

MEAT FOR TEA

VOL 17 ISSUE 4
THE VALLEY REVIEW
CHÂTEAUBRIAND



Meat for Tea: The Valley Review

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salutations from the editor

Greetings dear reader and welcome to the Châteaubriand issue. While most think of the luxury filet mignon dish for two, I like to recall the purported founder of romanticism in French literature, François-René de Châteaubriand. Lately, I've come to ponder whether print media itself is becoming a romantic notion. Especially since I've watched so many seminal print journals fold in recent years. A recent conversation on that musky site that I've been meaning to leave forced me to confront this very notion. The tweety chat was on the hotly contested practice of charging submission fees and I threw my hat into the ring, making it clear that my little fee helps cover the cost of shipping physical contributor's copies all over the country. "This is a digital age," I was swiftly informed. "There's no need to make print copies," she went on. I agree...there is no actual need, but what of desire?

Is there a need for paintings, sculptures, leather-bound volumes, vinyl records, perfumes, spices, and all of the things that make the world lovelier? Perhaps not, but how much are our lives enhanced by the inclusion of these non-digital things? Things we can have, hold in our hands, smell, touch, and maybe even things with pages we can actually turn.

And with this brief sermon, I present to you Châteaubriand, pleased for you at the delights you will encounter within...when you turn the pages.

Besos y Abrazos,
Elizabeth

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working in red dark

Thomas Reed Willemain

My first real job
quality control
local paper mill
coating Polaroid stock.

Adding backcoat
thwarting photons
no bits of light
should ever get through.

Sampling each roll
zapping with light
looking for dots
in a darkroom of red light.

Working in red dark
Samples in hands
dipping in chemicals
watching them dry.

Like an astronomer
searching in star plates
but lacking optics
and lacking science.

Untrained eyes
searching for dots
too many? too big?
Quality Control!

I was unskilled
just doing as told
not asking questions
alone in red dark.

Bored in red dark
picturing my girlfriend
or a forbidden girl,
enhancing my red.

Counting dots in red dark
thinking red thoughts
a green kid in red
earning a paycheck.



wood pigeons

Peter Tacy

Two by two, coo to coo
one after the other; “Yoo-hoo!
Are we two anew, we two?
Or...who’s new to you?”

Oh, there’s familiar syntax
in it...pause and call, relax —
as if more is left to say
and yet — goes on that way.

One bird arrived as another flew;
yet the chant went on: “You!
Are you the doo I one day knew,
who’s truly true, among the few?”

Bored, I drift away. Animal lust
is what it is; and then, I must
see what my lover has to say
about the way we’ll live today...



the war writers

John Guzlowski

They’re all alike

They tell you
about the bodies
like bundles of rags
the splintered trees
the blood so red
no words can nail it down

You hear it
in Stephen Crane
in Wilfred Owen
in Thucydides

Remember the butterfly
in *All’s Quiet*
on the *Western Front?*

Sure you do

Vonnegut’s soldier
asking “Why me?”

Yeah, that too

You’ve heard it
all before

Every word

And you’ll hear it again

or your son will
or your daughter will



love after the war

John Guzlowski

Pulling back the covers, she sees he's taken
off his pants and his prosthetic leg too,
but not the straps that bind it to his stump.
His right leg ends just above the knee.
He has no calf, no ankle, no foot, no toes.

She sees he's sleeping, perhaps dreaming
about the day the doctors cut his leg off.
She looks out the window, hears a dog
barking somewhere far off and wonders
what it's like not to have a leg,
rising in the morning and seeing it gone,
the eternal surprise of its forever loss.

She's read the great stories of longing
and love, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*,
Romeo and Juliet, *Love in the Time
Of Cholera*, and knows they're just
children's stories. She knows no one
loves another person more than we love
our own limbs and cheeks, our fingers
and faces and open loving hands.

She lies down slowly next to him
And pulls the comforter over them.



the belle of the eunuch ball or why i called the cops on karen

Connolly Ryan

“Every sentence I use refer to women and their names.”-Talking Heads

Angela likes her jellyfish beige and willing.
If you see Beth, tell her I said that everyone
is no longer everyone. She'll know what I mean.
Lest incest ruin her celestial youth, Celeste ghosted
her ridiculously alluring cousin Chaz. Dhalia walked
her lavender-espaliered spaniel across the seriously
weeping street. Ah Edna, the rose of God's idiocy,
The Belle of the Eunuch Ball, what will we ever do
with the envelopes of free time we hoarded for just
this very moment? When I first French-kissed Francesca,
I could feel my entire childhood tumescing.
Naturally Gertrude prefers to ring her own neck.
Halfway through a brick of piebald Halvah, Hester
both belched and farted and each of her spectrum-incandesced
adolescent sextuplets quivered with such gelid jollity
that the ceiling fan, usually taciturn, suddenly became
ebullient and very-near-literally chopped our freakin' ears off.
Is Israel real?, inquired Isabel who was on her way
to go see Palestinian Light Orchestra play the Vatican..
Be nice to Janice, her chihuahua has leukemia
and her children have termites. With every intention
of being generically ironic, I called the cops on Karen.
No sir, to say I was in love with both Lydia and Lilith
would NOT be an overstatement, but neither one
of those babies have my innocent features. .

Melanie had the smell of a peach orchard, but her brother,
my best friend, stank of ridicule and failure. When you
asked me if I thought Nola was gay I thought you said Enola Gay,
which seemed bizarrely insensitive considering what
my grandmother went through! Well, whether Oona
really was caught canoodling with an umlaut or not, I'm not
the grammar gestapo and could care less than less.
Pretty much everyone had counted Pauline out
of the knish-eating competition, but with only a mustardy
furlong to go, she and the reigning champion finished
in a dead heat. Liquored up, shellacked, three shit-fans
to the wind, whatever you call it, Querida was definitely
none of those. in fact she was a curvy pillar of shattering
clarity who once took me on a mystical hayride which I never
quite learned how to get off of. Ronda was her name, mankind
was her game. Which is to say, she actually hunted people.

She always shared her sandwiches with me, Sissy did,
and I can still cry just thinking about it.
I don't have to do anything you tell me to do, commanded seven
year old Thalia, to both her Snoopy and Winnie the Pooh dolls,
whose faces promptly sank in shame. "One of the great mundane
heroines of politely radical literature, Edith Wharton's Undine Spragg,
is immortalized by the gnarled elegance of her name alone," opined
Ursula under a parasol on Christmas Day.
While introducing myself to the shyest girl at the party,
whose name turned out to be Violet and to whom a decade
later I would be tragically affianced (we'd both perish
in a yacht-wreck on our way to go watch billionaires drown).

Not everyone knows, but the name Wendy never existed until the author
of Peter Pan conceived it as a nifty and catchy rhyme for "Fwendy," a tender
and child-like way to refer to a friend. My aptly named ex, Xena, not only
excelled at xylophone, but she could also play a fairly vicious zither.
On the avenue she lived, there were precious few venues
for the lithe thespian Yvette to recite her eccentric sonnets
and alchemize ecstatic vignettes. Never lacking spunk nor
pizzazz, on the trapeze or otherwise, Zola choked on a lozenge and expired.



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how quiet the house

Jane Yolen

The door shuts behind you,
and the house raises
its wooden finger
to a stone lip.
All goes quiet except
the tap-tap of my fingers
on the computer keys.
Poems long compressed
inside my head leap forth,
some better than I remembered,
some worse for their long sleep.



Philip Kobylarz

willa cather

Linda Chown

How words as words as worst
May intrude on the face you see.
Words as worst stab out the stuffing, the good stuff,
And leave you panting for the oil,
The smear stuff that makes it it.

Willa Cather knew through the moon that stars beat the night
Into lasting cream, that willy is not nilly. She knew to see the burn
of fires before the flat flab of name.

Reading her is like an unseen jump
Into always with everything there
nearby just right, not words but illuminations for your you to see.



walt and emily

Peter Tacy

How can we think of them without each other?
Or to ask this in another mode, how can we think of ourselves
without keeping ever-closer company with them?

Walt and Emily: they made others uncomfortable.
In that, for starters, they were American!

Walt, chanting in his apostate, worshipful voice;
celebrating all by encompassing all, notwithstanding
some resistance; Emily, celebrating all by seeing small,
the prime ingredient in everything that can be whole.

Strategic liars; a national trait. I am you, and us,
and everything else, sings Walt. I am no one. Are you too?
murmurs Emily. Brave individuals, pretending otherwise.
Both conscious of the poet's pulpit; both players.

Oh, we are not easy to deal with, we Yanks. Don't bother
trying. We're more interested in us than you, anyway.

But come along with us! A voyage of discovery?
Tryst? Journey without destination? Lover's quarrel?
Whatever! Walt and Emily will show us on our way.



consequences

R.L. Peterson

My high school shop teacher, World War II veteran, Mr. Blasingame, suggested I keep a journal when he learned I was enlisting in the Marine Corps. "We think we'll remember things that are important, but time clouds our recall button, and we forget. You don't have to write an essay. Just jot down enough to recall what happened. You'll be glad you did later." It sounded silly to me then and it sounds even sillier now, but in spite of myself, I started a journal a few days before Marine bootcamp. It's been a great tool to help me control the ghosts in my life.

10 June 63

Made it with Yvonne.

That's all. Like sex with a beautiful, married woman on my eighteenth birthday was no big deal. I'd arrived at Hank and Yvonne Cirillo's at 10 o'clock, ready to work. Tall maples shade their house, their lawn manicured, sidewalks lined with red geraniums. No hint that ghosts prowled the green pastures bordered by white painted fences.

I park my bike and put my sack lunch in the bough of a nearby maple. Yvonne, in white blouse and black slacks, auburn hair in a bun, lips painted red, answers my ring. "Good morning, Ken. Thanks for being on time. We've work to do."

Hank, gray chest hairs peeking from his open neck, flowered silk shirt, is all business. "Good to see you, Boy. While I'm gone, Yvonne's in charge." His grip would wring water from a rock.

"Off to be a Marine, huh? Here's a little something for ya." He slips a twenty-dollar bill into my shirt pocket.

Surprised, I manage a weak, "Thank you."

I've worked for Hank and Yvonne before. They're regulars at the Fair Oaks Diner where I 'pig tail' filling water glasses, pouring coffee, clearing tables so the waitress can take food orders faster. Hank's a legend around here. His spice import/export business employees forty or so locals, mostly women, pays well and offers benefits. Folks joke Hank went to visit the Grand Canyon and brought home the scenery. Yvonne, regal as a swan, is a real head turner in her late twenties. Hank's sixty if he's a day.

"Be careful. Don't get shot in some silly war," Hank calls as he drives off in his red Cadillac.

Yvonne seems out of breath. "We'll work down by the lake. I'll meet you there."

I walk past the dog kennel with the green shutters I painted last fall. Their lake glistens in the sun, straw bales stacked next to the fence. A wooden bridge arches gracefully to a small island maybe twenty-five yards out.

Yvonne comes up in a pink swimsuit and blue tennis shoes, her hair loose at her shoulders. *Elizabeth Taylor, eat your heart out. Wow.* “Your place is pretty as a park,” I stammer. *Terrible, Snead, terrible.*

“Hank lets me buy whatever I want.” Her smile makes my throat ache.

On the island, marten bird houses reach into the blue sky. Spirea and lilac bushes flank a brick barbeque and picnic table.

She says, “The mulch needs raking.”

I grab a rake from the nearby wheel borrow and stir the straw circling the plants. I’m finished in five minutes.

“What’s next?”

“That’s it. You’re through.”

“Really? I was overpaid.”

“Hank Cirilo never overpaid anyone, that you can count on.”

The sun brings out the gold in her eyes. She pats my hand. “You’re not a Marine yet. Relax.”

I shrug. *What can I say?*

“When my brother was eighteen, he was girl crazy. How about you?”

“They’re hard to talk to. I’m not up on the latest song or how movie stars wear their hair. They think I’m a stick-in-the-mud.”

Yvonne laughs. “Maybe they’re right. Relax. Enjoy life.”

“I’ll try.”

She winks again. Beautiful blue eyes. “Maybe I can help.”

She points to the wheelbarrow. “I forgot. Those tools should be put away. I’ll fix us a snack. Back in ten.”

The tool shed is a mess. I straighten up the work bench, hang tools on their outlined image, sweep the floor, then go back to the island. Yvonne sits, sipping white wine. A platter of small sandwiches is on the table. “I used your melon and Hoagie. That you put in the tree. That okay?”

I nod.

She cut the melon into animal shapes, the Hoagy is bitesize. “Your presentation would impress a French chef.”

Her smile shows white teeth and pink tongue. “Harvey girl training.”

I’d heard before that Yvonne had worked for the famous Harvey restaurants, noted from Vermont’s ski slopes to California’s Yosemite National Park for their pretty girls and great service.

“They lost a good employee in you.” I plop melon and Hoagy onto a blue paper plate. We don’t talk, just eat beneath the white and green umbrella, the smell of fresh cut grass mixing with the taste of mustard and lemonade. Fleecy clouds hang overhead. A meadowlark whistles. The breeze stirs Yvonne’s hair.

“Relax. Hank won’t be back until Wednesday.”

I nod and force a smile.

She asks, “You live with your married sister, right?”

“Yeah. Dad died four years ago.”

“Any other brothers and sisters?”

“No. Just Sandra and me.”

Yvonne spears melon. “I’m the oldest girl. Seven younger brothers and a sister.” She chews. “Hank’s a good man. When he proposed, I was a senior shift manager, sending Momma fifty dollars a month. She had four little ones at home then.”

Her shoulders are white. Her breasts rise and fall when she breathes.

“I agreed to marry Hank if he’d send Momma a hundred dollars a month. He agreed.” Her eyes sparkle when she laughs.

“I’ve never noticed your accent before. It’s cute.”

She giggles, her face turning pink. “I’m Cajun. From Louisiana.”

Her fingers play with the swimsuit tie at the nape of her neck. “Hank said he wanted kids. Not true. Guess I’ll raise Irish Setters instead.”

A robin chases a grasshopper in the clover near us. Bumblebees buzz. The meadowlark whistles again. Yvonne’s perfume floats on the air.

“When he passes everything’s mine.” She lowers her eyes. “Once a month he comes to my bed. Three minutes of wrestling and I’m pinned.” Tears roll down her cheeks. “I shouldn’t have said that.”

My face burns. I've heard the jokes. "Hank put the pot on the stove to heat, but it's about to boil over." I mumble, "Thanks for the snack. I better go."

"So soon? Aren't Marines brave?" Her eyes search mine, her hand on my arm. "I'll walk you to your bike. I've a present for you."

Another one?

We cross the bridge. Yvonne runs ahead, drops her jacket on the grass, and wades into the lake. "Water's great. C'mon in."

Silver droplets rain on me. "Party pooper. This is your last day of freedom. Loosen up."

What the hell?

I slip off my shoes and socks, roll up my pant legs and step into the cold water. Yvonne grabs my ankles and pulls me in deeper water. I snort and cough.

"Take off your trousers. I won't watch."

I'm wet, so why not? I duck behind the bridge, strip down to my shorts and swim out to Yvonne.

"Race you to the island."

She beats me by three strokes.

"Slow poke."

Yvonne swims farther out, waves and dives. *She's down a long time. Swimming after eating can cause cramps. Is she okay?*

Like a torpedo shot from a submarine, she skims through the water, leaps on my back, wraps her legs around my waist and says, "To the straw bales, my stallion."

Afterwards, we don't talk, just lay on the blanket, legs entwined. The meadowlark trills. A cow moos. Yvonne jumps up and grabs a package from a nearby basket.

"From Hank."

I unwrap a shaving kit.

Yvonne hands me a package, wrapped in paper with American flags printed on it. It's green bell bottoms pants and a red and yellow flowered shirt.

"Happy birthday."

“Thanks.”

I'll be styling at the induction center tomorrow.

Yvonne's green eyes lock on mine. “I'll remember our secret forever.”

That was the last time I saw her, although her smell, the taste of her lips, haunt me to this day. I was stationed at Camp Pendleton when Sis sent me the newspaper clipping. “Local Woman Wins Big At State Championships. Irish Setter Takes Best in Show.”

I wasn't surprised. Yvonne was destined to raise champions.

June 11, 1963

At the Induction Center, a headline in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch reads, “*Vietnamese Buddhist Monk Sets Himself on Fire.*” *Why do I care?* The happenings in a small Asian country thousands of miles from the States are of no concern to me.

That afternoon I stepped across the yellow line, placed my feet in the green foot prints on the gray concrete floor, raised my right hand and swore to protect and defend the Constitution of the United States. That night along with sixty-eight other recruits, I climbed aboard a MATS C-124 Globemaster bound for the San Diego Marine Recruit Depot. My Marine Corps journey had begun.

14 August 63.

Boot camp wasn't so tough. More mental than physical.

In the bus station on my way to Advanced Infantry Training, at Camp San Onofre, the first line in an article in the *LA Times* reads, “Sister-in-law of Vietnam's president says, ‘I clap hands at seeing another monk barbeque show, for one cannot be responsible for the madness of others.’” *Why does media report on everything little thing in that country? It's of no interest to me.*

Infantry Training is Cowboys and Indians played with real guns and blank cartridges – Marines are the cowboys, we always win. It's train, train, train. We happily call ourselves H.P.K.'s - Hired Professional Killers.

2 August 64

The rec room TV blares, “Congress authorized President Johnson to use all ‘necessary measures’ to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States, in response to the report from the U.S.S. Maddox that it was attacked by three North Vietnamese torpedo ships in the Gulf of Tonkin. The Maddox damaged three of her attacker's boats, killing four sailors, and injuring six others.”

Don't fuck with the big dog unless you want to get fucked. Does this mean war in a dirty little Asian country far, far from home?

8 August 65

Today, along with thirty-eight thousand other Marines from the 9th Marine Expeditionary Brigade, 3rd Marine Division, I proudly waded ashore at Da Nang, South Vietnam, my first amphibious landing. Armed Forces Radio reports States side at a Vietnam 'teach-in' at the University of Michigan, twenty-seven college students were arrested. *Serves them right. We're here to protect South Vietnam from a Communist takeover.*

We Marines believe we're the finest fighting force in the history of warfare, fully convinced the People's Army of Vietnam will tuck tail and run when they come up against us. Our first missions are Search and Destroy raids (with the emphasis on destroy) in Communist held areas, to support U.S. Air Force's Rolling Thunder bombing campaign that levels villages and kills bad guys by the score.

The Army of Vietnam (Arvan) proves to be a better fighting force than we anticipated. In my two tours in that hot-assed country, I came to admire their discipline, resilience, and dedication. Still, we'd kick their ass good if our politicians didn't restrict our ability to response and if the media didn't report every detail of every little skirmish.

31 May 66

Today a Buddhist girl set herself on fire to protest foreign troops in her country's soil. Doesn't she know we Marines are here at her government's request? We're the Good Guys.

7 June 66

Tore the shit out of my legs, arms, and upper torso when I dove into a ditch to escape incoming from Arvan. Glass shards, sharpened bamboo, and human feces turned me into a human sieve. Penicillin and the skill of Navy doctors will get me back honchoing my rifle in six to eight weeks.

7 Aug 66

On patrol. Seven miles out; 11 miles back. (I'm on light duty!) Glad to be back earning my pay, but I'm one tired assed Marine. Out unit rotates Stateside in six weeks. Hopefully.

15 November 69

LA on liberty. *TV reports two hundred and twenty-five thousand anti-war protesters filled the streets around the White House in Washington, D.C.; seven thousand college students arrested. Another reporter said that in Vietnam, Marines burned down 750 thatch-roofed huts, leaving over 4,500 Vietnamese homeless.* I agree with the reporter. That wasn't smart.

I've followed the advice Hank Cirillo gave me the day I made it with his wife back in '63. "Don't get shot," he said. So far I've ducked at the right time in fire fights, but I busted up my knee jumping from a jeep. My bamboo stick scars will disappear with time, the corpsman said.

9 September 71

I say goodbye to the Marines today. Eight years down the drain.

13 September 71

Interviewed with a Non-Government Organization working for American interests in South America. I leave for Bolivia next week

29 December 71

Bought out my contract with Air America. I can't do what they expect and look myself in the mirror.

17 January 72

Started my first civilian job. Selling plants and flowering shrubs for a San Diego nursery.

30 April 75

I cried watching The People's Army of Vietnam drive triumphantly through the streets of Saigon; 30,000 South Vietnamese helicoptered to American navy ships with thousands more waiting rescue.

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Did I cry for myself or for my buddies?

Guys like PFC Mark "Boomer Sooner" Cleveland from Tulsa, Oklahoma who was stabbed to death after he helped two Vietnamese women mired in a mud hole up to their necks get free. Or Steve Harris, a 20-year-old corporal from Duluth, Minnesota who died when his jeep hit a land mine while delivering mail. Senseless deaths of two great guys.

What about Lee Nguyen, our unit translator and guide? He liked Reese's Pieces and Ho Hos and could name every baseball team in the American League. He saved many an American's life in combat and helped them enjoy liberty. Another advisor, Tim Tran, carried an American flag and copy of the U.S. Constitution in his pocket everywhere he went. He insisted his son and daughter learn English, so they could go to college in the States someday. *Did these two heroes and their families get out safely?*

For my two tours in 'Nam, all I can show is my 'forever card' from the Veterans Administration Health System. I'm luckier than many American 18-and 19-years-olds, who died in that God forsaken place - kids fresh from high school, expected to fight like pros, even if they weren't taught which end of a rifle to point - cannon fodder for the foibles of politicians. The doctors and nurses who patched up our men and women are the real heroes. They get few accolades.

I've had people tell me how stupid I was to be there. It's really simple. I was there because my government sent me there. If you want to be mad at somebody, how about the politicians who sent young men and women to fight a war we shouldn't have fought in the first place? Many authorities said we should have never deployed since there was no way we could win.

Don't yell at me for doing what I was told to do. Is it my fault that a motorcycle backfiring on the street beneath my apartment, causes me to I dive under my bed thinking it's the explosion that blew out the stars and littered the ground with body parts of my friends? I obeyed my government's orders. Now, I'm not welcome in my own country.

