call out its name.

I wiggled my toes so they wouldn't freeze
as we sat and waited, sat and waited for the
trains to arrive and depart, arrive and depart.
I thought about warm, frothy cocoa in a mug
to lessen the cold, comforting chocolate chip
cookies to break the routine; I never asked.

Sometimes I wondered why we never bought tickets
and traveled the rails; I did not understand poverty.
When I travel by train today, waiting in stations
that are warm and welcoming, I look for my father.
We could board a train together, call out its initials,
check its schedule, and ride gloriously into oblivion.



housecleaning

Linda Kraus

I scrub away
the memories
that taunt me,
suggesting that
my husband
is alive.

I cannot hear
his voice,
nor feel his
tender touch,
but he lives
in the details
of my life:
in the music
that I crave,
in the flowers
of our garden;
in the alignment
of his chair;
in the absence
of his plate
on a table once
set for two.

He hovers
everywhere:
a spirit sent
from the
netherworld;
he will define
my earthly
pleasures and
my pervasive
sorrow as
long as God
wills him
to remain.



doe

Jan Shoemaker

Full disclaimer: the deer dies, so you might want to bail on this story here and find something less painful to do than read on, like weed the poison ivy out of your myrtle or get a full-torso tattoo or thread a catheter through your urethra. The doe at the side of the road was broken and will absolutely die by the end of this, maybe sooner, so let's be clear about that. Me, I'd cut and run.

But I didn't cut and run on that cold night in December when my headlights caught the doe, folded swanlike, with her legs tucked beneath her, on the shoulder of Park Lake Road. She held her graceful neck erect as a treble clef; her face--perfect as only a doe's can be, so made in God's image, presumably--was composed, her thoughts inscrutable. I veered onto the nearest side street and pulled up behind the SUV that had struck her.

Next to the wrinkled car, a young woman holding a baby was speaking into her phone, which she put away when I approached. I could see her breath. She was almost out of gas, I learned, and her husband was working, but her mother was on the way from just across town; she'd be there soon. And, almost before I could ask after her and her baby--were they okay?--her mom pulled up and popped the car seat and infant into her own warm station wagon then joined the two of us by the vehicle's ruined hood. "Have you called the police?" I asked. Yes, she had, about twenty minutes earlier. I took out my phone and headed for the deer.

It's not an un-busy road, Park Lake, slicing north to south through three major arteries that take people in and out of Lansing. Politicians line its two lanes with signs during election years. And it was very dark that night. The doe never shied when I drew near her and I kept a few feet between us as I stepped into the street and flipped on my phone light. The power of it's beam--like everything else about these phones--astonished me. Who knew I'd been packing a lightsaber? I pointed it toward an approaching car, which slowed down. Then, making a big, dramatic half-circle, I directed the driver into the other lane, as far from the deer, who had sunk to the asphalt right on the shoulder's white line--in sorely re-strikable distance of whoever drove by--as the road permitted. As other cars appeared--six, maybe, or eight--I waved them clear of the deer.

Then I called the police. "Hello," I began, streamlining the facts for the sake of clarity. "My name is Jan Shoemaker. I am standing in the middle of Park Lake Road directing traffic away from a wounded deer. There is also a lady with a baby here. Please send an officer."

"We have that call already," a voice replied. "We're sending someone. Get out of the road."

"It's been twenty minutes," I cut in. "I'm as old as the hills and I'll snap like a twig and I'm not getting out of the road until an officer arrives."

"You need to get out of the road."

“You need to send someone *now*.” Then another pair of headlights appeared and I hung up, clicked on my beam and waved the driver away from the doe. Several minutes later, I called the police again.

“Hi, I called recently about the lady and the baby and the deer, but no one has come. I’m still in the middle of this very dark road.”

“You *need* to get out of the road.”

