

MEAT FOR TEA

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THE VALLEY REVIEW

ELECTRIC

Meat for Tea: The Valley Review

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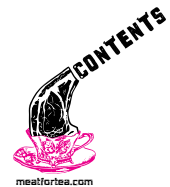
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This issue is dedicated to the memory of Michael Rothenberg - writer and co-founder of 100 Thousand Poets, Artists and Musicians for Change.

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guest salutations

Jerome William Berglund

Welcome friends, to Meat for Tea's own singular electric light orchestra. Congratulations on obtaining seats to this exclusive affair, they are not easily come by. So what is this elemental force we gather here to celebrate, worshipped diversely the world over under eclectic names, with analogous visages?

Throughout ancient Babylon they honored Baal, and in shadowy lodges across our nation those most influential, robed and cowled, venerate him still. In Norse fables Thor is the recognized master of lightning, Greeks argue this to be Zeus's domain, wielding fatal bolts fashioned to his specifications by cyclopes, or in Vulcan's forge. For the Hindu it is understood to be the prerogative and bailiwick of the great Indra. Historians are often of a mind these four are but one deity under different guises, well-traveled.

His power indeed surges through every cell of our bodies, extracted from food by mitochondria and converted into energy, sparring with protons and neutrons in their charged dances at an atomic level.

In Abrahamic faiths lightning causes Jews to tremble with reverence in the torah. Christians conceptualize their messiah's appearance as akin to its trademark streaking across the sky. The Quran specifies each bolt which falls is leveled with care and intent upon deserving targets.

4

Modern man, desirous of playing God himself, is wont and quick to harness this supernatural strength for his own perverse and blasphemous ends, promptly channeling it toward basest purposes imaginable: execution, fortifying prison plantations, torturing prisoners.

If you've ever worked as an electrician, been 'bit' as they call it with founded fear and paranoia, one comes to fast respect this force with enormous care and consideration. Once in my imprudent youth electricity damn near slayed me, laid this frail body out paralyzed and twitching for minutes which felt like hours passing. I'll never treat it lightly again, and nor should you ever get complaisant, make the mistake of acting so foolhardily.

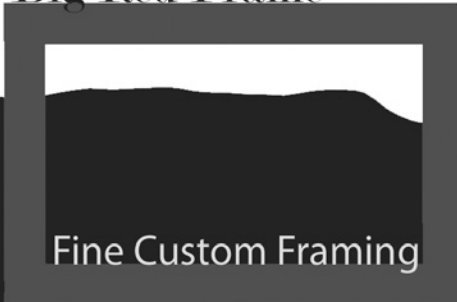
So pull up a chair, don the appropriate rubber gloves and boots, verify all wiring is in good order and thoroughly taped, grounding is properly placed, OSHA regulations are in compliance followed to a tee.

Once those critical formalities have been diligently discharged, we can get down to our very important business. For while electricity may mean death to the villain, it can also provide that very invaluable key we so desperately need to a better tomorrow, a green, sustainable future which at the eleventh hour might conceivably yank mankind up from its fossil fueled death spiral onto a zero emission, renewable path.

Galvanism is the fruit and - pun intended - currency from which we can convert solar bombardment, kinetic ocean and wind currents, to replace the pollutive coal and nuclear wastes which are presently inundating our air and seas. It is entirely logical, rational even to perceive some figurative or literal Higher Power in that potent might which heats our homes, cooks our meals, drives each transport, charges these very typewriters.

So let us praise this thousand-masked demiurge, at the pleasure and generosity of whom this very moment I am not freezing in my snowy land, enjoyed a hearty dinner of tacos thanks to the benevolent stoves and thawing furnaces. Should this divinity prove merciful perhaps our next generation may just stave off Armageddon yet. Of thee we sing, hail hail.

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an electric city

Peter Tacy

It was once a “place beyond the pines”
in the Algonquian common language.
Later, a Canal made the town a hub,
empowering it to share its fortune with
fertile lands far beyond the river’s
long-established broadening valley.

Things slipped; just a railway by-station
(we had our ups and downs, downs and ups);
an ever-willing part of the economy’s dance --
oft a partner, but never queen of the event..
So Schenectady awaited, with its station,
for the fated moment of electrification.

Legend has it that Edison’s choice
to make a vacant broom-corn mill
in our sleepy town into what became G.E.
was our city’s electrifying decision.
Just as much, it was the choice of J.P. Morgan
to force the inventor-businessman out
of General Electric that turned the trick.

But later, the MBA’s took charge.
That did it for our little city. Not pretty,
the aftermath. Bit by bit, GE departed.
As the moving trucks went south, we glimpsed
a vision of our electric moment; in that flash
we saw our darkest selves, lit very bright.
And yes, the end of every brilliant day, is night.



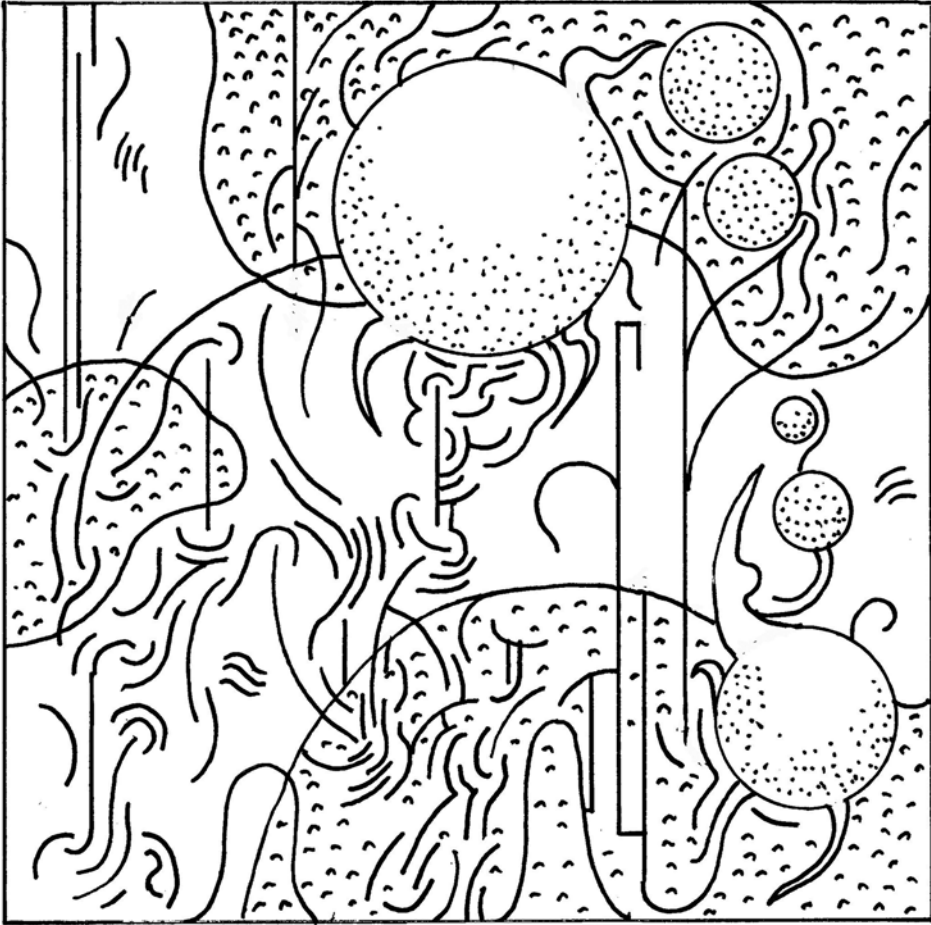
a small candle for mr. edison

Jane Yolen

We were born on the same day,
though many years apart.
I told my parents, when older
(not wiser, but bolder)
that he had brought the world light
and I had brought light to their world.

I was right, not in the large, but in the small.
Edison had done something for everyone.
I had simply been born. My small candles
would not shine for years.
They still light a few houses
sometimes schools.
Maybe even in Schenectady.
Not brilliant day, nor darker night.
But once in a while my work
Gets something right.





Steven M. Johnson

hot water soup

Jose Oseguera

“At your age, I could find my own food and cook it,”
Dad would say when we’d tell him we were hungry.
Mom’s response to his parental wisdom:
“Well, that’s because your dad and his brothers
were raised like animals.”

The few times he did cook,
Dad used to heat up water in a pockmarked pot,
big enough for a single mug.

“Why don’t you make enough soup
so that your kids can also eat?” Mom said
as the soft-boiled water’s chlorinated rank
softened the acrid track scent of metal
scraping against a rusted burner grate.

“It’s not soup,” Dad said
and poured the liquid into his cup.
“It’s just water.”

He blew on the porcelain lip
and slurped with a stare as empty as his stomach.

“Well, at least warm up enough for them too,” Mom said.
She was like a bitch who’d rather eat her puppies
than watch them go without food,
damned if she didn’t try to make her thin paycheck
spread as far as spilt water.

As Mom walked towards the door,
Dad placed the cup on the counter
and embraced her as carefully as one would
hold a nearly full receptacle,
ready to spill equal measures of love and hate.
There was no hug or kiss from her end,
just a stranger embracing another stranger,
a mop, vacant stoneware
and not a woman who’d carried his children
on three separate occasions.

As they stood there,
all they hated, loved and hoped for
was as visible as the arsenic and phosphorus

caked on the sides of the charred pot.
She dug her claws in his skin,
as she did into every word she spoke to him,
and walked towards the door.

“So, I guess you guys probably want some too,”
Dad said after he heard Mom close the garage
and slam shut the car door.

We drank a lot of tap water soup,
not for the taste, but rather,
because it made our bellies pop-out
and our guts feel warm inside and out:
the cocktail of minerals wouldn't kill
the hunger; but it'd drown the growling, our flaws,
and deliver us into a torpor that felt nice
until Mom got back from work.



missa

Jose Oseguera

—for Nicole

The capuchin's yellowed remains—
travertine filigree, intricately latticed below the ground—
were faint ghosts that lay in pieces,
far from the basso continuo of cars rumbling on papal cobblestone,
and the celesta cadenza of tiny espresso spoons
clinking on the lips of tiny porcelain cups,
resting on tiny, white saucers
before a choral fugue of sips and “aahs.”
Rome was a rose blooming in eternal beauty,
and we were her fortunate children—
still breathing and baring the sumptuous weight of flesh.

The frigid air in the depths was thick with silence—
a museum inside a crypt beneath a church—
the sweet jaggedness of incense seeped through the Urban rock;
its scent dared us to relinquish any remnants of romance
hidden in this Sheol's hard walls and narrow hallways.
We looked at each other— waging more than the afterlife—
yet dared not talk or interlace fingers
lest we be shunned by the priest who took our money and,
upon entering hallowed ground,
implored you to shroud your freckled shoulders and cleavage.

The brown robes and hoods that once clad their brethren's fervor—
the marrow inside the martyrdom—
hung desiccated and dusty,
untouched even by men holier than I'd ever wish for either of us to be.
The stacked skulls— a honeycomb of bone—
smiled simultaneously as cherubs chiseled out of Carrara marble,
singing mass in hushed prayers—
hums that reverberated down my spine.

When you asked me why Saint Peter had been crucified head first,
or why those bees were chasing your lemon gelato in Barberini Square,
I had no answers until I stared into the brothers' joyous, dark eye sockets.
I wondered if our bones would ever be exhumed—
juxtaposed in grim beauty— and whether those whose eyes
were still covered in fibrous tunic would be able to see,
in our ivory pearlescence, how much I loved your pumiced tissues
or that they were once layered with a skin
that smelled of orange peels when it rained,
one I used to coat with endless kisses,
sometimes because of a look you'd give me,
and others, for no reason in particular.

So, I took your hand— those fallible phalanges
that played the piano only when no one was listening—
I kissed it long until my lip smack resonated deep in its spongy core,
and thought about how the mass of what remained of you and me
would be displayed when our turn came to be eternal.



a brief introduction

George Franklin

Anonymous wrote before writing existed,
Before figures on walls or scratches on papyrus,
Before prizes awarded at festivals, or
Fees for commemorating a charioteer.
Anonymous' works were voluminous and
Incomparable for their range of emotion
And varying topics, for their insight into a
Condition that wasn't quite yet human,
Horses and lions on the savanna, the night
Someone invented fire. Legend has it, he may
Even have been immortal—his works written
Over centuries, lifetimes spent on revision.
Anonymous carved letters into steles
Set up at the last hilltop before the desert
Began, warning travelers that beyond these
Words lay nothing but sand and empty sky.
Anonymous satirized the emperor and the court,
Describing their sexual encounters in precise
Detail, how this one needed tincture of
Rhinoceros sperm to get an erection and that one
Was so dry she filled herself with an amphora
Of olive oil before each assignation. Thus,
Anonymous often found it necessary to flee
From one country to another, and his works
Became full of travel, prison, and escapes
Over rooftops. Sometimes Anonymous bunked
In sour hay with pigs and goats and sometimes slept
In Chinese silk or cotton from Egypt. The works
Of Anonymous have been praised by both
Grammarians from Alexandria and the harshest
Critics of medieval Baghdad. Yet despite these
Accolades and the evidence, prima facie, of
The texts themselves, some lesser scholars
Still persist in doubting his existence.



who's to say

George Franklin

Who's to say these faces in the clouds aren't gods
Peering down from Olympian heights, beings
Sketched in vapor, vanishing into horses
And hillsides, vertical landscapes, emptiness
Of sky? Buddha and Moses feared images—
So did Plato—how real the shadows lamplit
On the walls of our cave. In the corners of
The living room, galaxies of dust turn in
Their slow waltz, almost invisible, weightless
As dreams. The dog twitches in his sleep, chasing
Something smaller than himself, something smelling
Of open fields in summer, of musk and shit.
He opens his eyes, confused, the way I am
When I'm trying to hold on to wherever
I was before my eyelids cracked to let in
Morning, chiaroscuro of curtains. The
Faces dissolve into time—not a process,
Just a way to measure what the world does and
We do. Last night, you had fever and asked me
To hold you as you slept, to keep you warm. Our
Bodies wrapped into each other, and you stopped
Trembling. I fell asleep on my side, my legs
Warmed by yours, finding comfort against your feet.
Nothing is ever how we remember it.



the meaty interview: Matthew J. McKee

What's your favorite color?

A diabolic question to start! Well, I'd like to say I'm beyond the simple exuberant shout of "red!" or "blue!" but that's probably the adult conceit in me. Really, I've always been attracted to Earth tones. A beautiful hue of nature always catches my fancy. That said, if forced to pick just one, I'd have to go with a loamy shade of brown.

What's your favorite animal?

My favorite animal—hands down—is the horse. I grew up in rural Wyoming and there are few animals with the emotional intelligence of a horse. They are so therapeutic and wonderful to be around and provide many humorous and uncanny moments.

If you could choose to fly or to be invisible, which would you choose and why?

Perhaps to the vexation of all my readers and against all apparent evidence to the contrary, I'd choose the power of flight! Invisibility would be too big a cheat code to use on reality, but flight is perfect for making the world easier but not a walk in the park. Fly to work, fly to the grocery store, fly to the restaurant! So many minutes saved that just keep piling up. In short, flight is a damn fine shortcut that wouldn't take all the fun and difficulty out of life.

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Are you happy, and if not, why?

Wow. What an amazing left hook of a question! Well, for me, I think of happiness as a sliding scale and in a Nietzschean manner I like to make that slider move every now and then. I am in general a happy person; I have very little to complain about. But I always try to give myself a hard time, too, so I don't become complacent or overly lazy. So, while I don't make trouble for myself or anything, I am strict with myself more than is necessary. For example, the current book I'm writing is moving along at a decent pace, but I've been letting the voice in my head be a little meaner than I truly deserve, just to keep a fire lit under my butt. So happy? Yes. Perfectly content? Never!

What book/s are you reading at the moment?

Book, book, book. I'm always reading three books at a time. I bring one book to work with me, I read one book at home during the day, and the last one I read right before going to bed to unwind. Currently, at work I'm reading C. G. Jung's *Dream Interpretation Ancient and Modern*. At home during the day I'm reading a beautiful Folio Society edition of P.K. Dick's *Man in the High Castle*. And before going to bed I'm burning through Stephen King's latest: *Fairy Tale*.

What are you currently listening to?

I listen to many kinds of music, but currently I've been hooked on Joep Beving and his magically calming piano. When I'm in a more energetic mood I've been listening to Lord Huron, Nahko and Medicine for the People, and Florence + the Machine.

How old were you when it became clear that you would be a writer?

Uww! Self-Analysis! This is my jam! So, I knew I wanted to be a *storyteller* when I was in elementary school, and found the medium that served me best was writing. I wrote many stories and poems when I was little and my mother would sit, enraptured I thought, by the dramatic and utterly wild turns my stories would take. But while I could concoct a good bit of magic with the written word, when you put me on the spot to *say* something, I'd go blank. My mind was constantly churning out stories, but I could never make up a good excuse for being late or for breaking a plate! After that, it became clear to me I would be a writer in college when I sat down and committed myself fully to writing my very first novel. It was a real turning point in my mind because that was the first time I made a real commitment to the characters and suffered through the heavy lifting of taking a long story from its start to its end come Hell or high-water. It took me over a year to write that first novel, and at the end it was such a fulfilling experience that to me, it became evident that I was truly a writer.

You utilize an innovative structure in *Keeping the Stars Awake*. It's very nearly postmodernist/poststructuralist and very meta. What inspired this?

A grand, overarching question! I'll start by saying a lot of this comes from how I approach the act of writing. My style is very stream like; I don't storyboard or do tension maps or character interaction graphs or anything like that. I *imagine*; I start by daydreaming and telling myself a story—then a really good scene suddenly comes to me, and my imagination will just be so taken with what I saw that it won't let go and that scene will suddenly expand into a whole world, ready and real for me. For months or weeks I'll see bubbles of dialogue and narrative and take notes as they come. I want to emphasize that I always consider what I'm sensing as something real; I write down what I see, hear, feel, taste, smell, and I censor nothing. That is a big part of where the "poststructuralist" feel comes from. It's not *just* a story. Then, at some point, I see an ending scene, and only once I have that do I sit down and try to start telling a linear story. As I go, I use those bubbles I wrote down earlier and usually find that they fit like stepping stones, taking me toward that final end. That's just naturally how I write. Then, when I discovered Jung and his ideas, it made a lot of sense of what I was doing, and drew a more "meta" meaning out of the writing. This process of mine deals with my unconscious in a way that is well framed and explained by Jungian terms and theories.

Keeping the Stars Awake was written about a year before I discovered Jung but I recognized right away how well my writing fit into that mode of thinking and it really floored me. So in the revisions I leaned into that idea and tried to interact more consciously with these characters and their story and really dig down into what it meant to me and what it meant to them. Nietzsche was another influence in this regard; I could investigate my own personal abyss and write down what I saw there without fear or self judgement. And a final—but large amount—of credit is due to my wonderful editor. He asked, "what if you, **the** author—not a stand-in for you, but the **actual** you—interacted with the characters; what if you actively interacted with these pieces of yourself?" That idea brought everything together and made all the shifting and rotating parts of *Keeping the Stars Awake* fit together. So, there is a lot of inspiration from various places, but I think the true miracle is the synthesis of them all into what is the meta madness of *Keeping the Stars Awake*.

Tell us more about *Keeping the Stars Awake*.

(Excerpt, *Keeping the Stars Awake*, Pg 125-126):

An earthquake rocked the library, forcing me to catch Sen and pin her against me to keep her standing, books tumbling down upon us, the explosions of earlier no longer echoing, but *sounding*.

Nearer.

And nearer.

“Sen!” I smacked her a bit—for the fun of it. Don’t nobody start getting the wrong idea about me. I’m a paragon of gender equality, yep—and then shook her by the shoulders, her head bouncing about. “I really need you to focus *right now!* Whatever is going on with you, I need you to snap out of it, right now! Something—gt!”

The ground jerked beneath us, an unsettling buzz traveling up my legs, the hair on the back of my neck standing as static bristled in the air.

“Sen! Some *thing*, is coming!”

“Oh? Oh, is that you?” Sen stared at me in complete befuddlement, her blue eye lazy, her green eye rolling into the back of her head, the tension in her body similar to that of a wet noodle. “I...I feel...funky.”

“I can tell! Just tell me what I can do to fix it already!”

“Uh...” Sen swayed back and forth in my arms, her head lolling about as she smiled like a drunken idiot, giggling at the ceiling. “Heh-heh-he... Kiss me—”

I punched her in the face instead.

(End Excerpt.)

Happy to oblige! A little about the creation process: in terms of story, I imagined Sen first, and it’s very interesting when you look at the story from that perspective. She has the most interaction with the world around her and also shows the most growth out of all the characters. Reading with that in mind, I think a reread would reveal some new ways of looking at the story. I enjoyed writing Sen the most, and a cool little tidbit: in the first draft of *Keeping the Stars Awake*, all of Sen’s dialogue was italicized.

Something I haven’t shared in other interviews is that *Keeping the Stars Awake* exists in a universe that a few of my other novels share. I call it the Staircase-Cycle. It will be more than seven books, but I meant cycle as in cyclical, as in they circle in on each other like a weird escalator ouroboros. None of them *truly* overlap so none are straightforward sequels, but the world of Dimension 23 and the City that Oh Ok comes from and the wacky crazy gods that are the masters therein are the setting for about a third of the stories I’ve written thus far (some published, some not). So if the madness and unpredictability of *Keeping the Stars Awake* made your brain tingle, you’re in luck! There’s more! The characters that appeared at the end of the story beside The Train of The End have their own story. There are other characters we didn’t meet in *Keeping the Stars Awake* that were in that train and they have their own stories, too. It’s all one big tangle I look forward to unraveling in my mind and giving to the world; I hope everyone will enjoy trying to unravel it, too. Finally, a fun trivia fact: the largest book so far in the Staircase-Cycle is an unpublished manuscript that is currently over 800 pages long!

If you could invite any six people, living or dead, to the dinner party of your dreams, whom would you invite?

Any six people living or dead you say? Hmm... Well, I think Jung would be an obvious number one. I'd also invite Christopher Hitchens, Stephen King, Billy Collins, President Obama, and Lafcadio Hearn to the party. I'd be the most boring person there by far! What a fantastic and enlightening evening that would make for!

Any other projects in the works?

Oh, I'm always plugging along on something. It is never ending for me. My head spins up stories almost constantly, I just have to wait for one that's really worth writing to come around. Currently I'm writing what I hope will end up as a pitch-black Noir sci-fi slow-burn hair-raiser. I've written mostly fantasy, but I thought I'd bend my wit to the future for a bit. On the back burner in my brain is another Staircase-Cycle novel, and another book in my other unrelated series called *Monsters Are Words*. I'm also planning on writing a sweet prose book full of short interconnecting stories; beautiful little gems even your grandma could read. So many many many books in the works, being churned out of my furnace of a brain as fast as my fingers can type.



nosings with Alexandre Charra

As someone who started learning perfumery thanks to the wonderful tool that is the internet, I couldn't rely on the usual means you get from classical training to build up my perfume-making knowhow. Through trial and error over what has now been a couple of years I discovered what worked for me, what didn't and where I wanted to go next. However, I believe working on your own has its limits, at least when it comes to perfumery and know the scope of my knowledge is still very restricted. There are reasons why perfumery schools exist, and one of those is that you'll learn there a lot of the basics that could take you years to discover through experimenting by yourself.

While this essay isn't aimed at comparing self-taught from classically trained, it is a given that the learning experience differs. But what would happen if two autodidact perfumers were to meet and work together? What kind of dialogue would emerge, a simple teacher trainee dynamic, or the start of something perhaps far greater?

Last summer, Sarah McCartney from 4160 Tuesdays Perfumes hired me as an intern, and let me tell you, it blew my socks off. To say that Sarah has a lot of perfume making experience under her belt is an understatement, and if you have yet to smell one of her creations, I would wholeheartedly encourage you to do so. Having to deal with lame boring adult stuff for the first few weeks (like running a company, a scent tent in a festival and even having a talk at the World Perfumery Congress in Miami), she kindly allowed me to roam around her lab and explore her world. I smelled a lot and had a peak at some of her formulas. What a mistake that was, instead of answering questions I had about some of her work, I was left with even more interrogations. It almost felt like I was learning perfumery from the ground up all over again.

The reality is that no-one creates the exact same way. Each perfumer has its own composition style that developed over the years of practice. Let's say each "style" can be assimilated to a language: If you were to take two classically trained perfumers from the same school, they probably won't speak the exact same language but will nonetheless understand each other quite well. Differences in accent, slang maybe, yet overall comprehension isn't hindered, take British English and American English as a reference point. Next step: two classically trained perfumers, this time however, from different schools. Different language, but still close and mostly understandable, take Italian and Spanish, troubles may start to appear. One step further and we are now into the thick of it, a classically trained perfumer and a self-taught, or two self-taught. You will now be in the range of the two formers and trying to understand Russian as a Frenchman, you'll understand it's a language, but come on, it is not even the same alphabet. I may have got a bit too carried away with this analogy, although you can now better understand why I was so perplexed first reading Sarah's formula.

Back then, what first came to mind to quickly understand how she was composing was to be with her when she was coming up with a new formula. But she knew where she was going while I was going blind. This led to me following every step thinking: "It doesn't work. It doesn't work. It doesn't work. F*** it works, what happened there?". It was not the easy fix I was hoping for and looking back at it, I was bound to failure wanting to understand a composition style in a week time. The solution actually was, like it often is in perfumery, not rushing things.

To this day I do not pretend fully understanding how Sarah creates, but those would be the main lines: she is efficient, very straight to the point and has the ability to reach her goals within very few trials, each material being more or less a corner stone of the final creation, while I tend to take detours, meaning unlike Sarah's formulas, you could take out half of my lines without the formula collapsing (the bulk of it is here to add tiny nuances, which can get messy and countless trials to get remotely right with my current experience). More often than not, less is more in perfume making: having the ability to beautifully blend a few elements while elevating them to more than the sum of their parts is how you spot a skillful perfumer.

I'll admit it, I was slightly jealous of Sarah's abilities and realized I often was biting more than I could chew, potentially making formulas longer to hide the incomplete understanding of some materials. Because while making nice smelling things, it usually took me several trials to go in the exact direction where I wanted to go initially. Of course, how fast you can achieve the desired effect in a fragrance depends on the perfumer experience, so it is no surprises Sarah manages to achieve her goals faster. But she also wasn't shooting herself in the foot using dozens of materials she didn't fully understand to start with. When learning perfumery, each new ingredient is a bit like a shiny new toy that you desperately want to play with, not knowing exactly how it works, but oh so irresistible.

It took me a couple of weeks before I fully came to such realization, then started incorporating some of the newly acquired knowledge into new projects and kept a more open mind about what could be done and how. The aforementioned experience led to an evolution in my composition style and much to my surprise, a similar outcome may have occurred on Sarah's side of things where she started considering including some of my techniques into her creations. Both getting something out of this exchange pinpoints the importance of being exposed to the work of other artists in its discipline and being able to engage a dialogue regarding creation methods. I firmly believe perfumery to be a full-fledged art-form and would love the giant of the industry to, insofar as possible, take part in the conversation with indie perfumers and perhaps help reach new highs in perfumery as an Art.



écritures de nez avec Alexandre Charra

En tant qu'étudiant ayant commencé la parfumerie grâce au merveilleux outil qu'est l'internet, je n'ai pas pu m'appuyer sur les méthodes dispensées au cours d'un apprentissage académique classique afin de développer mes connaissances en création de parfums. En procédant par tâtonnement sur plusieurs dizaines de mois, j'ai appris à discerner ce qui fonctionnait pour moi de ce qui ne marchait pas et la direction à prendre par la suite. Cependant, je pense que travailler en tant qu'autodidacte a ses limites en parfumerie et sait l'étendue de mon savoir à ce jour relativement limitée. Il y a des raisons pour lesquelles les écoles de parfumerie existent, l'une d'elle est que vous y apprendrez énormément de concepts de base qui pourraient autrement vous prendre des années à découvrir de vous-même.