13 October 80

Letter from Sandy. Lung cancer. Third stage. Whatever that means. She's coming to visit. We'll meet in San Clemente.

When I left Fair Oaks for the Corps, Sandy was a checkout girl at Kroger's, newly married to Ray. We exchanged occasional Christmas cards and birthday greetings over the years. At our meeting in San Clemente we're two dogs smelling each other out. One night after two glasses of red wine, Sandy brought me current on home town news.

"Hank Cirillo died 5, 6 years ago. Yvonne's pretty as ever. Still single. Her son's a handsome cuss. Sixteen or seventeen, I'd guess. He starred in a Community Theater production. The city renamed the performing arts center after Yvonne. That's what a hundred thou buys in today's world."

"Good for her. I worked for her and Hank the day before I left for the Marines."

"I remember. Your birthday. She gave you the most hideous pair of bell bottom trousers and flowered shirt known to man."

I laugh but I feel like crying instead. The ghosts created that day are still fresh. I change the subject.

"What's your next step?"

"Surgery. Then chemo. Change of diet. Regular exercise. Hope for the best. I'm glad it's just Ray and me. Having no kids makes it easier."

I nod, but don't agree. *I'm thirty-five*. I wish I had a son. My branch of the Snead family tree dies with me if I don't have an heir. But, it's more than that. I want someone to care for, and someone who cares for me.

Sandy speaks through tears. "I've never smoked a cigarette in my life. Ray smokes a pack a day. Won't quit. Says it's bullshit that second-hand smoke causes cancer." She wipes tears. "You'll see more of me in the future."

I nod. *Not a true ghost, but an unwelcome waif for sure.*

November 1981

Sis called. Her Big C is back. She and Ray split. She'll rent her house and move into a retirement home. No news about Yvonne.

October 1982

I'm in Fair Oaks to sign legal documents. I drove by Yvonne's place this afternoon, but chickened out on going in. She probably wouldn't remember me anyway.

September 1984

Back in Fair Oaks to help Sis move into assisted living. She asked why I've never married. "I'm not as brave as you."

She laughed. The no kid ghost visits often, especially at nights.

I'm zero for two when it comes to seeing Yvonne. Her place is still stately. A big sign reads, "Coming soon. Cirilo Estates – Custom Designed Executive Homes for Discriminating Families." I slowed but kept driving.

August 1987

In Fair Oaks to bury Sis and sell her house. I'm her only heir – she had no kids, and we don't have relatives. At age forty-two I realize it's a pipe dream that I'll ever have a family. I'd try it with Kim, but she takes umbrage when a helicopter flies overhead at night and I jump out of bed, wild-eyed and sweating, toss her into the closet and dive behind the TV, yelling, "Set up a perimeter. Injured out first!"

Saturday afternoon at Sis' I mow the lawn and paint the front gate as the realtor suggested, then go for a jog. A black Dodge Ram pickup beeps. I wave. There are no strangers in a small town. My run over, I shower and sit in the porch swing with a beer.

The truck I saw earlier parks across the street. A young man in a Cardinals baseball cap, blue tee shirt, jeans and tennis shoes comes up the sidewalk. *A buyer for the house?*

"You Ken Stead?"

"Guilty. What can I do for you?"

"I'm Jason Cirillo."

"Cirillo. I know that name. Any kin to Yvonne?"

"She was my mom."

Ah, yes. A real ghost. In the flesh.

He twists his cap with white fingers.

"How is your mom - Yvonne?"

"She died last November." Sweat beads his forehead. "She said you'd remember her."

"I sure do."

I push a chair toward him. "Have a seat. Sorry, she . . . passed. I did odd jobs for her and Hank in high school. Good people. Gave me a shaving kit and twenty bucks when I left for the Marines."

That's enough, Snead.

"That's what she told me."

He sits, his eyes traveling from my face to my feet and back. We're silent for a moment, then I say, "How about them Cardinals?"

We chat about their lack of pitching, the weather, and how Fair Oaks has changed and the high cost of gas. *A man talking to a ghost.*

Jason blurts, "You and Mom had a thing. A tryst she called it."

The ghost is loosed.

"That was a long time ago." *No one likes to pay interest on the folly of youth.*

Jason waves a hand. "You're my Dad. Mom told me." His face is pale, sweat streaming down his face. "I'm not here to cause you any trouble. Mom left me well off."

I don't know whether to laugh or cry. I go inside and grab two beers. Jason takes one but doesn't pop the top.

"Thanks." A short pause.

"Hank – Dad – died when I was nine. I don't remember much about him. I wanted to meet you. That's why I stopped by."

I decide to come clean. "Your mother was a beautiful woman. We had a," I use her word, "a tryst. I had no idea . . . she was pregnant."

"Everyone thinks Hank was my Dad. No reason to believe otherwise. They seemed happily married. Dad died not knowing the truth. Hell, Mom didn't tell me until a week or so before she passed."

Jason stands. "I have to go. You seem like an all-right guy. Took my news better than I figured. Mom said you were a gentleman." We shake hands.

On the sidewalk, he turns. "Wanna go fishing sometime?"

Why not? I'll be here another two weeks at least.

Jason and I fished some and talked a lot. The lake where Yvonne and I did the horizontal mambo years ago is still pretty, the island bridge a pale blue now. We caught some nice bass and scads of bluegill. The huge houses of Cirillo Estates intrude into where the pasture used to be, obscuring the rolling green hills.

Any man worth his salt would be proud to have Jason as a son. *Too bad his last name isn't Sneed.*

His fiancée, Shannon, rides shotgun with us to a Cardinals game in St. Louis, my last Sunday there. I accepted an offer on Sis' house yesterday. The nursery keeps emailing asking me when I'll be back at work. I've agreed to the counseling Kim thinks will make our marriage possible. I fly home Tuesday.

A silly thing I do is surprise friends with cards on their birthday. It often takes subterfuge on my part to get the correct date without giving them a hint of my intentions. When Jason goes for hot dogs and beer, I ask Shannon.

"When's Jason's birthday?"

"He'll be 23, April 27th."

For some reason, this date seems wrong. Back in my bedroom that night, I open the leather valise where I store my journals. I learned early on that family trips, in particular, often require memory nudges. Thank you, Mr. Blasingame. I pull out the first notebook. June 1963. There it is. Page One: "Made it with Yvonne."

If Jason is the consequence of Yvonne's and my little fandango, he'd be 24 in February or March. If his birthday is in April, and he'll be twenty-three, he's at least a year too young to be my son.

Damn. I don't have an heir after all.

Why Yvonne chose to tell Jason I'm his father is a mystery. Is it important to correct his mistake? He'll never use my name. We'll live a part. Contact will be by email, an occasional phone call, once-a-year visits. My choice, I can ruin the high regard Jason has for his mother by giving my version of the truth. Or, I can keep quiet.

What did Yvonne say years ago?

"A secret I'll remember forever."

I smile and put the journal back in my suitcase. Why change what doesn't need to be changed?





tongue
Anna Maeve

out of order in the supermarket

Andrew Shelffo

The shriek surprises me. No one expects to hear that in a supermarket. I'm almost 60, and I've never heard a shriek in the supermarket before. More surprisingly, the shriek came from me.

I didn't expect to shriek. I didn't plan to shriek. He picked up the baguette in his cart and threw it at me, like a spear. I easily blocked it with my forearm, but the flying bread caught me off guard. That's why I shrieked. And the shriek surprised the dog, who'd been laying quietly in the shopping cart.

I like supermarkets because they're based on order. Straight aisles stocked with carefully arranged foodstuffs. Carts that perform better than they're given credit for. An efficient check-out system. Supermarkets are also built on trust. You'll go down the right side of the aisle with your cart. You won't block anything when you stop and talk to a neighbor. You won't pay by check if there's a line behind you. You'll do the right thing in the express lane.

I take pride in my supermarket prowess. I'm not one of those guys who refuses to learn how supermarkets work and comes home with the baking powder because they couldn't find the baking soda and hopes their wife will never make them go to the store alone again. I know where everything is, or at least where everything should be. I buy horseradish maybe once every three years, but I know that my supermarket keeps it in TWO places, by the seafood AND by the kosher pickles.

I was gliding through the supermarket, happily checking things off my list, and then I turned down aisle 7, the cereal-and-coffee aisle, and I saw approaching from the opposite end, a man by himself, about my age, with a cart that was mostly empty, except for a dog.

A dog in the supermarket.

Now, I like dogs. I have been a dog owner. My son recently got a dog, and I feel like I'm a proud grandfather. I can't wait to see that cute puppy face. But I also like rules. I've seen dogs in the supermarket before, and I've done my research: they're not allowed.

My mother once told me that being right isn't worth being dead. But this guy has a poodle in the cart. Yes, I'm being prejudiced against poodles and guys who have poodles. But I figured my chances of being bested by this guy were slim. I decided to say something.

"Excuse me, but your dog," I began. The transgressor started to smile. He probably thought that I was going to ask its name or its breed or if I could pet it. "...doesn't belong in a supermarket. It's a violation of the health code."

His smile disappeared. That's when he reached into his cart and grabbed the baguette and threw it at me.

The dog leaps to its feet and begins whimpering. The man's attention immediately turns to the dog. "That's assault," I say, even though I know it isn't assault. Throwing a baguette at someone

is actually battery. I know my *Law & Order*. And then I reach into his cart to get something to throw back at him, because the way our carts are positioned, it's easier. I see something wrapped in butcher paper with *chateaubriand* written on it in grease pen. I reach for that, but I take my eye off it to make sure the guy isn't doing something else to hurt men, and I end up picking up the dog.

"Kidnapper!" he screams.

That's another thing you don't want to hear in the supermarket.

"Technically, it's dog napper," I say.

Then the dog bites me. I drop it back into the cart and see blood on my hand.

I hear a voice over the PA system, and then four college-aged kids wearing polo shirts emblazoned with the store logo and blue rubber gloves swarm me. One is pushing a rolling bucket with a red hazmat symbol on it, and he immediately begins mopping up the blood in aisle 7.

A college-aged woman wearing blue rubber gloves keeps saying to me, "Sir, are you okay?"

"That dog bit me!" I tell her, pointing at the miscreant. The man walks away quickly. He doesn't even look back as he turns the corner at the end of the aisle. He's gone before the young woman even glances that way.

"Sir, you can't bring your dog in here. This is a supermarket. Dogs aren't allowed. It's against the health code. Now, please just try to remain calm until the ambulance gets here."

I can't believe she thinks I could possibly be the kind of person who'd bring a dog into a supermarket.

The official letter I get three days later says that I am banned from the supermarket for being disorderly.

Man, I miss that place.



the economics of the egg cream

Harvey Silverman

The Egg Cream, properly made, is a simple drink. In a plain unadorned soda glass deliver a couple of pumps of chocolate syrup, pour in an equal amount of whole milk, and add seltzer generated from a black handled gooseneck dispenser; the powerful stream helps combine the ingredients. A few brisk stirs with a long-handled spoon completes the drink.

At least that is how I remember my grandfather, standing behind the counter at the small Manhattan “candy store” he and my grandmother owned and operated for more than forty years, did it. In the 1950s when my boyhood self visited I think the price was ten cents.

The Egg Cream was a fountain drink unavailable at my home in Massachusetts. But a visit to my grandparents meant I could have what seemed to be unlimited (until my folks said “enough!”) ice cream and candy and especially that – to me – exotic beverage. The flavor of that drink, perhaps made the more tasty because of the association with my grandparents and my own childhood innocence, never left my memory.

In my late sixties, five decades later, Egg Cream long deprived, I was brought by my adult son to Union Market in Washington DC. He was excited to lead me to a fountain that served Egg Creams. An opportunity for me to enjoy this delightful drink from so very many years ago. It arrived in a fancy fountain glass with a huge head of foam. Something was not right. That was not at all the way my grandparents served it. The drink had been upscaled, I thought, appropriate perhaps for patrician New Yorkers or somebody from the upper West Side but it was not the plebian common folk Egg Cream of my youth. It tasted fine but the appearance prompted me to carry on a bit and I suppose my protestations created something of a modest scene.

That my grandparents were in the position of selling Egg Creams had not been part of the plan. My grandfather had been trained in Europe as a tailor; sometime after he came to America, met and married my grandmother, and had the son who became my father, he and another man began a business in New York to produce children’s clothes. The business failed in the Depression of 1920-21.

My grandparents borrowed \$2000 from a rich aunt and bought the store. For all the subsequent years fourteen-hour days began when each morning my grandfather, well before 7AM, went to the store to handle the newspapers that had been earlier delivered. Each of the many different newspapers that were published back then in New York arrived in a separate bundle tied up with a length of inexpensive coarse rope and needed to be unbundled and placed on a large wooden stand which stood outside the door of the store. My grandparents saved the rope.

Then the store – a tiny slot-shaped establishment with a fountain in too narrow a space to allow for fountain seats, the fountain itself long enough for just two or perhaps three people to stand – opened for business selling fountain sundries, penny candies, magazines, and the like. Seven days a week. Never a day off. Penny candies sold for a penny, newspapers a penny or two; their life together carried on a cent or two at a time.

The ten cents that they received for an Egg Cream (and doubtless much less than that in the 1920s) had a lot of work to do. That dime needed to pay for the ingredients that made the drink, the rent on the store, the store's equipment and fixtures, the electric and gas bill, taxes, insurance, licenses, and that rich aunt's loan which they paid off in full. After that my grandparents could think about food for the family, clothes, and other necessities. Luxuries must have been very few.

In December, 1963, I travelled by bus with eight high school classmates to New York. We were ostensibly attending a three-day convention of our high school fraternity; the real reason was that the New York drinking age was eighteen.

One early afternoon, sobered up, I convinced my best friend, Dave, that we two should visit my grandparents' store and get an Egg Cream. They had not been told I would be in *the city* and I wanted to see them. The store was on First Avenue, our cheap hotel on Eighth Avenue, so an easy walk of seven blocks I thought. Except the blocks between Avenues in New York are much longer than those between Streets. I did not know that. I also was unfamiliar with the unnumbered Avenues we would need to cross such as Madison and Park. An easy stroll turned into a mile and a half hike for hungover marchers. Dave asked if we could just take a cab but I repeatedly refused.

Finally we made it to the store, walked in, and surprised my grandparents. They were of course delighted to see me. I explained why we were supposedly in town and that I had promised Dave that they made "the best Egg Creams in New York." We each were treated to the iconic drink and after a brief visit it was time to head back.

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"Can we please take a cab now," Dave pleaded. I agreed, particularly as it was beginning to snow. But with the storm no cab would stop for us and we were forced to walk back, returning to our hotel cold and wet and tired. It made for a good story that Dave repeated many times over the years; I like to think the accumulated pleasure he got from his dramatic recounting of my miscalculation of distance, my refusal to get a cab, and his misery outweighed his temporary suffering.

Just a couple of years later my grandparents closed the store when the landlord informed them of a large increase in rent. They were well past retirement age by then.

The Egg Cream I enjoyed with Dave that day was last one my grandparents ever gave me.

Back to the 1950s. When we were ready to return home after a visit my grandmother would give me a ten dollar bill. It was passed to me "in secret" even though my folks knew it was happening. Now so many years later I contemplate that ten dollars and imagine it in ten-cent Egg Creams. One hundred Egg Creams needed to be sold. One hundred! Thinking about my grandparents, Abe and Helen, often brings the Egg Cream to mind as I recall them with love, appreciation, respect, and gratitude.



a disentanglement

Eliot Cardinaux

I.
TOGETHER

the rocks make a sign. The
sun in a field of grass. I wintered
over in this place of purpose.

II.
OFF THE LEDGE OF MEANING

This trough was reserved for you.



birdsong

Eliot Cardinaux

bed down light's
architecture of pain

in
commotion's cradle

a word
one sliver of sound has
totaled
the darkness



maine maple sunday

Laura Wolf Benziker

Oh, the bleary eyes of March! Kiersten's skull was full of ice blocks that collided painfully with each tentative step. On her shoulder was a jeering sprite. Ha! Kids get the tooth fairy; "grown-ups" get the hangover sprite. Did she think Saturday night was still party night? When in actuality it was watching a mediocre show with her wife and going to bed at ten because their kid would be up at six? Their kid, Lola, was up at six. She wanted them to read to her; she wanted to be fed.

It wasn't until after Kiersten had poured cereal for Lola; poured cereal for herself; they had eaten; and she was eyeing the tower of dishes with suspicion, that she remembered it was Maine Maple Sunday.

"Hey, tomorrow is Maine Maple Sunday!" her wife May had said yesterday afternoon. "We should take Lola. Eat pancakes; learn about farming."

"Eh," Kiersten had said, "It's honestly boring." Right away she felt bad for shooting down the suggestion, and said, "But yeah, sure, if we don't make other plans."

Maine Maple Sunday was observed the fourth Sunday of March. It was one of those acutely wholesome New England rituals Kiersten had grown up with. You could expect at least one per season: apple picking; corn mazes; snowman building, etc. Even tedious traditions sounded more appealing in late March, though, when she and her spouse and kid had been cooped up together in their small house for almost four months. She visualized the three of them being observed from above, like caged mice. She could picture the paths they had worn in the hardwood floors; the pattern repetition; the increasingly shrill tones in which they spoke to one another. It had been like pulling teeth to get Lola to play outside! Weren't six-year-olds supposed to like playing outside? She would go out only if her friends were out, or if it was a good day for sledding, which it rarely was. There had technically been snow on the ground most of the season. But in the absence of fresh bounty from the heavens, the hill was a slick of ice with a few pitiful patches of brown grass peeking through.

She sipped her coffee and did an internet search. Praise be! There was an article that profiled a syrup-maker, and went on to list sugar houses across the state that were participating in the holiday. These farms were in far-flung places with names like Solon, Liberty, Canaan, Albion, Industry, Hope.

She opened a tab on her computer for the maps app and began methodically entering each town, to see how far they were from the city where they lived. The first town she entered was a three hour drive away, and the thumbnail that popped up was of a cemetery. Creepy, she thought. She clicked open small town after small town, and *lots* had cemeteries pop up first. How bleak it must be, she thought, to make a life in a place where the dead were more of a draw than the living. She bookmarked the address of a maple farm about 45 minutes away. One with no graveyard pictures.

May came downstairs in her bathrobe, scanned the chaotic state of the first floor (the second floor was, possibly, worse), smiled at Kiersten and said, "You would think with two women in the home, the house would be tidy."

"Hardy har," said Kiersten. It was a running joke. Shortly after they had moved in together May's mom had come for a visit. Kiersten cooked a nice dinner; made fancy cocktails. The conversation was pleasant if a bit artificial. Though Mrs. Zhang seemed to enjoy the meal, on her way out the door she muttered something that Kiersten did not catch.

"Mom. I understand Chinese!" May had said.

Kiersten poured coffee for May, kissed her cheek, took her own mug and walked down the driveway in shearling boots. Lola and her neighbor friend Benjamin skipped down the block holding hands. Twin blondies. They jumped in every slushy puddle, screeching with laughter when one or the other got mud-splattered. It didn't matter which one. They swung their hands in time to the skipping, and chanted,

"Saddy Saddy Soup! Soup!

Saddy Saddy Soup! Soup!"

It was something they had made up and apparently it was HI-larious. They rounded the bend in the road and Kiersten saw a neighbor lady watching them. Kiersten gripped her mug tighter and felt her blood race. *This* neighbor. There had been an *incident* with her last summer. This lady had a beautiful raspberry patch right up by the road. Kiersten had allowed Lola to pick a few raspberries. They were so good! There were so many! But the lady must have been watching from her window because she came right out.

"Uh, uh, uh, little girl, don't pick those!" she had said in a high sing-song, "What if you were sick? Then what if I picked the raspberries you touched, and ate them on my cereal? I might get sick! And wouldn't that be *awful*?"

She had trilled all this with a wide, toothy smile. It was quite unnerving; Kiersten was taken aback. She didn't know what to do, so she apologized. Since then, every time she walked by the raspberry bush she felt a little burst of rage and shame.

Now this lady was at the end of her driveway, grinning that same awful grin. Lola and Benjamin skipped past, and Kiersten felt a sudden terror that they would splash her with muddy water.

"Look at you two lovebirds!" she said, "Someday you'll be going to the prom together."

Kiersten's eyes widened in disbelief. Her breath caught in her throat. But she could not come up with a retort.

When they had decided to try for a child, she and May had had their fertility tested. The doctor told Kiersten she had excellent hormone levels and a hearty ovarian reserve. Mercifully he did

not mention “child-bearing hips”, which was more than could be said for her mother. Months later, when they told her the good news, Kiersten’s mother had slapped her ass and remarked, “Finally putting those big bones to good use!”

At the sperm bank they selected a Chinese donor, in hopes that their baby might look a bit more like her non-bio mom. Kiersten got pregnant on the first try. It had been so easy! At thirty-five she was labeled “geriatric”, but there were no complications. The baby made it to full term, exited in the traditional fashion, and took to breastfeeding like a wolf to a flock of lambs. Through it all, Kiersten felt a deep guilt. She thought of their friends. For Meg and Tia it had taken four rounds of IVF. Adele and Justin had given up after three miscarriages. Colin and Andrew were still waiting to adopt a baby after *five years!* Kiersten carried in her a sharp fear, lodged deep, that fate would even the score some day.

As Lola grew it became clear that she had not inherited her bio-father’s Asian looks. At all. She looked, like Kiersten, Northern European. For this, too, Kiersten felt guilty. As if she had done it on purpose.

Lola was big enough now to buckle herself in; that was nice. May piled her with a mountain of activity books, graphic novels, and retro puzzle games. Lola selected a book of mazes, licked the end of her pencil, and got to it.

The route was familiar at first. They took this road once or twice a year to get to the big destination lake of the region. This lake was descended upon by swarms of tourists from Massachusetts every summer. These people staked out spots in their campers, set up lawn chairs, and proceeded to smoke butts and yell at their children for the duration of their vacation. At least that was Kiersten and May’s impression. They felt guilty for thinking that. *Sorry! Sorry!* However, this particular lake had warm shallow beaches, -perfect- for a young child learning to swim. So they would grit their teeth and go. They would spend an extra thirty minutes schlepping towels, beach toys and the umbrella to find a secluded corner of the shore where they wouldn’t have to breathe cigarette fumes.