“I *won’t* get out of the road.” It had occurred to me when I pulled over that I’d stumbled into one of those moments when the universe allows you to be a little bit useful, out of your ordinary way. I kept thinking my defiance, not to mention concern for the little PR scandal that might ignite if I were run down and the local news picked it up: “Mentally Ill Woman Struck On Road; Police Refuse Aid,” would set a fire under someone sworn to protect and serve--but half an hour rolled by, punctuated by my calls to the same dispatcher at five minute intervals.

“We need an officer! What’s taking so long?” Someone, I was assured every time, would be there soon. But shifts were changing, which added to the delay. I wondered how valuable a shift-changing timetable might be to aspiring house-breakers. *Window* of opportunity suddenly acquired an extra dimension. Every few minutes, the younger woman’s mother climbed out of her car to stand with her daughter in the wind, then retreated to the warmth of her front seat. The doe never stirred.

“Hi, it’s me--lady with the deer.”

“You need to get *out* of the road!” And so it went for nearly an hour--the doe stoic and austere, the young woman sighing by her car, me dancing in the street. To be clear, I was there for the deer. The driver with the baby, fully rigged with thoughts and thumbs and therefore access to the human engines of benevolence, wherever the hell they were, just then, was fine; plus she had a mom on hand with a spare car. “I always drive in fear of hitting a deer,” I had commiserated with her (maybe not that helpfully), which is true, and my specific fear is of wounding rather than killing one because what would I do? My brave friend Terry stopped and dismounted his bicycle one day to dispatch a ruined kitten with a rock, but my little well of moral courage has nothing like that kind of depth. Because the terrible frailty of animals homesteads my head *a lot*, I slow down when driving through corridors of trees and at dusk and dawn, tapping my car’s horn in a staccato of warning: five-thousand pounds of steel coming through! The possibility of striking any creature is a reasonable argument for carrying a handgun in the car, but I don’t. Eventually, a police car pulled up and an officer and the baby and the driver-mom and *her* mom and I--also a mom and butting into these strangers’ crisis whenever traffic cleared--gathered by the damaged car. There was a lot of patriarchy going on in our huddle. There was also, I thought, way too much interest in the mangled but insensate front of the car. The officer opened its hood and introduced the relevant but not critical topic of insurance. Everyone who wasn’t me peered inside and made small sounds of concern.

“I’m sorry,” I finally blurted at the officer, “but that deer (I pointed my beam at the doe) is suffering. “Will you *please* put her out of her misery?” I glanced at the gun on his belt.

Standing in the road during the previous almost-an-hour, I'd thought, of course, what might, what should, what likely would become of the deer. I knew of no local wildlife rescue organizations with the equipment to convey a damaged deer to an ICU; my own veterinarian's office had been closed for hours, and I believed, at that time, that the slender, broken legs of a deer would never heal to hold the animal. To be struck by a car, I thought, was *it*. All I really had was, "Traveling Through the Dark," that William Stafford poem about his finding a deer along the side of a road, in my head. The scene he confronted was made more morally ambiguous by the fact that his doe, while dead, was carrying her living, unborn fawn. If you're looking for a poem to tear out your heart, this one will do it.

It was euthanasia I had on my mind--a merciful shot, quick and clean--to release this doe from her agony. But the officer had produced a document and was taking the other two women through its intricacies while I agitated at the edge of the group and sprinted back to the deer, who continued in the guise of a bodhisattva, erect and serene, even as each new set of headlights bore down on her. Waving my fellow humans around the doe, I marveled at her equanimity and wondered if shock had subdued her, or if she simply accepted this moment as another among the uncounted moments of her life before an SUV had intersected it, because acceptance was all there was. I had no idea what sort of narrative enlivened the mind of a deer, if discrete windfalls and catastrophes were connected at all in some intimate story of self. When it seemed like another quarter hour had gone by, I jogged over to check on the driver-mom's mom, who'd rejoined her grandson in her own car. I was bending to their window when I heard the pistol fire.