Si ce commentaire n'est pas destiné à comparer académique et autodidacte, il va de soi de dire que l'apprentissage diffèrera selon l'approche prise. Mais qu'arriverait-il si deux créateurs ayant appris la composition d'eux-mêmes se rencontraient et travaillaient ensemble durant quelques mois ? Quelle sorte de dialogue émergerait, une simple dynamique classique professeur-étudiant, ou peut-être quelque chose de plus grand ?

L'été dernier, Sarah McCartney, la créatrice de 4160 Tuesdays Perfumes m'a embauché comme interne parfumeur, ce qui s'est révélé être une expérience hors du commun. De dire que Sarah a pas mal d'expérience de composition serait un euphémisme, et si vous n'avez pas encore eu l'opportunité de sentir une de ses créations, je vous y encourage vivement. Devant s'occuper de barbantes responsabilités d'adultes (comme gérer une entreprise, réaliser un atelier de parfum dans un festival ou encore une présentation aux mondiaux de parfumerie à Miami), Sarah m'a gracieusement ouvert les portes de son laboratoire et permis d'explorer son monde. J'ai senti beaucoup de nouveaux parfums, de matières inconnues et ai même eu accès à certaines de ses formules. Quelle grossière erreur, en pensant trouver des réponses à mes questions quant à ses compositions, j'ai en réalité ouvert la boîte de Pandore. Incompréhension vis-à-vis des formules que j'étudiais et la drôle d'impression de réapprendre la parfumerie de zéro.

Il existe autant de styles de composition que de parfumeurs, je savais cela en arrivant, alors pourquoi ai-je été aussi déstabilisé aux premiers abords ? Imaginons que chaque « style » est une langue : Si nous prenons deux parfumeurs issus de la même école de parfumerie, ils ne parleront probablement pas exactement la même langue, mais se comprendront néanmoins extrêmement bien. Des différences dans l'accent, le verlan peut-être, mais la compréhension globale ne s'en trouve pas affectée, prenez un Lillois et un Marseillais par exemple. Maintenant deux parfumeurs ayant reçu leur éducation dans différentes écoles de parfumerie. Différentes langues, mais de proche nature, la conversation reste donc intelligible. Prenons comme référence un Espagnol et un Italien, les ennuis peuvent éventuellement commencer, mais cela reste correct. Étape suivante : un parfumeur autodidacte essaye de communiquer avec un parfumeur sortant d'une grande école ou encore pire, deux parfumeurs autodidactes, nous sommes dans le pétrin. Avec beaucoup de chance, nous nous retrouvons dans l'un des deux scénarios précédents, sinon disons que c'est l'équivalent d'essayer de comprendre le russe alors que l'on est français, oui c'est un langage, mais b*rdel, ce n'est même pas le même alphabet. Peut-être ai-je un peu exagéré cette analogie, mais vous comprenez maintenant l'origine de mon désarroi initial.

De nature impatiente, j'imaginai alors que la solution miracle était d'observer attentivement Sarah lors d'une de ses sessions de création. C'était en réalité présomptueux de ma part que d'imaginer absorber un style de composition dans son ensemble en une semaine. Forcément, la solution initiale ne m'a pas apporté toutes les réponses, la solution fut en réalité de, comment souvent en parfumerie, ne pas précipiter les choses. Si aujourd'hui encore, je ne prétends pas entièrement comprendre comment Sarah créé, les grandes lignes sont : une grande efficacité, aller droit au but sans trop de fioritures et la capacité d'atteindre son objectif sans trop de mods. Chaque matériau utilisé est une pièce maîtresse du puzzle sans laquelle la formule s'effondre. J'ai plutôt tendance à m'arrêter sur le plus petit des détails, aussi insignifiant soit-il, ce qui entraîne des dizaines de mods et parfois la perte de l'idée originelle après autant de détours. Souvent en parfumerie, less is more. Être capable de bien doser quelques matériaux tout obtenant un résultat supérieur à la somme de chacun de ces éléments pris séparément est la qualité d'un grand compositeur.

Je l'admets, j'étais peut-être un peu jaloux des capacités de Sarah et ai réalisé qu'avoir les yeux plus gros que le ventre pouvait être contreproductif. Car malgré le fait que mes créations soient agréables à porter, il me faut souvent plusieurs essais avant d'orienter la formule dans la direction voulue. Il est infiniment plus difficile en parfumerie de parfaitement transcrire une visualisation mentale que de faire quelque chose qui sent bon. Bien sûr, la rapidité de cette exécution dépend de l'expérience du parfumeur et de la connaissance de ses matières premières. C'est donc évident que Sarah me surpasse dans ce domaine. Il faut dire qu'en même temps, elle ne se tirait pas une balle dans le pied à chaque nouvelle composition en voulant utiliser des dizaines de nouveaux matériaux qu'elle ne connaissait pas par cœur. Lorsque l'on apprend la parfumerie, chaque nouvel ingrédient est un peu comme un nouveau jouet, on veut absolument jouer avec sans trop connaître son fonctionnement.

Quelques semaines se sont écoulées avant que je ne réalise complètement la situation. Mais fort des nouvelles connaissances engrangées, j'ai progressivement modifié ma manière de travailler en incorporant certaines des méthodes de Sarah, tout en restant ouvert d'esprit sur ce qui pouvait être réalisé dans le futur. Suite à ce stage, mon style a évolué et à ma grande surprise, un effet similaire s'est retranscrit pour Sarah, qui envisage maintenant d'incorporer certaines de mes techniques dans ses formulations. La réciprocité de cet échange témoigne de l'importance d'être exposé au travail d'autres artistes de sa discipline et de pouvoir discuter librement des méthodes de créations utilisées. Je crois avec certitude que la parfumerie est une forme d'Art à part entière, et adorerais que les géants de l'industrie prennent également, autant que possible, part à cette grande discussion avec les parfumeurs indépendants. Avec un peu de chance, de nouveaux sommets pourraient être atteints en parfumerie, et le statut d'artiste pour les parfumeurs enfin officiellement reconnu.



all in how you saw it

Linda Chown

Once there was a way to catch fish in blue water bringing in a beauty,
A blue so blue
it stung your eyelids,
It was after all all in how you saw it,
in those 60s times of velvet opulence and city starlight.
When words squeezed in to enhance a furious loving, a love
So huge it made miles out of molehills.
You knew it in your legs, in those skins you came to touch to, all wet faced and open eyed

Life as discovery. My god, Buck, your Harris Tweed elbows gave me faith in a new forever. The
great new writers taught me the wonders of skin's unsaid policies and how we could go in
and on and in

No, life, we don't have to go back home again. We can keep counting our lucky stars out,
if we stay in that raging blue up to our face,
if we let our hearts rule our reason and become foolish and ripe to our soft spots often,
just to smile quirkily and strangely,
just to go over the edge again and again and again,
And to live keenly, always keenly, without letting yourself become merely a faint
delphinium wisp-stuck in sharp wind.

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No. Carry that weight. Let your life banners burn on, raucous and resounding
In your sunlit time sharp answers and bountiful belief.
your home inside you waiting for you all alive and jubilant.



eyeburn

Linda Chown

in this dearth day
If I were to say somersault
Over what stays stuck today
It would be the deer eaten
Sticks of my once gracious
Caladium once rich in
Redness
Eye burn in this dearth day
If I were to say somersault
Over what stays stuck today
It would be the deer eaten
Sticks of my once gracious
Caladium once rich in redness



sun, moon and the stars

Linda Chown

This uneasy world rocks
In a spindle. Wholes once were wholes, not holes to fall in.
I hear the Aegean Sea coming
Over me with the sun and the moon and a panoply of stars.
They once fired the universe
in stunning thereeness;
together they were a divine omniscience that stayed
in fog and in scream.
And we knew where we were by them. Now we're often mere bits,
Roasted pieces of what we were, squandered and blown off
course. The stateliness is gone.
Moonlit sonata melody over me astronomical harmony



tea for the taxman

Rollin Jewett

Uninvited he came,
beckoning silver
from a wounded wallet,
the sow's ear!

"A cup of tea...?" I offered,
and steeped in the boiling broth of a money-changer,
he tipped hibiscus and rose hips --
no honeyed irony in the calculated twitch
of his cream-catcher.

Blessed Master of Crime was he,
ignoring my impoverished glances
as he riffled my tea-bags
a second time.

He sipped Earl Grey,
as venomous figures
seeped from his pen...
and the Darjeeling feeling
sank to the bottom
of my own chipped tea-cup –

A bitter residue of fortune lost.





reflections of a strangler

Seth Cable

Standing in the commons one evening, appreciating the night sky, I was approached from behind by an unknown person. As he sidled up next to me, I could see he was an elderly gentleman, wearing the uniform of a Strangler. Though, by his age, I assumed he must have been retired, probably for many years already.

I smiled and nodded to him, but he made no immediate reply. Instead, he surveyed the grounds a moment, breathed deeply, and spoke in a thin whine. “I guess you’ve probably heard about all the so-called ‘atrocities’ that happened here a while back, right? In this park here?”

“Uhm, yeah. Sure. Of course.”

“Of course, you have. Of course. There’s a lot of stories about it; a lot of books written. At one point, there was a movie too. I saw it. But I also saw the real thing. Right from about where you’re standing.”

“Wait... what? How old – ”

“People have tried painting it in lots of different colors, vibrant and heroic. But all I saw were sad piles standing in a circle. Folks talk all the time about the terror; what terror there must have been, especially in the youngest. But, I didn’t see that terror. Hand to God, they all just looked... well... they all just sort of looked *bored* to me.”

We had so many pleasant summer evenings like this, that whole year when the world broke open. From April to July, every day was cool and crisp, like late September. We knew that the aquifers were drying up, but as long as some water was trickling, it was downright idyllic.



under the leaves, on teaching leave

Seth Cable

“Excuse us, Professor? There seems to be some kind of large gash carved into your back?...”

“Huh? Oh right! Sorry about that. But, you see, I’ve had to start sleeping in the woods more and more lately...”

When I was an undergrad, my friends would tell horror stories about classes of theirs where the professors had gone insane and were no longer actually teaching anything. Instead of following their long-outdated syllabus, they would rant profanely about their TAs, before insulting to their faces the few students in attendance.

I wish I could be such a pedagogue, but my shame prevents me. Instead, I rehash the same course the same way every year, giving all my students precisely what they need, which is next to nothing. It’s all forgotten the next semester, I’m sure.

Meanwhile, though, I sleep outside under the stars.



this can't be happening

Seth Cable

As a child, I often fantasized about finding at the back of my closet, behind my shirts and sweaters, a tiny door. And, behind this door, there would be a secret hidden PARTY ROOM, dark and cavernous, but containing an arcade, giant TV screens all along the walls, and an elaborate obstacle course like in Super Sloppy Family Double Dare (with Marc Summers).

I promised myself that someday I would own a house with just such a secret hidden PARTY ROOM.

Not too long ago, my wife and I finally saved up enough for the down payment on a 30-year fixed-rate mortgage for a beautiful property high up atop the ridgeway. The moment we had the keys in hand, I sprinted from room to room, checking each and every closet.

But in none of them was there a tiny door, hidden in the back.

Naturally, then, I took a wrecking bar to every single one of those fucking walls.

But, no. Nothing. No PARTY ROOM.

No PARTY ROOM.



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the footbridge

Derek Allard

We died in the following order: Ma (the suicide, she knew she couldn't swim), Jed (the savior, bad aim, cracked his head on the rocks), and me (the second guesser, clinging to the rail as long as my thin arms could). We reside in a sandy hollow near the base of the trestle not far from our fall. Water laps over the rocks, no longer soothing. We don't eat. We can't sleep. We've been trapped for so long. One hundred thirteen years, thirty days, but who's counting? This footbridge is cursed.

This morning, Ma kneels on the rocky shore, faces the sun, and prays. No one listens. She glances up at the footbridge. No one's there. To her credit, Ma still repents for her so-called sin. After her prayers, she approaches me: "The Good Lord will soon forgive me, Vera, and we'll be freed." Ma's been saying this for one hundred thirteen years. Her words are tired, especially "freed," which spills lifeless from her mouth.

Before I can reply, Ma breaks into her hymns about gratitude. She skips away, reinvigorated. I used to believe in Ma, but this isn't the woman who'd lead Pa, Jed, and I across the footbridge, who reminded us to stand tall, who made sure we shared the stale slice of buttered bread equally. That Ma is gone.

"Ma, would you kill yourself again?"

Ma freezes, faces me. She twirls the wooden ring on her finger. She hesitates with the aplomb of an actress. "I so loved your Pa," she says, tapping my balled fists. Then she spins away from me, her gray dress circling around her, still stained by the factory. Ma sings, "My Ve-ra ... I'm sor-ry." She reaches out her hand. I refuse. Ma curtsies then commences her solitary waltz. She smiles as if Pa were leading this waltz, as if he hadn't been ground into the gears of the loom.

Jed climbs the trestle. He used to be my protector. Now he refuses to believe that we're dead. But at least he's taking a break from his boxing this morn. I'll be spared his ineffectual fists disappearing into the bark. Jed throws his legs over the rail, and offers a joyous "Good day, good people!" as if it were June 13, 1909, as if we had a place in this world.

Jumping from rock to rock, Ma hears Jed's mindless greeting echoing through our expanse. "Oh Jed, my sweet, sweet boy." She places her praying hands to her mouth. I roll my eyes. It's a good thing that nobody's here. Jed would cause quite the fright. He's missing a chunk of his head, a memento from his botched rescue of Ma.

Ghosts are romanticized as these all-knowing, all-seeing, switchers of realms. But it's not like that. We can see but can't be seen. We can hear but can't be heard. Time passes but we do not age. Being a ghost is a slow, constant eroding. Everyone we knew walked across this footbridge to the factory each day, for years, for decades, until they grew old, until they disappeared, one by one. The factory is closed now, the crumbling smokestack never repaired. We are left to deal with the wreckage.

Wreckage. Maybe that's why Jed yet again asks, "Do you think fair Lucy will visit me tomorrow?" They'd only been married six months. Maybe that's why Ma sings, "J-ed, you ... never know ... when Lu-cy ... might find you." Jed smiles so wide, blood squirts from his damaged head. Ma kisses his cheek. But Ma knows. She and I saw Lucy on May 19, 1971 standing where Jed had jumped. A nurse held her steady. Lucy's white hair spilled down her hunched back. Her gray sweater flapped in the breeze. She released a rose over the rail. Between wheezy coughs, she said, "Goodbye, my sweet Jed. I shall see you soon." The rose bobbed in the river; the current carried it away. Ma cupped her hands to her mouth and screamed "Lucy! Lucy!" over and over before she fell to her knees on the rocks. Ma wept. Lucy shuffled away. So how much longer should we go before we lose all hope? Another year? Another decade? Another century? Time is a burden, timelessness a crushing weight.

"Come, my children. For tonight is the full moon!"

Jed turns from the boxing tree, jumps up and down like a fool. Bone fragments fall from his head. How this still excites him I have no idea. By twilight, we climb the trestle in reverse order of our deaths. Below me, Jed repeatedly screams, "Good day, good people!" Why, I don't know. Below him, Ma repeatedly says, "That's right, Jed. That's right!" Why, I don't know. I'm the first to look down. If my freedom was assured, I'd jump again without hesitation. But it won't help. Believe me, I've tried.

Ma dashes to the middle of the footbridge, her gray dress flutters behind. She waves us along. Downriver, the moon rises, and the stars of heaven pierce the night sky. "Someday, my children, we shall be there, with everyone we ever loved." Here Ma turns to Jed, who fails to comprehend the reference. Jed stares forward, dumb. Ma doesn't bother to face me. Everyone I ever loved stands here next to me. Minus Pa, of course. I was so young.

Ma mumbles prayers from her knees, eyes closed. Unbelievably she still believes the Good Lord can see her better by the full moon light. Without preamble, Jed belts out another, "Good day, good people!" I say, "Idiot. Shhh!" and point at Ma. Jed angles his head. Dried blood still covers the right side of his gray shirt. Sure, Ma's ritual is useless, but what if I'm wrong? What if she's right? What if the Good Lord is watching her? Ma rises, opens her eyes. She takes our hands and kisses them each three times. Jed smiles. I nod, then find my exact spot on the rail. The rail is now rusted, completely eroded in parts. But the terror of that first plunge still haunts me. The footbridge shooting to the sky. My impact with the water. Nobody taught me how to swim. Ma once told me that she (ghost she, after she'd drowned) saw me (real me, before I drowned) clinging to the rail.

"Why didn't you catch me?"

"Oh, Vera," Ma said.

We don't go into any of that tonight. Instead, Ma says what she always says. "Children, you are my gifts. I am so blessed to have you here with me." Blessed may not be the right word. Damned? Doomed? One of those may suffice. Ma wraps her arms around our shoulders. She and Jed stare at the moon, but I long for those stars. We embrace the silence for a time.

“Ma, remember I saved you after you jumped from that footbridge?”

“I do, Jed! I do.” Ma pats his hands. “You did a wonderful thing.”

“Do you think fair Lucy will visit me tomorrow?”

Ma starts singing as I walk away. “J-ed, you...”

I once fought the pull of this footbridge and found my way back to the shack we shared. Our home was abandoned, windows shattered, but our effects were still there. Ma’s sewing needles, our tin cups, Pa’s kazoo, and... Jed’s sketchbook. I paged through drawings of Lucy, of me, drawings of birds and Ma and Pa. This was eighty-three years, four months, and twelve days ago. I never left again.

The footbridge has seen better days. The concrete is cracked, the gray wood planks we once walked are exposed. Children with impure minds have painted obscene words that I shan’t record. The factory lights are no longer lit, but tonight the moonlight is so bright that I can almost see everyone seated at their machines, can almost hear the whir of the looms. Our history is long forgotten.

I approach the three boulders that block the footbridge entrance. Nothing new. But the red Xs painted on the floorboards sure are. So, too, the words on this bright orange paper:

NOTICE: This bridge will be demolished on July 18, 2022. KEEP OUT!

I sprint back to Ma, interrupt her singing without apology. “This accursed footbridge will be destroyed in five days! We’ll be free!”

Ma stops singing as if shot. She scowls.

“Free? How will that free us, Vera?”

“Ma, you—” but I stop myself because Jed’s facing me and I don’t want to engage in yet another useless, *We’re not dead* discussion. Instead, I whisper in Ma’s ear. “You killed yourself by jumping from this footbridge.”

Ma whispers back, “Vera, of this, I’m aware. But—”

“But? When this footbridge is gone so too will be our bounds!”

Ma’s having none of it. She storms off, peers down at the red Xs, slows. She reads the orange notice and swipes at it madly. Ma growls. This isn’t like her at all.

“Ma!” I say running up behind her. “Imagine we’re free!”

Ma folds her arms. “We’re not free, Vera.”

“Well, what we’ve been doing sure isn’t working.”

With that, Ma leaves me. She grabs Jed by the hand.

Jed asks, “Lucy?”

Ma says, “Someday, Jed.” She turns to me and adds, “But not right now.” Ma guides Jed over the rail. Down they go, back to the hollow.

Ma’s morning prayers now last longer, but her hymns of gratitude stop. Instead, she flicks imaginary pebbles into the river. Why the gloom, Ma? What do we have to lose? Behind me, Jed boxes his tree.

On the fourth day at dusk, I climb the trestle to the carvings labelled 2022 and mark our last day. I use the nail that was in the pocket of my gray dress when my thin arms gave out. I leave my mark. Forty-one thousand two hundred seventy-seven carved lines organized into one thousand three hundred fifty-seven months organized into one hundred and fourteen years, the last one, thankfully, partial. The marks cover the crossbeams, the pillars, the entire trestle.

On the fifth day, a giant metal machine moves into position on the opposite bank. The machine has a long arm from which dangles a wrecking ball. A man in a yellow hard hat holds a wide paper. Other men shout commands and point to the footbridge. One makes a swinging motion with his arms. My excitement grows. *What will Pa say when he sees us? Will I recognize Jed when the Good Lord makes him whole?* I run to Jed, turn him from his tree.

“Do you think fair Lucy will visit me tomorrow?”

“Today, Jed. Today!”

Jed smiles, as if understanding.

But Ma...she paces back and forth on the rocks, the water lapping through her feet. She eyes the wrecking ball suspiciously, then turns to the footbridge. “It’s all we’ve ever known for so very long. What about all the people we’ll miss?” Her voice dramatically trails off.

“Ma, they’re gone! You know this. All dead at least half a century.”

Ma covers her mouth as if astonished. What an act! Her eyes well with tears.

“What is it, Ma?” I ask, incredulous. “Why are you worried?”

Ma says nothing.

To cheer her up I sing a new song, “Oh Ma-a...to-day...you’ll be in hea-ven...with—”

Ma holds up a hand to stop me. Head down, she twists her wooden ring. She's shaking. This is no longer an act. Ma never shows weakness.

"I love you, Vera, you know that, right?"

"Yes, Ma. I do."

Ma smiles, still twisting her ring. "I have a confession to make. My prayers haven't asked to be freed from this footbridge."

Huh?

"I'm praying that the Good Lord will keep me here with you and Jed forever. Vera, I'm a sinner. He'll never let me in." Ma pauses, continues. "These have been the best years of my life. No factory. No scraping by. No—"

"Ma, we're dead! And why would you pray for that? And why would the Good Lord not forgive you?" That's when I realize Ma has no faith. Ma is a coward.

Jed skuttles over. "Good day, good people!"

"What about him? What about... Lucy?"

Ma falls to her knees. "I know, Vera. I know! I'm an awful mother. Too covetous. How dare I keep Jed from Lucy? Oh, how she haunts me!"

Jed jabs the air, throws a wobbly uppercut that makes his eye twitch. "Don't worry, Ma. I'll save you again."

I roll my eyes. Ma taps my unclenched hands. "Do tell Pa I love him."

The wrecking ball starts moving, gains momentum. One hundred thirteen years, thirty-five days and, suddenly, everything's moving too fast. The giant arm swings forward, swings back, swings forward, swings back. I close my eyes. I smile.

The collapse is the loudest sound I've heard in over a century, louder than the turbines that powered the factory looms. The footbridge crumbles. The walkway, the railings, the trestle, my marks... everything splashes into the river. But I don't see this long because I'm rising into the sky, far above our abandoned factory.

"We're free!"

Someone takes my hand. "Vera, my sister! How long has it been?" Jed's face is repaired, his eyes are watering. Mine are too because I recognize my brother's sharp nose and his tall forehead, which reminds me of Pa. He looks like my protector once more.

"Jed, I've always been here!"

“Really?” Jed pauses. “Where’s Lucy?”

“Soon, Jed. So soon!”

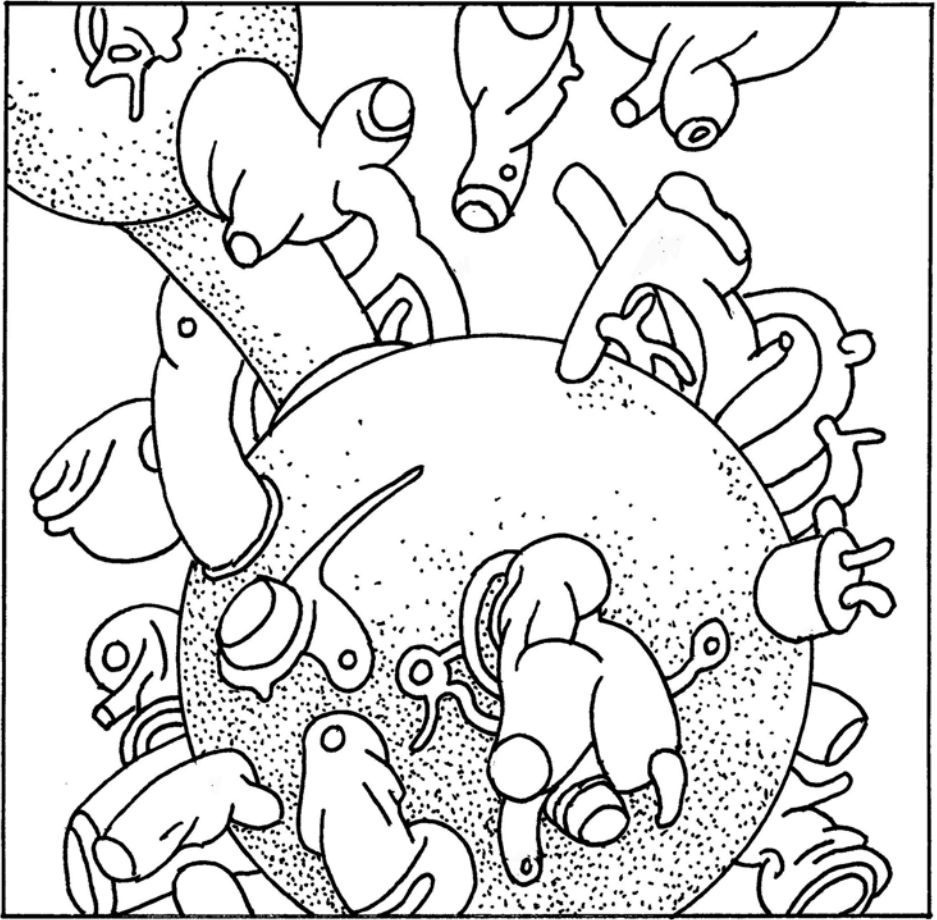
Jed runs in place, licks his fingers then straightens his hair. “Oh, I can’t wait!”

“Pa too!” I say. We float higher.

“Vera, where’s Ma?”

I spin around. Up. Down. My hand goes to my mouth. Ma’s far below and getting smaller. She’s standing on the river rocks. She’s facing us. Ma waves goodbye, slumps, and walks back towards the hollow. “Ma! Ma!” I say over and over, but nothing can be done. We float higher. Jed pulls me close as Ma vanishes beneath the gathering clouds.





Steven M. Johnson

essential worker

John Sheirer

Another gulped fast-food lunch sent Tilson to the restroom late that afternoon. Too busy to eat healthy, he paid a digestive price. But the peace of his solitary moment surprised him, separated from his cluttered desk and those sharp voices demanding input, output, projections, recommendations. After five minutes, the rest room's motion-sensor lights clicked off. He flailed his arms through the darkness behind the stall door, but nothing happened. Defeated, he closed his eyes. And that's exactly where he awoke, slumping but still seated, the next morning. Tilson was irreplaceable, indispensable, imperative, essential. Still, no one noticed he was missing.



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struck! three views of a lightning strike

debra wilson frank

Scotty

Scotty Imber, a climber from Utah, was crouched in the rain on the lower peak of Mt. Athabasca in the Canadian Rockies. Her two companions, Larry Swanson and Dennis Caldwell from the Salt Lake City-based Wasatch Mountain Club have continued to the summit. They were so close Larry had declared, “It’s all over but the shouting!”

But honestly, Scotty’s had enough of this godforsaken mountain. When the drizzle became outright rain, she’d observed that “the whole atmosphere felt kind of unfriendly somehow.” The weather obscured the view, and she was getting damp even in her rain gear. If she had her druthers, she’d be back at the campsite warming up by a roaring fire with a mug of strong coffee spiked with something even stronger. Scotty hoped the men wouldn’t dawdle. Now that she wasn’t moving, she was feeling colder by the minute. A cigarette would help, but she hadn’t packed any—just some dry Yukon biscuits.