“In a corder mile, turn left onto Killdeer road,” came the pleasant, feminine voice of the navigation.

“Huh. Never been this way before,” said May. The navigation took them along a road parallel to the usual road, about twenty yards deep to it. A thin membrane of trees and houses separated them from the familiar. And then they were told to turn hard left, fully into the unknown.

Scenic vistas melded one into the next: rolling hills out of nineteenth century paintings, topped with dignified houses, their lead white paint gleaming in the midday sun. Faded red barns; the pleasant traipsing of a post and rail fence. Rolls of hay the embodiment of brushstrokes. Then, like entering a tunnel, they would pass through a dark wood. They saw trailer homes in disrepair, their yards packed with debris. Several had oversized political flags for a far-right candidate who lost the election years ago. There would inevitably be yard toys for toddlers. A pink and purple princess castle; a navy blue police car; a drooping mini basketball hoop. Their indestructible plastic was slicked with mildew. These entities did not appear to have been in use during the

past decade, nor did it seem like there was any intention to dispose of them. They would wait. When the time came they would bestow their dubious blessings on the next generation.

There were old barns in the woods too. Smaller, of ambiguous purpose. The colors of the woods had seeped into them so that they were smartly camouflaged. The rot; the sog; the slow-motion collapse were so subtle that you didn't notice them until you had already gone past.

They didn't need the navigation to tell them when they were getting close. The road became lined on both sides with minivans and pickup trucks. They crept along a slow queue; it must have been a mile at least.

"What is this, a Taylor Swift concert?" said May. Kiersten was astonished. Her family had dragged her to many a Maple Sunday in the eighties and nineties. Never had there been a crowd *half* this size.

Not too far past the farm entrance they chanced upon a gap in the parking, like a pulled tooth. They maneuvered their car in, and carefully exited.

Every place to step was mud. They didn't even ask Lola to try to stay dry. They locked arms and wove themselves into the throng swarming the tree farm. They saw several vehicles that sported custom stick figure family decals: Daddy, Mommy, Brother, Sister, Puppy! There was the generic version; the golfing version; the Star Wars version. Every family was so unique! They felt the wind through their clothes. It was always a little colder outside the city this time of year. The gusts riddling the pines sounded oceanic. Kiersten became aware of an emptiness just beyond a veil of trees on the side of the road. She turned her head and observed a small graveyard; its rounded headstones exuding a serenity of ages. On the tallest stone, an obelisk, a surname was carved deep and clean: HUNT.

They slogged past festive activities: sack races; ox-cart rides; face painting; blacksmith demonstrations. They found themselves funneled across the farm's threshold.

Groups of people milled around. There were a few lines with unclear destinations. May ran a quick scouting mission. They rejected the pancake line (having already breakfasted). The sugar house seemed the most logical goal. It roosted, dark and weighty, at the top of a mossy hill. The wooden plank A-frame was blackened from decades of smoke. Its tin chimney rose to a dizzying height and puffed out a steady stream of intoxicating maple steam. May tipped her head back and closed her eyes. "Just smell that!" she sighed.

"Ahhhhh," said Kiersten.

They parked themselves in the unmoving line, and took in their surroundings. Hundreds and hundreds of white people. Perfectly normal for Maine as a whole. But living as they did in Maine's largest and most diverse city, it was a little jarring. These multitudes were dressed in various versions of their Sunday best. Kiersten found herself mesmerized. Even the goth kids looked freshly showered. There were dads in khakis, fundamentalist women in pinafores and bonnets, hipster guys in their fresh trims and raw denim. Even what appeared to be Brooklyn moms in prairie skirts and clog boots. Most were paired up in the traditional way. Everybody's children were running wild.

Lola huddled in close to her moms and jumped up and down, hugging her skinny shoulders. "I'm cold! I'm cold! I'm cold!" she sang.

May took off the old red wool shirt she was wearing and draped it around her. It was a man's shirt, passed down in the family. It hung below Lola's knees. May knelt to help her button it, and rolled up the sleeves. "Can I go to the playground?" said Lola.

"Sure," said Kiersten without thinking it through; without consulting her partner. Kiersten saw May's eyes dart left and right; saw the gleam of anxiety. She immediately felt a pit of guilt in her stomach. Lola took off toward the overrun playground, kicking up mud in her wake.

"We'll be able to keep an eye on her in that red shirt," said Kiersten, and instantly felt worse.

May looked off into some middle distance and started to shiver. Kiersten pulled her in close and kissed the smooth hair at her temple. Like lasers Kiersten felt the eyes on them. She sucked in her breath, and as often happened, flashed back to a moment at their wedding eight years ago. They had stood on the ivy-draped platform, beaming at each other while the officiant thumbed through her notes. Into the silence came the words of a young boy who had forgotten to use his inside voice, "Mommy, where's the husband?" The mommy was Kiersten's cousin Abigail. She pulled her child to her, took his head in her hands and whispered furiously into his ear. Kiersten had watched her mouth moving; had tried and failed to make out the words.

Kiersten forced herself to concentrate on the smell of maple steam. Breathe in. Breathe out. Most of the eyes eased up after a minute or so.

"What if we were invisible?" said May.

"What if we could fly out of Hell?" said Kiersten.

"What if gold coins sprouted where we stepped?"

"What if your hair never turned gray?"

"What if we slept in strawberry meadows?"

"What if we could protect her no matter what?"

They sighed and leaned into each other. Kiersten kept half her weight on one foot because she loved finding that balance.

The line's movement was imperceptible. They listened to refrain after refrain from a fiddle troupe. They bought a bag of maple sugar cotton candy and shared it, letting it melt halfway on their tongues and then crunching. After a while they noticed people walking with purpose away from the sugar house, back in the direction they had come.

"It's almost time," said a mom with perfect honey-blond waves, as she hustled four small children away from the cotton candy stand. The littlest one stomped and whined and had to be carried by his strapping father.

“Almost time for what?” said May. There came a roar of a crowd from over the crest of the hill. Both their heads whipped toward the playground, which was totally abandoned. They looked at each other and ran, following the flow of footprints in mud.

They snaked their way through a dense crowd at the base of the next hill. They grimaced and squeezed past the bellies of large men who had staked their places. They reluctantly tapped the shoulders of women before shimmying past. “Excuse me; sorry! I’m sorry; excuse me!” All around them the crowd murmured,

“Oh, isn’t she beautiful?”

“It needs to be *my* daughter next year.”

“Aren’t they just precious together!”

Ladies in long white dresses and aprons wove deftly through the crowd, holding aloft metal trays. From the trays they handed out tiny white paper cups that steamed out sweet vapor. An iron bell clanged several times, and the crowd went quiet.

At the apex of the hill stood Lola. She wore a flower crown and had a rapturous flush on her face. Next to her was a boy about the same age, wearing a vest and tie, hair neatly parted and combed. On Lola’s other side stood a brawny woman in a long blue dress. On the boy’s other side stood a tall bearded man in suspenders. Lola spotted her parents in the crowd and called down, “Mom! Mama! I won the prize!” She held up a basket and jiggled it.

The crowd’s murmuring died out and the large man bellowed, “I present to you this year’s King and Queen of the Maple!” The crowd erupted in cheers. “Raise your cups and drink to your King and Queen!”

In one motion, the revelers lifted the tiny cups and tipped them back. Kiersten and May had frozen; they could only watch. The woman in the blue dress opened her mouth in a broad grin. She had so many teeth; it seemed like too many. She flung her arms out and waited for silence. Then she called out, “And now they will kiss!!”

Lola and the boy looked at each other in horror. The woman grabbed them both by their shirt collars and hefted them towards each other. Lola screamed. She dropped the basket, wiggled herself out of the red shirt, and barrelled down the hill. The boy stood crying with his hands over his face. There was a flash of white as a rabbit tumbled from the basket and darted into the crowd.

Kiersten barged bear-like through the crowd to her daughter. She scooped her up and swung her onto her back. May forged them an exit trail, shoving anyone who failed to move.

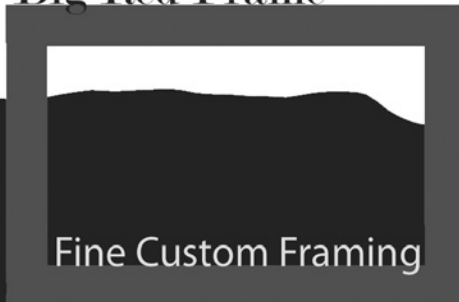
“Get the fuck out of our way!” she shrieked. She was an eagle; a valkyrie.

They made it back to the main road and it was empty. May turned not toward home, but away. She leaned on the gas pedal and they could all feel the velocity; it matched their heart beats. Kiersten sat in the back next to Lola. A joke book was procured; the mood remedied. *What do you call a cave man's fart? A blast from the past!* In ten minutes they were at the lake's entrance. It was the offseason; entry prohibited. But the wooden arm that barred their way was more emblematic than practical. May revved the engine and smashed through. It splintered so easily, like papier mache.

She pulled up to the beach. They tumbled out of the car, laughing hysterically. They leaped through the overgrown path. Kiersten swooped Lola up and over broken lawn chairs and piles of cigarette butts. In the sand they stripped off their clothes down to their underwear. They stood in a line and gripped each other's hands; crouched for the wind-up. In unison they yelled, "One! Two! Three!"



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clemence visits
Theresa Pisani

a walk through smoke and rain

Carolyn A. Cushing

On the bridge I pause to watch
the mallard couple cut Vs in the pond
below the haze. A heron flies silent
and so close my breath could touch its ancient breast.

The rabbit, though I'm nowhere near,
still she dashes low for cover.

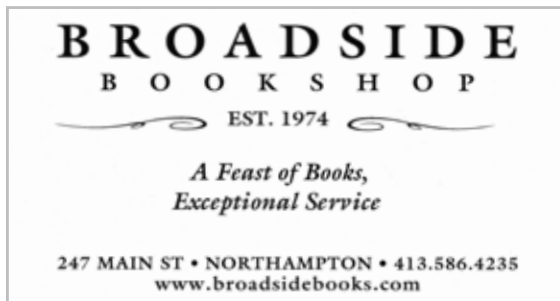
Chains twist and clank in the school bus undercarriage.

Sweet locust flowers nearly all fallen;
pink white ghosts flitting over exposed roots.
I pluck remaining petals to place between my teeth
and chew. Wonder if below the sweet I am eating ash.

The cemetery's trailer truck passes by with cement liners
so our dead bodies will never touch the soil.

Two pileated woodpeckers land in the dead tower of a tree,
dig deep into the shattered wood to break their latest fast.

The sky was spitting
when I left my house. As I return
rain comes with me, but when I raise my palm
to what's beyond the clouds
I still can feel the heat.



this is the morning

Carolyn A. Cushing

these fields silvered in fog
So the mountain is gone, birds rise
early sun takes dark from wings' tips

Follow the road as far it goes
to the edge of the flood
the bridge gone, too,
and beyond further fields are under water

These are the fields we would have eaten
sweet corn and peppers, potatoes and carrots
all through the summer and into the winter

Now all we can do is drink
the brown waters silted,
pluck sticks and twisted bottles from the brew
find—surprise—green life still in it
broken fronds of ferns and three acorns—
this season's first tree seeds.



hunger

Carolyn A. Cushing

The mountain is haze
And there's a hole in each maple leaf

I don't know if this is as the morning should be
or if the fires ...

Or if the insects moved by a new wave of heat
set off to eat and eat and eat

We hate insects, their dangled legs and broken wings
blister our lips at supper. We cover them with wine

Maybe someday we'll find ourselves inside
the same hot need, spilling cracks & doorway jams

Desperate to break out of all the grief
of this heat



mill town gothic

Richard Wayne Horton

I.

I Return To Work In My 90s

Old boss wanted me back. Wife wasn't thrilled but I went for a look see.

At the factory, jobs were piled up in dark corners against the bricks.
I told the boss, "You've expanded."

"Yeah. We like it."

"It's dark."

"We're getting lights soon"

Big machines sat on concrete, black iron covered in black dust.
I knew the machines. They knew me. "Where's my work table?"

"I put one in the other room. Window next to it. Light."

"Give me two guys to move the piles. A forklift. Water source, brushes."

"No problem."

"I can't keep steady hours. Can't lift." When I said it,
I looked at the dim black shapes, the handles, the wires trailing,
curved metal feet bolted into the concrete.

"We'll accommodate."

"Yeah." I turned to go.

He said, "We'll go out through the office. Everything else is blocked."

I laughed. "Of course."

I already felt the heaviness as if I wore the machines as clothes.

At supper I told my wife, "Hell, I won't go back."

Next morning before dawn

I got in the car.

2.

Don't Make Me Use It

I was at a poetry round table. Not at the table but standing near it like a vulture. One of the poets invited me to sit down. I said, "I'm outa here!"

Outside, the town was dead. It had been a mill town but the workers were all gone. No lights. Only abandoned factories, and everything made of brick. I headed for the bus station. In the moon-lit street I saw people lined up with suitcases, angry, all in a hurry.

Just ahead of me on the sidewalk two bobcats were fighting over a corpse that also held a suitcase. They kept snarling and fitzing

Finally I swatted them aside and stepped over the body, which was mostly eaten. I told the corpse it should have believed in itself.

Cutting ahead of the line at the bus station I went right to the ticket counter. I heard guns cocking in back of me, and thought, Come on! Come on! Try something!

The bus wasn't expected for 40 minutes, but it was sitting right at the curb, so I got on. The bus driver took that as a cue and got on too. We made it out of town before the bus pulled over. Oh, sure! I shoulda known that was coming. The driver got out and stood under a tree writing in a pocket notebook.

40

I rapped on the bus window and pointed at my watch.

He said, "Trying to scare me with that? I've got one too. Don't make me use it!"

Wo, now! Take it easy!

He did get back on and the bus headed into midnight starlight. Ahead, an enormous moon rose above the hill. I knew I hadn't really escaped from the poem being talked to death at the poetry roundtable. "Stop it!" I said. "Stop this poem right now."

The driver said, "Aw, now you know that doesn't happen!"

Looking out the window I saw that Saturn had appeared in the sky. I said, "Not a fan of transitions, are you?"

The driver said, "Fuck the reader."



motherless

Kelly Moyer

Tonight, I weave
a tapestry
with the remnants
of your disdain:
last season's fashion,
old photographs,
the wick
of a snuffed-out
flame.

But, you've never
been one
to mend
your own petticoat;

whereas, some
of us had no choice
but to surrender
the illusion
of safety
in order
to have
a motherfucking voice

and a hint
of that spark . . .

that keeps
a hope chest
stuffed
with pipe dreams
apt to detonate
in the dark.



ode to the coffee guy

Kelly Moyer

I'd prostrate before you,
but I'm just back
from the chiropractor
and, well, you know,
neuropathy's a bitch.
That, and . . .
there's a line reaching
out to the road.
So, I'll just drop this
off real quick.
Yeah, yeah,
I made you a bundt cake.
Real casual, like.
Like you aren't what's
made this city feel
like home
or haven't heard
more than you'd
care to hear. Or
that you didn't
save my life
last week with your
damn holistic remedies.
Or hawk my book
on my behalf.
So, yeah, bundt cake.



#simalucr crumbs

Kelly Moyer

I've conjured
this virtual verse
for you
with a tippity-tap
of fingertips
upon the dusty
ol' keyboard
in hopes
that one fine day
it may appear
upon your screen.

Perhaps you are
reading these lines
at this very moment
as you sip
a steaming cup
of Splenda-sweetened
chamomile tea
in your polyester
pajamas. If so,
may you rest well
to the patter of rain
emanating from
the white noise machine
your in-laws gifted you
last Christmas.

As for me, I think
I'll stay up for a while
with my steel-aged
chardonnay (for I
seem to have misplaced
the screwtop)
and wile away the night,
remembering what it was
to hold a pen, a hand,
an unfiltered sunrise
in spite of the "likes"
while vaping
Turkish tobacco.



a young man begins college

Gary D. Grossman

I

As I prepared to begin my freshman year at San Fernando Valley State College, in northern Los Angeles (Northridge), rolling waves of heaving ground shook me awake. Neither nerves nor excitement, not drunk or stoned—it was the Sylmar earthquake of 9 February 1971—6.6 on the Richter Scale—that greeted me at 6 AM with a thunderous noise followed by complete silence.

Lying in bed, the first sound I heard was the swish-swash sound of the water in our pool moving back and forth. It was an eerie, haunting noise, especially after the roar of homes and commercial buildings collapsing in our neighborhood. Mom and I lived about 10 miles from the epicenter of the quake and aside from some broken glassware and plates that had walked off shelves, we were spared injury and major loss. Our apartment building was still structurally sound and our only inconvenience was having to walk around the five foot piles of yellow cinder blocks that once stood as decorative walls.

The months following the quake were laden with both strong and weak aftershocks that caused me to race for the nearest outside door—fear flowing through my brain as adrenaline flooded my body. In the final tally, 64 people were killed in the quake. As proof that justice sometimes occurs in the here and now, the quake also destroyed Olive View Mental Hospital, where my Mother had spent six months doing inpatient therapy that consisted primarily of making ceramic ashtrays and knotting plastic lanyards and key fobs.

Valley State College, like many former teacher's colleges, was founded in the late 50's to accommodate the large number of boomers that wanted to attend college. Its architecture was standard post-WWII functional—steel and concrete, multistory structures with an occasional California Mission-themed building. There were few large old oaks or other native trees, and in a sop to the Biology Department the builders planted non-native sapling after sampling, because “a tree is just a tree, right?” The land in the San Fernando Valley had long been cleared of native vegetation to accommodate the agricultural activities of the region, and the college likely was built on old orange or walnut groves.

Valley State's halls and classrooms were painted with pastels, greens, yellows and blues, because, well, the 60's. The campus smelled of both of cut grass from extensive lawns and exhaust from the Fords, Chevys and VW Beetles of the mostly commuter students. Valley State was a popular college plunked down in a city of millions and enrolled over 20,000 students even in the early 70's. Northridge was full of pastel, stucco-coated apartment buildings for residential students.

I enrolled in basic science classes to begin my goal of becoming a zoologist. I had little conception of what that entailed—Mom and my high school advisors provided little guidance about college or curricula. My classes in physics, chemistry and basic biology all were taught by professors that were mediocre teachers, although after 40 years of college teaching myself, perhaps I should show more empathy and temper that statement.

After an unsatisfying semester, I decided to change my undergraduate major to pre-law and become a “movement” lawyer—power to the people! The Vietnam War dragged on, but student deferments were archeological artifacts, unknown in the current decade; however, having skipped a year and a half in school, and entering college at sixteen, I had three years before I was eligible for the draft.

I quit my high school job as a grocery bagger at Dale’s Market, and took a very convenient work-study job in the student cafeteria at Valley State. My co-workers were much older, and most knew each other as kids growing up in Ventura County, just northwest of Los Angeles. We worked various positions on the line, I was a salad maker, Don grilled, Kent dished-up desserts, and Jeff wielded brooms and mops.

My friends represented a rag-tag assemblage of financial-aid long-hairs sporting flannel shirts, Levi 501s, and either hiking or cowboy boots. Several had come close to getting busted by the Feds for importing a large amount of hashish hidden in camel saddle stools from Morocco. They were all at least seven years older than me, yet I was welcomed into their social circle as if I were an amusingly corruptible younger brother. As a sixteen year-old college freshman growing into my masculinity, my buddies represented a safe harbor, full of boats that bore the worn paint and occasional dent of life in the late 60’s – early 70’s.

The backbone of my cafeteria social group consisted of several very talented bluegrass musicians, and although I was familiar with folk music via Mom’s love of the genre, I didn’t know much about bluegrass—the general term for all Americana music in those days. Friday nights consisted of gathering at the house of my friend Don and his wife Renee—the most patient spouse in the world. Of course within a few years, and a move to Pocatello Idaho for Don’s grad program, they divorced when he returned from a fishing trip to find Renee in bed with some other long-hair. But prior to the move they were our hosts for many musical Fridays. Despite, or perhaps because of, our joint poverty, the intoxicant du jour was cheap beer, mainly Lucky Lager which had cryptograms on the inside of the caps. This led to many amusing incidents as six or seven drunk guys struggled to solve an obscure hieroglyphic riddle. Our libations also typically included a bottle of Jack Daniels, perhaps to celebrate the many cirrhotic livers of famous musicians.

The musical attendees consisted mostly of decent to eye-opening guitar players and several virtuoso fiddlers—my contribution was an on-key, baritone voice. We drank, played, and sang well into the wee hours, with an occasional participant folding in slow motion onto the varnished oak living room floor, only to arise when the sun broached the curtain-less living room windows, and the smell of Renee’s strong Mocha Java permeated the house. Our repertoire included mostly Appalachian ballads like Shady Grove, The Cuckoo, and Omie Wise, but also included expert pieces for the fiddlers, such as Orange-Blossom Special. One member formed a band that opened for one of John Denver’s tours—they were that good. Lord knows I should have picked up a guitar or played the autoharp more—instead, I just learned obscure songs while providing back-up vocals.

The LA music scene in the sixties and seventies was incredible, although most concerts and clubs were over the hill, rather, the Santa Monica Mountains, in Hollywood and West LA. Nonetheless, gas was cheap and free time was abundant as grains of sand on Santa Monica beach. There were free concerts in Griffith Park and headliners like the Airplane and the Dead could be seen there as well as lesser known bands.

My main concert-buddy was Howard, a high school classmate from Monroe High. We shared eclectic tastes in music and attended many live shows—most of which were made possible by the annual student pass offered by the Ashgrove, a well-known blues and folk club on Melrose in West Hollywood. For \$4.00 a student could purchase an annual pass that included admission that night, and \$1.50 admission every night of the week except Saturday. It seems mythical that we were able to see almost every blues giant, as well as bluegrass stars such as Doc Watson, Mike Seeger and Bill Monroe for the price of a subway token. Special treats were eclectic musicians like John Fahey, as well as famous folkies such as Rambling Jack Elliot.

One summer Thursday night, with the heat rippling the air above the Melrose Ave. sidewalks, we wandered into a record release party for Jerry Riopelle, found ourselves standing in front of an open bar and tables stocked with platters of gourmet hors d'oeuvres. Pulling together our bravado as only sixteen-year old boys can do, we walked up to the bar and ordered bottles of Pabst, as Riopelle, hit the piano with the opening measures of “Candy Barr”—his hit song about a legendary Texas stripper.