A doe's legs can mend, it turns out, and deer have survived in the wild on three. But even if I'd known this, I'm not sure any of us on the side of that road could have managed a better outcome for the doe. Though he hesitated in the listening wilderness and half-light of his own vehicle, Stafford famously pushed his deer "over the edge into the river."

Crossing a dark patch of lawn to where the doe lay emptied of her old desires and drives and fears, a gentle heap making its way, not across human roads anymore, but into the waiting all-of-it, I thanked the officer who'd finally shown up to open her way. Then I got in my car and drove home.





pawprints
Jennifer Weigel

I ♥ ART

website & weekly email with listings for visual art shows & events, calls, classes, studio space, and more in the Pioneer Valley of western MA. Listings are free!

valleyartsnewsletter.com



Everyone has a story about doing the dishes – tell me yours! Seeking couples, households, roommates to interview for a documentary produced with Montague Community TV. Call Nina, 413-834-8800

memories

Frank Zahn

As I enter the twilight
of a life hurried thru,
my bitter memories
rise to the topmost
of my memory pool.
Why, bitter memories,
why is it always you?
Please let the sweet ones
on occasion rise too.



nasty-dirty-filthy things

Frank Zahn

When I was six years old, and Ruthie Tanner was seven, my momma caught us coming out of the cornfield across the road. She got upset and accused us of doing nasty-filthy-dirty things. I didn't know what those things were, except that they had something to do with our private parts.

After that, I learned about nasty-filthy-dirty things from grownups who whispered about them with an intense glow in their eyes, flushed faces, feverish lips, heavy and irregular breathing, and sweat oozing from their pores.

By the time I turned sixteen, and impatient hormones had taken control of my every thought, I behaved just like grownups. I whispered and snickered about nasty-filthy-dirty things with an intense glow in my eyes, a flushed face, feverish lips, heavy and irregular breathing, and sweat oozing from my pores.

And I would have given my life for a girl who would have done nasty-filthy-dirty things with me like Ruthie Tanner and I were supposed to have done out in the corn field across the road when I was six years old, and she was seven.



the meaty record review by Jeremy Macomber-Dubs

Prince, Welcome 2 America (2021)

I woke up with the same amount of existential dread as usual, turned on the news and that didn't help at all, big mistake. It seems right-wing maniacs are still hellbent on distorting and inventing truth in order to further their own evil agendas, as more and more people are buying into their lies, which only leads to more chaos, confusion, division, and death. People telling you to take a horse de-wormer instead of a vaccine, the entire state of Texas losing their minds with their horrifying new anti-abortion laws, pretending to be pro-life as they continue to deny the realities of the pandemic - waking up in America, 2021, I don't recommend it. But I have to admit, there is something different about today - not necessary a feeling of hope in the air but a vague intuition that my day isn't going to totally suck, and that works for me. Quite likely it's because I finally picked the album I'm going to review for the new Meat For Tea - Prince's recently-unveiled posthumous, poetic, prophetic, and cosmically impeccable Welcome 2 America - and I decided to take my electric wheelchair out for a spin on the bike path while I listen to it. This has been the hardest year of my life. I lost my mom to COVID, and shortly after that my beloved cat Milo also passed away. I still often find myself overcome with grief, but right now the sun is shining, I'm alive, and there's a new Prince album to check out. I brought my Bose bluetooth speaker with me and hit the bike path that goes from Northampton to Hadley. The thing with being differently-abled, differently-bodied, and in a wheelchair - passers-by are going to look at you like you're weird anyway, so I like to make their viewing experience even more interesting and enlightening by blasting music at full volume as I speed past them, leaving them to ask, "What the hell did I just see?" Or (hopefully) declaring, "Whoa, that disabled man sure is having a good time." And the fresh funky sounds of the freaky, cheeky Prince were exactly what was needed for this moment of delighted awe.