Scotty took a bite of a biscuit, and something strange happened. Her left eyebrow rose slightly as if an invisible finger had reached over and pulled it up.

Maybe she should find lower ground. She stood to call Larry and Dennis. Then . . . there must have been a flash and a boom, but Scotty remembered nothing else until she regained consciousness, face down in rocks. When she got up to look around, the world had gone blurry. Her glasses were gone. Her hat too.

What about the men? Were they okay? Scotty staggered up a dozen feet to the lower summit—marveling that she was thrown all that way and wasn’t hurt.

“Larry? Dennis?” Again and again, Scotty called, but the silence was eerie. They’d been within earshot as they approached the final pitch of the 11,473-foot peak. So why couldn’t they hear her now? Had lightning found them too?

Dennis

It had, and without so much as a raised eyebrow for warning. As the two men were about to start their descent, Dennis was hurled to the ground so forcefully he imagined an unseen “sumo wrestler.” Burning electricity, acrid and ominous, laced the air. Dennis regained his feet, but only for a moment—the sky roared, and he was flung to the ground a second time.

Larry

Larry, a head taller, fell just once. But for him, “the lights went out.”

The Canadian Rockies camping, hiking, and climbing trip had begun eleven days earlier on July 18, 1964, with over a dozen other members from the Wasatch Mountain Club. The hikers had explored Glacier National Park, the Selkirks, Mt. Sir Donald, and two days earlier, the Columbia Icefield—the highlight of the trip.

The Columbia Icefield, which feeds six glaciers, is glorious to behold, with snow colors ranging from pale blue to bright white. It's also littered with steep slopes, crevasses, and unstable snow bridges, composed of moving ice. "Hot dog!" Larry said, in 1964 lingo, when he first saw the field. Not everyone shared his enthusiasm, so the clubbers divided themselves into two groups: *Hot dog, let's go!* and *Icefields, no way!*

The greatest danger proved to be the intense reflection. Dennis, Larry, and Scotty would have had more company on Mt. Athabasca, except the other Wasatch Mountain Club campers sported severe sunburns—some even had blisters *inside* their mouths. Larry had taken pains with sunscreen, and Dennis, observing, had followed suit. So had Scotty.

But sunscreen was no protection for the kind of burn Athabasca had in store.

Dennis

The morning of the climb, Dennis, Larry, and Scotty woke early and gulped cold cereal instead of bacon and eggs. They wanted to be at the trailhead by 6 a.m. and off the mountain by 2 p.m. to avoid afternoon thunderstorms.

Dennis wasn't too keen on going. After Mt. Columbia's stunning views the day before and the icefield before that, Athabasca, shrouded in clouds, didn't rate. But Tom Stevenson, the trip leader (nicknamed "Orders" for his stern reputation) said no peak should go un-climbed, and "Orders" must be obeyed—though he himself was staying behind to nurse his charred and blistered skin.

Scotty

The climbers had a choice of routes, either the snow or the loose rock (scree) trail. Scotty consulted a guidebook, but its description didn't remotely resemble the mountain before them. (The travelers were plagued by sketchy guidebooks to the Canadian Rockies. "Orders" joked that they "added greatly to the sense of exploration.") Scotty, Dennis, and Larry opted for the snow trail because conditions looked better in that direction. They set up a running belay to save time by moving together.

They encountered only one other party on Athabasca that day, just above the saddle. The group of three was belaying each steep pitch, making them slower, so Scotty, Dennis, and Larry angled around the saddle and proceeded up an easy rock ridge. That's when the rain picked up, and Scotty decided she'd had enough. She'd un-roped and followed the men more slowly, stopping at the lower peak.

Dennis

After being thrown off his feet by lightning, Dennis was vindicated in his antipathy toward Mt. Athabasca—for all the good it did him. Electricity fizzed in the air; lightning might yet finish them off. He stood tentatively and saw Larry lying prone nearby. After a moment of panic, Dennis saw the rise and fall of Larry's chest, and soon enough, Larry asked where he was and then groaned in pain as he tried to stand. Dennis was relieved, but Larry was a big guy, and it was on Dennis

to get him down safely. And quickly. There was nothing for it but to drag Larry by the rope that joined them. The route wasn't an easy one. The ridge was steep and snowy, and one slip could send them toppling down hundreds of feet.

As Dennis pulled, Larry bumbled along like a water skier, sometimes upright, sometimes not, but always bewildered—the strike had afflicted him with amnesia. “Where am I?” and, “But why am I here?” and, “How did I get here?”

Hoping to trigger memories, Dennis asked a series of questions: Where were you born? What's your profession? Who are your siblings? Dennis's technique worked. Within about half an hour, Larry was less confused. But confusion wasn't his only problem. Besides the excruciating pain from his ankle, Larry had tunnel vision—he seemed to be looking at the world around him through a small tube. Such challenges might have been too much for mere mortals, but Larry was unusually strong and determined, even without all his faculties.

Larry, Dennis, and Scotty

When the men arrived at the lower peak, they found Scotty had just recovered her hat and glasses. From the lower summit, she'd spotted a blurry version of her hat and then searched on hands and knees for the glasses, which, when found, were “cracked and cock-eyed but still serviceable.”

By the time the three climbers were reunited, Larry was moving on his own, but painfully. He'd sprained his ankle badly and limped using two ice axes as crutches. Scotty was better off—though blurry-eyed and addled.

Towards the bottom of the ridge, Larry, Dennis, and Scotty ran into the other party, who had just passed the saddle. One look at the bedraggled threesome, and they decided they were going in the wrong direction.

The other trio helped belay Larry and Scotty down a rocky couloir, which was steep and slippery. It was tough going, so all were relieved when they reached the gentle snow slope below. From there, the climbers skated and glissaded until they reached the scree trail that would take them the rest of the way down.

Although it wasn't the way they'd come up, Dennis “miraculously hit the trail down the scree right smack on the nose,” Scotty said. They'd also arrived at the trailhead at precisely 2 p.m., as planned. Looking rather the worse for wear, the lightning survivors attracted a few stares at the café where tourists gathered to take snowmobiles on glacier tours. Scotty didn't care. She was happy for the hot coffee—and a cigarette. Dennis ran ahead to get the car, and soon they were safely back at camp.

Larry

While many of the club campers suffered sunburns, Larry was the only one with a scorched scalp—and a hole in his knitted cap.

Recalling the experience, Dennis noted that Larry missed just one question during the memory recovery exercise. He could not name his girlfriend. "A few months later, they drifted apart, paving the way for what was destined to be the ultimate adventure and the best years of his life."

Indeed, Larry met Sharyl, who became his wife and partner. Together they put over 19,000 miles on their take-apart tandem bicycle in the United States, Europe, and New Zealand. Larry was biking across South Dakota with Sharyl when he passed away on June 15, 2021, at age 84.



40



good boy
Leah Moses

if one more person tells me it all goes by so fast

Lindsay Adkins

My body as black hole,
inward infinity on the shelf.

Thumb spine draw down,
whether pulled or pulling,

a billowing spill
of space on loop.

Can I exist like this,
as swallow and swallowed and swallowing?

Tree as both squirrel sleep and the place
to put a pellet in its head,

both antennae pitch frame and the place
to lightning fry a single wire to Johnny Carson.

This is the season I carried you,
a spade at my hip, ready

to dig through myself
for one dusty, household ligament,

double duty, hoping my herky-jerk
elbows would make you laugh.

I tried to make my voice
good blue, light as wind

so words didn't fall
from my mouth to the dirt.

I learned faucet water
could carry you downstream to sleep

and I couldn't go there
with you.

The peonies in the yard
put more petal endings underfoot.

At night, the dog barked down
the yard's black lonely throat.



simple minds

Lindsay Adkins

after Ocean Vuong's "Aubade with Burning City"

*December 2020: Nurse Dawn gathers all psychiatric inpatients
for morning stretches and plays
Simple Minds' "Don't You (Forget About Me)."*

Blue grip socks on linoleum,
sticky as scattered pills.
Don't you forget about me.

Dawn lifts her mask over her nose.
Let's begin, she says.

Outside an ambulance siren bleeds
as the morning racks lazy geese
into a triangle. *I'll be alone*

dancing while somewhere nostrils
flare for swabs.

Our hands shake through
inhale, exhale but open
softly for pills.

His blue, hers orange.
Same prayer, different answers.

In the gaping mouth
of a house down the road,
a radiator gurgles and spits

while a baby laughs
on the kitchen table.

A washing machine is filled
with stones. When the water recedes,
a cockroach glistens in the smut,

its antennae twitching
your troubles and doubts.

On the cart across from Dawn,
someone's half-eaten cheese omelet
stiffens like a teenage girl's spine.

*Giving me everything inside
and out the window*

a child climbs onto an empty bus.
His scarf, a mother's promise
around his shoulders.

The song rolls through
Dawn's phone like a gurney.

Don't you try and pretend...
you're reading your Bible
under the sheets. Memorizing

the diagram of brain receptors.
Watching Dawn swing her leg

left to right, right to left.
Eating Jello-O. Listening
to Simple Minds' la-la-la-la.

In the parking lot a daughter curls
over her steering wheel,

the map so red it is ready
for Tylenol. On the radio,
William Shakespeare gets a vaccine.

*Don't you forget about
breathing, Dawn says.*

Someone turns on
Good Morning America.
As you walk on by

will you call my name?
On the tv screen, Robin Roberts

rubs her lips together.
Let's begin, she says.
We begin.



luthier's co-op bar and restaurant

Michael Favala Goldman

St. Patrick's Day, 2022

The place is deserted at six-thirty when we arrive to set up microphones and instruments on the cramped stage flanked

by congas and amps, vintage guitars hanging on all the walls. Since last time, they've renovated, removed the closet in the

back corner so we stash our cases by the parts and repair counter and our jackets in one of the two new booths with

the red and blue table lanterns. By seven, people arrive. I'm in my brightest green t-shirt and Life is Good baseball

cap sitting on my imported German stool with our trumpeter and pianist to my left, our bassist to my right. The drums are

directly behind me, making me wonder about ear plugs. After a couple of sound checks and a martini for the trum-

peter, we launch into Now's the Time, which also happens to be the name of our jazz combo. The notes jump off the

stage into the lights that make everything else too dark to discern except for a pair of pretty women off to the left.

Stephen the sound man knows his stuff, as the balance is good though I have a bit too much of drums which is not

his fault. The applause after each tune is more than polite, as is our playing, since we are the only band tonight, extending

our solos to stretch our sets and our creativity. A few times Bill pounds the keys rhythmically making me nearly jump

off my stool. John thrums his bass to the melody line of Cheesecake and the notes dive down close to where my soul

resides. Chris both drives us with his sticks and chases us, when the two-headed train of Jay on trumpet and me on

clarinet start hurtling up and down our arpeggios. When the horns come back in at the B section of Dippermouth

Blues, Chris has to switch to two-handed samba to keep up,
and the band has somehow managed to sound like twenty

pieces instead of five, a solid wall of charging music, tones
and overtones as if New Orleans suddenly came loose and

was bearing down on all of us, about to capsize, while the
music is keeping us afloat, playing us, while we play it,

the energetic momentum actual joy, an involuntary grin
on my face at the end of the tune, a surprised explosion of

whoops from the applauding audience, who didn't know that
was about to happen, that we were all about to forget ourselves,

buoyed by liberation, years of discipline, an invitation, a
venue, a reason to be one specific place at one moment in time.



the gift

Michael Favala Goldman

I bought you a pair
of expensive panties

the greenish blue
reminded me

of mermaids,
the sea.

The sign said
100% cotton.

(I knew this
was important.)

Wrapped in tissue
in a fancy white carton

with a meaningful card
on Valentine's Day

you opened the box
and the panties

nearly weightless
and pretty

but on closer examination,
nylon.

(The gusset
was cotton.)

You said
you would wear them.

The panties sat out a few days
a delicate little bunch

I put them
back in the box.



the dream window

Michael Favala Goldman

Georg Achen painting, 1903

The flat cabinetry. Her contoured body.
Her dark dress from the high collar
nearly to the floor.
The long white apron hanging
from her narrow waist.

She cannot bear
my looking at her.
She may be seeing
other men
through the window.

She is caught
between two worlds.
One outside
the square shapes of this
blue, quiet nook.

Soon this reverie will end
and possibility for change
will disappear
with the return
of how life is.



judge and judy

Gerald Yelle

They say we're their ancestors.
We thought they were ours.
They built a bridge
to the past that ran both ways
but had no future. It took longer
than they wanted. They said
it was like running in circles.
They lost the urge. They
laid their heads on their desks
and when they awoke they
rubbed their faces and when
they stood up they sometimes
kept their eyes open.
They knew where they were
even when they didn't. They
locked their doors and played
a game where there's a
blinding sandstorm and they
have to feel their way to
a past-life lookalike in a mask
in an Amazon fulfilment
center where they turn on fans
to lower the heat from
the rockets that reach for the
stars and leave us burning
for any kind of sign: anything
to say it's better there.



blink

Gerald Yelle

I like the way the world ends —especially in the morning. When it spreads the news on everybody's phones. When it says we should think twice about jumping off a sinking ship. I have an idea what it might mean. When I think about it, do you? Who things work out for. Whose heart worn on whose sleeve. People talk about it. Changing dollars for possessions and pills. What happens to books when you read them —they wind up in the burn pit. What happens when you sleep. You catch up. You influence behavior. Go A to B and miss out on C because you only sleep so many hours. How long since you played your part in the swelling. Since you closed the door decorated with soda cans on the multidimensional time-share. Your sisters were stuck in there. Generating messy loops of nothingness. Fingerprinting fretboards. Digging ditches in everybody's elements. They wiped the dishes and watched TV. They let their hands do the thinking. There were too many people. Not enough minutes. Everything happened the second they blinked.



everybody's in it for redemption

Gerald Yelle

Tired of waiting for facts. Anything
you say at this point triggers us.
It doesn't have to make sense. It doesn't
have to taste like meat. Or be frozen.
Or come from the slaughterhouse.
Or out of the hive. We don't need honey.
We don't need bees. ATMs are better.
They buzz with money. They sting us
in places that barely register. How
easily they appease us. With the way
the road curves by the clock factory.
By the way we treat our sense of smell.
Flying sideways in the glitter of broken
pond ice. And borrowed books. All
of us working the same day at different
hours. So it becomes an education
in lip stretching. A lesson in grooves.
Uniting circles. Bluing our wrinkles.
Wetting the clay in windows having
more mouths than eyes, more months
than seasons, more self-cleaning ovens
than stretch to protect our shins.
Touching how little gloss they wear.



lovechild ballads

Mary Jennings

The ballad of the “humor-impaired” woman

She is a pear-shaped woman,
ripe for the picking and
dumping of mud upon
by the two-bit comic
seeking amusement from his
hum-drum existence.

“Hey, Miss Snip, why are you so serious?
Don’t I get a laugh from you?”

He’s read
“take a long walk off a short pier” right,
but he still wants to ride her pride
off into the sunset, just because
her hormones took a dip,
her womb bore no kids.

She lives the values she’s been taught:
work hard and reap many rewards;
treat others as you want to be treated.
But no matter how hard she works
and how much she gives,
all she gets is a punch line
to the story of her life.

She’s wasted her graces
on one who gets his wit from the sewer,
which he casts her integrity in,
initially pretending
to be in awe of her,
thus taking her for a fool.

For her, it’s about the struggle.
If she wanted to find humor in it,
she would know where to look,
not from the two-bit comic
who uses humor to try to shame her
for her life choices.

She made that choice
because the only child she raised

was herself, aware early on
of denigration calling itself love.
She's better off alone
than to be mismatched with one
who wants to grind her to a pulp.
Like the two-bit comic
who couldn't get his wife
to laugh at his jokes.
Therefore, he tries them out
on somebody new,
with similar results.
Unlike the wife,
she doesn't live with him
and won't keep his house for him.
She's no fool there.

No man needed to make her honest.
She made herself honest,
which is what he can't handle,
thus the derision he calls humor.

The pear-shaped woman
bears fruit in other ways
and insists you don't let it go to rot.
It can nourish you,
or it can poison you,
depending on your constitution.

The pear-shaped woman's
sense of humor is alive and well,
both juicy and dry, tart and sweet,
whatever the situation requires.
She just doesn't find you amusing.

The ballad of body language

Playing I spy upon the one
out of sync with the rest,
the one in charge calls out,
"Shape up or ship out!
Your attitude is not welcome here."
Soon it is followed by a message
to the company;
"Take a look at the one who refuses
to be the glue holding us together,
and don't be like her!"

Myopia and illiteracy go hand in hand,
 not paying heed to the real message
 that says, "I'm in pain, I'm bleeding
 inside."

Once the pain is evident,
 empty words of caring
 come raining down,
 condolences for the not-yet-dead,
 preparing her for the ditch
 to be buried in and forgotten.

But, soon she will heal herself
 without any help from the cluster
 and walk away from it all,
 not mincing words when she says,
 "This company makes me sick."

Her walking away
 is all the body language
 she needs to deliver.

The ballad of common ground

Oh, *la folia* – madness!
 she gasped, recoiling
 since the day the wicked and stupid
 hit the streets, bitter
 and proud of knowing
 how to get a hold of a gun
 and use it on anyone in their way.

The world has forgotten
 it's better to get your information
 from the poet than the
 office rumor mill where,
 if they know you're a poet,
 they want to be entertained and inspired
 at no cost to them.

The poet has absorbed all expenses.
 Common ground ceased to exist.
 The art of being human
 was not grasped rightfully.
 Everyone expects the poet
 to be a soft touch,
 even after they push her in the mud.
 It's what she got for rocking the boat.
 That is the poet's job.

She wants to pick and choose her audience,
but the wicked and stupid will love her
for what they can get from her
and use to justify their position.

In this case, the poet
won't be held responsible
for the lethal revision
of her words to suit their appetites,
won't mindlessly spew out
"love conquers all"
so they can conquer the world,
won't recite elegies of the seasons
when it's open season on humanity.

This time, her love has conditions.
The conditions are to
Respect her space
Honor her being
Do no harm to any one being
Honor your own being
Honor every single being.

Refusal to honor these conditions
will only ensure that the divide remains.
The divide the wicked and stupid claim
they want to reach out across.
She is not that stupid.



pathways

Kimberly Kuchar

thrown by his stunned horse
splashing in a muddy pool
with electric eels

cut off from the world
staring at a black screen
without a charger

frog legs jumping
with the current
the politician speaks

giggling
rubbing socked feet
across the carpet



completing the circuit

Jerome Berglund and Kimberly Kuchar

track pad
automated door not moving
personhood unrecognized

*huddled under blankets
begging for some power*

futurist phantasmagoria
all runs on steam
but very jerky

*neurons
rapid-firing
until things slooow down*

beeps first time over the line
not again for further errors

*our little words—
so many bright screens
on this blue dot*



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she holds the moon
Leah Moses

miss sam

Don Noel

Grandma Samantha – Miss Sam to everyone in the village and most of her family – bought the land in that out-of-the-way Jamaican village for its view. She then had the big vacation house designed and built to command that view.

Not surprisingly, she was more than a little upset when the power company threatened to string a power line across her seascape two decades ago. In what has become legend, she sent Mr. Lenroy to find the line crew foreman and invite him up to the terrace for a glass of lemonade.

“Isn’t that a fine view?” she put to him.

The hillside slopes gently to the sea. Coconut palms, sea grape and acacia line the beach; beyond them, aqua-blue waters surround the shallow reefs that protect the fishing cove. Farther out is the deeper blue of the Caribbean, a horizon so broad you have to turn your head to take it in. (The village road – so twisty that having the power follow it was hopeless, hence the beach route – is to the rear, below the crest of the hill, unseen from the house or terrace.)

“Me dear ma’am, yu right. ‘Pon my word. Mos’ pretty.”

56 “And you can see that ugly poles and wires would ruin it. I built this house for that view, you know.” Knowing the old lady, one can imagine the dialogue.

The foreman protested: He had a job to do. She said of course, but couldn’t he put the line underground for a few hundred yards?

“‘Pon my word, dat be too dear. I got no order fe’ to do dat.”

She said she didn’t need the company’s power; she’d gotten by all these years with a generator. But she would pay for an underground connection to her house if he could put the whole section out of sight.

He hesitated. She suggested they go down to the road and select the point at which the line ought to be buried. They walked down together. She shook hands with him and said she was sure he’d do the right thing.

We assume she had a few bills in the palm of her hand. No one knows, because she never tells this story herself, and no one has the temerity to ask Samantha Robinson if she bribed the foreman. She and Harrison, who was still living then, were well enough connected that she could have gotten from the local member of parliament a political, top-down decision to spare her view. But that would have taken time, and meanwhile the poles would have gone up.

The crew skipped three poles and went on preparing the line beyond. They came back a few days later with a backhoe and underground cables. The view remained pristine.

"It's just as it was when Columbus anchored here." Miss Sam liked to say, "If he was smart, he came up here to get the lay of the land while his men filled the fresh-water casks down there at Black Spring."

The family loves the story. Everyone except Tommy, her number three grandson-in-law, who (when she is not around) calls it an example of colonialism. He leaves the room if the topic is brought up in her presence.

I don't know why Sally doesn't contrive to fly down when Tommy can't. She wants her children to know their cousins, of course; and she's been coming once or twice a year since she was a little girl herself. She couldn't leave her husband behind every time, but she could avoid bringing him so often. When he gets up on his liberal high horse she doesn't say much. It's hard to tell whether she's avoiding a fight with him or with the rest of us.

I'm an early riser down here. The neighbors' roosters wake me when the first faint blush of dawn touches the eastern sky outside our bedroom window. I hurry out to the patio to see if the Southern Cross has faded from view, and find the Big Dipper, surprisingly low in the north, faintly visible as Orion sets to the west.

Then the few thin clouds turn pink, and the stars disappear. I go back in to put on shorts and a shirt and sandals, tiptoeing so as not to waken Mary. I switch on the Mr. Coffee machine that Miss Jennie has set out in the kitchen, and walk down to the beach to witness the new day.

Mondays and Fridays there are men at the fishing cove preparing to go to "near sea" – no more than a quarter-mile offshore – to draw their pots. Tommy is ahead of me this morning. He just nods silently to the men. They nod back, and he stands at water's edge staring at the gentle waves lapping over the reef. I don't think he's gotten up to celebrate the dawn. Rather, he can't sleep, and comes down to feel sorry for himself.

I speak to the men by name, using the Jamaican formality: "Mister Hugh-Jen, Mister Matthew, Mister Clive." They all have village pet names – Backstep, Tumpa, Tuku – but only Miss Sam addresses them thus, another of her indulgences that Tommy finds reprehensibly mistress-to-servant. This morning Matthew returns my greeting in kind: "Good marnin', Mist' Charles." The patois on this part of the island sounds almost Irish. The others greet me "Marnin', boss," pronouncing "boss" as "ba'as."

"That's what they called the white sahib in South Africa, you know," Tommy mutters at me when I walk over to say hello. "'Ba'as,' just like that. I should think it would make you uncomfortable."

"Get off it," I tell him. "They like the little bit of respectful distance. I could say, 'Hey, Tumpa, just call me Chuck,' but you know it wouldn't do any good."

"Yes, ba'as," Tommy sneers.

I turn and walk back to help the men push their boat into the shallow sea until it begins to bob

in the frothy residue of waves that have broken farther out. When Hugh-Jen and Clive climb in and man the oars, I go up to the house to waken Mary with a cup of coffee.

Most of us adults have breakfast together maybe an hour later. Miss Jennie and Miss Sheila have fed the children, and two nannies keep an eye on them as they set out for morning play. My Mary has gone to the pool to swim laps, joined this morning by Sally. Dave and Barbara have taken a walk, starting where I was at the fishing beach, then following the damp strand to an undeveloped scallop of reef and sand to the west, where you half-expect to see Robinson Crusoe with his goat.

Miss Sam, at 78, has slept in, ignoring all her guests' activity. Miss Sheila, no matter how busy in the kitchen, has listened for the faint sound of her bathroom door latch. She then has taken her a cup of coffee, brown with sugar and milk, and comes out to tell anyone on the terrace that "Miss Sam up now."

Good smells begin to drift out of the kitchen. Miss Sam descends in her invariable baggy white shorts, and we all go to breakfast.

All except Tommy, who has already breakfasted. He likes to eat in the kitchen. It isn't all that big, and he's underfoot if they're busy feeding the children, but it pleases him to break bread with the help.

"Where's Tommy?" Miss Sam asks this morning.

"He ate earlier." Sally obviously hopes her answer will suffice.

No such luck. "In the kitchen?" Miss Sam asks.

"Well, I wasn't up yet, but I suppose so."

"I don't think I've seen him at breakfast since you arrived."

"Perhaps not, Grandma. I haven't kept track."

"I have," Miss Sam says crisply. "Please remind your husband that I invited him to a social occasion, not a fast-food restaurant. Tell him I miss the pleasure of his company at table. I'm sure you'll convey the message, dear. Now help yourself to another of Miss Jennie's biscuits and pass them along, please."

Tommy is at breakfast next morning, visibly sulking. Miss Sam draws him into conversation by talking about his children. She asks if he wouldn't like another biscuit. Before he can say no, she rings the little table bell for Miss Sheila to bring a hot batch. He hates that bell, but can only say "Thank you, Miss Sheila; sorry to trouble you."

Miss Sam cannot find his company at the table pleasurable, but she plays the dowager hostess with smiles.

And she knows that talking about his children is playing to his strength. He is a good father,

better than the rest of us. It's too easy to let the kids play under the watchful eye of Miss Sam's part-time nannies. Although she even hires a lifeguard to watch them in the pool or at the beach, Tommy is always there, and Sally joins him more often than not. It isn't that he doesn't trust the Jamaican caregivers; he just isn't ready to abdicate parental responsibility as the rest of us too easily do.

Mornings after breakfast, though, all of us join the kids at the beach. It's a ritual: As we finish eating, Miss Sam repeats the mantra she learned from Mr. Endley, a village elder when she first came, exaggerating the broad *ahh* of bath: "A sea bath a day keeps the doctor away." Then she rings the bell to tell Miss Sheila she can clear the table. We go to our rooms to put on suits and gather up towels and snorkels and paraphernalia, and Miss Sam leads the parade down the hill.

It's a pretty beach. Mornings before the sea breeze stirs up significant waves, one can snorkel out to inspect the reef. Occasionally someone sees something special like an angelfish or a baby stingray or even a barracuda or small shark. Then you're supposed to roll over to float on your back, spit out the snorkel tube and holler to everyone to come see – or look out, as the case may be.

We often swim out beyond the reef, far enough out that I imagine Malcolm or Aamon or Matthew, whichever of Miss Sam's lifeguards is on duty, would have a hard swim if any of us faltered. They watch us like a hawks from the wooden tower she had built. Miss Sam picked them because they are strong and swim well, and she paid for them to go to a school for lifeguarding. Mostly they work up at the hotel beach, but one of them always has to be available for Miss Sam.

"That's pretty exploitative, isn't it?" Tommy asked me one morning. "*Droit du seigneur*. We come first."

"Get off it, Tommy! They earn twice as much lifeguarding as they could fishing; when she calls them, she pays them more than they earn at the hotel."

"And unemployment comp in the off-season when nobody calls them?"

"Tommy, you know there's no such system in Jamaica! There isn't that kind of protection even for all workers in the States, for crying out loud. Be fair!"

"Fair is what it's about," he came back. "In Jamaica or the U.S., it isn't fair for rich people to summon poor people when there's a job, and let them hang by their thumbs when the boss doesn't need them."