Some folks danced, but mostly everyone stood around drinking and softly talking as several other musicians took the stage. Record label execs in sport coats and ties mingled with girls in miniskirts and fishnets. In Levis and tee shirts, we were unmistakably underdressed—but apparently musician-enough looking to pass muster for the event. One of the high points of the party, was seeing Dr. John play several songs from his new album *Gris Gris* including *Mama Roux*, and the NOLA classic *Iko Iko*. We smiled in irony at the next song, *Right Place, Wrong Time*, because for us it surely was the lucky opposite—the right place and right time. Dr. John’s fingers extracted Cajun tunes from the keyboard with the light touch of a pirogue crossing Bayou Teche on a windless night.

For many of us, this era represented a unique time and place—typified by the indescribably funky atmosphere of the Ashgrove—a mélange of cigarette and pot smoke, Appalachian simplicity and hospitality, and soulful blues that slid down your throat and ripped your guts right up and out your mouth. It was a spiritual place for me, a place where electric or acoustic guitar could paint my bones with comfort and wash away teenage heartgrief and trauma.

II

I spent my first semester at Valley State living at home with my long-divorced Mom. Our relationship, when we interacted at all, was dominated by her bipolar illness—multiple suicide attempts (I found her overdosed at age eleven and again at fourteen). As an only child, when her mental elevator opened on “Floor Depression”, her care lay in my hands. We were living on Social Security Disability, but aside from rent and food, I was paying for my own necessities, car, clothes, gas, via my job.

By the end of my first semester at Valley State in June of 1971, Mom had become the lead actor in a Surrealist film of her own direction. This started with her claiming that before I left home she would have to teach me some final “lessons” including humility. For the first time in my life, she began to hit me and if she perceived some slight, would force me to get on my knees and beg her for forgiveness.

Each time this happened, my face inundated with red rage, but if I disobeyed she would threaten to call the police and have me sent to Juvenile Hall. Mom was in the depths of some sort of psychotic episode that left her mostly functional in her limited contact with outsiders, but completely nuts to those of us on the inside looking out. Because of the shame involved, the “inside” consisted of the few close friends that were confidants. My feelings were a hodgepodge of anger, frustration and occasional dashes of pity, but the insanity of my living situation had left me somewhat emotionally paralyzed and withdrawn. I suppose this was my own personal earthquake and the tremors were strong and all too frequent.

Adding to my frustration, there was little I could do to escape it, as I found out from my futile attempts to become an emancipated minor—apparently at that time and place, the State had no remedy for my situation other than foster care. I was fully in Mom’s control and she would regularly threaten to call the authorities saying “you had better buckle down, mister”. It was Catch-22, if I left home she could have me put in juvenile hall or foster care, but I didn’t think I could last at home until I was 18. At one point, infuriated after she had struck me with a curtain rod, I grabbed her by the arms and pushed her against our refrigerator. Somehow this seemed to kindle a semblance of reality within her, and we agreed that I would move out at the end of summer.

At the end of spring semester, and armed with my cafeteria kitchen experience, I landed a better job, first as a sandwich maker and then as a line cook at Bullocks’ Department store, a fancy chain with branches in New York City and LA. I had sufficient earnings to support myself in a shared apartment, while working part-time and going to school full-time, and located a potential housemate via the college roommate bulletin board.

III

Having scored a housemate, we apartment-searched throughout the summer, and in fall 1971, excitedly moved into a two-bedroom place on Parthenia Avenue—about four blocks south of Valley State. My housemate was an older, upper classman, quiet and unassuming—a talented guitar player who could even pick songs written by the fantastic guitarists, John Fahey and Leo Kottke. My social group had shifted slightly, because I now had a girlfriend, Jen, who was a friend of my first and oldest friend in California, Mark. Both Jen and Mark attended Jefferson High a school about ten miles from Monroe. Like a squirrel slowly withdrawing into its shell, I had begun to leave my Valley State musician friends behind—I just couldn’t keep up with their love for bourbon and beer, but I also no longer worked at the cafeteria and only ran into them occasionally. My housemate Kent had few friends and quickly adopted, and was adopted, by my friends from Jefferson High. Kent was a perfect roommate for me, accepting and open and music-loving. He was one of the few friends who knew about Mom’s antics and although he experienced them firsthand, never withdrew from me emotionally.

Mom had no need for a two-bedroom apartment and rented a small house about seven miles from my apartment, but became more and more tangled in the web of her bipolarity. Her “lessons” had continued and she would call me at 10 pm and demand that I come over and fix some small problem with an appliance or plumbing. Despite her illness, Mom was always coming up with classy ways to supplement her income, that unfortunately, typically failed. For example, she bought beautiful glazed pots and filled them with exotic succulents that needed little maintenance—these were to be sold at “swap-meets” held at local drive-in theaters.

Of course I was commandeered to be her helper and on Saturday mornings, regardless of my weekend plans, I was up at six AM loading up her van with planters, chairs and tables, and an ice chest. Unfortunately, these swap-meets were held in drive-in movie lots, typically in lower middle class areas, and no one north of Beverly Hills was going to pay \$30 for a succulent planter in 1971.

So many of my weekends were spent setting up her display and then trying to convince folks to buy a planter. If I told Mom I had other plans, I was subjected to aftershocks in the form of threats to call the cops and have me put in juvenile hall. Mom's abuse pushed me to the edge of one of the quake's open chasms—I was dealing with a mentally ill parent, while working part-time and going to college full time. I suppose I owe some of my creativity and determination to Mom, but those traits likely were a consequence of genetics rather than parental cultivation. On the other hand maybe Nietzsche was right—what doesn't kill you makes you stronger.

Mom had little extra cash, and was barely making ends even though she was keeping both her own Social Security Disability check as well as the Social Security check meant to support me while in college. I didn't really mind because it minimized our contact and my job as a cook paid enough to support my modest and independent lifestyle.

As Mom became both increasingly irrational and demanding, I entered survival mode and found myself retreating more and more into a hidden sphere where nothing could touch me, neither anger nor tenderness. I feared and was baffled by her unpredictability: would she slap me, give me another lecture on humility, or demand that I get on the floor and beg her forgiveness? Or would she morph into behavior of a normal parent? I was slowly retreating into numbness and disgust, and worried that I would become remote and uncaring like my father. My relationship with Jen, music, and my close friends Kent, Mark and Howard were a partial antidote to this numbness. Nonetheless, I began to experience anxiety attacks—rushes of adrenalin coupled with fears of suddenly going insane, as my personal tremors increased.

Our apartment on Parthenia was set in a block of mostly identical, 60's era, yellow or pink stucco buildings, with an alley that gave access to parking. Our place had two bedrooms and a bath, living room, and kitchen with appliances. The rent was \$125 a month, and it wasn't in the best neighborhood, but it was close to campus and affordable.

Kent and I had similar unpretentious tastes and so the apartment was easy to furnish via trips to various thrift stores. We ordered posters through the mail to color the eggshell-white walls. My bedroom was decorated with the obligatory peace sign and Che Guevara posters, as well as posters of paintings by Klee and Monet. Mom had instilled a love of art in me, and had taken me to many art museums. I had been raised with an original oil-on-paper Parisian street scene by Charles Cobelle hanging in our living room. It was the one piece of original art Mom could afford and was purchased in the late 50's in New York City.

Now in my sophomore year, I continued to take classes towards my pre-law, Political Science degree at the newly renamed California State University at Northridge, including a number of "field experiences" classes in which I represented clients who had been unjustly kicked off welfare in administrative hearings, and also worked on a project to support exploited farmworkers in the state. Philosophy had piqued my interest and I loved taking classes in inductive and deductive logic. The Viet Nam War was ongoing as was the Peace movement

and antiwar demonstrations on campus were popular and common. One time during a street demonstration adjacent to campus, I went up to a friend's apartment to pee, then came down to rejoin the protest which had oddly disappeared. I started walking down the street, only to see several members of the LA Police Department riot squad running towards me. The demonstration had been pushed down the street in an attempt by authorities to break it up, and it took me thirty seconds or so to realize that the cops were after me. I ran like the chased rabbit that I was, zig-zagging down an alley and out between two apartment buildings only to evade the human predators pursuing me.

That was undergraduate life in the early 70's, and although a number of events sent me back to eventually earn a PhD in ecology, my country road of life contained both hair-pin curves and occasional dead ends.



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bedtime story

Gerald Yelle

People always want to know: You've been everywhere –what do you prefer: mountains or valleys, coastlines or great plains, forests or deserts, hot, cold, day, night, sun, moon, stars? I like going into the mountains. I like being able to look across a wilderness landscape. I see what the planet looks like from a slight elevation and I feel a little less miserable. The problem is, to do that, I have to leave my palace unguarded. I'm talking about my apartment, which I share with my brother. Last time I went to the mountains he "borrowed" my beans. I know what you're thinking –how do you borrow beans –Well these were jumping beans. He told his friends they were his. He was trying to impress Cinderella –one look and she was all he could think about –that crazy brother of mine. I told him she was nothing but trouble –always fighting with her stepmother and two stepsisters. Anyway, none of them had any respect for Rupert –that's my brother's name. They thought he was a loser. They said the beans didn't jump high enough. As if Cinderella had any big leg to stand on. It took years for my brother to finally see what a sleepwalker she was. At least he didn't try to plant a beanstalk and give her the fortune she so richly thought she deserved. No, a few beans had lost their bounce, but I managed to get them back.



prostate

Gerald Yelle

50

I was looking for a place to go, even though I'd just gone. I found a bathroom near the entrance in the library, but there was a guy in there doing repairs. "Fixing the place up?" I said. He said he was. He was hoping to land a starring role as a gunslinger on Disney +. I said I thought he'd make a good bad guy in a Banana Republic commercial. He said he was way above that pay grade. He showed me his shotgun and said he'd let me try it but his wife would have a fit if he forgot to rewind it afterwards. I said it's a rifle not a tape player. Don't you mean reload? He said no, no. This was the kind of rifle that if you rewind it sucks the bullet out of the target, back through the muzzle and into the chamber. It sounded like a bullet on a string. Yeah, I said, and the people you kill come back to life, right? He said he hadn't shot people. So far only squirrels. And no, they don't come back to life. It was a pain, but he couldn't afford buying more bullets. He had three brothers and they all had pistols. He also had a baby. He said I could hold her if I wanted to. She was sitting in the corner, so small I hadn't noticed her. She smiled at me and said I love you. He said yeah, she takes to people like that. He said I could take her for a ride if I had a good car seat. That way he could finish what he was doing. I said yeah, just let me take a whiz first. As I drove her around she started talking. She said her parents belonged to a right-wing faction that was radical but not really into violence. They'd someday buy her a gun and a car like mine.



toy story

Gerald Yelle

She was arching her back in a way I found more and more stimulating, then we heard the kids come in for Easter vacation. She said we had to stop at the toy store after lunch. I wondered why when we already had a whole shopping cart full of Easter bunnies. The store was like somebody's playroom –but there weren't many toys –only a few grownups and kids sitting around. We stayed and visited awhile. I started watching videos on my phone. I didn't dislike visiting –I felt like I was likable, but as time went on I lost interest –until I saw the giraffe. It was a small giraffe, but big enough to sit on. I remarked about it, and it came over and bent its knees so I could climb on. I had to be careful not to squeeze its neck. Then it stood up and started running –a bit more of a ride than I'd bargained for. Someone had to keep saying “Whoa.”



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how to repair a refrigerator

Jacob Chapman

The refrigerator repairman they sent me
had a PhD in the history of refrigeration.
He talked talked talked
about freon, about frozen lettuce,
about defrosting, about the general state
of the industry. There was a pause,
and I said can you fix it?
He said let us consider
the underlying issues,
and I said let us not consider
the underlying issues, let us consider
my carton of milk, which is dying
as we speak. He said it's funny
you mention dairy, because dairy doesn't need ...
I don't care! I yelled. I don't care
what dairy needs, I just want
a refrigerator that works, and now
I'm going for a walk.
I took a long long walk.
It was forty-five degrees outside, which maybe
is the temperature inside
a refrigerator. I don't know,
and I don't care.
When I got home, the repairman's truck
was gone, and there was a note
on the counter that read: The refrigerator's fixed,
but there's a strange energy
in your house that needs to be adjusted.
I know some people
who do this sort of thing.
They'll be calling you, and please
listen to what they have to say.
I had a glass of milk and started dreaming
about silent repairmen who move quickly
and efficiently. They know their tools,
and they know what they can
and can't fix. They've seen it all,
and they know how to ignore the nonsense
and focus on the task at hand
like practical men from a practical time.



down the street, into the forest

Jacob Chapman

After so much time away,
the older couple from down the street returned.
We saw them walk by
on the sidewalk wearing green and black,
and we said maybe
they went on a pilgrimage.
We had just learned that word,
and we were standing on the edge of the forest
pushing jewels into the ground.
Ok, they were rocks,
but we were decorating the entrance
to the forest, so we pretended they were jewels.
Parenting was light
in the summertime.
We watched people walk by—
mothers pushing strollers
and the same older couple
at the same time every day.
They were always wearing green and black.
We pushed further into the forest
across the creek and into the meadow
we didn't know was there.
The grass was so high,
and there so many colors.
We wandered around, and sometimes
we got lost, but it didn't matter.
We were never scared,
which doesn't seem possible.
I wonder why the older couple
wore green and black,
and I wonder where they were
during their time away.
I could've asked them, but I didn't.
I was a quiet child, but I was brave.



red poem

Rebecca Schrader

Red, the first color, red,
the color of sex, the first blood; red,
the shame, red,
the breaking: you never see it coming.
Shaking, red
sleep, red
silence, red,
screaming, "hold me,
feed me, give me your water,
love me, love me, I am wide open!"

Red has no answer.
Red is not a question.
Red is like skin, it stains and
it stretches and smears; yes,
red can rip and tear and
fall off the bone, deep white, yes,
red is angry.

Paying tribute to the red girls,
the girls who once danced in white,
their long hair blowing
behind them in the wind like silk,
the girls who loved freely,
who embraced the earth and
the sky and the sun,
I huddled in the red room,
holding myself tightly, fiercely,
wanting to be seen and
afraid of seeing.

"The moon had nine times lost her light."

Remembering the red girls, I
painted myself in their tears, and I
painted the trees too.

Blue seems so far away now.
Did I dream it?
What was the blue part of me?

Blue is the center of the flame. Blue
is a dying star. Blue
is a memory of something that
can never again be. Blue
has taught me to be patient. Blue
has lifted me up and
carried me away. Blue
comes and goes.

Red is always with me. Red
is boiling under. Red
burns many shades,
feverish and quick.

Some reds are innocent, like
red berries, and warm fires, and
falling leaves, like red balloons and
wheelbarrows, red apples and
lollipops and blushes— the little reds.
The accidental reds. Reds
that do no harm.

Red lips and roses are
reds that cut and bite, reds
that are too red, aching red, reds
like open wounds.

Why are we so afraid to
look into the darkness? I
am more afraid of the light –
the pleasure is too much.
Unwanted pleasure is worse than pain.

The color of my shame is red. My
guilt is red and my hands are red and
so are the tops of my thighs.
This redness, this anger,
am I to blame?

He came to me in
a shower of gold.
He sang to me and
brought me sweet things
like candy.
They call it rapture.
They call it revelation.
Ecstasy when he comes.
I was thinking of my mother,
too far away
to give me shelter.

No one could hear
the cries of the red girls.
They were all alone.
Red girls, I see you,
red girls, I am you, red girls,
let me be your balm.
Don't you see it is you who I love?

I remember crouching together
in the red tent, washing
the place between our legs, the
air thick with incense and smoke.
I remember the nudes, thirteen bodies
on a hill made of glass, the
wind cleansing the bones.
I remember the rites of spring, and
the scarlet letter, and
the wine-dark sea.
I remember Jane, and Charlotte, and Hester,
Sula and Leda, Io, Daphne, Danae,
Judith, Anne, Assata, Simone,
Emily, Sarah, Rachel, and Leah,
Iphigenia, Hecate, Kali, Astarte,
Venus, Sibyl, Mary, Joan... I could go on.

In the black box, I
feel my heart open and close.
Some scars never go away.
The red girls, they are always with me.
So much depends on them.
The wind is gone.
No one can see me.
I too walked out of the light.





aubade
Aakriti Kuntai

change of address

David P. Miller

Melton, Welcome Home. See what your new home can do
greet the little stone urn holding Dad's ashes on my piano.
Or else Habitat for Humanity asks his open hand:
please save poor families from dead heating.
I scrawl *deceased, deceased*, refuse the envelopes,
but their faith in his existence whiplashes
like a boomerang. *Melton*, they salute him again.

What if we could save hundreds of thousands of lives?
The American Heart Association notices
that following his previous year's June demise
his annual contributions have dropped by half.
They wonder about this. They're checking in.

Nelson, an auto insurer names him, hoping a puppy
gnawing a softball will open the wallet.
Toys for Tots hails *Miss Melton Miller*.
That makes a sentence. And yes. I do.

Today, the Society concerned writes to him
reminding of *your family member living*
with multiple sclerosis. That would be my mother,
some seven or eight years previous, and her fall
crumbled beneath speechlessness. He would
have been there, as he plucked the phone
from her baffled hand, as she failed to finish
the last sentence she tried to speak to me.



first memory

David P. Miller

On my back in the bassinette?
Tucked in the sofa corner?
Propped in the high chair? Where
was I, at six months, without words
to anchor me? No bassinette
without 'bassinette.'

I gazed at a window of clean winter light,
light that was window that was light,
the golden ribbons my mother fixed
all across the glass at Christmas in Indiana.
It was my most golden thing, the first one.

Nothing but gold and gaze,
lacking 'gold' 'winter' 'shine'
I remembered that suffused light
after words became solid:
'ribbon' 'young' 'mother' 'window' 'I'

I write my first memory, have words
to tell you where *now* is: on Long Island,
propped in a wing chair, facing a Christmas tree,
a picture window embroidered with branches.
Light points spin from a hammered metal angel.
Tinted holly berries, plastic ice, suspended
golden bat, buddha, lion and hippo heads.

The words I need arrive and settle
on an: 'artificial' 'tree'
in a: 'dark' 'room' 'night' 'silent'
My man's body rests, gazes at color.



the execution of tertius lafontaine (novel excerpt)

Christian Livermore

TERTIUS

April 2, 2000 12:30am, Execution Day

Only six people come the night they killd me. The prosecutor, he was there acourse, and the prison priest. A reporter for the local paper. But for me they was Fletcher Purdy, and my friend Nissy and my brother Teddy. I begged Teddy not to come, but he come anyway. Then he sat in the back and couldnt watch. Winnie's parents was long dead by then. She dint have no other family. The only livin person who loved her was the one about to die. They offered me a last meal, like they do, but I couldnt eat. The priest came to take my confession, but I said no. Dint think God would like it.

The curtains pulled back and there they all were. Behind the glass they looked to me like some get-together I couldnt be part of, you know like when you see a bunch of guys playin basketball on the courts at sunset and you wanna join in but you know you ain't welcome. Dont know how I looked to them. Prolly not too good, strapped into the electric chair and sweaty and aint had a shower in a week.

I smelled leather. I looked up, watched the executioner strappin the cracked leather belt round my middle, bucklin me in. He yanked it tight and went for the ankle straps. Right leg, buckle. Left leg, buckle. I couldnt stop lookin at the top of his head. He had this blond fuzzy crew cut and a inch-long scar on the soft spot, and his head bobbin like a chicken's while he messed with the straps. Reminded me of Lucius, my father's old rooster. A Rhode Island Red. Used to strut around the yard and go for the ankles of neighbors when they went past. He kept cows and goats, too, penned in the side yard, long after the street stopped bein farmland and yard animals dint belong no more. Long as we was rich the neighbors shrugged it off, but later it was just one more thing they talked about when they talked about us. Once he started drinkin, he stopped feedin the animals and they broke free and ate up all the woodbine, and shit on the neighbors' lawns. I penned them when he died, after grandmother took Badness's brain away. But it dint change nothin. Only Winnie changed things. Things was better after she came. But then that was why I was here, wasn't it? Things got better, and that wasn't allowed. I knew it at the time. Should never have let it happen. Then the rest wouldnt of happened neither. Winnie would still be alive.

And now here she was again in my head. I always fight it, but she comes anyway. First the way she was, them shiny blue eyes sparklin in her freckly face, hair color of peaches, the way she laughed, throwin her head back like she meant it; then the way I found her, that night. I tried hard to think of something else, even just to concentrate on the guy strappin me in, but my eyes started burnin and then the tears come.

The executioner put them sticky white things on my head and leg. That's how they'll tell when I'm dead, I thought. I tried not to, but I got angry. And I said to God: Are you happy now? Bastard? Will this answer? Not for Winnie. That wasn't me. No. Only the ugliness of finding her, I got that part.

It was for all the rest of it that I thought this might even things out for my family. I dint do none of it, but somebody's gotta pay, eventually.

The little girl was there again, standin in the corner. Nobody else could see her as usual. I think I finally know why she keeps comin back.

The warden ast if I had any last words. I thought for a minute, somethin was there in the back of my mind, from my old lessons. Finally I remembered, and I said it: 'Thy will be done.'

The priest he made the sign of the cross over me, then a guard crossed hisself. I seen Nissy clutchin on her chair seat and lookin at the floor. I dint see nothin after that.

NISSY
Today

The Lafontaines had always been unlucky, as long as most people could remember, anyway. People in Godspeed had whispered about them for years, while they holed up in the big house like rabbits hiding from a hawk. Many would say that what befell Tertius - or what he did, depending on your perspective - was bound to happen. They had their various reasons for thinking so. I will come to those by and by. Was there something about us, about Godspeed, about what people did and failed to do, that meant things could not have turned out any other way? I include myself in that, for something I did to Tertius long ago. A childish something, perhaps, a thing for which I might be forgiven by some, but for which I have not forgiven myself. This account is in part, I suppose, a way of making amends.