134

I've always been fascinated by music's power to transcend time, to exist forever as a portal to the soul long after the souls of its creators have travelled far away, perhaps "1000 Light Years From Here", a magical place that Prince invites us to go to as an escape from the injustices of our world. Is that where he is now? Are my mom and my Milo there too? I hope so. When he sang this song in 2010 and then decided not to release it, could he have foreseen that 5 years after his death it would reach the ears and heart of this grief-stricken apocalypse survivor? I like to think the answer is yes, the masterful Prince did consider the eternal potential of the groovetastic hard-hitting truth bomb of funkadelia he was making. There's not a single song that isn't groovy on this record, meant to inspire even the weariest of souls to blissfully move their body along to the plethora of sick beats. There's not a single lyric that doesn't speak the unvarnished truth, managing to reflect the troubling times we are living in now even though these songs were written more than a decade ago. Of course, Prince, possibly to his benefit, did not stick around to witness the election of the orange buffoon and the miserable mess that would ensue, but he definitely knew that we were headed in a dangerous direction, and he tried to warn us about it through feel-good but truthful songs that might be more relevant today than his genius brain could have envisioned. His pure intentions are evident in the new-wave rocker "Hot Summer". I noticed that the bike riders and people walking by during this song gained a little pep in their step when they heard its undeniable pop hooks emanating from my speaker. I could see that it had a genuine, positive effect on them, maybe brightening their day too. But even this joyous tune keeps it totally real. "These are the days my people told me to fear," Prince ponders worryingly while encouraging us to dance our woes away to his "futuristical sound" on this hot summer day, and that's exactly what I'm doing. Thanks for the advice, Prince.

So I arrived at my destination in Hadley, ate some comfort fast food, smoked some reefer in an empty parking lot, then got back on the bike path for my return trip to Northampton, playing Welcome 2 America again through my Bose speaker and savoring every second of it. During the soulful, transcendently catchy “Born 2 Die”, folks looked at me with knowing smiles as if they could see that I was floating up high on a cloud. Well, it’s true, I was. Riding an electric wheelchair at its highest speed on smooth pavement is a sensation akin to floating. Your feet aren’t on the ground, and all you have to do is move the joystick forward, letting the wheelchair do all the work as you lay back, wind in hair, sun and sounds soaking into your soul. Along the way, I floated down a bit from my cloud and came across another disabled man who was pushing himself in a manual wheelchair, enjoying the gorgeous weather while getting some exercise in the process. He said hello, and we both stopped to converse for a few minutes. He said his name is Martin and made a point to tell me how much he appreciated the music I was listening to, which I took as a validating sign that I chose the right album for this adventure and for this review. I felt bad that I didn’t stay to chat with Martin longer, as he seemed like a super sweet dude, but I had Prince on my mind, and I was still in total awe that this phenomenal artist was providing me with this beautiful cathartic experience, making me feel a deep sense of aliveness and gratitude, from beyond the grave, no less. Now that takes talent! I wanted to be on my way so I could keep listening. Prince begins the album by welcoming us to an America where “truth is a minority”, singing of a society obsessed with money and celebrity, and calling out systemic racism. He closes it by echoing the sentiments of Donny Hathaway in “One Day We Will All B Free.” He may mean that we have to wait until we leave this mortal coil for that day to arrive. As I make my way home, worried about America, worried for the world, existential dread continuing to simmer just beneath the optimistic surface, I’m comforted by this message, as it seems to suggest that wherever my mom and Milo are, they are free. And maybe they’re hanging out with Prince.



a covid drama

Peter Tacy

Three radio preachers died today.
Their loss to the living was not
foretold, at least by them.
This was a sort of morality play.
We've seen each element of plot
and foresaw each weary stratagem
as it unfolded. Pride preceded fall,
as sure as sunset, or as gravity.
Yet the tale they told was not intended,
and the meaning was unknown to all:

*Assuredness can mask depravity
and a life of faith can be pretended.*

Preaching liberty and trust in text,
all three assigned a role to deity
that should be played by common sense
and love of others. What came next
was a tiny germ. For those whose fealty
to bad advice and their pastor's pretence
were so zealous...the end was obvious.
But what made the play so grimly just
was the fate of those who'd gamed the trust
of the believers they had blithely led:
Sheep and shepherd, equally dead.