I hadn't a ready answer for that – this was a sunrise conversation, and I'm not terrific at debate just after rising – so I dropped the subject.

The morning I'm speaking of now, there are no philosophical debates. The sea is as calm as it gets, and the water borrows its shimmering blue from a cloudless sky. Even Miss Sam, who sometimes just paddles in the shallows, puts on a snorkel mask and swims face-down with us the fifty yards to the notch where we can slip beyond the barrier reef.

All three couples are here this week, with seven children among us, the youngest of them six. Having grown up vacationing here, they swim like fish, but Cislyn and Ophelia, the nannies, always swim with them anyway, so there is a mob of us out beyond the reef. I look back and see Tumpa – Matthew, the day's lifeguard – standing on his tower, keeping track of us.

I swim over to Mary and our kids. We paddle among the big branching elkhorn coral, and watch tiny blue chromis fish darting among the flame-like cups of the fire coral. We admire a huge round brain coral, named for the pattern, with yellow-and-black sergeant-major fish, some no bigger than my thumb, hovering nearby. Ophelia swims over to join us as we dive to admire the broad sea fans and narrow sea whips waving on the bottom.

There's a general direction to our reef swims: We go out through one break in the reef, and come back in through another a hundred yards farther. If it's calm, we don't hurry. This morning Miss Sam is paddling along doggedly in the lead, while the rest of us linger and spread out. Mary and I and our kids follow a school of doctorfish, the ocean surgeon that looks purple if the light is behind it but flashes silvery when it turns into the light.

I almost don't hear Miss Sam's tiny, wispy "Help!"

60

She is at least fifty yards ahead of any of us. She's rolled onto her back, as we all had learned, to spit out the snorkel tube and call out, but I can't see what the problem is. To my left I see Tommy break into a vigorous crawl toward her, just as I am about to do.

I also see a blur of motion from my right. Tumpa. He must have spotted her the moment she rolled up. He has run through the shallows near shore and is swimming now. He has twice as far to swim as either of us, and had to clamber barefoot over the barrier reef and then swim again, but he has Miss Sam in his arms by the time we get to her.

"Here, Mist' Tommy, you hold her head, now. Mist' Charles, can you take her mask, please, so it don't squeeze her head?"

"Miss Sam? You hear me? It's Tumpa."

"I hear you, Matthew. You're a good boy. I just felt a pain in my chest. I think it's passing now. Just let me rest a moment and I can swim in."

"No, mon, I not be letting you swim in. We be towing you in like the Queen Mary, so the water lif' yu up. Mist' Tommy, you be the tugboat at the feet. Mist' Charles, you take the mid-ships."

And with effortless skill and gentleness he cradles her head against his chest and steers her toward the notch in the reef and in toward the shallows.

Miss Ophelia had raced in when all the commotion began and run up to the house; Lenroy has a car at the beach before we reach it. Miss Sam does in fact seem better – it will turn out not to have been a heart attack – but two of her daughters climb into the car in their wet bathing suits and they are off in a flash to a doctor’s office. They leave a worried Tumpa, agony written on his face.

“That was a helluva dash, Matthew,” Tommy says as they speed away. “I’m a pretty good swimmer, and I was a lot nearer. I don’t know how you got to her first.”

“Oh, I always keeps a sharp eye,” Tumpa says. “I see Miss Sam stop swimming, and I know right away somethin’ wrong. I be on my way before she call out. Miss Sam like a mama to me, you know, ba’as? Like a mother?”

If Tommy heard the “ba’as,” it doesn’t show. He drapes an arm around the young man’s shoulder and gives him an unmistakably paternal hug. “She’s going to be all right, Matthew,” he says. “You did real good.”



“beat turners,” a mix tape, annotated

Andrew Varnon

(An ode to coaching the boys high school tennis team at Greenfield HS, set in the pre-COVID spring of 2019.)

1. “Thousand-Dollar Car” by the Bottle Rockets. As a coach of a HS tennis team, I do a lot of driving around in a 20-year-old Honda Civic, with a Babolat “Let’s Rally, America” bumper sticker on the back. During the tennis season, the trunk is always full of tennis balls (a basket of practice balls and a case of unopened cans of Wilson game balls) and over the course of the season, the passenger seat and back passenger-side seat become cluttered with tennis paraphernalia: Tennis magazines, water bottles, spare balls and such. “If you’ve only got a thousand dollars, you might as well buy a good guitar. / Learn how to play it, it’ll take you farther than any old \$1,000 car.”

2. “Rise Up” by Bad Brains. Last season, the team had only six players on the roster, one short of what it takes to field a full team at a match. I resolved not to come back and coach a short team again in 2019, and I didn’t want to be the coach that presided over the end of the boys tennis program at Greenfield High School. So I got the AD to file an exemption to allow Middle Schoolers to play on the team and I actively recruited, taking a portable net to recess and playing tennis four-square with middle schoolers and handing out a flyer that told kids what tennis programs we have in town. It seemed to work: 13 players showed up to the first practice. There were more players than we had uniforms in the bin. So we did t-shirts. Our team mascot is the Green Wave, so I put a wave on the shirt with the message “Rise up” on it. I was thinking about this song: “Rise up, you. Wake up and rise. Come on!”

3. “Get Down, River” by the Bottle Rockets. At Greenfield HS, our historic rival is Turners Falls. It’s the town on the other side of the Connecticut River, which is on the other side of the Rocky Ridge where our town’s emblematic monument, The Poets Seat Tower, sits. Greenfield and Turners are both historic river towns, both old mill towns that grew to their present size on the power of brick factories built on the side of rivers. Greenfield is a tap & die town, whereas Turners is a paper town. Turners is also known as “power town” because of the hydroelectric dam. “I live in a river town,” the song says, “and it’s pretty little.”

4. “Goran Ivanisovic,” by We Are the Physics. A tennis podcast I listen to, “No Challenges Remaining,” did a tennis version of the “Eurovision” song contest and this song was one of the songs on the episode. It is episode 187a, and I have it saved on my phone. I’ve listened to it so many times in the car that my son Levi will request it. He has a favorite song – the one about Maria Sharapova. But the story of Croatian tennis star Goran Ivanisovic is the story of tennis in this far corner of the state, a story about persistence in the face of adversity. Ivanisovic was a 3-time runner up at Wimbledon before finally breaking through late in his career to win the championship, his only major victory. His last name is also similar to one of the Moldovan players on the team, Victor, who shared this sense of struggle: “He tried, he failed, he tried, he failed, he tried.”

5. "Growin' Up," by Bruce Springsteen. This song was recorded in 1972 about the time my father was playing tennis at a public park in Quincy, Illinois. It was during the tennis boom, and my dad says you had to wait to get on a court, even in Quincy. He knew a guy who owned the local Burger King franchise who used to bribe his way onto the court by offering free hamburgers to players who'd move along so he could play. The old timers tell me Greenfield was the same way: there used to be lights at Davis Street that would come on when you put in quarters. I didn't come across the song until I heard it on the film *Gracie*, which was about a girl in New Jersey in the late 1970s who broke onto the boys' soccer team. The Greenfield HS team picked up the nickname the "Davis Street Kids" during the 2019 season, in part because of our crop of upstart middle schoolers who did some "Growin' Up" on the tennis court. "When they said, 'Sit down,' I stood up, ooh, growin' up."

6. "Immigraniada," by Gogol Bordello. "We are the immigrant team," Victor said one day in my first season as coach. In high school, tennis is often an outsider sport, a place where kids who don't fit in on other teams end up. A sport of last refuge. In my three years, we've had players who were born in Malaysia, were adopted from China, whose parents fled Romania, or ran the Greek pizza shop downtown. "To hell with your double standards," the song says, "We come in rougher every time." I made it our team motto, that we say in call & response before every match -- Q: "What do we do, Wave?" A: "Crash the net."

7. "Living on a Prayer," by Bon Jovi. It's one of my favorite rumors in Greenfield: the one where Bon Jovi bought a house on Highland Ave. My understanding is that it started because somebody saw a moving truck unloading a truckload of musical instruments to an old Victorian house in the Highland section of town. The actual explanation is a little more pedestrian. A musician did buy the house, but the guy was the roadie for The Rolling Stones. What I like is that in Greenfield's imagination, if they're going to invent the musician who's going to move to town, it's going to be Jersey boy Jon Bon Jovi. "You live for the fight when that's all that you've got."

8. "The Mary Ellen Carter," by Stan Rogers. In the last match of the 2018 season, we had three players get off the bus for an away match against Chicopee Comp. We'd been losing all season, short of players, and we knew what was going to happen in this discouraging last match. When we walked off afterwards, I told them that the next season started right then. This Canadian folk song tells the story of a ship that went down in a storm, and the sailors who salvaged her. In the song, the deckhands refuse to give up on the ship, which I think is like our story as a team. "Those who loved her best and were with her to the end, will make the Mary Ellen Carter rise again."

9. "Road Runner," by The Modern Lovers. "I'm in love with Massachusetts and the neon when it's cold outside," sings Jonathan Richmond in this song. He talks about Stop & Shop and driving around town on his Road Runner scooter late at night. The song is set further east, but Richmond's song fits well in my mind for a team from Greenfield that takes hour-long bus rides from rural Franklin County down to the gritty cities in the Springfield metropolitan area, because these are the teams with us in the lowest division of tennis in Western Mass.

10. “Tennis Night in America,” by Jeff Richmond & Jane Krakowski. This is a skit from TV’s 30 Rock. It’s another song from the “No Challenges Remaining” tennis “Eurovision” episode. It plays on the cultural associations of tennis. I took a singles player and a doubles team to the Western Mass individuals tournament in 2019. My #1 singles player lost 6-1, 6-2 to a ninth grade third singles player from suburban powerhouse (and tournament host) Longmeadow, and my #1 doubles team lost to a clean-cut polo-shirted duo from college town Northampton. It made me think of “Caddyshack” and those “slobs v. snobs” movies from the 1980s. This song, with its “Kiss my ass, New York, because it’s tennis night, Hee Haw!” send off plays with those same cultural tensions.

11. “Shipping Up to Boston,” by Dropkick Murphys. This song is used as a bumper track for the Boston Red Sox – I think at Fenway Park as well, but I hear it on the radio play-by-play. It takes the pipe and drums Irish reel and kicks it up to a Southie hardcore bar band anthem. When I bought a second kilt to wear (my first is a family heirloom), I chose a green tartan so that I could wear it to Greenfield tennis matches. I first wore it to a match in 2018, after promising my players I’d wear it if they won a match – and they only won one all year that year. I wore it for the second Turners Falls match. We had lost the first one 2-3 in Turners, but in the home end of what I called “the Connecticut River Derby” we won it when two 7th graders playing at 1st doubles gutted out a three-setter, giving us a 3-2 victory. We ended up finishing one game back of Turners for the Tri-County league title, because we lost one of our matches to Pioneer Valley Christian Academy, but we did make the D3 Western Mass Team Tournament with a 12-4 record on the season.

12. (Bonus Track) “Crimson & Clover” by Joan Jett & the Blackhearts. Our reward was playing in Franklin County’s own “Battle of the Sexes,” against Frontier’s girls team. Frontier had chosen to play in the boys tournament because the school didn’t have a boys team and they had one boy playing on their team at 1st doubles. The rules said if he played, they had to enter the boys tournament. I told my players not to be Bobby Riggs, which got me quoted in the paper saying, “Chauvinists are losers and we came here to win.” We did win, like woke gentlemen, 5-0, although it featured a 1st singles battle that went to 11-9 in the 3rd sent super-tiebreaker. Then we lost to eventual champion Belchertown. I watched the film version of Battle of the Sexes in advance of our match against Frontier, where “Crimson & Clover” (the original) figures in a scene where Billy Jean King is getting familiar with her hairdresser at a dance. For the tape, I’m going with the Joan Jett version, which adds a little punk snarl.

¹ The bumper sticker is from a 2016 ad campaign featuring American tennis hopeful Jack Sock, who is a midwestern bohunk with a mighty forehand. The campaign archly plays on the American yearning for a male tennis hero to wave the flag and reanimate the sport, which has oft-reportedly been in malaise since the end of the Agassi-Sampras era. Sock is cast as a grinning presidential candidate, an avatar of Middle America, complete with shots of wheat fields and bald eagles. The idea is that he is the straight man, while the political operatives around him are building this “Colbert Report” hyper-Americana image around him.

² I marched in the Northampton Pride Parade in that kilt – several Greenfield tennis players were also there with the school’s spectrum club -- and there was a Methodist minister in the same group as me who had a kilt on. His side gig is as a piper in a pipe band and he told me that when they march in the Holyoke St. Patrick’s Day parade, people will run out on the street with plastic cups of beer to give them.



book review

Richard Wayne Horton

Review of Lanette Sweeney, *What I Should Have Said*. (2021, Finishing Line Press)

Lanette Sweeney began her career as a journalist. She has taught writing and women's studies at SUNY New Palz, and has published in Rattle, Gyroscope Review, Silkworm, Blue Collar Review, and Please See Me. Her short stories and essays have appeared in *Women: Images and Reality*. After her son Kyle's death, she wrote a large number of poems relating to her grief. She entered an MFA program to help get her poems published as a book, and to find a professional mentor. It was there that she decided to order the poems under the categories of the stages of grief.

Lanette in writing the book wanted to make a strong case that medication-assisted treatment for substance addiction should not be stigmatized or delayed, and that survivors can still restore joy to their lives even after the most devastating loss.

Lanette found that her poems had more meaning for her if arranged in such a way that they formed a continuing dialogue as regards the stages of her grief. She put them under four headings corresponding to 4 stages of grief: DENIAL AND DEPRESSION, ANGER, BARGAINING, and ACCEPTANCE & FINDING MEANING. Her son Kyle's poems, placed within the dialogue activated by Lanette's poems, seem to respond or to take up the same theme, and this bi-objectivises the theme, lighting it up.

As a reviewer not previously trustful of issue-related poetry, I was at first put off by the title, *What I Should Have Said*, which brought to mind the distressing social conditioning of women to blame themselves for whatever happens. Self blame is one of the poisons that get swirled around when addiction alters behavior and causes death, and I see women end up carrying most of the load, while men recover or forget more quickly. But this could be a misconception. People who have loved, whether male or female, cannot and will not put down their grief. And indeed they should not do so.

After reading the book, I knew the title was appropriate and natural. Survivors, regardless of their sex, always do blame themselves, and wonder what they could have done or said that would have made a difference.

I thought, when I first began reacting to *What I Should Have Said*, that I should argue with the narrator's self-blame. Children at times hide information from their parents, or manage how it is revealed, especially if they are gifted and independent. Parents at times wait to find out more about the situation before they sign on to remedial drugs. Drugs can have unpleasant side effects. In addition to this, Kyle, at the time of his death, was an adult, father and decider, with a wife and child. He had been in recovery for most of 2016. Lanette could worry about his struggles with dependency, but could not control him. While no response strategy would hold up for long, she thought maybe she should believe in him, believe in his ability to save himself. Advice was not having any effect. He told her that he was being offered Suboxone by his state detox doctor. It would put him in a steady state of addiction control, even if it was

not as effective as Vivitrol, which blocks opioid receptors. Vivitrol had become unaffordable when Kyle reached 26 and was no longer covered by his mom's insurance. On the phone with Kyle, she hesitated, saying nothing. She needed time. She didn't have time. The call came: he was dead. Grief scorns all excuses. That brings us to the first poem in the book: "Getting The News."

One of the questions Mark Luebbers posed to Lanette in the Straw Dogs Writers Guild interview of Sept. 13, 2021, was, why share personal grief with strangers? I've wondered that too. Lanette answered that she couldn't hold it in. She wanted someone to bear witness to her terrible grief. Mark asked, does writing a poem "transform" grief? Lanette answered, grief can make us open to transfiguration. Expressing our experiences in poetic form makes us feel them on a more primal level. "Because poems are not perfectly direct...they work on our consciousness at many levels, like dreams. Presenting familiar ideas in a new form can open our minds to think differently about them and may cause us to have new insights and deeper understandings."

I was surprised at how well put together Lanette's poems were. They work very well in well crafted poetic forms while possessing a clean and emotion- powered voice that can deliver a jolt. This takes the poetic form out of the clouds and puts it where you hear it as you live your life. The voice has not been merely poured into a form. It owns the form; the form does what it was intended to do. It kinetically pushes and directs the flow. The poem remains a living thing. The words, while not posturing or glamming, are in the right place, as a body's organs must be. Lanette has pointed these poems like guns. I believe and pay attention to them.

66

One of the recurring themes of this book is that what we say and write can at times be ameliorative or even deceptive. Reality is a mess. In order to communicate something that can help or guide anyone, or deceive them if that's the intention, the writer has to pick things out of the chaos. That process assigns them a new importance and referential structure. Poems are in their manner newly created worlds.

One of the reasons why reviewers have said that *What I Should Have Said* can help grieving families of drug overdose victims is that the battles are all there in the poems. There is an end, and it is not forgetfulness or escape, but integration. It is not possible or right that grief can ever go away, but survivors can grow around their grief. They can encompass it, and find love and purpose in their lives in spite of it.

Copies of *What I Should Have Said* are available from the author via Bookshop or Amazon, locally from the Odyssey Bookstore in South Hadley, Broadside Books in Northampton, and Booklink in Thorne's Marketplace in Northampton, or from finishinglinepress/product/what-i-should-have-said.





even the trees are dreaming
Leah Moses

the real thing

Thomas Rowland

By the time I reached Ithaca the rain had stopped. Still, the featureless terrain of middle Michigan passed by monotonously like a misty gray curtain. The time since I had picked up the rental car at the airport in Detroit seemed—as, in fact, it was—several hours ago. This state, I thought to myself, is a good deal larger than it appears to be on the map. Alma, Mt. Pleasant, Clare, Kalkaska, they all passed slowly by.

I was here in Hemingway country (“Up in Michigan”) to visit Jonathon, an old high school friend that I hadn’t seen for a good 30 years or so. It was so long ago, in fact, that I had the unsettling sense of heading towards a different time dimension altogether. Moreover, this was not simply a nostalgic visit to re-new an acquaintance from the past. No, I saw this visit in a much more philosophical light. One that had been dwelling on my mind as I passed my 60th year. But I’m threatening to get ahead of the story here. Let’s start at the beginning.

Jonathon had been a very bright, fairly straight-and-narrow fellow when I knew him in high school, but after graduation his life had taken a rather bizarre and certainly unexpected turn. Maybe it was his participation in the 1968 Chicago riots that had led him to suddenly drop out of society, moving into a barn on a farm in the Lower Peninsula, abandoning a promising future in law, family, and all the usual social conventions. And there he had been ever since.

66 Now I wanted to see this for myself. Had he become a different person? Was he content with this extraordinary abandonment of social conventions? His path in life was almost 180 degrees from mine, which was the usual well-regulated one, with career (pediatrician), a loving spouse, family (three gifted children), satisfying hobbies (tennis, musician), well-groomed suburban colonial home—all the conventional constructs of modern life. All the things I was “supposed” to be. I suspected, too, that beneath this visit, too, lay an important question—could I have (or, importantly, should I have) changed the “script” and lived an unfettered life of personal freedom in Jonathon’s manner? At age 60, such questions can begin to weigh on one’s mind. In any event, it was now too late, but still the issue was an unsettling one.

As I drove along, I tried to resuscitate from my memory bank the world that Jonathon and I had shared back those many years ago in high school in Lansing. It was obvious that a lot had been lost in my mind after all those years. I believe we had met as Boy Scouts. He lived just down the street and we would walk to school together every day. His father ran the local automobile supply store. We played sports together—football, basketball—and frequently we would double-date to drive-in movies. His success with the girls far exceeded mine, I painfully recalled. After graduation we went to different universities and gradually lost touch. What he was *like* as a person, however, I had trouble bringing to mind.

Now as I neared the farm where he lived, I began to feel a bit of apprehension. Would this long-delayed encounter be pleasant and uplifting, or was there going to be a painful recognition that time changes everything? That nothing stays the same. That we can’t bring back the past. Was I fooling myself thinking this visit was designed simply to be a personal exploration of options

for leading one's life? Was I, instead, wishing that nothing would change, that I would find a Jonathon whom I knew, and who knew me, the *real* me before I took on the roles of adulthood? How disturbing were these questions!

As I rolled down the drive and opened the car door, my fears were thankfully put to rest. There was Jonathon, looking a bit different, balding, with a long beard, but happy, and laughing, and so glad to see me that our embrace was like the lifting of a dark cloud. "Samuelinks!" he cried, this being the nickname that he, and only he, had called me by many decades ago. He was, in fact, the same Jonathon.

The inside of his dwellings in the barn was exactly as I had pictured. A total jumble of everything that only a person living alone would tolerate. We sat on a pile of old blankets and shared some apple cider. He was obviously over-joyed to see me and began to immediately recount memories of our times together that I had forgotten. We drank our first whiskey together when he stole a bottle of his parents' Southern Comfort when they were away. We were trying to design a rocket that, now in retrospect was obvious, would have exploded like a pipe bomb if we had ever built it. The day after graduation we took a trip together to Muskegon, a town where we had been told the girls were all "hot." When we got there, however, there was not a "hot girl" to be seen. Things like that. We sat for a couple of hours in a joyous conversation of remembrance.

I had noticed that there was no clock or other time-piece to be seen. "Right," he said. "The first thing I did when I got here was to get rid of all things that would govern and dictate my activities, that would disturb by freedom. And time was one of these. I haven't been aware of 'what time it is' for many years now." This, of course, was for me the first real culture shock of my visit, being one whose every moment is designed to be "on time." My mind recoiled. How would one know when to eat dinner? To go to bed? When would one know the coffee shop was opening for a morning latte? Or when to turn on the evening news, or how long to cook the lasagna. Whew! Time may have a strangle-hold on my life, but how would I do without it? Jonathon, on the other hand, seemed to be faring quite fine.

The other thing that was obviously missing was a bed. I pointed this out. Jonathon grew more serious. "I insist on sleeping outdoors," he said, "so as not to lose the magic." (By "the magic" I assumed that meant something like the glory of nature. But I decided not to ask.) He did confess that sometimes in the frozen winter evenings in Northern Michigan he would ask to sleep inside the farmer's house. (When I returned home, I did once suggest to my wife that we sleep outside on the patio, so as to not lose the magic. This was met with the expected look of disbelief, often witnessed in troubled marriages.)

"Jonathon, you've really done it here. You've done what many of us only dream about—finding a contented and happy life without the incumbrances of societal restrictions and conventions. But, you know, as much as I would fantasize on such a life's path, there are many things that make up my life that to me give it real meaning. And I don't think I could part with them." I described for him the typical day in my highly regimented life, devoted to on-time commitments of job, family, church, community activities, sports, and hobbies. "I know this seems disgustingly overly-organized to you. And it's just for avoiding this regimentation that you elected your existence here. But if I wasn't so organized, I wouldn't be able to do these things, all of which are important to me and which provide me a great deal of enjoyment."

He smiled kindly, not critically. "Are you sure of that? Do these 'things' really bring you pleasure? Or are they just the expected constructs that you've made to try to give your life a 'meaning?' Could it be that you are simply being imprisoned by them? It's not for me to say, of course. That's the way I felt about my life. Obviously, everyone has the right to live their existence as they wish. But think for a moment, do the activities to which you are so committed serve as a prison rather than as a necessary blessing?" Of course, I had no answer—because, in fact, I did not know the answer.

My visit was not providing me with any clear-cut picture. Stepping back to the days of high school graduation, I would have never figured that Jonathan would be happy taking the life path that he did. But it appeared that he, in fact, had successfully done it. What had "turned the switch" was a mystery to me.

I was tempted to raise with my old friend a more profound philosophical issue: he had elected the path of "freedom" instead of what he viewed as the prison of "conventional societal constraints and expectations." But freedom to do what? For many people it's the message in Eric Fromm's "Escape from Freedom." We need, it can be argued, to create cultural conventions to best live a life that *avoids* freedom. One that instead provides happiness and fulfillment derived from family, job, and structure. Total freedom, goes this argument, would be a pathway to loss of meaning in life, a prelude perhaps to insanity. (I decided in the best interests of all to forego this argument. I did not want my visit to become an antagonistic one. I was here to explore ideas. But I did wonder if this line of reasoning would have upset him.)

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Considering what I had heard about Jonathon's life style, I was surprised to learn that he was not, in fact, a hermit. He had a number of friends, whom he would visit in his run-down old Camaro (he figured a 10-mile trip as a limit). He even recently had had a serious girlfriend, but a break-up the week before my visit had left him quite depressed. "Sex," he told me with a far-off look in his eye, "is a slippery thing." I'm certain that he did not mean this in an ironic or humorous way. Instead he meant that a sexual relationship seriously complicates one's life, particularly when such emotional connections are ruptured. Indeed, it was the only point in time during my visit that I could detect any sense of disappointment with life on his part. I guess that in abandoning societal conventions one is still left with certain emotional and physical needs.

Most of his limited belongings he had either scavenged or obtained by barter. His annual income, he estimated following my direct inquiry, was about \$250, which he earned doing odd jobs in the area (he was particularly adept at fixing CD and DVD players). "So," he grinned, "not only do I live my days in complete freedom, I have no income tax return to file. See? My life is good!"

"So, Jonathon, what do you do for fun?"

"I'm not sure that 'fun' is the right word. My biggest emotional 'charge' is to visit the shore, sit on the beach, and look out on Lake Michigan. I sometimes do this for hours. The Lake is the Mother Water, you know, a Mother that hovers over us and provides us the spirituality of our being. You and I could go tomorrow and you will feel, I know, the uplifting of your soul to a better place."

I demurred, claiming a need to get the rental car back to Detroit. I had to admit to beginning to feel a bit uneasy about my visit. Was this the “real” Jonathon, just 30 years later in a different place? It had looked that way at the start. A successful abandonment of social convention for the benefit of personal freedom. His story teaching us that it can be done. Now I wasn’t so sure. Maybe beneath this “show” there was something else. Something more disquieting.

This all occurred about six months ago. But I still can’t cease thinking about it. There is probably not an adult person who, at some time or another, hasn’t felt the desire to “jump ship,” to escape what is viewed as a routine, hum-drum existence for a “better” life. One looks in the mirror and says, “What am I doing here? This life isn’t what I expected.” It’s a drive that a good many have felt, a wish to change roles in the play of life. So, legion are the stories of successful New York City lawyers and financial advisors who abruptly in mid-career leave it all, move up to rural Vermont, and raise chickens, or manage a bed and breakfast, or write novels. One supposes that such a shift of life style has resulted in greater happiness and contentment, but, then, one never knows for sure. (It is not easy to suspect that after a year or two of this quiet rustic existence, such individuals begin to miss the adrenaline surges of their earlier lives in the big city, for the better or worse.)

But Jonathon did not simply shift his life style but, instead, basically “chucked it all.” It seems to me that most of those who have made the decision to abandon life style A for life style B usually have not gone too far from the beaten societal path. Running a B&B or becoming a “gentleman farmer” is not truly casting aside a “normal” existence. In this story, Jonathon’s failure to follow societal expectations are, on the other hand, the “real thing,” or maybe call it “the full Monty.” No part-way measures here. He has elected to ignore societal expectations to create a path of life which is *authentically* for him a new one. And no turning back—a total commitment.