60

There was a time when things were very different for the Lafontaines. Older folks, people like Fletcher Purdy's daddy and my grandmother, remembered when Will Lafontaine, Tertius's father, and his wife Emily had a big future ahead of them. Will had been singing in the clubs in Atlanta and Memphis, and people loved him - girls, especially. Emily was young and pretty and had married well, which is what they say if you're poor and 'married up' and they like you. If they don't like you, they say something else. They were about to have a baby, and everything seemed perfect. And of course there was all that money. Oh, yes, the Lafontaines were rich. Rich as Croesus.

Then things changed. Overnight. Nobody knew why. All they knew was that one day, Will walked into a dive bar and started drinking. He drank till nightfall, and stayed drunk pretty much from then on, and never sang another note.

When the children were born, many people saw it as divine retribution, or voodoo, or God-knows-what-all-else. Stories about the family went from house to house, flicked between neighbor kids like marbles: that the idiot Lafontaine children were 'wrong' because Will and Emily were really brother and sister, or that they were thalidomide babies, and any number of other things.

The truth was worse. There were three by-God terrible things that happened to the Lafontaines, or because of them. The last was about Tertius, and it was the cause of the most infamous trial in the history of Godspeed. The first was how Jean-Paul Lafontaine made the family fortune. He was a slaver. The second was perhaps the worst of all, but for a long time only a few people in

the world knew about it, knew enough to say what really happened. And they were not telling. So I am telling. Tertius can't tell it himself, and very few people know, or bothered to find out. To understand why Tertius wound up in the execution chamber, you have to know what happened before.

So this is what happened, and it includes a very extraordinary thing. Some of it I got from Tertius, some of it from his father just before he died, and some of it from teachers and other folks, sometimes when they did not know I was listening and sometimes when they did. I listened first as a child, because I was trying to figure out why the Lafontaines were the way they were. Later, as an adult, it was my job to listen, because I covered Tertius's trial for the local paper. I listened to it all. So if you want to know what happened you'll have to read this, because I'm the only one who cared enough to write it down.

TERTIUS
February 21, 1999

I dont know what happened the night Winnie was killed. I mean, I know what happened before me and Teddy went to the store and what happened after we got back, but I dont know what happened while we was gone.

I was out back getting wood for the fire. It was darker than usual, there wan't no moon that night, and acourse no porch light to save money, and I tripped on the walkway where the stones was loose. I sat a minute, holdin my knee, then got up. I could feel my pant leg scrapin, so I knew I was cut. There was hardly any wood left. It'd been a cold February. Me and Teddy'd have to chop more to make it through the month. Wouldn't warm up nights till at least March. Days was usually okay, but sometimes you needed a fire the whole time. I needed to clean the flue in our bedroom. Been ages since I'd done it and two nights before we'd woke up at three with smoke all over the room.

We slept without the fire the next night but it was a hard one. I was too tired to clean the flue after work, then I'd got watchin TV with Teddy. We'd hafta sleep in the livin room, and I'd clean it out next day. Least we got the fireplaces. One good thing about such a old house. Without em, boy I don't know. We'd go into the little forest back of the house for the wood. It's public, and I think the county knew we was takin wood, but they never bothered us about it. At least we weren't beggin at their offices for relief money. Least I'd managed that much.

I took what wood was stacked by the back wall and went through the garden to check the second stack by the shed. There was buds on the trees, and the azaleas was comin out. I hoped the cold wouldnt kill em. At the shed, since I was there, I opened the door and went in. It was even darker inside, but I knew the way. I went to my workbench and picked up the figure I'd been workin on. A old washerwoman. I held it up to the dim light comin in through the window. She needed more work on her face. Still dint have the wrinkles right. Tomorrow, I figgered. After the flue. I put her back on the bench and looked at the other figures, already finished, on the sill, on tables, in boxes. I finish one, then, nothin to do with it, set it aside. There's all kinda workers. Farmers and coal miners, loggers and fishermen. And there's animals. Some real, some I made up in my head. Once I tried a scene. A boat on the water at sunset, with a man fishin off the back. But I couldnt get the sky.

I filled the log basket and went in. My knee was burnin and I was limp, but Winnie was all sweet and worried over me so it was worth it.

'Sit down and let me see.'

She pulled up my pant leg. The skin was raw, and there was a little blood. She pressed a wet paper towel on it till the blood was gone, then put on bacitracin and a bandage.

'All better.' She kissed me softly and went back to the counter, where she was countin out change.

'What's that for?'

'We're out of milk. I need it for the pot pie.'

'I just bought a whole gallon yesterday.'

'Teddy had it with his Oreos.'

I called in to the next room. 'Teddy, you drink all the milk?'

For a second there was no answer, just the noise of the radio.

'No,' Teddy finally said, soundin not too convincin.

I stood up and opened my wallet. Five dollars. 'I got enough.'

Winnie came and looked down at the five, then beamed at me like it was a million bucks.

'Payday tomorrow, then we'll stock up,' I said.

'We always manage,' she said and patted my cheek.

I looked in at Teddy, in the TV room listenin to the game. They used to call this the drawin room, back when Jean-Paul built the house. But that was too fancy a word for what it was now. Any furniture worth anythin we sold long ago. We replaced it with musty mismatched stuff from the Salvation Army. A couch with big ugly gold flowers on it, an orange plaid chair, curtains somebody dint even care enough about to use good cloth on the insides, just that plasticky stuff. Least it was all clean. They fumigate it and all, fore they sell it. The Baptists used to come by once in a while with food baskets, but we never took em. Imagine what people would say if we did. In winter we keep to the TV room, the kitchen, and our bedrooms. I wear a coat and heavy sweaters to work in the shed.

Teddy was in the armchair, pullin at one of the frayed threads. He twisted it back and forth as he listened. I say TV room, but we got the radio in there too. We usedta keep the TV in the living room, but beetles had ate through the floor in places, so we closed it off. I'd hafta tear up the boards and replace em and then varnish, and proly fumigate too.

It was high school baseball. Season opener, Effingham at Screven. Bottom of the fifth, Screven up by four. Two down, no one on base. Effingham batter Exley swung a millisecond too late at a fastball from Redfield and hit a pop fly into left field.

'Crap.'

Screven's left fielder got in position under the ball. It hit his glove and bounced out.

'Oh oh oh!' Teddy stopped twistin and pulled the thread tight. Exley rounded first, but instead of stoppin he tried for second. Teddy shouted and jumped up from the sofa.

'Go go go!'

The left fielder recovered and grabbed the ball, threw Exley out at second. Scoreless close for Effingham. Teddy slumped back in the chair.

'Man, they suck.'

'Gotta go to the store,' I said. 'Come with me, okay?'

'Why do I got to go?'

'Cause you're the one drank all the milk.'

You could see a little better on the road, but not much. There was dark spaces between the light from the streetlamps, and the sky was that kinda blue-black it gets when it's cloudy and there aint no moon and the stars cant peek through. The houses and trees was just shapes. It was the kind of night makes you feel scared. Not scared of anything in particlar. Just scared. Like you dont mean nothin and life dont matter. You start to think how a million people walked down this same road and they're all dead now and nobody remembers em and pretty soon it'll be the same for you. I wisht I could say it to Teddy. Maybe it would make me feel better if I could say it to somebody. But I dint want to scare him. I'm the big brother. So I kept it to myself.

Me and Teddy shuffled along. Teddy kicked a stone along, caught up to it, kicked it again. The cold cut right through me. Teddy shivered.

'Told you to wear your heavy jacket,' I said.

'You aint wearin yours.'

'I aint cold.'

'Me neither,' Teddy said. He kicked the stone hard and it went skippin down the road. Take awhile to catch up with it that time. He took a pack of Newports from his pocket and tapped it against his hand to get one out. He lit up and puffed a few times, watchin the cigarette bob up and down.

'Thought you wanted to quit,' I said.

'No, you wanted me to.'

'Bad for you.'

Teddy puffed away, grinnin at me.

'Go head kill yourself then.'

I realized somethin then and stopped short, and Teddy plowed into the backa me.

'Sorry.'

'Great, let's give the neighbors a show. Watch the retards fall all over themselves in the street.'

'Nobody saw.'

'Forgot my wallet. Be right back.'

I jogged back up the road to the house. When I got back, Teddy was jumpin up and down and blowin into his hands to keep warm and his breath was all round his head like fog. I held out his coat. He cut his eyes at me but he put it on.

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We turned onto Benham Road. Cars rushed past us now and then, folks comin back from work in Savannah, proly, hopin to make it home in time for the lottery numbers. A guy was comin towards us, and when he got close enough he saw Teddy was smokin and he ast for a light. Teddy took out his lighter and flicked it. The guy hung the cigarette from his lips and dipped it in the flame, cuppin a hand to shield it from the wind. He puffed until he had a good light. He was shiverin. I said it was a cold night and he said yeah it was, 'colder n a witch's tit', and passed on by, and we went on our way. A man in a house across the street was draggin the trash to the curb. He lifted his hand, bout to wave, but then he saw it was us and made like he was just scratchin his head. We acted like we dint see it. Couple minutes later we got to Miss Patsy's.

'You walked all the way down here at this hour for milk? Looks like a person would wait till the morning,' Miss Patsy said, ringin up.

I told her Winnie was makin pot pie, and she said how you couldnt make a pot pie without milk could you, and I agreed no you couldnt, and she asked Teddy did he want his Newports and reached for em fore he answered, cause she knew he did.

'Got to wait till payday on them,' I said.

'Pay when you can,' she said and went ahead and handed Teddy the Newports.

Connie Jr come out of the storeroom then, wipin his hands on a filthy apron that used to be white. 'You been listening to the game?'

'Uh huh.'

'Radio's dead,' Connie Jr said, jerkin his thumb at the radio he kept behind the counter. 'What's the score?'

I told him it was four-nothin Screven and rolled my eyes, then Connie Jr rolled his eyes and blew out a disgusted breath and said they got no hitters, which Teddy agreed they dont.

'How's my boy's arm?'

Connie Jr's boy pitched for Effingham. I told him he was doin good. Never mind Screven got four runs off him. I hoped he'd blame it on bad fielding.

'I hate like hell to miss the first game,' he said.

Connie Jr was one of the people who treated us normal.

'If you two are going to talk football—'

'Baseball, mama.'

'Mind the register, I'm going to watch my stories.'

Miss Patsy limped to the storeroom where the TV was, favorin her right side. She had a hip replaced or somethin.

Well we went on talkin, and fore I knew it we was havin a little game in the aisles.

'Hey, batta batta batta batta batta...'

Connie Jr underhanded the ball. He'd made it hisself by wrappin hundreds of rubber bands round and round till the ball was baseball-sized. I swung and caught it dead center with a rolled-up newspaper. Line drive into the potato chips.

'Base hit for Lafontaine! He takes off for first—'

I ran slow toward the dairy case. Teddy lunged for the ball, caught it for a second, then fumbled it. I jogged on toward the cat food.

'Oh, oh, Lafontaine's making a break for second while the opposing Lafontaine fumbles the ball. As you listeners know, the Lafontaines are brothers. Yes, it's brother against brother tonight in this winner-take-all game-'

The whistle at the firehouse went off. I froze halfway between the Doritos and the Friskies, hopin it was a actual fire stead of the whistle. If it was, it would be a bunch of little short blasts after the long one. I mean I dint want a real fire, just like a garbage can fire or somethin, just somethin that meant it wasn't already eight o'clock. I waited, hopin, but the horn stopped, and nothin else came after. It was eight o'clock. I said I was gonna get it, and I grabbed the milk and

me and Teddy took off for home. I heard Connie Jr call after me to call him with the score.

When we got to the back porch, the door was open. I was sure we had closed it. It was cold. Why would Winnie have it open? I went real slow up the three stone steps. It was one of those times when you feel like somethin's wrong. Only difference was this time I dint tell myself it was my imagination. I knew it wasn't, cause I already felt alone. I pushed at the door. It creaked. I looked into the kitchen. Winnie was lyin on the floor. The carton slipped out of my hands, and I felt my knees hit the ground.





experience

Carla Manene Cooke

It takes all kinds
to make a life what
it is—joys, challenges,
ups and downs. Homer
recited epic poems in the
town square. His began at
the beginning. If I could tell
the story, I might start in the
middle or at the end—or even
weave a story within a story. It
doesn't matter which. A tale can
sound different every time it's told.
What would happen if our lives ran
in reverse, or inside out? Maybe akin
to Benjamin Button, or perhaps Merlin
who had centuries to develop wisdom—
though even he could not entirely explain.
Where is our oracle? We must endeavor to
show up, pay attention, tell the truth, without
letting ourselves become attached to outcomes.



how to do nothing if you have no money

Carla Manene Cooke

after a poem by Barbara Kingsolver

Remain in your house or wherever you live
and: Don't go outside, even into the yard.
Don't tell anyone where you are or why
you no longer appear at work. Don't
worry about finding a pair of shoes
or adequate clothing. Don't even
think about food because you
don't have any. There's one
chair left; sit in it. Let the
lights go off because you
cannot pay your power
bill. The air around
you will eventually
match outdoors.
Sit in the dark
write poems
till all the
words
leave
you



the meaty record review by Jeremy Macomber-Dubs

Now and Then by The Beatles

On the day I met Paul McCartney, I handed him a home recording I made of an unreleased song he wrote in 1987 called "Return to Pepperland". I did it for two reasons: To remind him of the time he envisioned a 20th anniversary reunion of Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band, and to get his attention. It certainly caught his eye when he read the track listing and said to me, "Return to Pepperland? You're not supposed to know that one. How do you know that song?" Flabbergasted and awestruck that Sir Paul just asked me a question, and frightened that I may have just irritated my hero, in that moment I could only manage to mutter one word: "YouTube." Paul repeated it back to me: "YouTube," he said, nodding his head affirmatively, as if remembering that everything he's ever recorded is probably available on YouTube. "Return to Pepperland" harkened back to the Beatles' kaleidoscopic psychedelic period. Paul wanted it to be the title track for his next album, sort of like an imaginary, fantasy reunion of his old band. Pure fantasy, of course, because John had been gone for 7 years, and there wouldn't be a real reunion. Any sort of reunion would be merely a dream. But wait a minute... maybe that's not such a far-fetched idea, after all. Hear me out: From Sgt. Pepper on (except for their rooftop performance in '69), all their output was just that: a dream. Since they were no longer live performers, one could only dream of experiencing such complex compositions and arrangements in a concert setting. The Beatles are all in the mind, dude. This freedom gave them the opportunity to try all sorts of new technological tricks, such as slowing down and speeding up tracks, combining multiple takes in different keys to create new keys, utilizing tape loops and moog synthesizers and sitars and string sections - anything seemed possible. Oh, to imagine the magic they'd have been capable of had they stuck together, or if they had gotten back together. Paul gave up on returning to Pepperland, perhaps because it didn't seem right without his bandmates' involvement. The album he was working on eventually turned into the Elvis Costello-produced *Flowers in the Dirt* which came out in 1987. Studio trickery once again would pave the way for production of more Beatles original material in the year 1995, and once again it would exist purely in the recorded dream realm. Paul finally got his chance to return to Pepperland as he, George, and Ringo worked on 3 of Lennon's old demos, "Free as a Bird", "Real Love", and one more tune that they wouldn't finish for another 28 years called "Now and Then". George was gone when they picked it up again in 2023 to put the cosmic puzzle pieces together, to bring back to life and complete the most famous band of all time's final project - the magnificent minds of our two surviving soul-searching Beatles using modern technology once again to realize their vision.

It should come as no surprise, therefore, that "Now and Then" sounds exactly like what it is: a bittersweet dream - the sound of four friends separated by time and space, destined to be linked together forever ("If I make it through, it's all because of you"), attempting to communicate with each other ("Now and then, I miss you"), to be together again ("I want you to be there for me, always to return to me"). It should also come as no surprise that "Now and Then" is by far the most heart-wrenching, melancholic, most tender Beatles song we've ever heard. This makes total sense considering that John was no longer writing jabberwocky like "I am the Walrus" or "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds". The lyrics of his solo career were direct in nature, containing clear emotional honesty; he didn't hold anything back anymore. How wonderfully thrilling and

chilling it is to hear Lennon's post-Beatles' vulnerability making its way into a new Beatles track way out in the future 43 years after his untimely death. George's steady acoustic and electric rhythm guitar playing from 1995 and Paul's plaintive piano playing in 2023 lay the groundwork for this precious, fragile experiment. In fact, the communication happening here between Paul and George, who famously seemed quite different from each other yet somehow made so much magic together (check out Paul's shredding guitar solo on George's "Taxman"), is one of the most compelling rewards for the listener. Paul's gorgeous slide guitar solo attempting to mimic the style of George but not quite getting there because no one can replicate Harrison, is perhaps the highlight of the entire piece, musically, emotionally, and spiritually. You can hear them speaking to each other from different parts of the universe, agreeing, disagreeing, then agreeing some more. How exciting! And as usual, Ringo brings them all together in peace and love with his signature backbeat, playing triplets when other drummers would play straight eighth notes, adding a swing that wouldn't be there otherwise.

Everyone who knows me knows about my deep affection for The Beatles. It should come as no surprise that I wholeheartedly love "Now and Then". So, instead of concluding this Meaty review with more of my opinions, let me tell you a true story. The last words that John Lennon ever spoke to Paul McCartney in person were, "Think about me every now and then, old friend." One year after John's assassination, a song came to legendary rock n' roller Carl Perkins in a dream called "My Old Friend". He wrote it down in the middle of the night and, completely unaware of what the words would mean to Paul, showed it to McCartney the following morning. The chorus went, "If we ever meet again this side of life, in a little while, over yonder, where there's peace and quiet, my old friend, won't you think about me every now and then?" Paul broke down in tears and had to leave the room. Linda told Carl Perkins that this was the first time Paul had really cried since John's death. In 1997, George Harrison bought a clock in Rhode Island featuring the words "Now and Then" on it. Just recently, his wife Olivia randomly decided to move the clock to the mantelpiece so she could have a closer look. Then the phone rang. It was Paul, explaining to her that there's a third song, one they had started working on but never finished. It's called "Now and Then". According to Olivia Harrison, "I'm standing there with the phone in one hand, looking at the clock that said Now and Then. I was sort of dumbfounded. I said, 'I think this is George saying it's OK.'" And so the dream continues...



trespassers

Marcia Yudkin

After six weeks touring the US and Canada by car, it felt great to see our cute little house in the country come into view. Our lawn, if you could call it that, badly needed a trim, and the indoors, after we unlocked the porch door and ventured in, badly needed airing out. Two apples we'd meant to bring along on our trip as first-day snacks, sat shriveled on the kitchen counter. The main-floor toilet had greenish-yellow scum in the bowl that needed to be flushed and scrubbed away. So far, not that bad, we reassured each other.

Bu, my husband, ducked into our bedroom to sniff out whether we should strip the bed and remake it with fresh sheets. Reappearing in the hall, he crooked a finger at me, an unreadable expression on his face. At the doorway, I looked at where he'd thrown the bedcovers back. Tiny black pellets and white grains of rice – enough for a scanty burrito bowl – sat scattered in the center. What? It took a moment for me to grasp the mischief that had taken place while we were gone. Mice had scurried back and forth from the half-filled rice bag in a kitchen cabinet to the master bed, inside of which they'd lolled snug and warm. The impertinence of these creatures, squatting while our house had been temporarily devoid of its masters!

During the 2016 election, I felt baffled to hear Hillary Clinton repeatedly attacked as “corrupt.” In my mind – and in the dictionary – “corrupt” meant taking bribes or misusing political power to enrich oneself. The infamous 30,000 emails of hers that had been deleted represented at best a careless mistake and at worst dishonesty that didn't fit the meaning of “corrupt.” She'd had high ratings from the public while serving as Secretary of State, yet now that she was running for President, her opponent said, “Hillary Clinton is the embodiment of corruption. She's a corrupt person.” Why turn that word into a rallying cry?

One day while rebooting my computer, I remembered another meaning of the word. When unknown forces “corrupt” a file, bits or bytes that don't belong get mixed up with those that do. Information order becomes disorder. Digital contamination occurs. Aha! I saw the parallel perfectly now. Women didn't belong in the presidency. Hillary Clinton running for the highest elected office in the United States embodied disorder – defiance of the supreme cultural dictum “Men here, women over there.”

By crossing a line, Clinton in herself represented pollution. It was not anything she had done that opponents objected to so much as the threat she posed to how the world should be. No wonder the other rallying cry throughout the campaign, shouted gleefully by thousands of spectators bonding against an intruder, a cosmic gatecrasher, was “Lock her up!”

We'd heard scratching and pitter patters in the walls before our cross-country trip, but we didn't expect mice to have the whole run of the place during our absence. Maybe they'd invited in the neighborhood and held orgies? A long learning curve on our part followed. First we had

to cordon off where we didn't want them to go. Bu fashioned a door sweep to seal the guest bedroom that doubled as our pantry yet allowed us to go in and out. And before we next went away, he blocked the space under the door to our bedroom with folded cereal boxes.

With trial and error, we discovered which types of mousetraps worked best, what type of bait tempted them and what didn't. (Peanut butter got far better results than the proverbial cheese.) Still, incursions continued. In my downstairs office, I saw tooth indentations in the bar soap on the bathroom sink. I found turds and wet spots inside corrugated boxes waiting for me to take them to the dump.

Outside, a few times Bu spotted a mouse scampering straight up our shingles to the roof. From there they squeezed into the attic, he thought. And were they wandering in and out or only in? We didn't know. Years after all the chasedowns and sleuthing started, the house finally became mouse-proof when an energy audit made us eligible for blown insulation all the way under the roof, paid for by the electric company.

More than one conservative politician has orated this year, "It is a fundamental scientific fact that there are two sexes, only two." This is demonstrably false. Estimates of how many babies are born who physiologically don't clearly fall into the boxes of male or female range from two in 100 to one or two in 1000 births. In past generations, such intersexuality got swept into silence as a shameful abnormality that had to be medically adjusted somehow and then hushed, lest the "only two sexes" order crumble.

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In the 1970s, when I was a college freshman, a prim sophomore woman who lived in my dorm went everywhere on campus holding hands with a placid, good-looking boyfriend. One day the woman – not a close friend by any means – told me matter-of-factly in our communal bathroom that she and her boyfriend had gone to see a doctor because they'd tried to have sex and discovered that something was wrong. "I don't have a vagina," she said while brushing her hair. "But the doctor said specialists can fix me up so we can make love."