“LEARN TO PLAY”



WWW.AVALONGAMECAFE.COM



Ballet For Murderers
by
Richard Wayne Horton

SHIRTS!

COMIC BOOKS!

MUGS!

GEEGAWS AND CURIOS!

PRINTS!

WWW.TOPATOCO.COM

TOPATOCO

I guess it's okay?

THE SHIRT IS AWESOME!

138

OH MY

a sensuality shop

www.ohmysensuality.com
 122 Main Street
 Northampton, MA 01060
 (413) 584-9669

413-203-2330

CORSELLO
BUTCHERIA

Custom Crafted Meats

130 Cottage St.
 Easthampton, MA
info@corsellobutcheria.com

Contributors' Notes

Kate Becker is an award-winning jam maker and food blogger turned fiction writer. She resides in coastal Maine where she writes, cooks, and takes long walks with her lab, Beckett. France, food, and fashion are her passions and seep into her writing when it can enhance the story. Her work has appeared in *The Dillydoun Review*, Volume 2 (2021). A selection of her short stories (along with food/recipe post intrusions) are on her blog katebecker.co. And a Parisienne adventure, dolloped with French culinary moments is underway, in her debut novel.

After years of study, consultations, and experimentations, **John Berglund** abandoned his comfortable corporate world in the U.S. to open Tijon, a boutique Parfumerie on the French Caribbean island of St. Martin in 2007. Berglund, and his award winning parfumerie, has created 26 perfumes widely known as "*The Fragrances of the French Caribbean*" while offering interactive and fun perfume making experiences for which 14,000 people from 63 countries have participated in to-date. With the onset of Covid Tijon created a virtual lab where one can create a custom perfume online.

Lindsey Britt is a baker, an organizer of people and things, and an amateur ethicist. Her work has been published in *Waging Nonviolence* and *The Commons*. She lives in Vermont.

Jane Carey is a published photographer and poet. She has also self-published three musical releases, *Another Incarnation*, *What When and Where*, and *Standing Out*. Jane has a doctorate in language, literacy, and culture and is currently employed as an associate professor of English. Some of her passions as an educator include visual and media literacies and promoting awareness about peace and social justice through project-based learning.

Ben Castleman is a writer and comedian based in Brooklyn, New York. He works at the Public Relations Society of America. He's on twitter and instagram @bencastleben and he hopes to be in the best shape of his life someday.

Jacob Chapman lives in Amherst, MA with his wife and daughter. He plays guitar in the band Camel City Drivers, and his chapbook *Other Places* is available through Open Country Press.

Hyewon Cho is a senior attending Korean International School in Seoul, South Korea. When she is not making artwork, her hobbies include making jewelry and experimenting with old film cameras. She is currently building a portfolio for university.

Nathan Cho is a sophomore attending Youngsan International School. He is currently creating his portfolio to attend a university in America. His current plan is to major in architecture.

Kate Choi is a 17-year-old eleventh grader attending Asheville School in North Carolina. Her hobbies include listening to music, watching movies and reading books. She is currently preparing her portfolio for university.

RC deWinter's poetry is widely anthologized, notably in *New York City Haiku* (NYTimes, 2/2017), *Winter Anthology: Healing Felines and Femmes* (OtherWorldly Women Press, 12/2020), *Now We Heal: An Anthology of Hope* (Wellworth Publishing, 12/2020) in print: *2River*, *Event*, *Gargoyle Magazine*, *Meat For Tea: The Valley Review*, the *minnesota review*, *Night Picnic Journal*, *Plainsongs*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Southword*, *The Ogham Stone*, *Twelve Mile Review*, *York Literary Review* among many others and appears in numerous online literary journals.

Scott Ferry doesn't want a bio, but one follows him around anyway like a sullen ghost. He has a book titled *These Hands of Myrrh* upcoming from Kelsay Books.