There are some troublesome questions here that I feel compelled to share with you. First, does such a total abdication of an expected life actually *work*? For Jonathon, at first blush, the answer seems to be “yes.” He is happy, content with this life, not yearning for more. This is more than can be said for the helter-skelter existence many of us lead to keep our daily lives afloat in a conventional way. But just when such a conclusion seems reassuring (at least for those contemplating such an “escape”), there are some clues that maybe—just maybe—Jonathon’s decision was not so rational after all. He begins to speak in terms of mysticism (Lake Michigan is the “Mother Water”), leading one to suspect that perhaps in the events that occurred in the Chicago riots of 1968 he suffered from physical—or at least emotional—brain trauma, and that he “dropped out” not by weighing pros and cons but rather by the effect of mental derangement. That is, it could be that he’s *just crazy*. Does one have to be truly “out of one’s mind” to make such a decision to abandon societal expectations? Is that the only way it would work? Is such a path impossible for a sane person with certain expectations from life?

That line of thinking leads to another question. Does one have the power to consciously decide his or her patterns of behavior in life? Most of us behave as if we are actors in a play. We have certain roles to play—husband, father, insurance salesman, church deacon—that define our existence. Do we, or can we, or should we consciously decide which script to follow.

Perhaps one ventures to say "no." For the great majority, the play is followed passively. One graduates from college, gets married, has children, maintains a home and family, works 9 to 5, takes regular vacations, has friends, attends a certain church—all as if this was a fixed pathway. And most are seemingly, for the most part, very content with this. In fact, if any parts of this role-playing fall apart—divorce, fired from the job, serious illness—one's life can become a tortured existence. Conforming in one's life to social and cultural expectations pays many rewards. But is such passivity always justified? Again, in everyone's life, there are moments when the answer is a resounding "NO!," but, in reality, few would venture far beyond the lines of the play. But Jonathon did it. Could you? Should you?

And then finally—and maybe this is the most difficult philosophical question—should one consider Jonathon as a hero? From certain existential standpoint, indeed, he is. He has carved out a new existence by his own volition that, for him, is better than the fixed, expected one that lay ahead for him. His story, from one perspective, embodies the power of the human mind to forge a life based on his own free will. On the other hand, is he a coward? Does this story reflect nothing more than myth, perpetuating a false idol of "dropping out" which, in reality is a phony one? Hemingway warned us about this. Outside the fabricated societal world there is no magical never-never land of happiness and contentment, he said. Instead, there is "nada"—nothing. An abyss. The *real* person, with true courage, recognizes this and works to create meaning in life with what he or she has.

So, then, the bottom-line question that won't go away: could I be—or, rather, could I have been—Jonathon? I am troubled by the realization that I will, sadly, never know.





Steven M. Johnson

just a lamp

Meg Vlaun

-2022-

It sits on the buffet unassembled, still in plastic. The six-inch shade, parchment shot through with gilt filaments, lays on its side. Its base is a charcoal grey hollow stone circle, eight inches in diameter. Inside of this, about seven inches tall, reclines a golden woman with long hair, her spindly legs akimbo: she's engrossed in a book. Because my husband Brian and I are overstimulated by clutter, our house is sparse; this deposit on the buffet screams disorder.

Disorder, indeed.

I hate myself for loving this lamp. I love the luster of the woman's skin and hair. I love that she reclines in a sort of crescent moon – a detail that implies mysticality, daydream, fairytale. This is how I see myself.

Yet the gift is unwelcome. Mom sent it for my 42nd birthday. I want to unwrap it, screw in a bulb, and set it somewhere to illuminate the pages of the book I'm currently reading, Margaret Atwood's *The Robber Bride*. But I'm not sure I can. I also want to throw it away.

-1980-1990-

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Mom says she always wanted to be a mother. When her first child was born without meds ("There was no pain, just discomfort!"), she was beside herself in love. She cradled the black-haired cherub in her arms, crooned to her the Joe Cocker song, "You Are So Beautiful," and named her Rebecca. Soon, Rebecca's hair grew strawberry blonde. Mom says her first word was "strawberry."

Mom wanted another child to complete her nuclear family. This time, she wished for a boy. In the hospital after mom delivered me, 18-month-old Rebecca visited with shining curls, a pink, layered dress, and white patent leather Mary Janes – she carried to mom's bed a single long-stemmed rose. This moment is captured in a photograph hung on a wall above the ebony upright piano in mom's living room. Mom did not sing Joe Cocker to me; that was Rebecca's song.

Rebecca began Suzuki piano lessons at age two. This method does not require the player to read music; it focuses instead on mother-child connection and playing "by ear" through repetition. I recall them sitting close on the piano bench while I lay on a blanket nearby. I recall Rebecca playing for houseguests who ogled over her potential.

Mom and Dad divorced before my fourth birthday. Mom received full custody. By the time I was five, mom moved Rebecca and me from Lima, NY, to Silver Spring, MD, for a job opportunity. Mom worked full-time; Rebecca and I became latchkey kids. Mom wanted Rebecca to continue piano even though she was no longer available for Suzuki, so she found a piano instructor nearby, and we both took lessons weekly after school. Somewhere around this time, I recall

mom's frustration with my hair. "You have *such* a sensitive scalp," she'd chide, as she raked a comb along my scalp and tears leaked from my eyes. Wherever she placed barrettes, they tore the hair and fell out. So, mom gave me a bowl cut. On piano lesson days, Rebecca and I walked alone together, hand-in-hand, south along busy Connecticut Avenue for nearly a mile to our teacher's house. Sometimes, cars honked. Sometimes, people howled at us out their windows. I'm not sure why, but we decided it was because they thought I was a little boy holding a little girl's hand – and somehow that merited attention. But in that scenario, I didn't want to be the boy: *I am a girl!*

I didn't mind those long walks, though. Beyond Connecticut, we passed through a park overhung by giant trees. For long months, eastern tent caterpillars littered the blacktop there, and I busied myself squishing them under my shoe to see how far I could make their fluorescent green guts fly.

Our piano teacher was kind enough. She was patient with me, although I never practiced. I was an excitable child, loud and rambunctious when aroused. I enjoyed singing, dancing – cartwheels and somersaults – swings. I wanted to do *gymnastics*, not piano. It doesn't surprise me that my excitability translated poorly to ivory keys. When I practiced, Rebecca shouted down the stairs, "Stop *clonking* the keys!" For years, so often she made this accusation (uncorrected by mom – perhaps even reinforced by mom) that I became insecure about playing and less and less inclined to practice. When coerced to play, it became my habit to depress the damper pedal so it would not bother Rebecca or mom. Only in my home today, alone, do I play without that pedal.

It makes sense to me now that mom felt she needed to compensate, to be both mother and father. Strict regulation was our normal. We learned to follow mom's rules or face her rage: punishment came in the form of screams, scraping fingernails, sharp spansks. When she left for work, our rule was to finish breakfast, clean our dishes, take turns practicing, then walk to school. Our time on the piano was meticulously allocated: one half hour for my sister, one half hour for me.

One morning when I was in fifth grade, I finished breakfast and knew Rebecca was done on the piano downstairs, but I did not want to practice. Mom had just left for work. As I meandered out of the kitchen to go brush my teeth, mom burst back through the front door. Her skirt and raincoat swirled about her calves as though she were the eye of a storm. She was out of breath, dewy, her shoulder-length hair disheveled. She'd run all the way from the southbound merge ramp between Viers Mill Rd and Connecticut Avenue, where she'd merged into another vehicle, destroying the front of her brand-new Dodge Colt Vista. Mom shoved past me in the entryway and sought the kitchen's wall-mounted rotary phone: she needed to call work, insurance, a tow truck, etc.

I don't remember feeling anything about the accident. Mom was clearly okay, and I couldn't care less about a car. What I remember, instead, was crippling terror when she appeared in the doorway: *Oh no, I'm supposed to be practicing piano – she caught me! She's going to murder me!* When I realized she hadn't re-materialized just to catch me red-handed and was too preoccupied to notice I wasn't practicing, what replaced that terror was warm levity. Even still, I worried she'd punish me after things calmed down ...

For eight years I was forced to do a thing I disliked whilst being told I was bad at it. *Not good enough* and *not as good as your sister* echoed in my head no matter what we both did: piano, painting, basketball, volleyball, softball...I began to hate myself for not being good enough. I began to hate my sister for being good enough. This fueled enmity between us, a fierce, scrappy competition for mom's approval. We fought like rabid cats and probably still would if I hadn't realized, at 36, that when mom was out of the equation, I rather liked my sister.

-2022-

When I communicated with mom just over a year ago that I was cutting ties, then asked her not to reach out, I thought I was clear about what that meant: please don't contact me. I meant not by phone, email, text, snail mail – not even gifts. Perhaps I was not as clear as I could have been. She reached out via every medium that same day. I had to block her. But I cannot block snail mail. Brian tried to hide from me mom's mail arrivals, but that got awkward with very large birthday and Christmas gifts. *What could it be? Should we trash it or donate it, unopened? What if it's valuable? What if this card contains money?* We realized that I must at least open the gifts to decide what to do with them.

I suspect I know why she still send gifts, despite (or because of) my never reciprocating. Another medium I cannot block is family members. In the past year, she's sent four ambassadors to appeal to me. Their messages all echoed the same theme:

she is miserable

look how much you're hurting her

you're being unreasonable

it's selfish to keep your children from her

you should learn to forgive

if you truly loved her, you would reconcile

during this difficult time, you have a family obligation

Mom's ambassadors prod me to compassionate her; they don't see that I do have compassion. I don't blame mom for her behavior; she is a product of her upbringing. I just cannot have compassion for her at the expense of compassion for me. Her desperation for love breaks my heart because I know how it feels to be empty and alone. Yet I'm her daughter, not a spouse, therapist, nor puppet. Her obligation was to raise me to live a fulfilling life. My obligation was to go live said fulfilling life. Not only can I not fix her, but I cannot satisfy my obligation if I'm tethered to her by shame.

- 1980-2000 -

My memories of mom's calm, affectionate, undivided attention are few. Between the ages of two and four, she'd come to me at night when I suffered pain in my lower legs. "Growing pains," she comforted. That nighttime mom was loving. She walked me to the bathroom to relieve my bladder and take a sip of water, then walked me back to my bed; by the time we returned, the pains subsided. There were early mornings during that era when she allowed me to crawl under her covers, her legs so familiarly warm and prickly. At night, we knelt bedside to recite "Our Father" and "Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep."

Mom's sense of humor can be delightful. Her jokes are irreverent, crass, bordering on socially taboo; in adolescence, they sent me and my sister into fits. As I entered sixth grade, mom moved our little family (her, Rebecca, and me) to Frankfurt for a three-year work opportunity. One purple midwinter afternoon, the three of us ate lunch together in a restaurant in Garmisch. The room was warm, rich, wood-paneled, and close. A fire crackled in the corner. German patrons occupied booths all about us; we were the only Americans. Germans are more reserved than Americans, so it didn't surprise us that they didn't succumb to fits of laughter the way we did. That day, mom said something we all found riotous; the three of us snorted and laughed. Tears flooded our eyes. I wet my pants. Neighboring booths stared at us in disapproval.

As a teen, mom let me place toppings on the Friday night pizzas we consumed on trays laid out upon the family room floor while watching movies. I remember spacing pepperonis in perfect concentric rings. She brought us together for table games during Forced Family Fun Nights – sometimes fun, sometimes not. We sang songs in harmony around campfires. Mom hummed those songs to herself during house chores and on hikes. When she visited me in Paris when I was 20 and studying abroad, we attended a Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* concerto amidst the jewel-like stained glass of Sainte-Chapelle; on our walk back to the hotel afterward, we serenaded the vacant streets with "Spring" – our soaring, playful notes ricocheted off ancient stone walls back at us. The night was magic.

Her role as a single mom employed full-time was challenging; by her example, mom taught me persistence and strength. Through our travels together, she also taught me to be open to diverse experiences. Yet too often my home environment bounced between roars of laughter and roars of rage, the in-between characterized by anxious tension: hope for one, fear of the other. What was missing was predictability. What was missing was calm. What was missing was what I needed.

- 1994 -

In Germany, we lived in a small town named Altenhain and attended Frankfurt International School in Oberursel, thirty minutes away. There were no US families living nearby; nobody in our neighborhood spoke English.

I had no complaints, really, about loneliness. I was fine as a solitary child. My friends were books. Flying under mom's radar benefited me in this: she didn't have time (nor perhaps interest) to screen my reading selections. By seventh grade, I developed a penchant for gore and exclusively read Stephen King. In each novel, I met a protagonist that blurred boundaries between hero

and villain; in each of those protagonists, I recognized a bit of myself. Alone with my books, my imagination ran rampant: I absorbed their powers. Like *The Shining*'s Danny, I shone. Our house was definitely haunted, and those ghosts communicated with me. More than once, I fell asleep with my eyelids pasted open in dread. Like *Firestarter*'s Charlie, my body temperature rose when I angered. My ears grew red hot. I knew that if needed, I could fling fire.

In eighth grade, finally, I made some friends. We were permitted to try out for JV basketball with the high schoolers, so I tried out and made the team. I remember those girls warmly. In the locker room, my bestie Stephanie used a pink, floral deodorant (a German brand I'd never seen in the US). As she did, she'd laugh, "Dee-O for my B.O.!" I was envious of her deodorant, so she let me borrow some. I thanked her, sprayed it on my pits, then relished smelling like Stephanie for the rest of the afternoon. Our team traveled across Europe to compete against other schools in the International School Sports Tournament league. We stayed together at host homes in pairs and trios. We bonded. At away games, we threw our arms around one another's shoulders atop the bleachers and sang "We are the Champions." While belting "We Will Rock You," we stomped our feet, sending tremors throughout the gymnasium. In Prague at the championship, I scored a layup in the final quarter, tying the game. A teammate sunk another, and we won second place for the division. My memories of that evening are tangy with the scent of Bengay.

My teammates maintained an ongoing gentle ribbing of me, though, for my hairy legs. The hair was dense and dark brown – like an ape, mom always said. The rest of the team shaved. As our season ended, I attended a sleepover at Stephanie's house to celebrate. With only a little prodding, I consented: the team banded together about the bathtub to shave my legs for the first time. The reason I hadn't shaved them yet, though, was because my sister and I weren't allowed to shave until we had our first period. (It turned out I was a late bloomer and wouldn't menstruate until I was sixteen.) When I climbed out of Stephanie's mom's car onto my driveway the following morning, I knew instantly from her scowl and stance that mom knew I'd broken her rule. Something hardened then rolled over in my stomach. I hovered beside Stephanie's mom for a beat, wishing that with her cool, confident demeanor she'd take me back to her home, where there was fresh bread and real fruit jams and Nutella and down comforters. *How does she know?* I wondered.

I was so susceptible to superstition. It was a small leap in that instant to be convinced of mom's clairvoyance. I believed she knew not only when I broke her rules, but also my thoughts, my intentions, she knew I was evil (selfish, deceitful, disobedient) down to my bones. After that moment and on until graduation, I lived in our home with an undercurrent of terror... a fear of getting caught-out and admonished for who I *really* am inside my head. Indeed, mom always knew when I broke her rules. I didn't understand then that she was following the evidence – that she could feel the TV's warmth with her palm and know I'd turned it on; that she spied the friend clambering out the front door as she opened the garage; that she found the empty potato chip bag buried in the kitchen trash...

Maybe in that sense, Stephen King's *Carrie* was the perfectly timed protagonist for me. It did not escape me that Carrie's mom was a caricature of my own or that my shaving incident loosely paralleled Carrie's tampon incident. But Carrie was stronger than me. Angrier. Unafraid. As I read her, I felt the warm pig's blood sluicing through my hair and the tang of iron on my tongue,

and I recognized my own rage. I understood that I could do something about it: I could slam doors, lock them, and burn it all to the ground – with everyone still inside. No one could hurt me if I did not wish it, not even my mother. A fierce independence and defensiveness brewed within me.

It was my inner Carrie that gave me strength to push back and pull away from mom in late adolescence. Carrie helped me solidify my decision to run off with a calm, steady, self-assured man at 21. I invoked Carrie to cut ties with mom altogether when I was 40.

-2022-

Some days, when the mood is right, I crank my car's volume knob hard. Lady Gaga comes on, singing of how her mom did her makeup and told her "There's nothing wrong with loving who you are 'cause he made you perfect, babe," and I cry. I cry because I wish I had a mother who'd said these things to me. I wish I had a mother who connected with me, taught me to regulate, instead of banning me from my sister's birthday parties because we'd fight. I wish I had a mother who told me I'm awesome just the way I am, rather than accusing me of being "too sensitive" when her biting jokes hurt me. I wish my mom said that I deserve to shine, instead of implying I'm selfish and ungrateful for wishing she'd return to the store for more perm solution after she'd finished my sister's hair, so there'd be enough for my whole head: "Just put a barrette on the left!" I dream of a mother who entertained my thoughts and musings, instead of calling me "argumentative" for expressing my truth. I *still* want a mother who prods me toward my goals instead of doubting: "What if you fail?" I wonder about my life's potential had Lady Gaga's mother been my own. When I hear that song, I weep. But that doesn't feel quite the same as grieving over mom.

Mom once told me that if I ever "got into trouble," I could come to her – that I could tell her anything. But because I so feared her fury and believed she could mind-read, my trust for her never developed. I knew I would not tell her my secrets; very young, I began to hide from her my errors, my failures, my reality, and I became hypervigilant of my virginity. Without trust, love and connection cannot form. They say that grief is love with no place to go. Can grief exist where love did not?

-1997-

I made varsity volleyball along with a handful of friends senior year back in Silver Spring. On the court, we were raucous. Marvella had watched Olympic volleyball over the summer and witnessed the coolest phenomenon: when a player was up to serve, as the ball rolled toward her along the floor, she used the tip of her shoe to pop it up into her hands. Marv demonstrated for us: it was glorious. No leaning over to grab the ball from the floor. Energy conservation! We all tried it. If the ball was not bouncing too much, it worked – and it looked so *badass*. Once we started, none of us could stop.

Mom attended all my sports competitions; her reliability never faltered. At our first game, within a few sets, she appeared in the bleachers. When it was my turn to serve, someone from the opponent's team slung the ball along the ground toward me. I popped it up into my hands with my toe, more than a little pleased with myself. A few dribbles, then I tossed it with

my left hand. My right connected soundly with the center of the ball. On the follow-through, my forearm angled forward, fingers down. Launched thus, the ball lifted just long enough to float over the net, then cut down sharp, the topspin sending it hard to the floor before our opponents could react.

“Ooooooh...ACE!” my teammates roared in unison, their right arms arced high over their heads, then descended with a *clap!*

I shot an excited glance up at mom. She scowled back at me, lines pinched deep between her brows. *Wait, what?* Elation transmuted into confusion.

The ball rolled toward me along the floor again, and I popped it up into my hands, but mom’s glower was now in my head. This serve hit the net: side out. *What the hell?*

Mom’s scowl never subsided over the course of the game. I could feel the weight of her distant disapproval encumbering me each set. Normally, when Leanne and I clasped sweaty forearms to launch ourselves into position after the serve, we did so with a shared smirk and mischief in our eyes, convinced that *this* play would stick. That embrace was our superpower. But suddenly, I could not meet Leanne’s gaze. I felt ashamed without knowing why.

After the game, as the team dispersed, mom grabbed my upper arm with steel fingers and hissed in my ear, “I am ashamed of you. You are so cocky, kicking the ball up like that!”

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My scalp prickled. She’d been inside my mind again. I thought about the past two weeks of volleyball and shriveled inside myself. *I am cocky.* I didn’t want to be cocky – I didn’t want people to think I was cocky. When had I allowed myself to become cocky? I’d never let it happen again. I never wanted to be seen again. I wanted to become invisible.

-2022-

I believe I understand what mom intends with this gift – even if she’s not aware of it.

If I keep the lamp, I lose and she wins: each time I see it, light it, I am appreciating a gift she gave me without returning anything in kind. How ungrateful. I should be ashamed.

If I toss the lamp, I lose and she wins: I am rejecting a gift given out of what she believes is maternal, unconditional love. How ungrateful. I should be ashamed.

The gift feels like an emotional booby trap.

I wish mom could understand I don’t want to hurt her. Her suffering pains me. Oh, she might apologize for the hurtful words she said the day I decided to cut ties with her. She might even attempt to make amends. But she refuses to change. I know that if I return now, she’ll treat me so, so well. Her words would fulfill my ever-unmet needs, and for a moment, or a day, even a week, I’d love it. I’d relish it – finally, my mommy’s approval. I’d let her in. But before long, I’d say something that injures her ego – who knows what? – and she’d lash back, offloading her pain onto me. And after being drawn in, I’d find myself wounded and staring down another month’s worth of recovery in therapy.

It's a never-ending cycle if one of us does not choose change.

I choose change. In stepping away, I'm making space to heal from mom-and-me. I can now discover me (my desires, opinions, goals), shuck my habits of hiding and people-pleasing and perfectionism and negative self-talk, and approach my husband and children with an intact sense of self.

Mom thinks she wants and needs me, and I understand that. I wanted and needed her, too. But what she wants I cannot give...

-2019-

It was a steamy summer day. My kids and I were passing through Kensington, MD, in a little white rental car on our way up for a week on the St. Lawrence River. We stopped to visit mom for lunch. Nothing more than lunch – and no wine. Over the years since I moved away, I'd developed ever stricter boundaries with mom to protect myself. It didn't matter; she still found ways to hurt me. My intent was to keep this visit brief, to avoid conflict.

"Let's sit at the gazebo," mom said after the kids retired into the house with their devices. "I'll get us some wine."

"No wine thanks, I have a long drive." It was an ideal excuse to dodge the bullet of drinking with her.

The rusted metal chairs swiveled and groaned as we settled into them under the wrought iron gazebo. Bird houses dangled around us. Ivy twined through the trellises. On the rich soil beside me, between the exposed roots of a giant oak, mom had arranged a glittery fairy garden with a gnome. I love her gazebo and green, sloping yard with its songbirds and ancient trees. It is always Edenic, apart from the mosquitoes.

Mom set a bottle of Skintastic *Off!* on the edge of the fire pit before me. I pondered it: a gesture, an olive branch, following the tension of our most recent psychic scuffle. Normally, she'd scoff when I complain about mosquitoes, despite the welts about my ankles, behind my knees. My oversensitivity collides brutally with her undersensitivity. But today I'd anticipated the insects; in skinny jeans and cowgirl boots, my legs and ankles were protected. Would I need spray? If they started to bite, I'd use it. I was grateful for her thoughtfulness.

"Thank you," I said.

We talked about my new car (at the dealer, having a tow package installed), about Grandma's health, about my kids. It didn't take long for the conversation to turn to her 20-year life-partner, Jackie, and my unappreciativeness regarding their breakup five years earlier.

As the conversation turned, reminders streamed along the bottom of my mind like a news ticker: *Here it comes. Be mindful. Listen well. DO NOT REACT.* I breathed deep, in then out. In an eerie calm, I floated outside of myself to view the scene: the gazebo, mom, me, and a cloud of chaos brewing between us.

I looked at mom with attempted charity. Her dusty hair was shot through with silver. She must've stopped coloring it. I liked that on her. It had grown long, like her sister-in-law's – was she growing it because she wanted to, or because someone told her to? She looked less like an old lady, more distinctive. This was a welcome change. Her eyebrows, overplucked in her twenties and thirties, had all but disappeared. She could have filled them out with pencil, but she didn't. Instead, what remained were a few wisps of hair toward the bridge of her nose, which emphasized two deep vertical crevasses between them. These give her an expression of perpetual disdain. Below, the tip of her bulbous nose had reddened. *Will my nose look like this?* I wondered in horror. Underneath her pinched, lipless mouth protruded the tip of her chin, matching her nose in color and shape. I tried to unrealize the resemblance between her and Lady Elaine Fairchilde from *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. I failed.

My god, I hated her for hating herself so overtly. I hated her for forcing me to ruin a beautiful afternoon in this backyard by spending it with her. My feelings were fueled by decades of unmet needs, hurt, anger, pity, distrust. *How could anyone love you? How can you ask me to love you when you don't love yourself?* I tried but probably failed to keep my derision off my face.

In truth our conversation was a monologue. Mom ran on, almost breathlessly, about how I'd abandoned her. She said I didn't care about her feelings. Was that true? Maybe that was accurate: how impossible is it to care for someone who explicitly tells you that you're never *enough* for them (as she did in that email she'd just written my sister and "accidentally" sent to me)? How difficult is it to care for someone who perpetually revisits your gravest error as a weapon to remind you of your shame? Perhaps she was right. Perhaps my long-standing concern for her feelings evaporated as I realized she did not care about mine.

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She said I didn't support her. Was she right? No, the truth was that I didn't support many of her decisions; but that I supported her as a person, per familial duty, I had made clear. What could I say? There were no right words. I'd tried before. Three years earlier, I'd asked: "What do you want me to say right now?" She said, "I want to hear that you love me and support me." And so I replied, "I love you and support you." The words solved no problems between us because they weren't what she truly wanted. What she truly wanted was for me to take her side over Jackie's in the dissolution of their partnership. But thanks to Carrie's hardness, my decision on this point was intractable. To protect Jackie, I would not take sides.

I sat mute and numb, rocking my chair, and focused on gratitude for the boots protecting my ankles. I waited. Absent my response, mom continued her monologue. Or was it a soliloquy? Did my presence matter? Here's the gist of her tale:

After Jackie cut off all communication with her (leaving a lawyer as their go-between), mom discovered Jackie's new wife, Diana's, email address. Mom spun Diana her tale of woe: Jackie cheated on mom, Jackie lied, Jackie robbed her of her dining table and other valuable antiques during their messy separation, don't trust Jackie, etc. Mom claimed she wanted to "warn" Diana, but I suspected her true intent was to destroy Jackie's hopes for a happy marriage. In response, Jackie served mom with a restraining order. Despite that, mom learned Jackie's address in Alexandria, and as we sat under her gazebo, mom baldly admitted that she drove over, parked out front of Jackie and Diana's, tried the front door, walked around back, and peered into windows. She then wrote Jackie a note on a slip of paper and placed the note in the middle of

the driveway, pinned under a large rock. Jackie reported the restraining order violation; if mom got pulled over even for speeding in Virginia, she'd face jail time.

Mom told me this with no lilt to her voice, her face stony. *Is this psychopathy?* I wondered. *How can you not feel guilty about this?* It was impossible for me to wrap my mind around the incongruence between her misdeeds and her own reactions to her misdeeds until it dawned on me that she believed her actions justifiable – and she was relying on me to corroborate. I blinked, stunned.

Finally, mom turned the subject back to me and wept. She begged me to love her. She begged me to support her – which I deem meant to approve her behavior – I could not. I couldn't endorse breaking the law; no matter what Jackie did toward the end of their relationship, she didn't deserve this. No, I would not abandon myself (my feelings, my moral code), not even for the promise of mom's so-called love.

I can't recall how I extricated myself from that conversation. Perhaps I told mom, once again, that I do love her. Perhaps I lied.

-2022-

I wish that my walking back into mom's life would solve her problems, but I know it will not. I cannot drag her along the path toward healing without myself getting hurt. Now, as I crawl away from her enmeshment, dust settles, and I see things in ways she never intended for me to see them. I see in this birthday gift bonds of shame.

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However, maybe that mom compelled me to choose for myself a perspective divergent from hers is her best gift to me yet. I cannot control her (nor would I wish to): I suspect there will be more gifts. Yet I can control how I feel about her gifts. I can choose to feel something other than shame. I choose to enjoy this lamp because it makes me happy.