Later I wondered: So she never had a period, and that didn't raise an alarm? Did she have some male characteristics without realizing it or she only lacked some female ones? At a recent college reunion I asked my roommate from freshman year if she'd heard this story. Her eyes went wide and she slowly shook her head. "No. I would surely have remembered that."

While we eventually erected defenses that kept mice out of our house, our car remains contested territory. The first year we moved to the country, I began driving our BMW to the post office one day when a little mouse raced from behind the back seat, across the arm rests on the passenger side to the front floor, then up and across the dashboard area and down the driver's door toward the back again. I shouted, braked the car without pulling over and pushed out the door, shivering that the creature just missed running up my leg.

Another year I opened that car's hood to check the oil, and atop the old T-shirt rag we kept for that purpose, tucked into a corner of the engine compartment, were three newborn mice. Pink, hairless and obviously helpless, they wouldn't survive if I drove the car with them there and probably not if we transferred them to the woods, either. Bu moved the rag and mice as gingerly as he could to our wood pile.

The car we have now, a Toyota SUV, seems even more attractive to the mice who live around us. When the weather cools in fall, they begin to visit. Their poop in the front footwells shows where they cavorted during the night. Not wanting a repeat of the mouse that spooked me while I was driving, we set up spring traps for them. Once for twenty days running I discovered yet another teeny corpse sprawled by a trap in the morning. But then day after day I'd find a trap licked clean of refreshed peanut butter and no mouse, dead or alive. Were they lucky now or had some wised up?

The past few times we've flown away for several months, we came back to cracked nuts on the front floor of the car along with mouse droppings, indicating that chipmunks had taken up residence as well. Bu disassembled the dashboard to find a small bucket's worth of nuts stuffed inside it and the air filter chewed to just filaments. Supposedly mothballs keep away mice when a car isn't being driven for a while, but that remedy made little or no difference other than forcing us to drive with all the windows open for weeks once we came home until the harsh chemical smell vanished.

~~*

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One year Bu lamented that apart from a squat Japanese maple in our backyard, we didn't have plants that turned scarlet in the fall. So when the foliage colored, he pulled up red-leaved plants growing wild down the road and brought them home. Using a trowel, I was replanting one of these halfway up our driveway when a neighbor walking by called out, "Hey, you shouldn't! That's Burning Bush. It's non-native." I straightened up and shot back, "So are you and I!" She glared. I added, "And what do you think the tomatoes and carrots in your garden are?"

After she left, I looked it up. Burning Bush arrived in America from Asia decades before one side of my family did from Ukraine and the border area of Poland, Austria-Hungary and Czechoslovakia. This was not long after ancestors on my other side immigrated from Germany. Tomatoes were brought to North America from the Andes, carrots from Persia and zucchini from Central America. My neighbor's apple tree originated centuries ago in Kazakhstan.

The next time I saw her she tried again. "Burning Bush is invasive!" I thought that over and asked, "So does that make it worse planted here than down the road where we got it from?" Later I thought some more. Human immigrants today, along with citizens of a despised ethnicity, are often denounced as invaders. Whether plants or people, invaders are not only going where they have no right to be, but also unfairly multiplying and taking over. Resisting an invasion is considered justified and even heroic. That's how torch-carrying young men march and chant like an army of the righteous, "Jews will not replace us!"

Although we watered our red-leaved transplants and marked their locations with stakes, the new Burning Bush plants didn't survive. The following fall, we didn't have any more red leaves in our yard than the year before.

In his 1902 masterwork, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James tackled the category of evil. He noted how some religions included evil as part of God's beneficent creation while others regarded it as some kind of "dirt" – that is, "matter out of place." This may seem like a theological nicety, no more consequential to everyday life than how many angels can dance on the head of a gun bolt. But anthropologists have wrung quite a bit of significance out of similar insights. Exploring in depth the beliefs and practices of cultures around the world, they demonstrated that humans everywhere make sense of life through ideas about which things belong where and which do not belong anywhere at all.

Things that cross mental boundaries or appear ambiguous represent danger. So cultures enforce taboos and have rituals for restoring order after transgressions. What violates category rules in one part of the globe – like a man wearing women's clothes or animals running around within a house – may prompt yawns or shrugs someplace else. But no one escapes the psychological dynamics involved. As Mary Douglas put it in *Purity and Danger*, "The yearning for rigidity is in us all. It is part of our human condition to long for hard lines and clear concepts."

Some years back I watched a neighbor uproot a few weeds from the roadside near his house and throw them into the woods. "My wife is allergic to ragweed," he volunteered when I approached. "If I can get rid of it, she won't be sneezing so much." As I walked on, I thought back to my childhood, when I got a weekly shot that our family allergist mixed up against my sensitivity to ragweed, mold, dust and dogs. I don't recall having had symptoms related to those substances, except for reddening at the site of the scratch test they did on one's forearm back then. Yet because of those test results, I got to have an air conditioner installed in the window of my bedroom while everyone else in my family suffered summer heat with just fans.

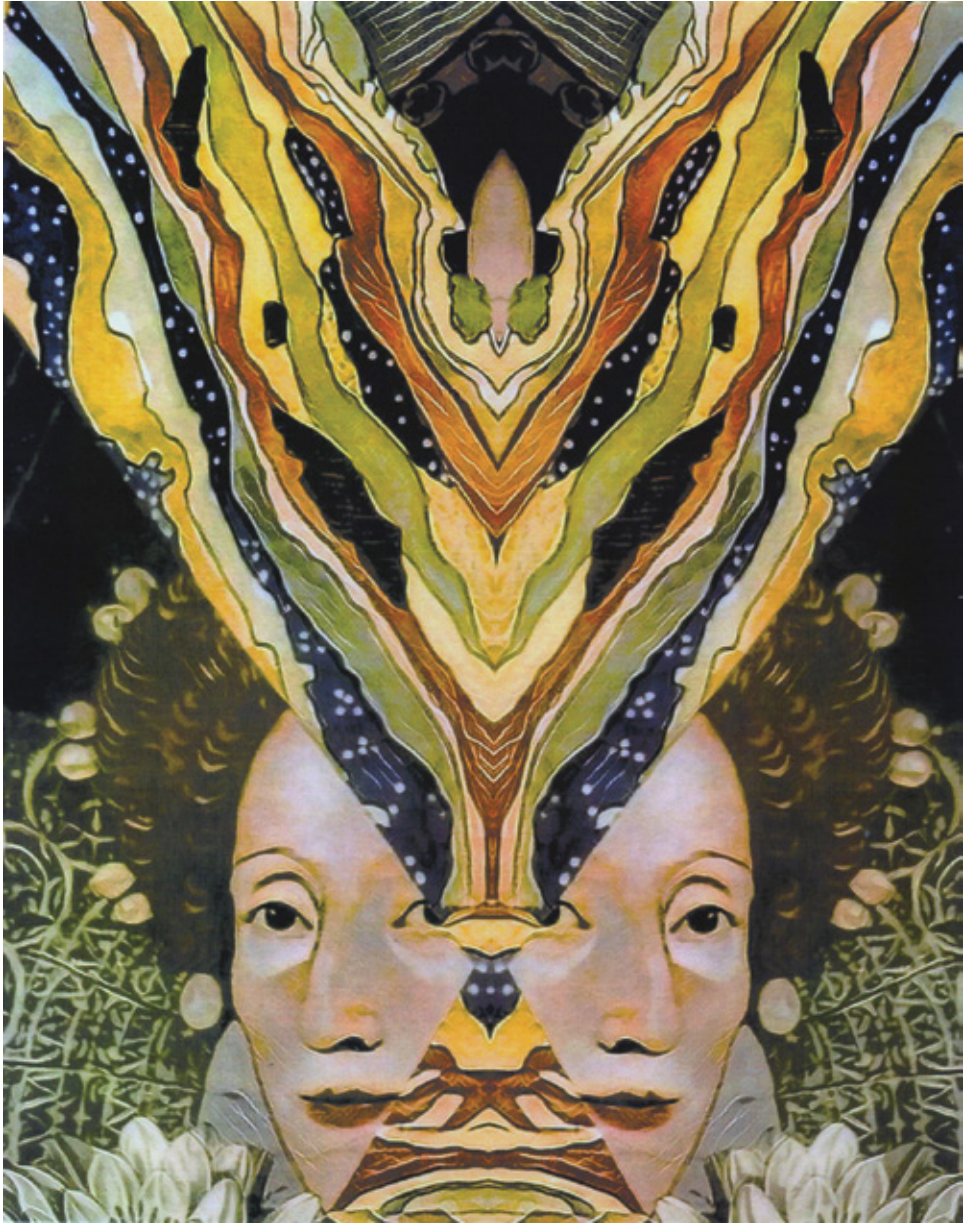
Who knew if I was still susceptible to hay fever – or ever really had been? What my neighbor was doing stuck in my head, and I decided to follow his example. Summer after summer I pulled up and tossed away stalks of ragweed along the road from our house in both directions. Its roots dislodged from the ground with a gentle tug, and after a few years I had created a quarter-mile-long, easily maintained ragweed-free zone.

A weed, most gardeners know, is a plant we don't want to be growing where it is. Native to North America, ragweed and its pollen trigger hay fever in vulnerable individuals. This August I looked at a ragweed plant in my hand and wondered, "If I were allergic to this thing, shouldn't I be sneezing and itching from touching some so often?" I wasn't. I shook my head at my silly thoughtlessness. Still, something about pulling "bad" things out of the ground, grooming a small part of my neighborhood, gave me a weird, private satisfaction. Like wiping snot off a baby who didn't care one way or the other, culling the ragweed put a smile into my soul.





country house
Claudia Tong



second sight
Denise McQuiston

cette nuit qui passe

Sarah Das Gupta

Pale white, in moonlit fields,
the cattle of Burgundy stand.
Dark shadows stretch beneath the trees,
where ghostly creatures graze.
Old farmhouses flash past,
silvered, as the moon sails out
from behind dark clouds.
Fields of stubble gleam,
gold, silver,
the harvest safely gathered.

The pastoral magic fades.
Now, the train passes grey suburbs.
Nameless tower blocks flash by.
Straggling rows of houses loom large
but are quickly gone.
Even the Gare de Lyons
enjoys a midnight snooze.
Passengers, so close for several hours,
disperse, intimate strangers, into the Paris night.

Empty café chairs and tables await
early morning commuters,
while lovers drag out
the last dregs of the fading night.
Street lights play on the old cobblestones,
the homeless cling to the baggage of the streets-
cardboard boxes, wet blankets, plastic sheets

The Seine glimmers in the moonlight
flowing under the Pont des Arts
The Arc de Triomphe dreams again
of battles won, of glories past.
Along the Left Bank,
paintings, sketches are packed away,
till the city faces another day.



in the circle

Sarah Das Gupta

Beyond the lights
the garden's darkness –
black and all consuming.
Step outside the circle,
you've lost now an arm,
now part of a leg,
only two steps beyond
leads to anonymity.

Within the circle
you are acceptable,
sipping champagne,
eating hotdogs
with the best.

Yet inside the lights,
it's tediously dull,
safely predictable.
Barbequed spare ribs,
the best lamb kebabs.
The evening here's
duplicated at Nos 10.
In the flattering light
the women look
well under fifty,
the men, in Hawiian
prints, a trifle shifty.

Hold fast to fried prawns
and succulent sausages.
Out in the darkness
hovers life.
Keep inside,
bypass the strife.



bush life

Paul Ilichko

There were any number of plants
in the garden that we failed to recognize
and others that looked familiar
but which we could not quite name
it was all quite exceptional
in its flowering beauty

I told you that I could have been
a writer with expertise
in the field of shrubbery
and you laughed for a while
as we turned the page
on that period of our lives

moving into a world of music and art
a crisper life filled with activities
that no longer required digging
or loam or metal implements
with shaped wooden handles
avoiding the irritation of calluses

admittedly
we still had the many potted plants
that swamped our apartment
and the stains of a thousand hours
of weeding could never be fully
removed from your boots

my professor tries to persuade me
to move beyond the natural world
but it's one thing that I really know
a safety net for me
he insists that I will be rewarded
for stretching beyond my comfort zone

aiming for the stars
metaphorically speaking
as if I were an artisan in southern Italy
inventing a new way to shape
the local clay upstaging my neighbors
and taking a share of the pottery market

enabling the regional flora to be displayed
to its best advantage changing irredeemably
our position in that feudal society
that resembles in so few ways
the one in which we now struggle
to survive.



life as modern art

Paul Ilichko

The harshness of the midday light turned you
into a post-impressionist portrait your world
as flat as modernism we had been through
so much by that point but I still remembered
you poised beside the swimming pool so
relaxed as you breathed in filling your lungs
and I wanted to capture you mid-dive framed
by the blueness of the water and sky later
you turned the kitchen upside down trying
to make everything from scratch your streak
of perfectionism erupting into cascades of flour
and broken eggs you told me that it was
a gesture of love and I believed you the blue
sky turned to black long before you finished
and I was asleep on the old gray sofa that leaned
to one side and sagged in the middle I woke
to find you sobbing at the table your celebration
ruined as you sat there beneath an abstract
portrait in purple and lime green a semi-nude
who had perhaps just returned from the beach
stripping now to shower away the gritty sand.



hot red

RC deWinter

The wizards who monitor celestial bodies
have discovered Mars has a hot red ocean
of liquefied magma buried deep under rock mantle
where it's been hidden for so long, and which,
unlike the planet's small metal heart, never hardens.

Kept molten by radioactive elements in a 1000 mile radius
ceaselessly sloshing and hissing in the fury of the god
for which it's named, it's a sea no sailor will ever cross.

But I know this ocean. Its twin lives in my chest.
In my dreams. A fury of grief for love lost
kept molten by the memory of a man
stolen by the god of war and left to lie shrouded
in the silence of a mystery that, unlike this discovery
unearthed in the cold realm of science, will never be revealed.



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undoing the earth

RC deWinter

undoing the earth

some days it seems like the world is dying
in the silence of neglect as we pretend not to notice
closing our eyes in the hubris of our certainty
that what has existed for so long will continue to thrive
in spite of everything we do to almost guarantee it won't
tra-la-la-ing on our merry way
ignoring every warning the planet gives us
in the belief that titan's burning wheels
will continue to roll no matter what outrage we commit
after all are we not the masters of our fate?
to this i answer yes and when the world dies
in fire or ice or an endless deluge of the tears of heaven
if i'm unlucky enough to witness it
i'll carry no triumph in its unfolding
but only weep to see what we've wrought
in the complacent belief that there's a fix
for everything we've so long ignored



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dissection
Tommy Twilite

dissection

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there is long truth
drawn like wire
through the die

we are nothing
composed of things
held together with
electromagnets

frog legs quiver
then jerk to the probe
touch them
with your finger

we gulp lungfuls of air
break the tension of surface
kick for all we are worth
to reach the moon

but we do not enter
we wait until
we can enter
through the cracked lens



take me

Tommy Twilite

I felt guilty taking her
as I have taken her before
many times
but she offered herself to me
so I took her
again and again
and she gave me everything
but it was never enough
and as we moved together
I felt my release building
it was like the first time
as it always was with her
and I loved her
and she thanked me,
for loving her

later
as we lay there
cool breeze
through the window
afternoon sun
on her skin
her dark hair
like dark fire
the scent of her
made me wish
that this was heaven
and not hell



*"ferrous" // "ferocious" **

Ernest Brute

** a.k.a. Magnet Fishing in America*

the chance you pull in a grenade
the chance you pull a grenade in close

the chance you land a handgun
camouflaged in muck
slimy

you bring it home
clean it
like bullet fish
cook in a coconut cream sauce

pose with bolt cutters like they're a bigmouth bass
pose with a sword like it's a swordfish

stand on the banks of the river
with shotgun shells scattered at your feet

can't help but see the cigarette butts

catch and release rusted tire rims
catch and release corroded sheet metal

its razorsharp edges cause lacerations
gloves or not

jumping up and down for a tetanus shot!



domestic terrorism

James Vescovi

Giulia's summer ground to a halt when her husband announced a change in vacation plans: Instead of a week at a bed & breakfast on Cape Cod, the family would go camping at a non-descript, rustic campground in Kalkaska, Michigan.

"Rick, are you out of your mind?" she asked.

"No, not that I know of," replied her husband of nineteen years. Rick Reinke, tall and fair-skinned with thinning blonde hair, was a successful corporate attorney with ever-ready quips.

"*Kalkaska?* Can there even be a town with such a horrible name?" she asked.

"There certainly is. And it's a Native American word."

"What does it mean?"

"I don't know. Probably 'lovely lakes' or something."

Giulia left the stove and flipped open her laptop on the kitchen counter. She started tapping, as Rick removed his suit jacket and hung it in a stool.

"Everyone knows the pioneers mangled the indigenous names," she said. "Oh, here it is. Kalkaska: 'burnt over country'. Sounds lovely."

"If it was that, it's not anymore. The area's filled with trees and has pristine streams."

Giulia read silently, moving her lips. "The town also the highest rate of crystal meth addiction in the state of Michigan."

"Now you're being cynical," he said.

"Rick, who's going to wear a suicide vest on Cape Cod? For God's sake, most men go around bare-chested—or nude!" Giulia said, back at the stove. She added olive oil and salt to a pot of boiling water.

He loosened a bow tie and went to the refrigerator for a bottle of chilled Chardonnay. He plucked two glasses from a rack.

"It's not just the Cape, Giulia. We'll be crossing major bridges, using federal highways, driving through Boston ..." he said, uncorking the bottle and pouring.

"Terrorism in Boston?" she said.

"Yes. Who'd have guessed those two brothers would stage an attack at the marathon two years ago?"

He handed her a glass.

“Fine! The only thing that happens in Boston all year—and it’s in April!” she said. With a pink fingernail, she hooked a bit of cork from her wine. “The rest of the year, Detroit is a higher priority target.”

“Sarcasm isn’t going to get us on the same page,” her husband said.

“Rick, we *live* in Michigan! I don’t want to vacation here!” Giulia cried.

From the cupboard, she grabbed a box of bow-tie pasta with such frustration that it rattled like an angry snake.

A graduate of Michigan State University, Rick had moved to Manhattan to study law. They met because Giulia was an assistant to his favorite professor. They’d courted in the cafes and bars of Greenwich Village. He proposed marriage right after graduation, and she’d accepted—without ever having stepped foot in his home state, or even paged through a picture book. She’d grown up in New York. The only fact about Michigan she could remember from geography class was that it was surrounded on three sides by water. It didn’t impress her.

“You’re either an island or your not,” she thought.

To her, Midwestern states were full of trees, lakes, fresh breezes, and decent people whose initial thought, when asked a favor, wasn’t, “What’s in it for me?”



Nevertheless, it was 1994. She was twenty-four without a career plan and wasn’t even sure she wanted one. The couple settled in Woodruff, a town of 45,000 northwest of Detroit. Their firstborn, Paul, arrived before their fifth anniversary, and Bruno followed two years later.

Later that evening, as the couple got ready for bed, the discussion resurfaced.

“Rick, it’s a charming B&B. The breakfasts are rated the best on the Cape. And the brochure said J.D. Salinger once summered there.”

“The only thing more overrated than *Catcher in the Rye* is Jameson’s whiskey,” he said, yanking off his slacks.

“It’s a wonderful book. Besides, Bruno will be reading it this fall.”

“He’s the last kid who should be exposed to Holden Caulfield.”

Giulia turned her back to her husband to remove her bra. She slipped on a peach-colored nightgown. When she turned around, he was grinning at her. Rick was handsome. He had elegant hands and one of those faces that wouldn’t change with age. The only thing Giulia wished different were his square shoulders and stentorian voice—both fit more for a courtroom than a marriage.

“Giulia, thousands of people visit Michigan every year to take their leisure,” Rick said.

“Fine. We’ll go to the Cape and make room for them.”

“Very funny.”

“I don’t want to live the woods with bugs and sleep on a dirt floor!”

“We’ll also be visiting attractions—cultural attractions.”

“I’ve seen Michigan cultural attractions. It’s usually a forty-foot-tall wooden statue of Hiawatha. Whose painting is chipping.”

“Now you’re just being a New York snob. You’ve never even been camping.”

“Yes I have. I was raised by a single father a five-story walk-up,” Giulia stated, climbing into bed.

She’d grown up in Little Italy, the oldest of three daughters. Her mother, who’d come from a well-to-do family on Park Avenue, had gone AWOL when Giulia was eleven. Her father, Marco, was an abstract painter who, though he claimed to have studied with Willem De Kooning, couldn’t get anyone to buy his work. He supplemented the family income by painting portraits, but lost commissions because he fought with clients. Exhausted raising three girls on nothing, his wife—no longer charmed by the artistic life—fled, after which the housework fell to Giulia. There was more of it after her Marco’s bossy and doting mother, Maddalena, moved in. Her contribution to housekeeping was snapping a damp rag at the old furniture. Worse, she’d given her granddaughter the despised nickname “Briciola,” which means, “crumb.” The girl often felt like a crumb: swept off the table and tossed out the window for pigeons.

“Rick, please—I had my heart set on Cape Cod ever since *Life* magazine did a spread on the Kennedy compound in Hyannisport,” Giulia pleaded.

“I’m sorry, Honey, but I have this gut feeling.... Something bad is coming this summer,” said Rick. “I just know it.” He kicked off his slippers and lay down.

Giulia glared at him. She was tall, with short, curly black hair, a beautiful round face, a taut, angular figure.

“Don’t look at me like that,” he said. “9/11 changed everything.”

Her glare continued unabated.

“Well, fine, go ahead and stare,” he said, snatching a Jack Reacher paperback off his night table. “But I don’t hear our sons complaining about the trip.”

“Of course not. For boys Bruno’s age, ripping down innocent branches and hooking minnows through their eye-sockets is pure pleasure.”

“That’s true for me, too.”

“But you’re wrong about Paul. He was looking forward to meeting some girls on the beach.”

“Girls go camping, too.”

“Not ones who bathe,” said Giulia, under her breath.