Poet **Michael Favala Goldman** (b.1966) is also a jazz clarinetist, an educator and a widely-published translator of Danish literature. Over 140 of his translations and poems have appeared in literary journals. Among his seventeen translated books are *Dependency* by Tove Ditlevsen (a Penguin Modern Classic), and *Something To Live Up To – Selected Poems of Benny Andersen*. Goldman's three books of poetry include *Who has time for this?*, *Small Sovereign*, and *Small Phoenix*. He runs bi-weekly poetry critique groups and lives in Florence, MA. <https://michaelfavalagoldman.com/>

Stephanie Guediri resides in the Pacific Northwest and prefers to write short stories from the deep woods, poetry along the Oregon coast, and adult fiction in the cafe at Powell's City of Books. When not experiencing pandemic restrictions, she travels as much as she can and journals all that she sees. Her husband, children and grandchildren encourage her creativity and provide material daily, but her cat, Lola, could not care any less.

Richard Wayne Horton has received two Pushcart nominations for poetry and fiction. He is the 2019-21 MA Beat Poet Laureate. He has published in Southern Pacific Review, The Dead Mule, Meat For Tea, Bull & Cross, Scryptic, Literary Heist, The Bitchin' Kitsch, and others.

Isabella Kim is a high school student attending Seoul International School in South Korea. Her hobbies are listening to music alone in her room while drawing. She is currently working on her portfolio for university.

Linda Kraus has taught university courses in literature and film studies. She has published poetry in several literary journals and anthologies and is currently editing two collections of poems. She is an orchid judge, a screener for film festivals, a rock hound, and an impassioned Wagnerian.

Elizabeth MacDuffie is one of the founding editor's of Meat for Tea: The Valley Review, the arts & literary journal she started with Alexandra Wagman in 2006. She is pleased that Meat for Tea was chosen as a winner in its category five Annual New England Book Show. She has been organizing 100,000 Poets, Artists, and Musicians for change events for over 10 years. She lives in Holyoke, with her handsome sound-engineer husband Mark Alan Miller. Here she edits Meat for Tea and produces gala, multi-media events to celebrate the release of each issue of this quarterly publication.

Jeremy Macomber-Dubs is the guitarist, vocalist, and co-songwriter in Bunnies. Born and raised in Central Pennsylvania, he and his best friend/band-mate moved to Western Massachusetts in 2004 to play seven shows opening for the reunited Pixies. Bunnies decided to make a permanent home there where they've been playing shows and recording albums ever since. In 2011 and 2012, Dubs released two solo albums on Frank Black's label The Bureau Records, and in 2013 he sang on 5 new Pixies songs. Jeremy has also played drums for artists such as Severe Severe, Rabbit Rabbit, Problem With Dragons, and Black Francis.

Doug McNamara is an artist and pamphleteer living in Brooklyn with the writer Amy McNamara. His drawings have appeared in Conduit, Esopus, Meatpaper, jubilat, Weird Illustrated, the Society of Nematologists newsletter, and NYC subway seats.

David P. Miller's collection, *Bend in the Stair*, was published by Lily Poetry Review Books in 2021. *Sprawled Asleep* was published by Nixes Mate Books in 2019. His poems have recently appeared in Meat for Tea, The Poetry Porch, Muddy River Poetry Review, Lily Poetry Review, Nixes Mate Review, Denver Quarterly, Boston Literary Magazine, The American Journal of Poetry, and The Telephone Project. A retired college librarian, he is a member of the Jamaica Pond Poets.

Emerging writer and fully grown MIT nerd, **Jane** (Yevgenia!) **Muschenetz** (Veitzman!) came to the US as a refugee from Ukraine at 10yrs old. She is now a mother to two very American kids. Culinary and cultural displacement strongly influence her writing. Creator of PalmFronDZoo.com, Jane's work also appears or is forthcoming in Mom Egg Review, The San Diego Poetry Annual, and The Detour-Ahead Exhibit.