My large bedside lamp was bright – 60-watts! – too bright for bedtime reading. It roused rather than lulling me to sleep. This new lamp takes a chandelier bulb, just 30 soothing incandescent watts. Its power switch is located on the cord, which I've pulled close to my pillow where I can reach it as I nod off. Each night, my akimbo-legged golden moon-goddess beckons: *Come dear child, read with me.*



the bean's neighbor

Jerome Berglund

The newfangled electric bicycle his old high school pal lent him handled like a winged horse. They tore in formation across the streets of Minneapolis, a pair of hellish bats in tight formation, blazing careless about confounded traffic, weaving aimless through lanes as motorcycles when they cared to be automobile, down sidewalks and grassy embankments where bike more fit their immediate objectives and felt expedient. Barking back and forth with the loosest coherency they conversed in short barrages of dialogue along this journey, shot the proverbial breeze via terse squawks between dodging and swerving, despite all odds managed to catch up and apprise one another about the approximate gist of each's very different and singular paths which had diverged nearly two decades previous, found understanding in countless common threads implausibly through those human constants of jilting and ennui, want and dissatisfaction, poverty and industry. His friend informed him of the glorious lawlessness presently prevailing in their fair city for bike traffic since the local authorities had vowed to stubbornly cease all enforcement of riding regulations for some cause or other, citing those bigger fish of unrest they were engaged in straining against, bolshily intent upon abolishing their entire operation. That distraction was our duo's gain, and made for one wild and unchecked tear through sprawling urban decay.

horizon line

bifurcates a white canvas

finger painting

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His friend discussed a desire to relocate for more happening parts of town with young birds about sunning on beaches or volleying Frisbees, regaled his chum, newly recruited into the two-wheeled realm of rapid titanium beasts he assembled custom from scratch at great expense, re: the occasion he and a date jumped off the entrance to a kayak tunnel into the winding channel of pond-scum beneath, and she nearly injured herself choking and biffing the landing, crashed into the water below with most inappropriate form. Somehow this friend managed to pull a good plentitude of sporty lasses though, particularly with that shaggin' wagon he traveled the country in on ski trips and recreational vehicle adventures. These hashtagging, van life boho beauties were a bawdy crowd too, by all accounts. A highlight came cutting across the Walker museum's famed sculpture garden. His comrade pointed out a notorious piece of abstract expressionism, and damned if did not indeed resemble a cooter. Feeling quite intellectual and cultured, they pontificated at length about Georgia O'Keeffe and that celebrated tower in Chicago, somehow managed not to run any passing pedestrians down.

geese flying north

pole star ever orients

navigation



duck and cover

Jerome Berglund

The wormhole appeared abruptly in the corner and would not go away. At first Raffi admired it with something resembling amusement. But then it took his cat... And his own father shortly thereafter!

requires N95
to prevent contagion
risking some contacts

...Raffi would really miss that cat. He guessed he might relocate, but where to, and how to get there, orchestrate such a convoluted transfer? Easier said surely, an ambitious proposal he lacked the resources or drive to translate into actual effect. So instead the young man stood his ground and stared it down. The wormhole might without warning swallow up the occasional errant article of clothing, unsecured piece of antique furniture or junk mail poorly paper weighted, in effect anything not bolted down was fair game to its peckish appetites, but the thing appeared altogether uninterested in absorbing a personage so unexceptional as Raffi himself. Perhaps it possessed some rudimentary consciousness with reasoning capabilities, relished the presence of a witness to observe its expropriations, each of those singular, arbitrary excesses?

Thankfully his mother left the damn nuisance well enough alone, always eyed it quite warily, at a great distance, peeking out from behind various corners. If his sister ever found time to visit Raffi determined he should provide her with a thorough forewarning, cordon off their danger zone with tape, erect a crude barrier to prevent any unfortunate mishaps from occurring.

It looked harmless enough, sitting there colorfully pulsating. But Raffi had learned by now not to let his guard down around the thing, for even a moment's carelessness could very feasibly spell outright disaster. So from his side of the room, reading their daily paper, mother outside in the yard hanging laundry across the line, a delicate truce was maintained for the time being. The young man glanced at the peccadillo from the corner of his eye. It flippantly undulated back at him with a twinkle...

roll of black cats'
crackling thunder...
Order in the court!



blue christmas

Jerome Berglund

This night is different somehow, does not seem to end. I have gotten into a bad habit of wandering after the sun dips, can't quite wrap my head around the reasoning of the matter. Escape is part of it, from structures, their stifling enclosure. Pacing confines like a pinball bouncing around its dusty machine, mental patient crashing against padded walls, bruising my outsides and insides both, the only answer apparent has been absconding, but to where and for what purpose?

I've worn these old Adidas down to shredded nubs, each article of clothing representing a similarly tattered embarrassment. Hair matted and scruff bushy, face and digits caked in muck, I continue onward searching for a dawn that this time has proven reluctant to turn up. The drunk wears off, one by one street walkers call it a night and leave me to my own stumbling devices, burglars make themselves scarce to count their loot somewhere, vagrants slink away to snatch a few unharassed z's while they can, alley-cats curl up in secret hideaways and guard dogs settle down to deep REM sleep, even police prowlers cease their odd incremental patrols. It's just me here alone in the dark squinting at that horizon, trying to convince myself a cherry hue is finally heating up along the edges like an oven warming. But slog forward in perpetuity though I may, no light shows up. My sense of time is fuzzy, but this is surely not Alaska, darkness cannot keep dragging on for this length I'm downright *positive*, assure myself...

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Yet here we are, *hear* wee hour, or I am at least, in this strange deathly zone of bleak lifeless morbidity. Seeking what now? Not passion, for that I could have found surplus of indoors, with modest effort. Plunder? Perish the notion, care not for such tawdry, prosaic incentives. Expiry? That sounds more to the quick, but similarly shall not entirely fit the bill, precisely. Will recognize it when I encounter, tell myself, and shortly find suitable opportunity to put hypothesis to the test: the mugger materializes from inky shadows before me, and out clicks his blade.

"Shoes, watch, wallet," he growls, and I feel the violence surging suddenly, like an organ engorged. Hopped up on krokodil the assailant does not notice my transformation until I am twice his height, but the chemical confidence driving this ruffian muddles that logical flight response which should be lighting up his neural network. The hate is fueling *his* being too, it becomes clear in an instant, and before I know it the attacker also is approaching the size of a light post. Then we are grinning malevolently at one another, tussling across the deserted street like kaiju, crushing automobiles, flattening bus benches and scattering outdoor dining areas to the four winds. The knife has grown large along with him I discover, plunges into my shoulder, belly, lung, and I merely laugh and laugh. I gouge an eye from my combatant...he similarly guffaws. Our red stains the sidewalks, splatters across gates and brick exteriors, christens redeveloped businesses of our shuttered metropolis like champagne upon the bow of a ship. Piece by piece we shed parts of ourselves as battling lizards do, across the gutters and parkways until all that's left is a trail of writhing indistinguishable remains for the day shift to gawk at and struggle to identify, that is if the sun ever returns to awaken them.

A few lights which had switched on turn back off at last. If the authorities ever got summoned, they do not deign to make an appearance or present themselves. A light storm system passes through, washing away the most conspicuous mess, so that beyond the property damage few will be able to suss out what all transpired this late night or early morning, and mayhap that is for the best.



london lunchtime
Allison Beaumont

the man who studied sex journals

Richard Wayne Horton

The keeper of the sex journal put down his pen and glanced across the café. A woman with lustrous brown hair was looking his way. In fact he'd just described her hair in his sex journal. He ventured a smile. She smiled back. He sent her a questioning look. She nodded. He picked up his coffee and sex journal and made his way over to her, deftly closing the sex journal on his way. She smiled and said, "What a crowd!"

"I know! Something must be happening on campus."

"Well, it's good to have someone to talk to. Are you a student?"

"Yeah, I'm in graduate school working on an MA report on sex journal writers in late imperial Austria."

"I'm not. A student, I mean. I'm thinking of getting back in school. My name's Denise."

"Hi, Denise."

Just then the waitress came and took away two empty soda glasses. Denise ordered a third soda. The sex journaler said, "I hope I didn't interrupt anything. Were you waiting for somebody?"

"No. Just sitting here thinking."

This put him off just a tick. Thinking. But maybe it was OK. The thinking episode passed off, and he and Denise grooved for a while, getting in a few laughs.

Then she sighed heavily, which made him tense up, but she saw that she'd frightened him, and said something light-hearted to relax him. He settled back down. If this gig didn't work out, he'd go home and get some rest, you know, do a little light reading of sex journals, enjoy a brandy, set the clock and...

"Would you mind walking me home?"

"Uh.....Sure! No problem!" He was paying both bills, but she said she'd pay her part. He said, "Of course!" not wanting to imply obligation on either side. Good catch.

On the way to her apt. she put her hand in his. He jumped, relaxed, re-calculated. He felt something in the hand, a soggy napkin. She'd been wiping her eyes. The hand was warm. He cherished it of course. The night, unlike her hand, was a bit chilly.

In her apt. she put on a CD. "My boyfriend used to like this. Do you like it?"

(gag!) "Yeah, it's nice."

She was crying but trying not to. “He left me.”

The door was looking good. The singer on the CD slobbered through his self indulgent routine.

“After,” she said, resuming her sentence. “After I got an abortion, to try to keep him.” With an angry jerk she pulled the tab off a soda and brought it to the exaggeratedly relaxed visitor. She put it down hard on the coffee table, and a drop got on his shoe which was casually cocked on his knee..

After a pause, he reached slowly for the soda can. “That guy was a real jerk!” he said. His hand got almost to the soda, then pulled back. No, he wouldn’t drink to that.

“A jerk? You give someone what I gave him...no, that’s not a jerk! You’re the jerk!” She was really angry now. The sex journaller wore a sympathetic expression Denise saw it. In a small voice she said, “I’m sorry. You’re not him. You’re not Charles. I didn’t get your name, but you’re not him.”

“No.” (And she would never, ever get his name).

She walked over to her kitchen sink. “Would you like to smoke some weed and hang out? I can put on another CD.”

“OK.” He got up too, and stretched in a relaxed way, looking again at the door. His toe nudged a hassock out of the path just in case. Denise got the weed out of the cabinet. He walked over to her. She smiled when he rubbed her shoulder, and that made him rub it some more. It seemed appropriate to lean his hip against hers, pushing her gently against the sink. Very gently. “Would it help if we had sex?”

On the way home, with his ears partially blown off by what she’d called him, he stopped under a streetlight, punched the air, got no satisfaction, and let out a sick yell. Just a little chagrin, that’s understandable. At home he paced back and forth. He opened his sex journal but found no solace in previous entries, though he had to admit they were awfully arty. So he looked in Arthur Schnitzler, Frank Wedekind, Henry Miller and Lucius Apullius. Not all Austrian. You can’t hobble yourself. A little Stendhal. He cracked a Casanova. Nothing was working.

So he dialed the campus crisis hotline. The woman who answered was surprised to hear a man’s voice. “Help me!” he croaked. “I’m not what I am!”

“And I wasn’t,” he wrote later in his sex journal. “Oh, no! I was much much more!” Recovered now, he thoughtfully put down his pen and reached for the fat little glass holding a centimeter depth of candle-lit brandy. This entry would have many subtle highlights. He should reference the French imperial debacle at Sedan in 1870. Perfect comparison!

“The Imperial family in flight, wet as drowned rats, had been forced to eat at an inferior restaurant! Then the pile-up in the narrow passageway to the restroom, enormous skirts and chest medals becoming tangled...” (par. Marked out)

“My return to my apartment, abused, mislabelled...” (par. Marked out)

“Oh of course she wasn’t real, dammit! A panther on a branch waiting to drop...” (par. Marked out)

Should he try meditation? Some sex journal writers had become geniuses at that. Closed eyes, a knuckle against the forehead, a studied smile, as his other hand reached for the brandy glass.

And that was the key to *amour propre* at last. He was long overdue at a monastery in Tibet where he would eventually teach the sages how he did it. At the end of his stay, they would give him an exotic prayer necklace to take home.

Back at the university, the chicks in his class would finally treat him with respect when they saw “le relique” draped over his playboy jacket. Signing off for the night, he closed his sex journal.

“Be patient, world! More wisdom tomorrow night!”

The Playboy’s Automatic Dream Poem

A coffee table which has
Barked his shin (barking in the background)
Back forty who or what
Is lowing – a calf has lost
Its mother and remembers her
Now distant udder Denise just uddered
Something The playboy stirs* (*)
Dam that calf got caught
In the stereo furniture is
moving herd behavior the
Playboy rises like a good guess
With his soda drawn from its holster puts
It down spilling no smallest drop
And balloons dreadfully to the
kitchen
sink where Denise hurts I want out
screams he her the player’s lobster claw
rests now on her
hip so maybe this rig rigged
setup will work out hey
babe I get it say that
he was human and knew the way one time
the player’s the playboy’s oh
great groan! Wouldja
turn that slayer off? He gets it
and now he’ll hit the off
switch and the screaming
will stop. “You are Charles!” His

dream voice lows Noooooooooo
 lllllllllmmmmmm... "You
 Horrible, horrible...Get out!"
 (barking in the bark ground) hack hack hassock
 is moving in closer; the coffee table
 doing a flank move
 the tiny stomach-like apt
 has its hands around his polite
 neckkkkkkk while the turn table
 lows sweetly
 bye bye now have a sweet
 but no, not that! Oh baby baby
 "Get out! You fake nothing!"
 ohbabybabyboobyoooooooooooo

(p'boy auto-poem marked out)



The Most Excellent Immigrant by Mark Budman

A lost antique pillow contains pearls, valuable by themselves. But what makes them even more precious is that they are the main ingredient of the elixir of youth. A certified interpreter of dreams and afflictions fights a charming con woman Penelopa and her clueless sidekick Piotr for possession of these pearls. A few more human and not-so-human creatures are ready to kill for them. Every character in these twenty-two interlinked stories collection is an immigrant from a place real or imaginary.



Author Mark Budman is a first-generation immigrant from Russia. (His novel My Life at First Try was published by Counterpoint Press).



The Livingston Press

\$17.95

scan code to purchase online



every man

John Yamrus

every man

loves
the smell
of his own farts.

Billings was different.

his
were so bad
he had to get up
and leave the room.

that's
probably why
he never got married.

it was horrible.

no woman
stayed very long.

even his dog ran away.

twice.

which was
okay with Billings.

he didn't mind
being alone.

he
liked
the quiet.

it
gave him
time to think.

and listen to his music.

no one
liked his music either.

life,
for Billings,
was almost perfect.

if he
could only
get used to the
smell of his own farts.



electric blues

James Penha

Blues deeper than loss
Blues deeper than grief
Blues deeper than failure
Blues bluer than indigo or cyan
These blues are electric

Blues deeper than jazz
Blues deeper than St. Louis
Blues as deep as Billie's
Blues bluer than velvet or the moon
These blues are electric

Blues deeper than reason
There are no reasons
If there are reasons they cannot be so deep as these blues
The reasons do not matter
These blues are electric

Blues deeper than despair
Blues as tangled as Hamlet's
Blues bluer than the perfect electrical storm
Blues I cannot fathom
These blues are electric

These blues are current
Alternating and direct
I have no resistance
To the shocks
Of these electric blues



it's not even past

David P. Miller

As the Valley recalls me,
it calls back my pulse as I flipped
that John+Yoko calendar page

for one more shock stare. The Valley recalls
her nude chest, no airbrush to keep those twins
parent-safe, sneak-filed in a drawer.

Pimpled and uptight, not daring a touch,
purely thirteen in my inane stiness,
in the Valley I'd stride up the glacier-

carved sidewalks, peek through headshops,
young and overdoing. And then my fingers
skittered the waist of Olivia in Ballroom Dance,

undone from grade school, unready for coupling,
in that Valley where nubiles
and panics were mutual wildcards,

where school bus and Town Common fair
were sandpapering away
the tight wrappers of friendship,

sparking another Valley-jolted heart-jam.



a hover of discs

David P. Miller

Here is the rewind, the reset. Where is that kid?
I unshelve then release a covey of vinyl
on the revived turntable, renew the voices

inside the boy beneath this skin. The needle voices,
deep down in the grooves, that rewired kid.
He's been distracted so long. I lift him from vinyl.

My oldest tethers are sounds popped from vinyl,
ears overloaded, surface-scratch-decorated voices.
His nerve-racing music silent so long, that kid's.

Oh kid, those wildlands of vinyl, voices spun back to you.



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half a tongue

Lillian Nećakov

The dinner party is more, chewing the fat about Rambo
then conjuring Wittgenstein
after the pie and un-corking
the room grows thick with nostalgia
superheroes are dropped in favour of
the topology of the Möbius strip
Rumi's syllables as a mountain we will never climb
and Kandinsky's egg-yolked cow

there is liquor, ruleless gin rummy and cigarettes
the cat long forgotten in the garden shed
and an impulse to squeeze ourselves into some bone
like an ephemeral thirst
a desire to Noam Chomsky your way around
the Ouija board
to retell the *Little Match Girl* using Doris Lessing's lightning
to eat the orange straight out of Plato's hand

the sky opens her mouth wide
history, convalescing there, like half a tongue
spoons rattle through the enormous room held safely
in the rain's shifty hands
women come and go
conversations splayed over the shoulders of
Andalusian dogs
throats collared in 20,000 volts of rapture

the cake is in the shape of Andy Warhol frosted
with Pauline Boty's *Sheba*
our jawbones crack in sync with the pearly drops
of Satie's *Dances gothiques*
someone opens a window
Jackson Pollock climbs in wearing a merry-go-round
the guests collapse into an exhausted
equation of themselves.



monk's cove

Lillian Nećakov

We walk into the beer store, tell the lady behind the counter
hey, we are poets
outside it's 1937 Los Angeles, only it's not
it's here and the lake looks like a live wire
we don't know anything, we want to know everything
we follow our shadows down to the beach
we don't smoke cigarettes, we drink beer
someone points a pistol our way, only it's just the shadows
only it's just our poems hanging from the trees riffing
your life is your life
and the beer tastes like rust, and the beer tastes like kisses
and there is a coffin holding us to our lies, only it's just
the clammy jaws of the breakwater
and we hear particle displacement, velocity, oscillation, transverse waves
only it's just Tatum, Coltrane, Lateef
your life is your life
only it's just knuckles against the sternum
the muffled grinding of a small life too afraid to resist.



in this dream i had a monkey

A group poem by the Unbuttoned Poets*

In this dream I'm on a lake and see a chic outfit on my friend.
I ask if it's Chanel; she tells me it's actually Perth.

I dreamed I was on the bus to prison and my stomach felt still
and settled.

In this dream I hid secrets from you again and I could feel
you knowing every lie I told.

In this dream I forgot I signed up for a class
and I'm sitting on a wooden desk on the day of finals.

In this dream all the pictures I had hanging
on the walls of this new office crashed
to the floor, in silence.

In this dream deer were leaping from an open
field into a thick dark forest.

In this dream I was hungry
and wanted a meal.

In this dream I was a child
disillusioned with the grass surrounding me
I was a peony
opening on her own.

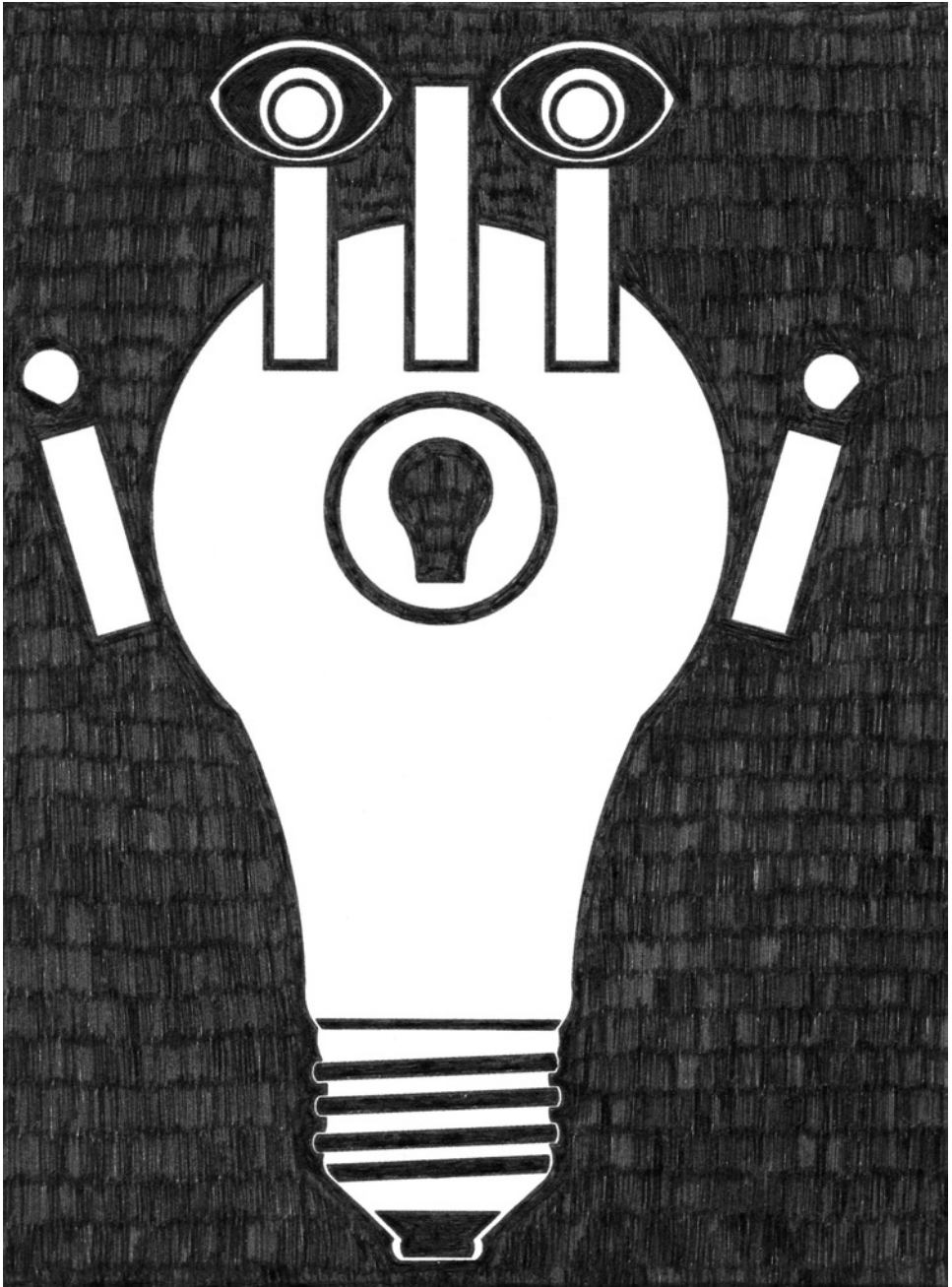
In this dream I heard ...
and woke.

Years ago I banished dream memory.
I dream every night.
I forget each one.

I leave my dreams in the unconscious where
their music is a silent symphony
I love.



*Jean-Paul, Gary, Elizabeth, Holly, Anonymous,
Nathan, Kim, Doris; with Tzivia Gover, Dreaming on the Page



disintegrate

Tammy Takaishi

The weight of it seems inconsequential; as though it was perfectly balanced to fit my problems.
It sits across my heart—custom made—and I wonder how long it had been there before I noticed its existence.

Now,
nothing
is
the
same.



under the x axis

Scott Ferry

after a few days of wading
through negative numbers

a great blue heron appears
at the end of the dock

and then sails off with a grace
which splits physics—

a blood orange cleaved
with a laser—

and i realize that spirit is light
so strong it bisects

so soft it brings all broken
vows together—

numerals of glass in the chest
words thrown down in anger—

melted now in this flight—
one bolt of

flame



eleventh hour

RC deWinter

Somehow you always show up
when my dreams are the static electricity of an empty heart.
As you dance across the tripwire of memory
you sing a hymn of adoration.

When my dreams are the static electricity of an empty heart,
when I miss you most,
you sing a hymn of adoration
in the key of always.

When I miss you most
the lovelight in your eyes shines
in the key of always,
wrapping me in the promise of eternity.

The lovelight in your eyes shines
as you dance across the tripwire of memory,
wrapping me in the promise of eternity.
Somehow you always show up.



lightning, december

RC deWinter

lightning splits the sky
fierce pitchforks illuminating
the nothingness of this frigid winter night

it's late for a thunderstorm
but meteorology is no respecter
of the calendar

i can almost taste the electrons rushing
to the embrace the earth
in the erotica of the unexpected

somewhere the devil's laughing
and the walls laugh too
as words rust in my throat

all the secrets i saved
for a day that never came
demagnetizing



kissing the matrix

RC deWinter

there's a storm brewing somewhere close by
cold air colliding with the damp of midsummer
my hair crackles in its invisible electricity
as i taste the salty heart of the sea
and the lighthouse sings a melody
i know in my bones

i should get up and close the windows
before lightning splits the sky
with zeus's vicious tongue
but i'm a prisoner of a past
collected in photos
on this phone

which is all your going left me besides
this tiger chair holding me
in its merciless claws as my lips leave
striations of sorrow on the screen
when i kiss all that's left
of you





way of the jihadist

Frank Zahn

So you got all excited and joined a jihad in order to kill a bunch of Jews, Christians, and other infidels while shouting, *Allah Akbar! Allah Akbar!* And you did so because you believed it gave you a chance to get killed in the service of Allah with a reward of fourteen, or so, virgins in heaven to quench your sexual appetite throughout eternity.

Okay, so let's assume that's all true, and you get blown to smithereens along with a bunch of Jews, Christians, and other infidels in a marketplace when you set off an explosive device and shout, *Allah Akbar! Allah Akbar!*

Further, assume that afterward, you immediately sense that you are in heaven with fourteen, or so, virgins who have been eagerly awaiting your arrival. A second later, you will surely realize that in anticipation of sex, sex, and more sex, you don't sense your pecker becoming erect. The reason is straightforward: You no longer have a pecker.

You are just a spirit now. You left your blown-to-smithereens body, including your pecker, down on earth where your jihadist buddies are probably taking advantage of your absence by screwing your wife, your momma, your two sisters, and your kid brother.

So what use is the reward of fourteen, or so, virgins when you haven't got a pecker? You're not in heaven, you dumb ass. You're in hell. Think about it.



christian, muslim, and hindu paths to god

Frank Zahn

Evil or sin is the ignorance that separates us from the word, the truth,
or the ultimate consciousness that we call God. – Zhang Fu Lai

Our karma, which is the consequence of our thoughts, actions, and conduct, determines the extent of our separation from God. Good karma moves us closer to God and away from ignorance, and bad karma moves us closer to ignorance and away from God. In other words, that which we sew, we also reap.

Christians, Muslims, and Hindus disagree on the character of our separation from God as well as the path we must take in order to end the separation. Christians and Muslims believe we are literally separated from God through ignorance (sin) so that our objective is to dispel the ignorance and end the separation, i.e., go to heaven. Some Hindus (Theistic or dualist Vedantins) hold a similar view. However, many and perhaps most Hindus (Advaita or nondualist Vedantins) believe the separation from God is illusionary, i.e., we are separated in the sense that we are already one with God but lack consciousness of it because of ignorance so that our objective is to dispel the ignorance by increasing the consciousness of the oneness with God we already have.

Christians, Muslims, and Hindus follow different paths to end the separation. Christians follow the path provided by Jesus; they believe we can dispel ignorance (sin), i.e., we can be saved from it, if we accept him as the incarnation of God and abide by his teachings. Muslims follow the path provided by the prophet Mohammed; they believe we can be saved from ignorance if we accept and abide by his teachings.

Hindus believe there are many paths to God, and we can save ourselves from ignorance by choosing the path that works best for us as individuals. They choose among a variety of paths that are based on meditation and devotion to manifestations of God, but they believe other paths lead to God as well, including the Christian path, the Muslim path, and paths of our own creation.