Rick slipped on his reading glasses and opened his book. She let him read a page, and then pounded her fist on the covers.

“Goddamn it! I don’t want to sleep in a tent for a week!” she screamed.

“But, you don’t understand,” he calmly replied. “We’re not going to be on the ground. I’ve rented a trailer.”

Giulia sat up and gaped at him. “You mean like circus people live in?”

“Oh, cut the sarcasm,” he replied. “It’s a pop-up tent trailer.”

“A tent on wheels—like the one Giulietta Masina had in *La Strada*.”

“Say what you want. When you see the modern conveniences, you’ll feel differently.”

Born with a jittery disposition, Rick lived a childhood of ribbing, petty gags, and Charley horses. The youngest of four boys, his brothers took the most pleasure in scaring him. They hid in closets, basements, and trees, and his overreactions brought them much laughter. By the time he was twelve, Rick sensed danger around every corner. A news story of a prison break kept him awake at night, though the prison was a hundred miles away.

With the help of a therapist, Rick learned to tamp down his knee-jerk reactions. But the rise of terrorism in the 1990s triggered his old demons. To Giulia’s chagrin, he stocked the basement with canned foods, medical supplies, and drinking water in the event of a terrorist blitzkrieg. At a recent PTA meeting, he harangued the administration for ten minutes about the school’s lack of preparations. Paul was so embarrassed that he dropped out of the running for class treasurer, though he’d been a shoe-in.

It took Rick several attempts to back the trailer into the driveway. On the third try, when he gunned the engine, his new SUV jackknifed and nearly decapitated a newly planted crab apple tree.

Giulia watched from the porch with a smirk.

Having successfully parked, Rick popped open the tent-top. Spotting Giulia out of the corner of his eye, he waved, and she ambled over to see the trailer’s features.

The sink was the size of a shoebox. The oven looked like a Mattel Suzy Homemaker model she’d yearned for (but never got) in Macy’s Christmas catalogue. The kitchen table looked big

enough for four toddlers taking mid-morning snack, as long as they didn't elbow each other. The worst feature were the beds, which cantilevered over the ground like truncated wings. Giulia imagined herself asleep as a bear sniffed for scraps 2 a.m., their backs practically touching.

"Where do we shower?" she asked.

"There are bath houses," Rick sheepishly replied.

"That's how my grandmother bathed when she immigrated to New York in 1938," Giulia said. "By 1943, she'd gone upscale and had a bathtub in the kitchen."

Rick stalked off.

"You're not going to rope me into a spat, Giulia," he said over his shoulder.

Half way to the garage, he spun around.

"And speaking of your family, you told me once about your grandmother's ice box. We may need your expertise here because our refrigerator runs on ice, too."

The next morning, Rick was up early, tying suitcases to the luggage rack of the SUV. Bleary eyed, Giulia stared out the kitchen window. The camper had been closed up into its boxlike shape. She noted the name of the model: *Starcraft Galaxy*.

"My space capsule for seven days," she sighed.

"All right, everyone! Let's go! Get in the car while I lock up the house!" Rick joyously called.

Paul emerged from the house looking moody and irritable. He was tall and gangly, with an oval face and a cowlick that the neighborhood moms found irresistible. In anticipation of meeting sophisticated girls at the Cape, he'd been religiously slathering on creams to fight the acne that peppered his cheeks.

"After I get poison ivy all over my body, I'll look like a human pizza," he complained to his mother as they got in the truck.

Bruno was missing. Rick called out again, and the boy appeared from a garage across the street. His father surveyed him limping towards the car. He was fourteen and stocky and, for reasons unknown to anyone but himself, wore his hair in a Beatles cut.

"You hurt?" he asked.

"Just a sprained ankle."

"When?"

“Yesterday.”

“I didn’t see you limping last night.”

“Just woke up with it sore.”

“What’re you hiding beside your leg?” asked his father.

“Nothing...”

“C’mon, let’s see it.”

Bruno held up a BB gun.

“If you don’t return that weapon to Artie Richardson now, I’m going to line you up against the garage and shoot,” his father said.

“But Dad, I want to bag something—a raccoon or a possum or...”

“You want to *bag* something? We’ll bag some fish.”

“But there’s no blood in fishing. Fish are boring. And they’re idiots.”

“Try catching a Muskie. They’ll outsmart anyone,” said Rick.

The boy didn’t move.

“What did I say?”

“I was thinking,” Bruno said, “maybe we should take it along in case of terrorists.”

“Don’t be a smart ass! Now go!”

Rick climbed into the SUV. “Well, I see they heard us fighting about the vacation,” he said.

“Kids will do that,” she said.

“Just tell me this: You made sure their cell phones are at home?”

“Yes,” she replied.

“Where we’re going, couldn’t get any reception, anyway,” Paul mumbled from the back seat.

Bruno got in. Rick turned the ignition.

Paul asked, “Dad, can I at least drive?”

“Maybe later,” Rick replied.

“Maybe never,” Bruno whispered.

Giulia stared through a tiny screen a few inches from her face. Outside, smoke rose through a canopy of oaks. Wearing a Detroit Tiger cap, Rick fanned charcoals on a grill. She sighed. It had been a long ride. She needed a shower, but was averse to taking one after visiting the bathhouse, with its crumbling, slimy tiles. When they'd arrived, she'd asked Rick if she could take a nap.

“Absolutely! You're on vacation now,” he replied, without a trace of irony.

Giulia rolled over to survey the dollhouse cupboards, whose magnetic doors didn't work. The trailer tilted whenever someone climbed inside. Already a can of tuna had slid out and conked Bruno on the head.

When the Reinkes had first pulled into the Devil's Lake Campground two hours earlier, Rick surprised everyone with the news that he'd camped there before as a child.

Giulia said, “I'd have been happy just to see photos of it.”

“Very funny,” he said, climbing out. He slammed the door hard and stalked towards the ranger station to register.

They drove to their assigned site. Rick backed the trailer between two small trees without incident. After he'd opened and secured the tent, Paul and Bruno clambered in, tearing into the marshmallows and crackers. Giulia stormed in after them.

“Get away from those Triscuits! Put down the sour cream chips!” she yelled. “This isn't feeding time at the zoo! Go outside while I set things up! Get some firewood or something!”

After the boys were out of sight, she located the Kraft Cheddar and Bacon Easy Cheese spread and sprayed a ribbon on a Triscuit. Crunching away, it suddenly dawned on Giulia that daily tasks here would be no different than they were at home: She'd dole out meals—cold cereal for breakfast; baloney sandwiches, celery sticks, and peaches for lunch; and grilled food for supper. She'd wash dishes and sweep the trailer of twigs, pine needles, and God knows what. When necessary, she'd blast indoor freshener. Just outside the camp, the Reinkes passed the Devil's Lake Laundromat. She expected she'd spend part of an afternoon there.

She sprayed another cracker, piling the cheese high, and stuffed it in her mouth. She made a pact with herself: The next seven days were going to be *different*—no matter what. She'd sweep the trailer once daily for hygiene's sake and then to hell with it. She'd jettison any attempt at balanced meals; Fig Newtons counted as both a fruit and dessert course. She'd let grease build up on the stove and not fret if ants invaded the cupboards—because this lean-to-on-wheels was rented. If the trailer man wanted to withhold Rick's \$250 deposit, so be it. She was on holiday.

That night, Giulia slept so soundly that she didn't hear heavy rain pelting the canvas roof. She awoke to the sound of the opening of a flimsy aluminum door. Damp air filled the stuffy trailer. Wearing yellow rain gear, Rick announced that no one was to go outside until he returned.

"Look at this rain. What're we going to do all day?" moaned Bruno from his bunk. "Just sit in this box?"

Giulia rolled out of bed and went for the coffee maker, filling it from a jug of distilled water. She unlatched the kitchen table, which had to be vertically secured when not in use. Otherwise, it was impossible to move about. She laid out plastic spoons, bowls, bananas, and Count Chocula cereal.

Paul sat down to eat, while Bruno continued to peer outside.

"Those people next door have an RV. Maybe they'll let us come over and watch TV," he said.

"We're not watching any TV!" said Rick, re-entering the trailer. "We came here to get away from it all."

He slipped off his raincoat, and finding no place to put it, stuffed it into the tiny sink, where Giulia had just placed hamburger meat to defrost. He was in a foul mood, but tried to hide it by rubbing his hands together enthusiastically.

"Well, we're going to have to be resourceful," he said. "I talked to the guy with the transistor radio a few trailers down. He said this rain fooled everybody, even the weathermen. It's going to be like this for a while."

"How long's 'a while?'" asked Paul, his mouth full of cereal.

"All today, probably tomorrow."

"You said there were things to do if it rained, Dad," Bruno said.

Rick produced a guidebook and held it up as if it were a roadmap to family fun.

He said, "I read about an Ojibwa Indian living history museum. You can actually sample deer meat."

"Gross," said Bruno.

"Or we could go into Lewiston. That's where a famous battle was fought between French and British settlers in 1749. There are re-enactments."

"In the rain?" queried Giulia.

"Says 'rain or shine.'"

"It's summer vacation. We're allergic to history," Paul said.

Giulia surveyed pajamas strewn around the camper. "I'm not picking them up," she told herself.

"Let's see...Byron City has some antique stores," said Rick.

"That sounds good!" cried Giulia, envisioning a slice of civilization in this backwater. "We can browse the shops. I'm sure there's something of interest for everyone."

"Like what?" asked Bruno, slipping on his jeans.

"Like Civil War things your dad collects," said his mother.

She snatched the booklet from Rick and read.

"Paul, it says one vendor has a huge collection of records. Maybe they'll have some of those Doo-Wop albums you like. Let's everyone get dressed and go for it!"

"Wait. What about for me?" Bruno asked, pulling a red poncho over his head. "What's there going to be for me in these crummy junk stores?"

Rick replied, "You never know till you get there..."

"Just a lot of crap..."

Giulia yanked him out the door.

A half hour later, they pulled into Byron City to discover the shops were closed on Mondays. All that was open was an army-navy outlet and a bakery. The males headed to the outlet, while Giulia went for coffee and a glazed donut. She followed it up with a raspberry cruller when the waitress came to refill her coffee mug. A short time later, a smiling Bruno galloped into the bakery with a jackknife, blade open.

"Ma, look at this—with a real bark handle!" he said.

"Watch it!" yelled Rick. "I told you no running with that damn thing!"

"The handle's not real bark, it's fake," said Paul.

"So are you," said Bruno.

"Paul, did you find anything?" his mother asked.

"No."

Rick asked, "Honey, how are the donuts?"

"When you come from New York, any pastry is a step down," said Giulia. "But, as my Sicilian grandmother would've said, I wouldn't feed this to the pigs."

The Reinkes piled into the car. They didn't want to return to the campground, though no one knew exactly where to go.

"Dad, can I drive?" asked Paul.

"Not now."

"Not ever," muttered Bruno.

"I'll be driving before you," Paul stated.

With Giulia navigating, the family motored randomly up and down country roads, desperately searching for a distraction, while the windshield wipers slogged rain back and forth. When they hit a dead end for the third time, Paul let out a huff, and Giulia flung the map at him in the back seat.

"You try guiding us now!" she said.

Paul tried to direct them to a cider mill, but they ended up in a mobile home park for migrant workers. The people stood outside their shacks grimly staring at the Reinke's SUV.

"Think they're Al-Qaeda, Dad?" asked Paul.

Rick turned around. "You expressed the desire to drive. If you'd like it to remain a possibility, cut the terrorist jokes."

"Terrorism is no joke," Bruno said like an officious announcer.

His father turned around again.

"And you—if you keep it up—are going to get grounded."

"This camping trip is like being grounded," mumbled Bruno.

Rick screeched off. "Keep it up, Bruno. Try my patience and see what happens."

The morning was saved when Giulia spotted a roadside cherry stand. She bought several pounds and returned to the car. The Reinkes continued to drive around, tossing pits out the windows.

After lunch at an A&W, they returned to the campground.

"Thank God, I remembered board games," said Rick, as everyone shuffled into the trailer.

"How about Monopoly? That should keep us occupied for a while," said Rick.

After the game began, Giulia intentionally bankrupted herself so she could slip off to read *Harry Potter*. Paul soon got angry that Bruno was besting him and dropped out, claiming a headache. He lay on his bunk listening to his iPod.

That left Rick and Bruno. The contest went back and forth, with hundreds of dollars exchanging hands and no winner in sight.

“Can you turn down the music?” asked Rick.

Paul removed an ear bud. “Huh?”

“Lower your music. We’re trying to concentrate on something important over here,” said Bruno.

“Paul, the music is a bit loud,” said his mother. “I can hear it despite your ear things.”

“Well, it’s my book you’re reading!” he snarled. “Why am I being attacked?”

“So what if it’s your book?” said Bruno. “Dad and Mom paid for iPod, so shut that jive-ass music down.”

“Mind your own business!” Paul yelled.

“Stop it, boys!” said Giulia.

Bruno yelled, “You’re being a baby because I was killing you in Monopoly...”

“That’s it, we’re going fishing!” said Rick, sweeping the game pieces into the box.

“Wait! Wait! Dad! I was winning!” cried Bruno. “You did that because I was going to beat you!”

“I did not.”

“Yes, you did!”

“I did it so that I wouldn’t murder anyone in this trailer!”

“But it’s the best property I ever had!” cried Bruno. “What about my railroads? My hotels?”

“I’d love to go to a hotel,” Giulia said.

“The game’s over! Everyone get ready to fish!” barked Rick.

“But it’s pouring,” Paul said.

“They bite better in a rain. Let’s go!” said his father. “And leave that damn iPod here!”

Rick stepped outside to fetch the poles from the car. He was shocked. The campground was practically deserted. A couple they’d met from Tennessee with every modern convenience in their motorhome had departed, and a Canadian family across the way—a hardy bunch from Manitoba who’d been roughing it in a tent—had pulled up stakes, too.

“To hell with them—more fish for us,” thought Rick, as he yanked a tackle box from the SUV. “Come on you guys!”

The Reinkes headed down a winding trail towards Devil’s Lake. They crossed a bog on wobbly planks and ascended a slight hill. The lake appeared just as Paul, bringing up the rear, reported seeing a slice of blue sky behind him.

Lying on a sandy shore was a perfectly straight row of aluminum rowboats. Rick leaned the fishing poles against a camp shed and led everyone inside.

“Good afternoon, folks,” said a ranger in a gray uniform. He had a Hitler-like mustache, droopy chin, and outmoded sunglasses. Nearby were a barrel filled with oars and a brown refrigerator with a sign that read: “CRAWLERS. PLEASE HELP YOURSELF. PAY AT COUNTER.”

“We need a boat,” said Rick.

“So did Noah,” replied the ranger.

“Who? What are you talking about?”

“Just a little joke, my friend. But I’m afraid there’s no renting today.”

“Why?”

“Rain!” said the ranger, as if it were obvious to the 25-pound lake trout mounted behind him.

Rick pointed out the window and said, “I don’t see any drops falling right now.”

“You will shortly,” said the ranger, placing his pale, sweaty hands on the counter.

“But I saw blue sky on the horizon,” said Paul.

“Just a small break in the clouds, young man. Not gonna last...”

“Is that why you’re wearing sun glasses?” Rick asked.

“These are prescription, my friend,” the man replied. His nametag said “KARL.”

“Well, let’s have a boat. I’ll worry about the rain,” Rick said.

“Sir, I’ve worked here twenty-two summers. I know weather conditions like the back of my hand. And it hasn’t finished raining yet, so no boats,” stated Karl, and then with a grin, “and no ifs, ands, or buts.”

“Buts, my ass ...” muttered Bruno.

Rick glowered at him, then said to Karl, “Listen, right now, at this place, at this time, it’s *not* raining.”

“Now, I told you...”

“I want to rent a goddamn boat!” Rick added, in his litigator voice.

“We don’t rent during rainfall. Camp policy.”

“Afraid the boats’ll get wet?” asked Bruno.

“For your information, young man,” said Karl, “we don’t rent because of lightning strikes. Do you know what happens when you get hit by lightning in an aluminum boat?”

Bruno shrugged.

“You’ll look like a charred log in a fire pit.”

“At least the fish’ll get cooked.”

“Giulia, take him outside, will you?!” pleaded Rick. He turned back to the ranger. “Listen, Karl, we’re going nuts sitting in the trailer all day.”

“The Indian museum’s good.”

“Saw it last year,” lied Giulia, hustling Bruno out the door.

“How about Sturgeon Falls?” asked Karl. He sipped coffee from a mug emblazoned with “WORLD’S BEST DAD”.

“Do you really think we want to look at a waterfall in all this rain?!” asked Rick.

“Well, sorry, but it’s campground rules. No renting when there’s any form of precipitation.”

“I’d like to see those rules—in writing!” Rick demanded.

“No problemo,” Karl said. “I happen to be heading up to the main office right now.”

Rick and Paul exited the shed, followed by Karl, who locked and triple checked the door. He started up the trail, though the two did not follow.

“Aw, come on, fella!” yelled Rick, his voice echoing across the lake. “You enjoy lousing up people’s vacations?! Is that what they pay you for?!”

Karl continued his march. They watched his figure bob on the bog planks and disappear.

Bruno called in a shrieked whisper, “Hey, Dad! Dad, check this out! They forgot to lock up one of the rowboats!”

Bruno and Giulia had shoved off with fishing poles and the tackle box.

“Wait a minute! Giulia! What are you doing?!” asked Rick.

“I’m on vacation!” she replied, paddling out into the lake with her hands.

“Dad, throw us the worms!” Bruno called.

Rick paused, then said, “Oh, what the hell,” and hurried to the end of the dock. He underhanded the container to Bruno.

Thunder rumbled in the distance. Drops began to fall, and Rick joined Paul under the shed’s eaves.

“Aren’t you worried about them getting hit by lightning?” asked Paul.

“Nah.”

“Could happen.”

“Let’s put it this way, son. If it happened, one of us would have to learn to cook,” his father replied with a smirk.

They watched Bruno show his mother how to do an over-the-shoulder cast.

“It’s kind of like a Hail Mary football pass, Mom,” he said.

Giulia tossed but released the line too early. The metal lure fluttered through the misty air and hooked itself onto an overhanging branch.

“That was my lucky lure!” cried Bruno. “Shit!”

“Watch that mouth of yours!” said Giulia. “And I’m doing the best I can!”

Bruno plopped down on a seat and sulked momentarily—then stood up and cut her line with his new jackknife. He rigged up a new line, this time with a worm.

“It’s disgusting,” said his mother.

“Don’t worry about him. He’s having more fun than we are. All right, Ma, don’t embarrass yourself twice. Cast like I showed you.”

Giulia was hesitant to try again so Bruno stood up and threw. His line made a graceful arc and the lure hit the water with a soft *plosh*.

“See, Ma? That’s how the pros do it.”

Rain fell harder. In the distance, lightning flashed, and everyone flinched. Thunder rolled through the campground.

Bruno's bobber disappeared below the water.

"I got one! I got one!" he cried.

"Go easy, easy, son," said Rick, dashing back to the dock with Paul in tow.

Bruno reeled in—the fish broke the surface and disappeared.

"See that? That's our dinner, Ma!"

"That wouldn't feed a kitten," snarked Paul.

"Take your time now, Bruno," said his father.

From a distance came a buzzing noise. Everyone looked up at the sky expecting a plane, but saw only low clouds.

Suddenly, a skiff rounded a bend in the lake. Through the mist the Reinkes saw two Devil's Lake rangers heading their way.

"Uh-oh..." said Bruno.

The skiff moved nearer; the buzzing became a growl. A tall man was at the tiller, while Karl stood at the bow.

Bruno reeled in his fish, while Giulia paddled furiously, but boat only idled in place. The rangers glided up, and Karl seized the gunwale of the pilfered rowboat.

"You're setting a hell of an example here, Mister, letting your family fish in a storm!" Karl yelled at Rick. "And another thing: that fish your boy got is too small. It's an illegal catch!"

The fish was still alive, squirming and leaping in the bottom of the boat. Giulia was screaming. Bruno took off his sneaker and whacked it cold.

The boats were fastened together and the skiff pulled Bruno and his mother to the dock.

"I'm going to have to ask you to leave our facility pronto," said Karl.

"The boy caught a lousy sunfish," said Rick.

"It's a youth! And state law requires you to release them."

"Bruno, toss him back," Rick said.

"Dad, the sucker's dead!"

The rangers helped Giulia and Bruno on the dock and handed over their gear.

“We wouldn’t spend another night if you paid us a hundred bucks,” said Rick.

“That’s about what the fine’s going to cost you,” scolded Karl.

“Put it on my tab,” said Rick.

The sky went white with a flash of lightning, followed by a careering roll of thunder.

“See?!” cried Karl. “You think I’ve been out to spoil your fun!”

“If it hadn’t been the rain, you’d have found another way to do it,” grumbled Rick.

The Reinkes plodded back to camp and changed into dry clothes. Rick and Giulia lowered the trailer and battened down the hatches. As the SUV swept past the ranger station, Bruno flung the limp out the window.

The rain continued. Rick turned on the radio and stared glumly ahead. The announcer reported that a low-pressure system was stalled over Wisconsin. Rain was forecast for two additional days.

Reinkes pulled into a run-down restaurant whose roof was outlined in pink neon. The place sported a Western motif, and a cowgirl arrived to take their order.

“Whiskey and soda—a double,” Rick said.

“I’m sorry, sir, but we don’t serve alcoholic beverages,” she said.

“Are you joking?!” asked Rick. “Didn’t cowboys need a belt at the end of the day?”

The waitress whispered, “The place is owned by Baptists.”

Everyone ordered steaks and salad bar. While the Rick and the boys ate dessert, Giulia bought a newspaper and sat by herself at the restaurant counter. A weather map showed a sun symbol over Cape Cod. She had lost eleven pounds to look beautiful on the beach. She summoned the waitress for a pie a la mode.

The Reinkes spent the night at a campground off Lake Huron. They awoke late; the rain had turned to drizzle. The air was chilly. Heavy drops of water, shaken from the trees by wind gusts, thumped the canvas roof as they ate toasted waffles.

“What do you say? Shall we give fishing another try?” Rick asked.

The boys stared at him with blank faces, his wife with arched eyebrows.