Sabyasachi Nag has published fiction and poetry. His work has appeared or forthcoming in Anomaly, Blackfox Literary Review, Canadian Literature, Grain, The Antigonish Review, The Dalhousie Review, and The Windsor Review, among others. He is an alumnus of the Community of Writers at Squaw, the Writer's Studio at Simon Fraser University, the Humber School for Writers, the BANFF Centre for Arts and is currently an MFA candidate in the Creative Writing program at the University of British Columbia. He was born in Calcutta, India, and lives in Mississauga, Ontario.

Amanda Palmer is a singer, songwriter, playwright, pianist, author, director, and blogger who simultaneously embraces and explodes traditional frameworks of music, theatre, and art. She first came to prominence as part of the punk cabaret duo The Dresden Dolls, earning global applause for their inventive songcraft and wide-ranging theatricality. Her solo career has proven equally brave and boundless, featuring such groundbreaking works as the fan-funded *Theatre Is Evil*, which made a top 10 debut on the Billboard 200 in 2012 and remains the top-funded original music project on Kickstarter. In 2013 she presented "The Art of Asking" at the annual TED conference, which has been viewed over 20 million times worldwide. Palmer expanded her philosophy into the New York Times best-selling memoir, *The Art of Asking: How I Learned To Stop Worrying And Let People Help*. Since 2015 Palmer has used the patronage platform Patreon to fund her artwork with around 14,000 patrons supporting her creations each month. In 2019, Palmer released her solo album, *There Will Be No Intermission*, with producer/engineer John Congleton at the helm. The album is a masterpiece that includes life, death, abortion, and miscarriage among its tent pole themes. After the Covid pandemic disrupted life as we know it, Amanda Palmer has found a home amongst the Kiwis in Aotearoa.

Thomas Rowland has previously published several works in Meat for Tea. His most recent book is *A Philosophy of Tennis. Or, You Kant be Serious* (Kemper-Conseil Publishing). He is a retired pediatric cardiologist who lives in Longmeadow, Massachusetts.

Deborah Daniel Shea's short story, *Penis Candles*, is published in the current issue of the Berkeley Fiction Review. Her work has also appeared in Southern Humanities Review, Black Willow Review, Kalliope, Poem, Three Monkeys Online, flightwriting, Yellow Silk, and Slipstream. She has received awards from the Academy of American Poets, the Tennessee Arts Council, and the Tyrone Guthrie Center in Annamagherig, Ireland. She lives in Amherst, Massachusetts.

Jan Shoemaker is the author of the essay collection, *Flesh and Stones: Field Notes from a Finite World*, and the poetry collection, *The Reliquary Earth*. Her work has been published by many magazines and journals.

John Sieracki is a graduate of the University of Massachusetts Amherst MFA Program for Poets and Writers, where for several years he read for jubilat. He writes, acts, and directs as a member of the Connecticut River Valley Poets Theater (CRVPT). He earns his keep as director of development and communications at Mass Humanities.

Alex Starr is a writer in the San Francisco Bay Area. Prior recognitions include the Dorothy Sugarman Prize in Poetry, George Harmon Coxe Award in Fiction, and Barnes Shakespeare Essay Prize from the Cornell University English Department. Alex holds a B.A. in Philosophy/English from Cornell and Oxford where he co-led the Mansfield College Poetry Society.

Danielle Sung is a junior at Phillips Exeter Academy in Exeter, New Hampshire. In her spare time, she enjoys creating art, visiting exhibits around the world, studying art history and anthropology. Sung has won recognitions in several art competitions, including winning Gold Medals in the National Scholastic Art and Writing Awards, being selected as the American Vision and Voices Nominee, and the winner of the 2019 Congressional Art Competition. Sung is currently preparing to major in art with a focus on portraiture and installations.