Christians believe their path is the only legitimate one, and we must take it during a single lifetime or end-up separated from God forever. Muslims have a similar belief about their path. Hindus believe we must take a path of our choosing during one lifetime after another until we achieve our objective.

The Bible provides arguments in support of the Christian path; the Qur'an provides arguments in support of the Muslim path; and the Vedas, Upanishads, and Bhagavad-Gita provide arguments in support of the multiple-path approach of the Hindus. None of the paths can be shown false, so each one is accepted or rejected on the basis of faith—faith seeking understanding. This means any attempt to rank one path superior to the others, except as a matter of individual belief, is a futile exercise in ignorance.



a visit from jimmy

Ed Orzechowski

I turned the TV on and sat down on the couch with a bowl of popcorn, settling in for the night.

“You’re traveling through another dimension,” Rod Serling told me in that quiet delivery of his. “A dimension not only of sight and sound but of mind.” Smoke from the cigarette in his hand curled toward the stars. “A journey into a wondrous land of imagination. Next stop, *The Twilight Zone!*”

Just then, there was a knock at the door. My grandson Jimmy had stopped by for a visit. “Hi, Grampa!” he said. He looked a bit tired, having traveled some distance, all the way from 2022.

“So great to see you, Jimmy! Here, have a seat, I just made popcorn. I’ll get you a root beer.”

“Gee, thanks,” Jimmy said, when I returned from the kitchen. He hadn’t taken his eyes off the TV. “I’ve seen this guy on YouTube, Grampa,” he said.

“You, too? This is my favorite show,” I said. I set the popcorn between us and we both dug in.

“Your TV’s kinda small,” Jimmy said, sipping his soda.

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“I know, it’s a 17-inch. They have 24-inch screens now. I might get one of those someday.”

“You might splurge for color, while you’re at it.”

He grabbed another handful of popcorn. “Why’s the picture so fuzzy?”

“This station’s far away. That’s called snow.”

“Wow, snow in summer. Can you crank it up a little?”

“Sure.” I got up from the couch and adjusted the volume.

“What’s that round thing?” Jimmy asked.

“It’s called a knob,” I explained.

“Huh! How’s it work?”

“You turn it—this way to make it louder, this way for softer,” I said, demonstrating.

“Awesome! But where’s your remote? We have five of them at home—one for the TV, one for the DVR, sound bar and subwoofer, one for cable, another for Roku.”

I hadn’t the remotest idea what he was talking about.

He looked around. “I don’t see any box. How do you stream?”

“Well, I usually put on my waders. Why, you wanna go fishing?”

“No, I mean apps like Hulu and HBO. Netflix.”

“What?”

“How do you find your movies?”

“They’re all listed in here.” I handed him my *TV Guide*, but he wasn’t interested.

“Well, if you don’t have apps or cable, how do you get your channels?”

“Come with me,” I said. I took him outside and pointed at the roof.

“See that thing strapped to the chimney? That’s my antenna.”

“Oh.” He looked dumbfounded.

“We better go back in,” I said. “Your mother’s probably wondering where you are and she might call!”

“Can’t you take it out here?”

“Course not, the cord’s not long enough.”

“You don’t have a smart phone?”

“I don’t know how smart it is, but my phone’s in the kitchen.”

Back inside, I pointed above the counter.

“Awesome, right there on the wall! I’ve seen these in old movies. What’s that thing called?”

“What thing?”

“That thing with holes in it—some kinda special knob?”

“That’s the dial.”

“We had dial-up a long time ago, it took forever to connect. There’s no buttons...so, like, how do you make a call?”

“Hold this part up to your ear,” I said, handing him the receiver.

“Wow, this thing’s heavy. Wait...I hear something!”

“That’s the dial tone. That means you can go ahead and dial.”

“Dial?”

“The round thing. Go ahead, try it. Call your mother.”

He gave me a blank look.

“You put your finger in a hole with the right number, turn the dial till it stops, and take your finger out. Watch.”

I dialed a six and Jimmy watched, mesmerized.

“Now you do the rest,” I said.

He tentatively stuck his finger in the three hole, turned the dial, and let go. The dial spun back and he smiled. Then he did a nine, and another three.

“Jeez, this takes a long time,” he said.

“A little. We used to have an operator, which I liked better.”

“Operator?”

“A woman who...well, you just picked up the phone and she said, *Number, please*. You told her the number, and she connected you.”

Jimmy held his finger to his lips. “S-h-h, it’s ringing... but nobody’s answering.”

“Your mother’s probably busy. Or she might be out. Hang up and you can try again later.”

“Can’t I leave a voicemail?”

“You do have a strong male voice, Jimmy. It’s getting deeper.” I put the phone back on the hook. A second later, I heard music.

Jimmy held his wrist up to his mouth. “Oh, hi, Mom.”

He was talking into his watch!

“Yeah, I just tried to call, I’m at Grampa’s house.”

“Oh, that’s nice.”

My daughter’s voice was coming out of Jimmy’s watch!

“I don’t want to interrupt your visit,” she said. “Tell Grampa I said hi.”

“Okay, Mom. Love you.” Jimmy tapped his wrist and she was gone.

“Wow, just like Dick Tracy’s two-way wrist radio!” I said.

Jimmy blinked at me. “Dick who?”

Back in the living room, Jimmy reached into his pocket and pulled out a shiny rectangle about the size of a cigarette pack, but flat. “I’ll call Mom back before I leave,” he said, and put the rectangle on the coffee table.

Twilight Zone credits were scrolling up the screen.

“So what else is on tonight?” he asked.

“Let’s check.” I got up and changed the channel. It was Lawrence Welk.

“Bubbles in TV snow,” Jimmy said.

“Mr. Welk calls it champagne music,” I said.

“Whatev.”

We watched for a while and the music must have put us to sleep. It was after 11 by the time I woke up. *The Star Spangled Banner* was ending, while an American flag waved against the sky. “This concludes our broadcast day,” a god-like voice said, and the test pattern came on.

I got up to turn off the TV. And when I glanced back toward the couch, Jimmy was gone.



Michael Favala Goldman

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what's my line?

Charles Rammelkamp

It was Cecil B. DeMille who gave me my name,
inspired by the Rand McNally atlas;
I was born Helen Beck in Elkton, Missouri,
to a retired Army colonel and a schoolteacher.

First appeared onstage at thirteen,
a chorus girl at the Empress Theater in Kansas City,
worked as an acrobat for the Ringling Brothers Circus,
did a bit of summer stock, but it was Hollywood
where I made my name,
known for the fan dance I'd popularized
at the Paramount Club in Chicago,
my peek-a-boo striptease for which
I'd be arrested *four times* in a single day
during the 1933 Chicago World's Fair
for "indecent exposure" when I rode a white horse
down the streets of Chicago, even though
the nudity was merely an illusion.
I did the fan dance in *Bolero*.

But my 1952 appearance on *What's My Line?*
always stands put for me.
I was the "mystery challenger" that night,
following a tax collector from Massachusetts
and a man from Indiana who made mud packs.
The panelists, Dorothy Kilgallen, Bennett Cerf,
Arlene Francis and Robert Q. Lewis, all wore masks,
so they wouldn't recognize me.

Dorothy began the questions, but the audience howled
when Bennett asked if I was a lady.
"That has been questioned on occasion,"
I responded, amused,
"but yes, I am of the feminine gender."

Robert Q. Lewis lost his turn
when he guessed I was Bette Davis,
and when Dorothy learned
I was performing on Broadway
more than eight times a week,
Lewis blurted, "Oh, I know! I know!"
He was like a little boy having to pee
while he waited his next turn,
Bennett asking if I was at Radio City Music Hall,
then Arlene guessing I was Gypsy Rose Lee.

"Sally Rand!" Robert Q. Lewis exploded,
the kid who *finally* gets called on in class!



sweet tooth

Charles Rammelkamp

OK, it's kind of a silly stage name,
like Rip Torn or something,
but it sure beat Juanita Dale Slusher,
the name my parents gave me.

I was sweet sixteen when I starred in *Smart Alec*,
a twenty-minute porn movie so popular
they called me "the first porn star";
I'd been pulling tricks for a couple of years already,
since I ran away from home and got a job in a motel.
Barney Weinstein saw *Smart Alec* and hired me
to be a stripper at his Dallas club, the Theater Lounge.
He also gave me my name, Candy Barr –
because I liked Snickers so much.

My get-up was a cowgirl costume,
cowboy hat, pasties and scant panties,
a couple of pearl-handled six-shooters
in a hip holster, cowboy boots.
I was hot. Married, had a kid at nineteen,
shot my husband a couple of years later,
when he kicked in my apartment door.

The love of my life?
Probably Mickey Cohen. I met him
when I was stripping at the Largo Club, West Hollywood.
He put up bail when I was convicted on the marijuana charge,
fifteen year sentence, for which I'd serve three,
after all the appeals went up in smoke.
I testified against Mickey in his tax evasion trial
just so I could reduce my own sentence.
They let me out April Fool's Day, 1963.

November 25 that year the FBI questioned me
about my friend Jack Ruby, after he killed Oswald.
We'd been pals for about a decade;
Jack had even given me
a pair of dachshunds from his prize litter.
But they were sure he'd told me names and places and people,
which of course he hadn't.

What a life! At my peak I was taking in a couple grand a week
in Vegas, LA and the Sho-Bar Club in the French Quarter.
I finally gave it all up, retired with my pets
back in Edna, Texas, but you know what?
I was named a "perfect Texan" along with Lady Bird Johnson,
so roll that up and smoke it, honey!



the great 48

Charles Rammelkamp

I couldn't live a normal life with these.
My breasts are so large, I can't sleep.
My back is killing me, they're just so heavy.

I was born Geraldine Paredes in Saint Louis, 1939,
but I took the stage name Alexandra the Great 48–
stopped traffic once when I paraded
through the Pacific, Honolulu's financial district –
the Wall Street of Honolulu – in one of my sexy costumes,
that 48-inch bust leading the way.

Winning that Sophia Lauren lookalike contest
when I was still a teenager
really launched my career, though my tits
had already taken off
when I was still a self-conscious kid.

Rose la Rose helped me develop my act
when I worked at her club in Toledo,
known as the Town Hall.
I'd been modeling for Xavier Cugat
when she took me under her wing.
I was headlining at Town Hall within two weeks.

I performed for about fifteen years,
mainly Hawaii and Australia,
but I finally gave it up –
I know I'm a sex symbol,
but I'm also a person.
It finally got to me, having to bare my body
in front of that whooping vulgar audience.

So I became a beautician at Universal Studios,
pioneered my own brand of cosmetics.
You see, I always wanted
to use my mind as well as my body.



the pond is low

L. Ward Abel

That Ibis gray against
powder blue to white
alone and beyond
the roof now.

His trajectory makes
an arc away and over
some pines in remission
from summer.

The pond is low. Somewhere
but not here the world
the storm, there lightning
fills a sky.

An equinox glow evens
to sounds below hearing
for the last wing leaving
dead oak creek.



the unused gate

L. Ward Abel

The originals
high above they swirl
an hour or so
either side of dusk—
those icons
in their gloaming.

A crescent trails Jupiter
bright and over a twenty-year
evergreen placed not planted
under that loud dark'ning.

Southwesterly
a rose-orange sky boils at the gate;
it's always open now seized-up
overgrown never to swing
to scratch clay or make an arc
no more purpose.

Nearby
a mature wing sees me. He's
brown and white and heaving
perched on the bones of april
beside what's become
a gap in the fence

he gestures me
something about great ovals
like blades that slice
an ever-thinning
minute.

Utterly still but in orbit
the old hawk settles
at buddha-gate
instant
halted
velocity.



the skipping stone

Judith Mikesch McKenzie

i.

It sails, spinning outward in
twilit air

the black exterior an earthbound
gift of mass

streaking through air and clouds
of fireflies

a comet in solo flight above the mirror-
dark plane

it sails away, taking with it the
things she said

to darkly injured eyes upon
her doorstep

spinning away with meteoric speed
to kiss the

water over and over, before sinking
in the deep,

consecrating the forgiveness she
refuses to accept

or give.

ii.

*Afterwards, she ran out to apologize
to their mother,*

*to say how sorry she was to have
assumed that two*

*eight-year-olds dressed in their
Sunday best*

*were there to con her, but you know
the mother needed*

*to understand that she'd been accosted
before by those*

*with dark eyes, so it was only natural
to assume*

*and would the mother please accept
her donation*

*for their school, and the mother smiles
and her eyes flick*

*away like a dark stone flying across
the water.*



a victory garden

Judith Mikesch McKenzie

close to the dirt, just an arms length away, knees and palms in contact,
my fingers working trenches into the soil, clearing, sifting,

finding small toys buried who knows when, but with one sweep of
my arm, a startled snake emerges from under the dried

leaves I have pushed away, and speeds away in clear panic to lay
hissing, wide eyed and visibly shaking,

under the bottom rail of the fence just inches away from my patch of
dirt, and in that moment I fall back on my knees,

struck down, knowing neither my poem nor any other words can
ever matter, not at all, not in the face of

feeling in every cell of my body the grief and the captive pain
of the woman on the news, on her knees,

digging through rubble to find pieces of her child for burial, the
scent of burnt wood and singed rubber

in the air, and the panic of all her family, trying to pull her away
as the sirens sound, and she

cannot
stop
digging

fingers scraped raw, her terror rising, the panic choking her words,
she cannot leave without something to bury, even as her fear

grows, and I am trembling in every part, watching the wide, terrified
and hostile eyes of the snake under the

fence, and feeling the ragged concrete scrape her fingers, and know
that she cannot stop, and nor can the snake

waiting to strike.



banquet

Shirley J. Brewer

When you examine the follow of a poem,
it's too dark in your throat to swallow a poem.

Your senses, the little soldiers who know you,
will guide the path and the flow of the poem.

You don't need to grind teeth or chew the rhythm
to feel the electric blues of a poem.

Letters quiver on the mucilage of tongue.
Who presumes to measure the juice of a poem?

Begin with a nibble, an inquisitive lick,
then suck a few syllables from the fizz of a poem.

Words stick, metaphors are sweets, similes
like sugar cubes inflate the beats of a poem.

If you study the form you might miss the bite,
the way sounds sink and hiss inside a poem.

You may decide to ignore the beast before you.
Do you forego the playful feast of a poem?

You will collapse like a brick in the moonlight
should you refuse the thick swoon of a poem.

Surely, your mouth will relinquish the muzzle
when you open your lips to guzzle a poem.



before the last chapter

Shirley J. Brewer

I am wintering with Stephen King.
His lengthening shadow and eerie words
frighten the birds at my feeder.
Still, my fingers relish suspense.
They press into every snow-white page
as if the book police needed my prints.

Death satisfies December malaise:
early darkness, a devilish wind.
Beneath my lavender flannel shroud
I drink tea, continue to shiver.
Outside my window, a clueless sky;
even the moon looks guilty.

Tonight, I take a small break
from fiction, make a list of my own past crimes—
times I blamed myself for following the wrong path
when all along I knew my way.

What if I kill off that old self,
haul her into the frozen garden and put her down?
The weapon remains a mystery. Don't
ask me how I'll do it.



billy and claire, the alligator and the wig

Shirley J. Brewer

in memory of Billy and Clarie Mae Crippen

Uncle Billy built an airplane
in the garage he called the *luh bor' a to ry*.
Legally blind, he had lost his license to fly.

Aunt Clarie grew hibiscus that shimmered
like pink petaled lollipops. She whipped up
gourmet treats—a baking sheet her silver wand.

One summer, I stayed at their Florida home
on a lake ruled by a black alligator
named Orange Julius. An eccentric neighbor,

Miss Lily, willed her gewgaws to locals.
At her help-yourself wake, Billy and Clarie
chose a giant pickle dish, a stack of scarves,

two pairs of pigskin gloves. Billy elbowed me
toward a fluffy yellow wig with a rhinestone
barrette. *Play is the mother of fun*, he said.

After Clarie died, Billy kept her ashes
inside a prized cookie tin he garnished
with a fresh hibiscus each day. Orange Julius

disappeared. In my dreams, Billy flies his plane
above the Magic Kingdom. His vision clear,
he wears leather gloves, an olive paisley scarf.

Forever by his side, Clarie holds a pickle dish
loaded with fudge, while Orange Julius—
now a blond—glitters near the lake.





Steven M. Johnson



Steven M. Johnson

turn up the devil music

Kevin Ridgeway

his wrinkled jowls frown at me
from his electric wheelchair
while my song choice for music group
plays, the funky grooves and heavy lyrics
make his nose violently wheeze with rage
until his face turns to cherry Jello salad,
wiggling in animosity as the group leader
asks me what the song means to me
and I look over at the man as snot flies
on the arms of his wheelchair
before I tell the group the song got my
spirits up after the death of my girlfriend,
was glad to see it moved the angry man
to dance and everyone laughs but him,
because we all know he is a fogey
who just doesn't like to rock and roll,
no matter how sensitive the material
is to our hearts, it is best to let him
follow the cranky beat of his sad
Lawrence Welk Orchestra drummer
and ignore the old rhythmless bastard.



lightning afterglow

Kevin Ridgeway

Sunday's offering:
blue skies dine on stray
mashed potato clouds,
a smog gravy drizzle
reaches across a globe
with fresh oxygen from
a nightfall of hard rain.
People will earn their
salaries playing games
while millions watch in
diehard unity. I have
my own games to play
with zero net worth,
church doors closed
while sermons are
given of the blood
of a worshiped Christ
and screams are heard
across neighborhoods
for the blood of athletes
worshiped until an armada
of war ships are built in
moments of disagreement
but I can't hear any of
that sorry jazz, I worship
what's in between all
the raindrops who
washed away my own
desperate malaise
and crowned me with
a maniacal hope at
the faint rainbow altar
of a crazy old sun.



not quite right

Kevin Ridgeway

They decorated
a memorial tree
for a dead patient at
our mental health clinic
with bones and a skull
spattered with
fake blood
for Halloween.
When I first saw it,
I laughed and wondered
if the dead patient
would laugh
at his potentially
offensive,
macabre rise
from the dead,
and knowing him,
he probably would,
the smile of his
ghost beaming
from a demented
great beyond.



illumination

Margaret R. Sáraco

Home alone, not grown at ten
she trembles between the flimsy coverlets
and white cotton sheets counting cracks of thunder
as lightning flashes distance in miles.

Bursts of white light streak across the sky
while rain saturates her ruby red carpet
dripping on her beloved bookshelf.

She pulls her chair to the window
and yanks the window down but water
still seeps through the steel mesh.

Standing face-to-face with the storm monster
she reopens the window pressing the jammed
screen tabs until the metal indents her fingers
and tries to lift the screen with might.

In a momentary lapse she stops to catch her breath
and is zapped with an electric shock
turning her hand translucent blue.

Forgetting the storm, she holds her tinged blue hand
over her booming heart. Has she has been touched
by the lightning and thunder twin goddesses

Astrape and Bronte, shield bearers of Zeus?
With remarkable zeal, she attacks the window again,
lifts the screen and lowers the storm.
Without hesitation she chooses her dampened

Greek Mythology book from her shelf
gently wiping the cover, and with her bed shirt,
plucks herself down on the mattress

to reread their ancient story
with her flashlight lit and the power out
her heart still pounding, her hand still tingling.



wake up!

Margaret R. Sáraco

Blasted awake at four by screeching tires, brakes,
broken glass and steel, concrete against curb,
triggering an uncanny rhythmic car alarm,
all echoing in the quiet of a morning bedroom.

Front doors thrown open, neighbors run towards the car,
an impaled Impala, parked, resting, crushed with a giant's
fist, the driver stunned holding her phone trying to call 911.

Sirens wail, we wait, cover her with blankets,
police cars, agonize the distance, red and blue lights
flash their dreamy beauty highlighting small puddles
in the street and dew drops on manicured lawns.

Ambulance arrives, takes her away—no one died this time—
tow trucks slowly clear debris, death averted,
cool, gray heaviness suspended in crisp, late summer air.

Later, commuters
none the wiser, race down the street as we pile blankets
by the front door, in case.



querencia: the fictional home place

Ellen Meeropol

Since March 2020, I've been thinking about home. Once the intimate landscape of a life, the domestic touchpoint of widespread activities, home became a combination of workplace, school, supply storehouse, isolation ward and—sometimes—a prison. Some things haven't changed. I continue to work at my computer, looking out my window. But my social life has moved outdoors or into small boxes on my laptop screen. I've lost friends to this disease. I feel less safe in the world.

The pandemic has brought a different slant to the idea of home, both the dwelling and the setting. It makes me think about querencia.

Querencia, from the Spanish verb to want, to desire, to love, is defined as the place where one feels safe, where one feels at home. The concept has fascinated me since I first heard the word twenty years ago at a graduate school seminar. In an essay based on that lecture, Colin W. Sargent notes that “to bullfighters (and writers), it is a concrete spot in the ring – or in the mind of a character – where memory and safety beckon, . . . where a combatant feels compelled to return, often after a long absence, for a moment's peace before beginning the final charge into the abyss.”

I know nothing about bulls or bullfighting, but it seems to me that people are hardwired for attachment to place, whether it be current, in memory, or imagined. So, I was fascinated to read about research published several years ago that identified “place cells” in the human hippocampus. These nerve cells activate an internal brain GPS of location memory. Almost as if our home place loves us back.

I wonder if writing and reading about place also fires those place neurons. After all, literature offers us many landscapes we will never physically experience but which feel very real. This expansion of our world is especially critical during periods of physical isolation. But stories can also dig deeply into our local history, our home place. Exploration and appreciation of both exotic and local feel critical when many of us are geographically limited.

I've lived in the Pioneer Valley of western Massachusetts for over fifty years. It is my home landscape, familiar and beloved. It is the safe place from which my imagination flies outward and returns. This small bit of homeland changed drastically five years ago when I moved to a condo on the grounds of a decommissioned state mental hospital. At the time I had just begun writing my fifth novel. The story, set on a small cull-de-sac of bungalows with an ensemble cast of narrators, wasn't working. It didn't begin to come together until I changed the setting to my new home neighborhood and welcomed the ghosts of the state hospital into the story.

It didn't surprise me that changing the setting had such a strong influence on the story. Two the novels I admire deeply, *The Air We Breathe* by Andrea Barrett and *The Women of Brewster Place* by Gloria Naylor, derive much of their power from the landscape. In each of these books, the setting not only provides a powerful grounding, but also connects profoundly with the characters and the theme. This is true for the isolation and human relationship of Barrett's

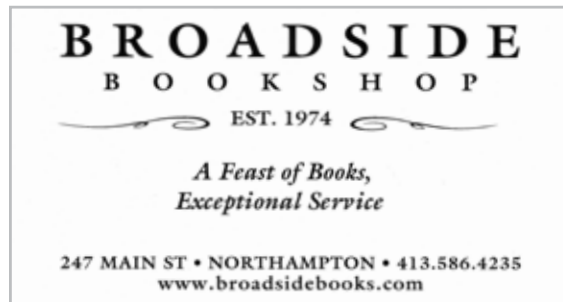
tuberculosis sanatorium in the Adirondacks and for Naylor's down-and-out urban housing development closed off from the rest of the city by a brick wall.

While writing *The Lost Women of Azalea Court*, I frequently thought about Naylor's "novel in seven stories," which I first read when it was published in 1980. I thought about it but didn't let myself reread it until I finished my manuscript. When I did read it again, I was struck by how my work echoed Naylor's: different time period and structure, but similar relationship to place and between neighbors.

Brewster Place and Azalea Court are each fictional, each born from an ugly history. Brewster Place from the waves of barely tolerated immigrants living in those gray brick houses; Azalea Court from an overburdened and often misguided state mental health system that rarely helped people. Both places were sired by a city trying to cover up that history. Both are small enclaves, physically and emotionally separate from their towns but valued by the people who live there.

Both novels dramatize the worlds of women—mothers and daughters and sisters and lovers—living in the often-painful shadows of the "real" world of men and power. Along the grassy paths of Azalea Court and the broken sidewalks of Brewster Place, the women seethe with anger, mourn their losses, connect with each other, and figure out how to survive.

Significant class and race differences exist between a wrong-side-of-the-tracks city neighborhood and a half dozen bungalows on a hill across the river from an idyllic college town. But the eight women who live on Brewster Place and the residents of the six bungalows of Azalea Court share a deep attachment to their home place, despite the ugly histories. I imagine the inhabitants of both neighborhoods, like all of us, nurturing those "place cells" in their brains. I imagine us all nesting together in our *querencia*, in the safe place carved from the danger of their metaphoric bullfighting ring, trying to overcome our histories and our differences.



hot water

M.L. Owen

The idea, as I understood it when she originally proposed it, back when the kids had all moved out, was to come up with a holiday ritual. Something special for just the two of us: celebrate the empty nest, reinvent your life, all that sort of thing. She planted the idea and then looked at me.

Me, being me, said the first thing that popped into my mind: New Year's eve in a hot tub. She said I wasn't taking it seriously. That meant, of course, that I had to come up with a fervent defense of a casual idea; The soothing effect of hot water on holiday-frazzled nerves, the unique bonding that takes place in moist placidity, the delight of watching snowflakes fall through the steam, should it ever actually snow on a California North-Coast New Year's eve.

I think it was the snowflake thing that turned the trick. Twenty-eight years flew by. We went out to that damned tub every New Year's eve, but it only snowed once: last year.

We'd already been out to the tub and were back in the house. Her pain pills weren't working as they should, and she wasn't feeling well, so we'd gone out earlier than usual. Come midnight, or thereabouts, we were snuggled up in robes by the fire, but she had to get up to use the restroom. As she came back into the family room, she stopped to look out a window and then called me over.

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"It finally happened," she said, "and we missed it because I'm sick."

"If I weren't eighty," I said, "I'd pick you up and cart you right back out there."

"You aren't eighty. You're seventy-eight."

"Close enough."

"I just want to keep it honest."

"Honesty's over-valued, You trying to say I should haul you out there?"

"Lord no! And honesty certainly is not over-valued. Why would you say such a thing?"

"I'll do it if you want me to."

She batted my shoulder and then leaned her head against it and sighed. We watched the snow in silence. Then she raised her head again. "Go open the tub and turn on the under-water lights."

"I thought you didn't like the lights on. You getting kinky on me?"

"Do what I say."

“Yes, ma’am.” When I returned, she was standing in the open door, with all the house lights behind her turned off..

“You’re going to let all the heat out of...”

“Button your lip and turn around. Look.”

I did. Snowflakes fluttered through the tub’s halo of steam.

“Okay,” she sighed, “you were right.”

“Happy New Year,” I said.

“You’ll have to start a new ritual next year,” she said,

“Oh, shut up,” I said.

“You thought of this one, maybe I should think up the new one.”

“Will you please...”

“Something just for you.”

“Just shut up.”

“I need to set my mind at ease about you, how you’ll be, after I’m...”

I grabbed her in my arms and lifted her.

“Put me down! You’re going to kill both of us.”

“Shut up,” I whispered.

“All right. Put me down. Not talking about it won’t change anything, you know. All right. All right, I’ll be quiet! Put me down.”

I did. We stood there, held each other close, and watched the snowflakes drift down through the steam to the hot water below.



snow birds

Peter Tacy

They're back: *junco hyemalis*,
slate-colored race of species junco;
our snow birds. Latin name means
"winter-flowering". True, though
this flower's but a metaphor.
So's winter; thus far. Beyond the door
no snow exists; but the juncos say
wintry times are surely on the way.

They decorate our feeders and the garden hedge,
fresh from piney woods and hemlock grove
where they sheltered from the summer heat
and raised their young. Now less discreet,
they're showy, in gray anoraks up above
and pure white snow-pants down below.
So juncos move in where others fled,
preferring to winter here instead.