After some successes as an undergraduate and graduate poet nearly sixty years ago, **Peter Tacy** spent his working years not writing, but as an independent-school English teacher, Headmaster, and regional administrator. When he retired, he deliberately returned to writing, and published two nonfiction books. More recently he's been writing poems. This latter development has been very much encouraged by his new wife Jane Yolen, whose own poetic output (a poem a day) has never abated since the 1950's, when they first knew each other. They live in Hatfield, Ma., Mystic CT, and St. Andrews, Scotland.

Weining Wang is a Senior student at Beloit College, WI, where he is majoring in interdisciplinary studies--East Asian Studies. He published one short paper in a Chinese literary journal - Beijing Literature 北京文學 - which is collected in the Harvard-Yenching Library and Princeton University East Asian Library. He was the winner of the Global Chinese Youth Literature Award 全球華文青年文學獎, which is organized by The Chinese University of Hong Kong. He published his Beijing flavor fiction *The Old Snack Shop* in the journal *The Sucarnochee Review*, an undergraduate publication by the University of West Alabama. He translated eight poems from the Tang dynasty and published them in the *Equinox*, a journal of contemporary literature at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock. His Chinese-style artworks, *Fire and Ocean*, *Black and White*, and *Great Wall* have also been accepted for publication in this year's edition of *Long River Review*, an annual literary journal of art and literature staffed by undergraduates at the University of Connecticut. His artwork and fiction has also appeared in asppublishing small press, black moon magazine, Wordgathering, Third Wednesday, and elsewhere.

Michael Washburn is a Brooklyn-based writer and journalist and the author of *The Uprooted and Other Stories*, *When We're Grownups*, and *Stranger, Stranger*. His short story *Confessions of a Spook* won Causeway Lit's 2018 fiction contest.

Jennifer Weigel is a multi-disciplinary mixed media conceptual artist. Weigel utilizes a wide range of media to convey her ideas, including assemblage, drawing, fibers, installation, jewelry, painting, performance, photography, video and writing. Much of her work touches on themes of beauty, identity (especially gender identity), memory & forgetting, and institutional critique. Weigel's art has been exhibited nationally in all 50 states and has won numerous awards.

Gerald Yelle is a member of the Florence, Massachusetts Poets Society and lives in Amherst, Massachusetts. His books include *The Holyoke Diaries*, FutureCycle Press, and *Mark My Word and the New World Order*, Pedestrian Press. He has an e-chapbook at Yavaneka Press: *Industries Built on Words* and a chapbook *No Place I Would Rather Be* forthcoming from Finishing Line Press.

Last year **Jane Yolen** won the Massachusetts Book Award in the Young Adult category for a Holocaust novel, *Mapping the Bones*. One of the two main characters is a fourteen year old Jewish poet, so she got to write his poems for him. Or with him, as it often seemed. She is set to release her 400th book in 2021.

Frank Zahn is an author of nonfiction, fiction, and poetry. His poetry publications include those in issues of *Midwest Poetry Review*, *Meat for Tea: The Valley Review*; *Black Cat Quarterly*; *The Blind Man's Rainbow*; and *The Criterion*. For details, visit his website www.frankzahn.com.

the MEAT FOR TEA CAST

available on:
spotify,
sticher,
apple podcasts,
google podcasts,
pocket casts,
radio public,
castbox,
overcast,
breaker,
and at:

anchor.fm/meatfortecast



Emma liked to make
Julia happy, but she
wondered why that
always seemed to
involve silly hats...

**Vintage Photographs,
Books & Ephemera @Joslin Hall**

*please come visit us at
joslinhall.com*

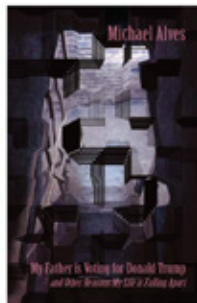
out now on meat for tea press:



Peter Urkowitz
Fake Zodiac Signs



Richard Horton
Sticks & Bones



Michael Alves
*My Father is Voting for Donald Trump
and Other Reasons My Life is Falling Apart*