Each tiny bird has all the warmth it needs.
A junco feasts all winter on a range of seeds
others abandoned, when the fruit was gone
and a hasty harvest had been done.
Juncos remind anyone who peers at birds
that nature's deepest lessons need no words.



no-nonsense aunts

Jacob Chapman

No-nonsense aunts don't have time
for the bullshit.
They storm into rooms and take them over.
They have a lot of questions,
and they want answers.
They just don't understand
why you stayed with that nightmare
of a person for so long.
They also don't understand
why you won't eat their pork chops anymore
or why you became a vegetarian.
They think you should get your ass to church
unless they think church
is a bunch of bullshit.
They keep telling us
it's time to get married.
They remember that our fourth grade teacher
thought we were smart, we were so good
at math. We should do something with that.
With math. We should get a job with math.
But we never liked math.
Our no-nonsense aunts say honey,
that's fine, but those bills
aren't going to pay themselves.
They're not the biggest huggers,
but if they hug you,
you better brace yourself.
They aren't always around,
but they're always there
when we need them.



traveling with strangers

Jacob Chapman

Our guides set up rows of chairs
in the desert and said it's time
to watch the sunset.

They're kind of pushy, but I have to admit
this trip has been amazing:
turquoise lakes, peaks, valleys,
all that stuff.

A month ago, a friend of a friend
of a friend called me and asked
if I'd like to go on a complimentary trip
to some out of the way, beautiful places.

I was between chapters
of my life, so I said sure.

My fellow travelers seem nice,
but we all speak different languages,
so we mostly nod to each other and smile.
Our lead guide, Josef, speaks all our languages.

I know there's a catch.

There has to be. It's ridiculous,
all this food that just gets better
and better, and the luxury transportation
I'm too embarrassed to describe,
and the towels, yes the towels
that are kept at different temperatures
depending on the day.

I didn't know that was a thing
until one of our guides handed me a cool towel
at the end of a hot day, and I thought
Oh my good lord, that feels nice.

None of this makes any sense,
but I'll leave that for another day.
Right now, I'll drink this weird,
delicious tea and watch the sunset,
which seems to nod along
to all my questions, yes yes yes.



i was sent to talk with you

Jacob Chapman

Yes, I know your leader was great.
We all know that.
She was smart and tough,
and she never backed down from anything.
But she's gone,
and your refusal to meet
with her replacement is a problem.
I don't know what you've heard
about her. I admit, I didn't know
what to think of her at first. She's quiet,
and she doesn't have a commanding presence.
But after speaking with me
for five minutes, she understood me
better than people I've known for years.
You've painted yourselves into a corner
with all these threats and public statements.
I'm going to the river over there
to swim and refresh myself.
Then I'll have my morning meal.
Then I'll return, and we'll talk again.
I can tell you want a way out,
and this is it.
It's not the future you envisioned,
but this other future,
the one in front of you,
is much more interesting.



the meaty record review by Jeremy Macomber-Dubs

Meaty “electric” review: *All Nerve* by The Breeders (2018)

Last night, I had the rare opportunity to tell a story I haven’t gotten to tell in a while about a thrilling time in my life. All my friends and family already know this one, so the wow factor has waned on them over the years. But last night my wife and I were at a bar in Boston surrounded mostly by people we didn’t know, and when you’re in Boston, the likelihood of running into Pixies fans increases exponentially. It’s not something I normally bring up out of the blue, mainly because in social situations it’s not a goal of mine to be the center of attention, but when someone points to you and says, “Tell them about that time you got to be Kim Deal”, and their riveted friends stand there ready to hang on to your every word, you have no choice but to quell their intrigue. Frankly, there isn’t anyone else on earth who can tell the story about the time they made demos with Charles Thompson (aka Black Francis) for what would become the first Pixies album since *Trompe Le Monde* (1991) and in the process get the chance to sing vocals (Indie Cindy, 2014) that Kim Deal was expected to sing. But when she quit the band midway through recording, their producer Gil Norton called me from England and asked me to sing her parts. That’s my story and I’m always happy to tell it. When I sang the chorus of “Bagboy” in my breathiest falsetto, the writers from Rolling Stone, Spin, and Pitchfork were one hundred percent certain that it was Kim, and they gleefully announced that the Pixies original lineup remained intact. I felt bad bumming those “journalists” out by letting them know they didn’t do their homework at all and that it was just me singing, and many Pixies fans were disappointed to learn that Kim was no longer in the band. But I had done my homework thoroughly, approaching my performance as an actor would. As a lifelong fan, I’d spent much of my time on earth preparing for this role, and that’s how I got the job to “be” Kim Deal on 5 songs. Getting to tell this story again after so many years inspired me to revisit her extraordinary voice and mad genius for this very special meaty review. Yes, it did take some nerve to try to temporarily walk in her shoes (for one thing, I can’t even walk). But, as Kim emphatically, empathically warns on the title track of The Breeders’ 2018 captivating comeback album, “I’m all nerve.”

I don’t use the word comeback lightly. Whereas the 2 low key, lo-fi successors of their 1993 *Last Splash* smash success, *Title TK* and *Mountain Battles*, masterworks though they were, are perhaps more aptly described as Kim Deal experimental solo albums, the cohesive explosive full band performance of *All Nerve* is a true technicolor coming back to life of *Last Splash*’s magical Breeders lineup featuring Kelley Deal, Josephine Wiggs, and Jim Macpherson. And as soon as you hear those up close and huge drums that sound like they’re being played right there in the room with you, your trained music fan’s ears will automatically recognize the distinctive sound of Electrical Audio recording studio in Chicago, IL with none other than infamous engineer Steve Albini at the helm, who previously worked with the band on their timeless debut *Pod* in 1990. Though they laid this familiar groundwork for the making of *All Nerve*, there are now new levels of emotional depths explored such as despair, desperation, loneliness, resilience, executed with that recognizable underlying surfy-ness but now taking them, and us, through more unpredictable, futuristic, turbulent terrain with a dreamy soaring vulnerability that makes us feel safe on this darker trip into the unknown. It’s almost like this music is a spiritual armor as necessary as the space traveler’s helmet, and any experienced space traveler will tell you that when you are light years from home, mental well-being is just

as key to survival as physical. In the cinematic visually stunning music video for “Spacewoman”, twin sisters Kelley and Kim, dressed in orange astronaut suits, walk determinedly through a forest toward a portal that leads to a faraway place, either another planet, another dimension, or another time. They don’t know for sure, and neither do we. We see them throw their guitars into the portal. They watch their guitars become swept away by the currents on the other side as they walk through without hesitation to face the same fate. Wherever their guitars go, they will follow, and although they don’t know where they are going and they may be frightened, they’ll be going there together, and that’s all that matters. This listener imagines the band calmly and cathartically performing these songs on a beach where they’ve safely returned from their dangerous mission and are currently blissfully jamming away the stress while carefully conveying to us the heaviness of it all with the knowledge that more danger and sadness could be around any corner. There’s a lot to be nervous about, but there is still beauty and love to be found along the way that makes this life worth living and these songs worth singing. The nervous system needs electricity to send signals through the body and to the brain, making it possible for us to move, think, and feel. Music provides electrical currents with the power to open portals to deeper understanding of that which connects us to our greater humanity.

On our way home to Northampton from Boston last night listening to All Nerve on full blast completely entranced, my wife reminded me of something I said years ago when I was deeply absorbed in recording Pixies backing vocals: “Kim Deal’s voice is like cake.” She said that I spoke with clear conviction, as if I had given this a great deal of thought, though to be honest all these years later I don’t remember what inspired me to say it or what exactly I meant. But I felt like I needed to include that declaration in this review because I think there is some degree of truth there. Cake is glorious, delightful. Cakes have many layers to ponder, like the majestically epic banana cream cake we’ve been devouring all weekend from Brandee Simone’s miraculous Many Layers Cake Shop, soft yet structurally sound, sweet, flavorful, rich, expertly designed to deliver a pleasure so deliciously out of this world that we can, at least for now, find comfort in this divine moment despite the fear and uncertainty that lies ahead. If Kim’s voice is cake, then the icing on the cake would have to be Kelley’s glorious spot-on vocals on this record, blending so perfectly and effortlessly, proving that, from The Beach Boys to The Bee Gees to The Breeders, siblings sing the best harmonies, and magic is real. A long time ago, in preparation to sing like Kim Deal, I studied her voice and concluded that it is like cake. That’s my story and I’m sticking to it.



Contributors' Notes

L. Ward Abel's work has appeared in hundreds of journals (Rattle, Versal, The Reader, Worcester Review, Riverbed Review, others), including a nomination for a Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net, and he is the author of three full collections and ten chapbooks of poetry, including his latest collection, *The Width of Here* (Silver Bow, 2021). He is a reformed lawyer, he writes and plays music, and he teaches literature. Abel resides in rural Georgia.

Lindsay Adkins is a writer from Western MA whose work has appeared in Electric Lit, Narrative, Tinderbox Poetry Journal, great weather for MEDIA, Frontier Poetry, Crab Fat Magazine, So to Speak Journal, and Sugar House Review, among others. She is a recipient of the Amy Award from Poets & Writers, the Phyllis B. Abrahms Award in Poetry, and an Author Fellowship from the Martha's Vineyard Institute of Creative Writing. She holds an MFA from Stony Brook Southampton, and currently works in communications at Mount Holyoke College.

Derek Allard grew up in dying mill town in Western Massachusetts. His mother taught him how to read before kindergarten. He graduated from Southern New Hampshire University's Mountainview MFA program in June.

Illustrator, designer, crafter and all-around late developer, **Allison Beaumont** lives in a small English town nestling between prehistoric chalk downs and Oscar Wilde seafronts. Determined to be superhuman, she completed degrees in both Illustration and Communication Design in the brief moments to herself whilst wrangling her three small children as a single parent. Before disability forced her retirement, she had found a unique voice and translated it into her very recognisable visual style, much in demand.

Jerome Berglund, recently nominated for the 2022 Touchstone awards, graduated from the University of Southern California's Cinema-Television Production program and spent a picaresque decade in the entertainment industry before returning to the midwest where he has worked as everything from dishwasher to paralegal, night watchman to assembler of heart valves. Jerome has many haiku, short fictions, and fine art photographs published online and in print, previously shared poetry in the Mugwort and Passion Fruit editions of Meat For Tea.

A Pushcart nominee, **Shirley J. Brewer** serves as poet-in-residence at Carver Center for the Arts in Baltimore, MD. Her poems appear in Barrow Street, Comstock Review, Gargoyle, Meat for Tea, Plainsongs, Poetry East, Slant, among other journals and anthologies. Shirley's poetry books include *A Little Breast Music* (2008, Passager Books), *After Words* (2013, Apprentice House), and *Bistro in Another Realm* (2017, Main Street Rag). Her fourth poetry collection, *Wild Girls*, will be published by Apprentice House Press in Spring, 2023.

Keith Cable is a Graphic Communications student at Smith Vocational and Agricultural High School, in Florence MA. He has a raging passion for cartoony illustrations.

Seth Cable is a writer, musician, and academic living in Florence, MA with his wife, three children, tiny cat, fluffy cat, and sweet dog. His (non-academic) work has appeared in Meat for Tea, Bull & Cross, Eclectica, Oddball, the Bitchin' Kitsch, Down in the Dirt. He's terrible with names, but great with tones. Other work of his can be tested at <http://people.umass.edu/scable/Faction>.

Jacob Chapman lives in Amherst, MA with his wife and daughter. His chapbook *Other Places* is available from Open Country Press, and his book *Here Over Here Over Here* is available from Human Error Publishing.

Linda Chown is a person of commitments, personal, political, marital, social. She spent much of her life in the classroom when she wasn't sick or demonstrating. A graduate of UC Berkeley, San Francisco State University, University of Washington and a professor at San Francisco State University, University of Washington, Grand Valley State University, and the University of Maryland. This sounds very academic, but she isn't: she's been arrested for civil rights activities, baked bread and made lasagna from and learned firsthand from living under the Fascism of Francisco Franco in the 1960s and 70s in Spain. She is about intense freedom, freedom of the pen, freedom of the heart, freedom of the mind, freedom of the spirit. She is author of multiple studies of narration and women writers and four books of poetry. All her essays, books and talks develop a kind of closeness which she believes we need to experience, a closeness of the body, spirit and heart and consciousness. She is a "Come Together" person, and her last book of poems called *Sunfishing* is readily available on Amazon, complete with many photos and Interviews.

RC deWinter's poetry is widely anthologized, notably in *New York City Haiku* (NY Times, 2/2017), *Now We Heal: An Anthology of Hope*, (Wellworth Publishing, 12/2020) *easing the edges: a collection of everyday miracles* (Patrick Heath Public Library of Boerne, 11/2021), *The Connecticut Shakespeare Festival Anthology* (River Bend Bookshop Press, 12/2021), in print: 2River, Event Magazine, Gargoyle Magazine, Meat For Tea: The Valley Review, the minnesota review, Night Picnic Journal, Plainsongs, Prairie Schooner, Ogham Stone, San Antonio Review, Southword, Twelve Mile Review, Variant Literature, Yellow Arrow Journal, The York Literary Review among others and appears in numerous online literary journals.

Scott Ferry's most recent book is *The Long Blade of Days Ahead* from Impspired Press. You can find more at ferrypoetry.com.

Hugh Findlay's writing and photography have been published worldwide. He is in the third trimester of life and seeks inspiration in everyday people, places and things. Instagram: @hughmanfindlay

Debra Wilson Frank has been published in The Rumpus, Brevity's Blog, Herstry, Moss Piglet Zine, and the anthology, *Being Home*. She is currently writing the centennial history of the Wasatch Mountain Club—based in Salt Lake City, where she lives, writes, and hikes. debrawilsonfrank.com

George Franklin is the author of *Noise of the World* (Sheila-Na-Gig Editions), *Travels of the Angel of Sorrow* (Blue Cedar Press), *Among the Ruins / Entre las ruinas* (Katakana Editores), and *Traveling for No Good Reason* (Sheila-Na-Gig Editions). Individual publications include: Into the Void, The Woven Tale Press Magazine, The Threepenny Review, Salamander, Pedestal Magazine, Cagibi, and The American Journal of Poetry. He practices law in Miami, teaches poetry workshops in Florida state prisons, and is the co-translator, along with the author, of Ximena Gómez's *Último día/Last Day* (Katakana Editores).

Michael Favala Goldman (b.1966) is a poet, jazz clarinetist and translator of Danish literature. Among his seventeen translated books is *Dependency* by Tove Ditlevsen, which made

the New York Times Best 10 Books of 2021 as book three of *The Copenhagen Trilogy*. Michael's five books of original poetry include *Small Sovereign*, which won the Los Angeles Book Festival in the poetry category. His work has appeared in dozens of publications including *The New Yorker*, *Rattle*, and *The Harvard Review*. He lives in Northampton, MA, where he has been running bi-monthly poetry critique groups since 2018. <https://michaelfavalagoldman.com/>

Richard Wayne Horton has 2 Pushcart nominations and is the 2019-21 MA Beat Poet Laureate. His work has appeared in *Southern Pacific Review*, *Scriptic*, *The Dead Mule*, *Meat For Tea*, *Bull & Cross*, *Danse Macabre du Jour* and others. His books include *Sticks & Bones* (2017, Meat For Tea Press), *Artists In The Underworld* (2019, Human Error Publishing) and *Ballet For Murderers* (2021, Human Error Publishing).

Born in New York City of artist parents, **Jane Hudson** has pursued the life of an artist through rock music, video art, photography and painting as well as teaching artists for many years at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Jane received an NEA for her work in Video, and showed large abstract paintings at the Atlantic Gallery, Nielsen Gallery and Segal Gallery in Boston. She is also a composer and musical performer. Her paintings have been shown locally at Hudson Art, Images Cinema, Tunnel City Coffee in Williamstown and at Mass MoCA, Gallery 51 in North Adams as well as The Left Bank, No. Bennington, VT and iartcolony in Rockport, Mass. For more info: janehudsonpaintings.com jane.video@gmail.com @antiquergirl on Instagram

Mary Jennings is a performance poet, musician and retired public servant. Her work has been published in *Oddball Magazine* and *Exist Otherwise*. She lives in Chicopee, MA, where she serves on the Chicopee Cultural Council.

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Rollin Jewett is an award winning playwright, screenwriter, singer/songwriter, poet and author. His feature film credits include *Laws of Deception* and *American Vampire*. Mr. Jewett's poetry has been seen in *Gathering Storm*, *Coffin Bell*, *Penumbra*, *Southern Fried Autopsies*, *Wordsmith*, *Night Picnic* and *Door is a Jar Magazine*. His short stories have been published in magazines and anthologies, including *Aphotic Realm*, *Ghost Stories*, *Fell Beasts and Fair*, *Fantasia Fairy Tales*, and *Bloodlet*. Mr. Jewett's plays have been produced off-Broadway and all over the world.

Steven M. Johnson is a Northern California artist who began a side career in the early 1970s as an inventor and illustrator of his own peculiar product ideas and predictions. He retired from Honda R&D with the title of futurist, in 2004. In 2013, he gave a TEDx talk: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_iFuSb-3EPc. In 2014 he gave a keynote address to the World Future Society's annual meeting. He has more than a dozen books in print with the latest being *Patent Depending: A Collection, 2nd ed. 2020*, and *Patent Depending: Vehicles, 2nd ed. 2020*. In 2022, a 400-page volume, *Patent Depending*, was published in China with Chinese captions. In 2018, he began creating an online series of abstract drawings, *Noodlings*.

Kimberly Kuchar has always loved writing. Recently, she has jumped deeper into short-form poetry and waded into collaborative poetry and haibun. Her work has appeared in multiple journals, including *Prune Juice Journal*, *Poetry Pea Journal*, *Suspect Device*, *Scarlet Dragonfly Journal*, and *Drifting Sands*. Kimberly lives near Austin with her husband and son. While she's writing this, her pet cockatiel is sitting on her shoulder.

Denny E. Marshall has had art, poetry, and fiction published. Some recently. (A partial list of credits can be found on dennymarshall.com.) Denny mostly draws.

Ellen Meeropol is the author of the novels *The Lost Women of Azalea Court*, *Her Sister's Tattoo*, *Kinship of Clover*, *On Hurricane Island*, and *House Arrest*, the play *Gridlock*, and is guest editor for the new anthology *Dreams for a Broken World*. Recent essay publications include *Ms. Magazine*, *Lilith*, *The Writer Magazine*, *Guernica*, *Lit Hub*, and *Mom Egg Review*. Her work has been a finalist for the Sarton Women's Prize, longlisted for the Massachusetts Book Award, and selected by the Women's National Book Association. Ellen is a founding member of Straw Dog Writers Guild.

Judith Mikesch McKenzie has traveled much of the world, but is always drawn to the Rocky Mountains as one place that feeds her soul. She loves change - new places, new people, new challenges, but is always connected to the people and places of her roots. Writing is her home. Her poetry has been published in *The Poetic Bond X*, *Wild Roof Journal*, *Rogue River Echoes*, *Halcyone Literary Review*, *Plainsongs Magazine*, *Gyroscope Review*, *Elevation Review*, *Cathexis Northwest Press*, *Scriblerus* and others.

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 appeared in *Meat for Tea*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Blue as an Orange*, *subTerrain*, *Muddy River Poetry Review*, *Constellations*, *Lily Poetry Review*, and *Nixes Mate Review*, among others. His poem "Add One Father to Earth" was awarded an Honorable Mention by Robert Pinsky for the New England Poetry Club's 2019 Samuel Washington Allen Prize competition. He lives with his wife, the visual artist Jane Wiley, in Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts.

Leah Moses is an artist/musician/witch who lives in the foothills of the Berkshire Mountains.

Lillian Nećakov is the author many chapbooks, including, *The Lake Contains* and *Emergency Room* as well as the full-length collections *il virus* (Anvil Press; shortlisted for the Pat Lowther Memorial Award), *Hooligans* (Mansfield Press), *The Bone Broker* (Mansfield Press), *Hat Trick* (Exile Editions), *Polaroids* (Coach House Books) and *The Sickbed of Dogs* (Wolsak and Wynn). Her new book, *duck eats yeast, quacks, explodes; man loses eye*, a collaborative poem with Gary Barwin, is forthcoming in 2023 from Guernica Editions. She has also published in many print and online journals in Canada and the U.S. Lillian lives in Toronto.

Retired after four decades' prizewinning print and broadcast journalism in Hartford CT, **Don Noel** received his MFA in Creative Writing from Fairfield University in 2013. He has since published more than six dozen short stories and non-fiction pieces; all can be read at his website, <https://dononoel.com>

Ed Orzechowski is the author of *You'll Like It Here*, *The Story of Donald Vitkus— Belchertown Patient #3394*. A freelancer, retired English teacher and radio news reporter, his features and columns have appeared in *The Republican*, *The Daily Hampshire Gazette*, *Life After 50*, *Early American Life*, and *Southwoods* magazine. Ed and his wife Gail are advocates for persons with developmental disabilities. They live in Florence, Massachusetts.

Jose Oseguera is an LA-based writer of poetry, short fiction and literary nonfiction. His writing has been featured in Emrys Journal, North Dakota Quarterly, Potomac Review and The Literarian. He was named one of the Sixty Four Best Poets of 2019 by the Black Mountain Press.

M. L. Owen lives and writes among the giant redwoods of Northern California and has published in a number of literary journals, including The Bookends Review, Bright Flash Literary Review, South Shore Review, Cafe Lit, and Headlight Review. among others.

An expat New Yorker, **James Penha** has lived for the past three decades in Indonesia. Nominated for Pushcart Prizes in fiction and poetry, his work is widely published in journals and anthologies. His best newest chapbook of poems, *American Daguerreotypes*, is available for Kindle. His essays have appeared in The New York Daily News and The New York Times. Penha edits The New Verse News, an online journal of current-events poetry. Twitter: @JamesPenha

Charles Rammelkamp's latest poetry collection is *The Field of Happiness*, published by Kelsay Books. Rammelkamp is Prose Editor for BrickHouse Books. He contributes a monthly book review to North of Oxford and is a frequent reviewer for The Lake, London Grip and The Compulsive Reader. A collection of flash fiction, *Presto!*, will be published in 2023 by Bamboo Dart Press. A poetry collection entitled *Transcendence* has been accepted by BlazeVOX Books.

Kevin Ridgeway is the author of *Too Young to Know* (Stubborn Mule Press) and *Invasion of the Shadow People* (Luchador Press). His work can be found in Slipstream, Chiron Review, Nerve Cowboy, MacQueen's Quinterly, Plainsongs, San Pedro River Review, The Cape Rock, Trailer Park Quarterly, Main Street Rag, Cultural Daily and The American Journal of Poetry, among others. He lives and writes in Long Beach, CA.

Thomas Rowland is a retired pediatric cardiologist who has written numerous popular and scholarly works involving sports, science, philosophy, and neuroscience. He has been a frequent contributor to Meat for Tea. He lives a quiet life in Longmeadow, Massachusetts.

Margaret R. Sáraco is a writer, activist, and retired educator. Her poetry and short stories have appeared in many anthologies and journals. Margaret was a semi-finalist in the inaugural Laura Boss Narrative Poetry Contest in 2022. She received Honorable Mention in the Allen Ginsberg Poetry Contest in 2020 for her poem, "The Unlocked Door." A member of Writing the Land, she helps to raise awareness of the importance of land conservation through her poetry. *If There Is No Wind*, her first full length poetry collection, was recently published.

John Sheirer lives in Western Massachusetts and is in his 30th year of teaching at Asnuntuck Community College in Northern Connecticut. His most recent book is *Stumbling Through Adulthood: Linked Stories*. Find him at JohnSheirer.com.

Edward Michael Supranowicz is the grandson of Irish and Russian/Ukrainian immigrants. He grew up on a small farm in Appalachia. He has a grad background in painting and printmaking. Some of his artwork has recently or will soon appear in Fish Food, Streetlight, Another Chicago Magazine, The Door Is a Jar, The Phoenix, and other journals. Edward is also a published poet who has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize multiple times.

Tammy Takaishi is a musician and multi-creative. Having studied both music and literature in college, her love of writing continues to this day.

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. His father grew up in South Hadley, and his mother's family first arrived centuries ago in Hadlyme, CT. He has a new chapbook of poetry with Peter Tacy entitled *The Black Dog Poems* (Meat For Tea Press, 2022).

Along with being the coach of the Greenfield High School boys tennis team, **Andrew Varnon** teaches English Language Arts and Social Studies to 5th graders at the Greenfield Middle School, where he lives within walking distance with his wife and two kids. His work has appeared previously in Meat for Tea, as well as American Poetry Review, The Nation and other periodicals.

Meg Vlaun was born in upstate New York but has lived in Frankfurt, Paris, Madrid, and ten US States; she speaks four languages. She is a Military Spouse and mother of two teenagers. Her creative outlets include writing and photography. Her greatest passion is teaching college students how to find their own voices through writing; she has taught at Northern Virginia Community College, Minot State University, and Central New Mexico Community College. She currently studies creative nonfiction at the University of New Mexico and has published in LIMINA, UNM's Nonfiction Review.

In a career spanning more than 50 years as a working writer, **John Yamrus** has published 35 books (29 volumes of poetry, 2 novels, 3 volumes of non-fiction and a children's book). He has also had nearly 3,000 poems published in magazines and anthologies around the world. A number of Yamrus's books and poems are taught in college and university courses.

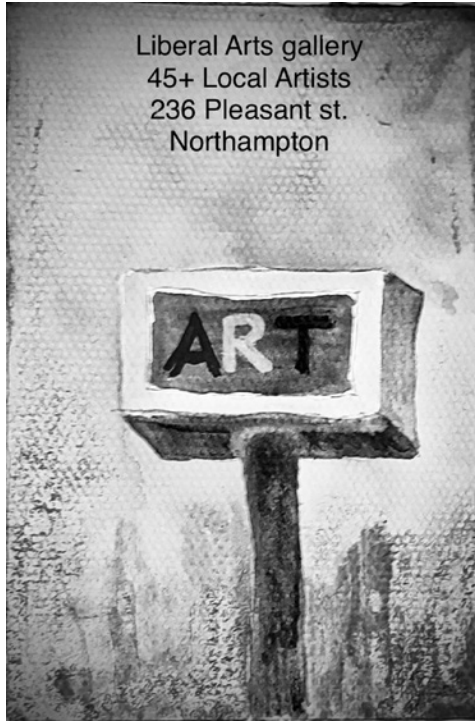
Gerald Yelle is a member of the Florence, Massachusetts Poets Society and lives in Amherst, Massachusetts. His books include *The Holyoke Diaries*, and *Mark My Word and the New World Order*. He has an e-chapbook at Yavaneka Press: *Industries Built on Words* and a chapbook *No Place I Would Rather Be* from Finishing Line Press. *Dreaming Alone and with Others* will be published in 2023.

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 has a new chapbook of poetry with Peter Tacy entitled *The Black Dog Poems* (Meat For Tea Press, 2022).

Frank Zahn is an author of fiction, nonfiction, and poetry. His publications include nonfiction books, articles, commentaries, book reviews, and essays; novels; short stories; and poetry. Currently, he writes and enjoys life at his home among the evergreens in Vancouver, Washington. For details, visit his website www.frankzahn.com.



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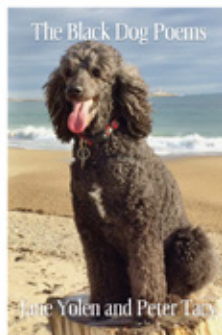
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*God Bless America
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