“Don’t start with me, Giulia,” he said.

“Start what?”

“That Cape Cod business.”

“I didn’t say a thing about the Cape.”

“This rain is not my fault.”

“No one said it was,” she said. “But I’ve got an idea.”

“What?” he asked suspiciously.

“The Grand Hotel.”

“On Mackinaw Island? What about it?”

“Let’s go.”

“Giulia, I went there for a conference once. The rooms are out of sight—four-hundred fifty a night.”

“We’ll stay two nights—just till the weather warms up; then we’ll rough it again.”

“That’s a lot of money!”

“Don’t be a cheapskate, Rick!”

“I’m not a cheapskate, but I don’t like throwing cash out the window,” he said, folding his arms across his chest.

“Rick, on the gas we’ve spent vagabonding around like gypsies, we could’ve driven to Massachusetts and back! C’mon, Mackinaw Island! It sounds like a wonderful place! No cars. Horses. Bikes. History.”

“But—in the rain?”

“Who cares?!” she cried. “You and I can have their famous afternoon tea. Without cars to run them down, the boys can wander the island. There are interesting shops. And I can have a hot bath.”

“I’d says ‘yes,’ but Giulia, in the height of summer—we’ll never get a reservation.”

“I called last night when you were asleep. They’ve had cancellations and can take us.”

Rick scowled. “I knew you’d get me like this,” he said.

“No one’s *getting* you. I’m suggesting this because it’s a respite.”

“From what?”

“From our vacation!” Giulia cried. “We’re tired, bored, and cold. Let’s go to the Grand Hotel. Once in a lifetime experience!”

“Okay, fine,” he said.

They set out for Mackinaw in the late afternoon. The van’s tires droned on the wet asphalt. Paul and Bruno nodded off in the back seat. The sky was dark with looming thunderstorms.

“At least I can return home with my head up,” thought Giulia, with visions of downy mattresses and evening strolls along the famous hotel portico.

She suddenly leaned forward and squinted.

“Are those fireworks?” she asked her husband.

Rick stopped behind a long line of traffic. He climbed out for a look and returned to the SUV

“What’s going on?” Giulia asked.

“Those aren’t fireworks. They’re police flares,” he replied.

“What’s happened?”

A hand rapped on Giulia’s window. She lowered it. A state trooper, water dripping off the brim of his hat, leaned in.

“Sorry folks, but there’s been a fire on the ferry going out to Mackinaw Island. Service is halted till at least noon tomorrow. Stay in the car. A trooper up the road will show you where you can turn around. Sorry for any inconvenience.”

Rick rested his head on the steering wheel.

“It’s those terrorists again,” Bruno whispered.

The trip strangely re-played itself in Giulia’s mind: As they left home, water slowly began filling the SUV, rising to the top of everyone’s socks. On the next day, the water was at everyone’s knees. Then it climbed past their navels and up their rib cages; then lapped at their chins. And now, the vehicle filled completely, it slid off the ferry, and the Reinkes, in their new SUV, sank towards the cold black bottom of Lake Michigan, trailer in tow.

The next morning during complimentary breakfast at Motel 6, the family took a vote on whether to remain on vacation or return home. It was 3-1, against Rick, for home.

"My dad would roll over in his grave if he knew families were now run like democracies," he complained, pulling onto the highway.

"Be thankful you didn't grow up under poverty and anarchy, like I did," said Giulia.

"This entire vacation was anarchy, as far as I'm concerned."

"What's anarchy?" asked Bruno.

"Just play your magnetic checkers with your brother," Rick said.

"Why? I've whipped him and Ma a hundred times," said Bruno.

Rick's eyes narrowed, then locked onto Bruno's in the rearview mirror.

"You haven't played me," he said.

"I'll play you," Bruno smirked.

Rick pulled off on the next exit ramp. He slammed the car into PARK and opened his door.

"Wait, who's going to drive?" asked Giulia.

"You."

"Me? I don't know how to operate a car with a trailer," she said.

"Then let Paul. He's got his learner's permit," said Rick.

"I don't think he's allowed to drive with a trailer. Don't you have to be eighteen, or twenty-five or something?" Giulia asked.

"I'll do fine!" said Paul. "Lemme take the wheel. It'll be the first good thing on this trip."

"Rick, I don't think..."

"Giulia, the State of Michigan has screwed us on everything from rowboats to ferry fires to the weather. We'll bend this rule."

Paul jumped out of the back seat. He was scrambling around the hood to lay claim to the steering wheel when Giulia slid over to the wheel and slammed the door.

"Mom! What are you doing?!" he hollered through the glass.

She hit the air locks.

"Damn it! I haven't gotten to drive once on this trip!" he cried.

Giulia shook her head. Paul made his way back around and threw himself into the front passenger seat.

“Just keep your speed at fifty-five and stay in the right lane. Nothing to it,” Rick instructed his wife from behind. “Okay, Bruno. Best of five.”

Giulia purred down the ramp and merged into traffic. She was relieved to be returning home, but still angry. That morning at breakfast, because they hadn’t paid for the Grand Hotel, she’d suggested that Rick use the rest of his vacation for two days in Chicago.

“Baseball for you guys, shopping for me,” she said. “We can get the boys school clothes from Marshall Fields.”

“Nope, this vacation tired me out,” he said, peevishly. “I’m returning to work. It’ll be more restful.”

Now at the steering wheel, her fury came to a full boil. Four days of heavy rain, slimy fish, and not a single shower in exchange for a week at Cape Cod. Plus, she’d be returning to daily routines: cleaning, meals, and carpooling.

“Summer 2015—ruined by phantom terrorists,” she thought darkly, even malevolently.

And next summer seemed eons away.

106 Giulia did not notice an eighteen-wheeler come up directly behind her; then swoop into the passing lane. The roaring truck began to overtake the SUV on the left.

“King me!” yelled Bruno. “You are in deep do-do now, Pops!”

“Ha! Game’s far from over,” said Rick.

Roaring like buzz saw, the truck seemed so close that Giulia was afraid it might clip off the side mirror.

“Wait a minute, wait a minute, let me see that move again,” said Bruno.

“What, you don’t trust me?” asked his father.

Even with the van, the monstrous vehicle unnerved Giulia. Her heart raced. She had trouble swallowing, then breathing. If only an oxygen mask could descend from the ceiling, she thought.

The driver shifted gears. Giulia flinched. The vehicle belched black smoke and pulled away, leaving in its wake a vacuum that caused the Reinke’s trailer to sway right, left, then right again.

“Hey, what’s going on up there?!” Rick asked.

“It was that truck!” said Giulia, trying to neutralize the lurching trailer

“Well, slow down!” cried Rick.

“I can’t get it to stop weaving!” she yelled.

She panicked. She hit the brakes instead of tapping on them, as she’d been taught her decades ago.

“Whoa!” cried Paul.

Giulia knew better and, later—when the family was safe—she could admit to herself that perhaps, just perhaps, she hit the brake pedal too hard on purpose—mashed it, really.

She’d despised the trailer ever since she laid eyes on it—with its poor ventilation and cheap cabinets. This shack-on-wheels had replaced her Cape Cod bungalow, which Salinger had called home for a summer, all because her husband feared terrorists might be planning a poison gas attack from a whale-watching boat off shore. Well, Giulia wanted nothing more than to dispatch the Starcraft Galaxy into a black hole.

And that’s what she accomplished. The hitch jumped its ball. No longer encumbered by additional weight, the SUV lurched forward, while the trailer, as if itself wanting to flee the Reinke family, veered across the highway shoulder.

“Giulia!” screamed Rick.

“Holy mackerel, check it out!” hollered Bruno, with shock and pleasure.

Everyone turned. Time seemed to slow down. The trailer launched itself into a fallow field and began bucking like a bronco, tearing up the ground and sending hunks of wet soil into the air. Rushing air ripped the canvas top open. Mattresses, beach gear, and paisley seat cushions burst out all directions. When Giulia saw the bathing towels flutter like through the air like exotic birds, she thought, as she brought her vehicle under control, “Good—at least I won’t have to do laundry when I get home.”

The Star Galaxy slammed against an oak and toppled over.

A Michigan state trooper managed to calm Rick down. The boys fought over binoculars, trying to get a closer look at the wreckage. After completing his report, the trooper placed his meaty hand on Giulia’s shoulder, which she subtly shook off, and said, “Wasn’t your fault, ma’am. Clearly an accident.”

Except it wasn’t an accident, Giulia knew. It was domestic terrorism.





floramaximus
Susan Sensemann

first words, last lines

Susan Sensemann


I go to the woods everyday
 salt crisp acrid sting
no waiting for me
 after the slurry wept storm
but, I am angry at the woods today
 low-slung bog fog brews
a caricature drawn
 coffee dirt stick brown mud
a thimble full of firmament
 ink tang black sacked gold
filigree and crystal. gothic dust
 a log's precision fall, crack!
what drama! a honed-in look reveals
 a flat recline of ripple
not now! whispers a citrus moon
 stars blinking ever babble
at night we condemn
 candy-colored mirth lush with froth
when questions of risk
 ricochet from sweat to tears
why feel an edge falling solo
 into the reek of ship wreck
red
I'm not a cadaver yet! she exclaims
 mildewed to spew
I don't want to leave, I am not done
 pine tar resin stain
waiting for the muck to arrive
 it's a tan-tongued Buddhist yearning
it's not just the lotus
 I tossed a silver stone to see
wherever is a dream
 maybe an ancestor stone
risen tall to lichen cover
 nothing that is simple.



the week my friend's student dies, i talk to my student about stickers

Katie Manning

After my first in-person class during a pandemic, the college student who couldn't keep his mask up—first wearing it under his nose, then under his mouth, covering his chin like a child with a fake beard, or occasionally pulling the mask above his nose just to fall back down like all of my saggy-jeans friends used to do when I was in high school—that guy pushed a sticker onto another student's laptop on his way out of the classroom. I think he'd call her a friend. He may or may not know that she hates stickers, but I think he knows. I think that's why he did it. But during the same week that one friend lost her 33-year-old brother and another friend lost his 20-year-old student to the virus, I tell my college student that he's an adult. My first grader went through his first class with a masked face and without putting stickers on anyone else's stuff. I shouldn't have to remind an adult that the mask doesn't go on his chin when so many people are still dying, and I shouldn't have to tell a college student not to put stickers on another student's computer. I take a deep breath inside my mask, scrape my fingernail against the laptop's smooth silver, and slowly lift the sticky square away. And my student—the one who hates stickers—exhales.



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after my car slipped on ice when i was 16

Katie Manning

We got out, climbed over the guardrail, and stood a few feet back from the freeway, stranded between child and adult, home and away. *I think I'll get my jacket*, I said, but then I just stood there, shivered, watched the snow fall—and a large white truck slammed into the back of my friend's car, right where I would have stood had I returned. The car became an accordion, but I can't remember the sound. I picked green-tinted glass from my bag and jacket for weeks. I still keep the largest piece of glass in a box of treasured things, as if I'm hiding a child's lost tooth, as if I'm still pretending I'm real.



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andersonville evening in july

Patrick T. Reardon

World by window walk.
Worry the loose tooth.

Who are we?

Limp-hop, foot-twist, hand held.
Bus voice curbing
outside Clark restaurant window
as summer color frocks, nude navels,
thigh tats stroll.

Over the second-floor window wall,
near dusk sky, sun and wisps, the moment,
a still soft voice, itch of sound.

Bodies and souls, flaming foreheads.
Armor clothing hinting beneath.
Muscle tan. Leash dog at ease.
Women and children first.
Someone I know?
Bus voice again.

Step-step-rhythm stride.

Who are we?

In freeze-frame, 737 sidewalk souls, a new moment.
Bus voice.

Who are we?

White wine, step-step-rhythm.
Bus voice.
Stop and one-way and Berwyn.
The waiter's name is Xavier.
Who will I know?
A loose blend of teas.

Orange coveralls, one strap unstrapped.
Orange slash car flash street.
Clockwork bus voice.

Who are we?

Sweet Turkish.
Gorpy romantic teens,
skin to skin, innocently carnal, sidewalk awe.

Postcard from Crete.
Fred Astaire's dancing radio melody.
737 moments.
Bus voice.

Who are we?



Michael Favala Goldman

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a time in america

Patrick T. Reardon

*"Hear the trumpets, hear the pipers. One
hundred million angels singin'. Multitudes
are marchin' to the big kettledrum."
— Johnny Cash,
"When the Man Comes Around."*

Serve in Cleveland a sad hosanna.
Carry the broken alleluia.
Gamble, dance, make strange,
adorned with costly votives.

Smite the smiters.
Cross Thief River Falls.
Strike the Tallahassee anvil.

Bread is broken in Casper.

It is a time of mourning after the flood.
Will you lay with me?

Live under another name.
File a questionable report in Denver.
Corrugate iron.

Preach in Spokane numbness.
Trudge Abilene alleys.

Prance a world of trouble.
Work the unfit stone.

It is time to feast on spleeny vipers.

Look. Twitch. Big river.

Leave in Milwaukee no stone
when the man comes around.
The hiss of gas and awesome
signs
in the heavens over Little
Rock.

Bread is broken in Fort
Wayne.

It is landfill time.
Will you lay with me?

Rejoice in pain.
Run the halls of heaven.
Walk the line.

Call it an order.
Call it reconciliation.
Call it honest fashion.

Bread is broken in San Diego.

Call it a day.

Through my fault.
Wisdom.



disliked, dismissed, dispatched

Kimberly Hoff

I never knew there were so many ways to kill a mouse. Apparently, however, this is something to which others have dedicated hours of research, experimentation, and practice. Years ago, when I was on the Appalachian Trail, backpacking for four straight months, we had hundreds of wildlife sightings - black bear, rattle snakes, fox, deer, rabbits - but the creature we interacted with most was mice. They were everywhere along the trail - every state, every town, every altitude.

Hiking season is a mouse's harvest time. Backpackers drag themselves into camp at the end of another miles-long day of hiking up and down mountains, across streams, through heat, through cold, through rain. With a thud, they drop their backpacks from their shoulders to the floor at the edge of the open-faced shelter. The 30 to 45 pounds that land there may sound heavy, but that weight comprises everything the hiker needs to live on the trail until the next time they reach a town, which could be three, seven, even ten days away. Exhausted, they switch out of their sweaty hiking boots and into a pair of loose, comfortable shoes. They grab their water bottles and purifier and set off for the nearest piped stream, dripping rock, or flowing brook. Their backpacks rest, abandoned.

This is the mouse's chance: food found free and easy. All the mouse has to do is nibble through a little fabric, a food wrapper or two. And there it is, survival. Tiny teeth and claws make their way through a cornucopia of ramen, oatmeal, granola, and - if the backpacker hasn't stridden past a public trash receptacle in a while - a resealable plastic bag filled with a week's worth of food scraps, wrappers, and crumbs.

The same is true at night. The mice, who have learned that two-legged creatures carry food, come out while the backpackers sleep. In their hungry haste to gnaw into a food sack left unhung, the mice scramble over synthetic cocoons of hikers snoring on the wooden floor. Occasionally, a mouse might poop in a baggie of raisins, sample a hiker's last sleeve of crackers, or dessert on that one last peanut butter cup tucked into the bottom of its open orange and brown wrapper. But anything the mouse touches becomes inedible - no one wants to eat something a mouse has run across, chewed through, or shat upon.

And that's where the killing comes in.

In the darkness, you might hear the tiny slip of claws on polyester, followed by a harshly whispered "Fuck!", and the bang of a hiking boot as it slams down on the escaping mouse. Then the scrape of a stick over Gore-Tex as the tiny carcass is peeled off and flung into the night. And finally, the soft rustle and thump as the lifeless mouse lands on the forest floor. Some say this is justifiable homicide. Is it?

There are pre-meditated mouse-killings on the trail too that have nothing to do with a mouse being an "intruder" (and I do use this term loosely). One thru hiker left a count of the number of mice he killed. He baited with crackers and peanut butter and waited in areas near trail shelters, picking off the mice as they sniffed their way to his established territory. I don't know how many hours he traded along the trail for this "lying-in-wait", but I do know he claimed

victory for every mouse that died beneath his boot or at the metal-tipped end of his trekking pole by announcing and numbering every kill in trail journals from Georgia northward. Beneath his scrawled entries, other hikers signed their thanks for the work of this miniature-game hunter.

One thru hiker used his quiet hiking time to invent new contraptions that would “bring death upon those annoying mice”. In journal after journal, he drew pictures of mouse-sized guillotines, wrote instructions on how to tempt a mouse to the edge of a cup of water, and blueprinted mousetraps made from “natural materials found along the trail”.

Another thru hiker whittled a notch in his walking stick every time he crushed a mouse. When I met up with him in the middle of Virginia, his stick was rough with tiny claw-sized gouges.

Mice do what they need to do. They access food where they've learned it's easiest – in our abandoned backpacks, unhung food bags, lingering campsite crumbs. They don't set out to disgust us or to hurt us. No, mice find food to survive.

And then they die for that survival.

And die.

And die.

And die.

“Who cares?” some ask, “they're only mice.”

Only mice.

Who cares, indeed?





dream to be a butterfly
 Claudia Tong

señora añoranza

Jose Oseguera

—for Soledad Ramírez Marrón

Lard, flour, water, and air are all you need
to build a better life. Stretch it out and allow it
to spread its wings into a beautiful *arcoíris*, a promise of more,
an ark where there will always be enough room.
The tortilla's soft ivory flesh shimmies
and shivers between the slivers of the hands.
Over fire, its goosebumps give rise to freckles
and moles that sprout as randomly as Rorschach blots.

The burnt-brown dots stare long and dark
as the eyes of Mamá Chole, those eyes
that slowly dimmed to a gentle gray—
more cerulean than cyan. I misplaced the recipe
she used to hide in her wrinkled knuckles,
later carried in my mother Cholita's fingernails—
long, lacquered, and layered in Egyptian blue.

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I search for it in the ocean of my oldest recollections
and dig deep into silty beds of Tijuana dirt.
Time sieves through the gaps in my grasp
as mouthfuls down a sand clock's throat
until its contoured body is satiated and flipped
onto its other side like a tortilla rising,
soaring high beyond the hands that made it,
and of those who are always hungry and need to remember.

Mamá Chole only cared about being enough for her own—
child or grandchild, visitors from *el sur* or travelers crossing to *el otro lado*—
and every day she made tortillas—
an everlasting lembas— we were all hers.
These unleavened flatbreads were feathers
on Noah's dove which found new land, its beak
heavy with the weight of peace amidst a deluge.



Luciano's dream

Jose Oseguera

A wave of anger washed over my bones as the nurse blamed COVID for having to kick me out of the hospital. My unwavering right— a father's enthusiasm to see the ultrasonic echoes of his unborn child— held a damning response tight between its fingers as my son was perched on my left.

I stormed out of the lobby with operatic bravado as the sliding doors parted for me as the Red Sea for Moses and Sunset's naked sidewalks crashed sunlight into my eyes as water columns on Pharaoh's army.

My son and I headed east where a homeless man was pushing a blue sanitation bin in the center divider. The dark gray clothing on his back wasn't the color of his T-shirt, but that of his sweat. He looked over at us— unmoved by the rush of cars on either side— as if my noticing him had rerouted the sweat cascading between his trapezii. "Que onda?" he yelled and waved. I nodded and raised my hand to catch his swell of emotion which rippled through traffic with the sweltering heat.

We came across a French bistro where a French woman served me a French beer: limit one refill. I was hungry, but the Farro salad behind the cool glass didn't look very fresh. I allowed my son to play with the pint's condensation beads as I watched a video my wife had texted me: a close-up of soundwaves, our fetus's heartbeats rolling in and out of focus. When I showed my son the undulating images of his sibling's body, he looked away as if the moon had receded from an eclipse exposing the sun's searing flares. A firetruck roared red in the distance, and my son plugged his ears as it weaved by us, a beast plunging through an ocean of cars and pedestrians.

The reverberating wail flooded my mind with Luciano Pavarotti's voice, and his dream of being able to place his ears in the last seat of a hall just to hear himself sing, to use his ringing vibrato to drown a well of doubt.

I swirled the last swig of beer in my glass and, as it slid swimmingly down my throat, I waived my second serving of the drink and the foam, and motioned my son to wave as the engine floated away in the distance; we waved and waved at it because isn't that all we are, just waves?



the possum

Daniel McGinn

It was already there when I got out of my car. I could see it in the road, turning from left to right, rubbing its back against the blacktop, and waving its arms in the air like my dog does in her dog bed, when she's happy or she's just been fed.

It seemed odd for such a stoic creature to be celebrating in a public fashion. I stood at the car door for a while. I could feel at least one neighbor looking out the window, watching me watch the possum. I didn't care. I've never cared what my neighbors think of me.

I began to realize that while its front legs were celebrating, its back legs weren't moving at all. They flopped back and forth aimlessly as the body turned. What I was witnessing wasn't possum play after all. It was pain. I'm not one to complicate my life with the pain of others.

I've learned not to trust a possum. I tried to pick up a dead one once, with my shovel. They appear to be passive and dead in one moment, and alive and defensive in the next--hissing and showing their fangs, just like some of our neighbors.

I decided that whatever it was that was going on in the street, it wasn't something I could change.

I locked the car, opened the trunk, took out my bag of groceries and was heading for the back gate when a truck appeared, turning on to our residential street.

The possum stopped moving. The truck drove slowly and carefully around the possum. I went into my house. When I placed the groceries on the kitchen table, which is by a large window that faces the street, I saw a crow take the possum's tail in its beak and try to drag it to the curb.

A murder of crows appeared on the lawn behind them. The possum did not respond to any of this. I assume the crows were planning to eat the possum, which looked like it had died, but when it comes to possums, one can never be sure. I don't trust them.

I asked myself,
What would David Attenborough do in this situation?
I closed the curtain and I didn't interfere with nature.

The next morning, I was cleaning floors and cooking for an afternoon gathering with our adult children. Lori, who has more words to spare than I could ever collect, was telling me about television friends, actual acquaintances and total strangers that she's been talking to.

It's hard for me to keep her stories straight when I'm only half-listening. I think in images, more often than words, and the image of the crow trying to drag a possum to the side of the road started following me around the house like a ghost.

It was a reminder that, like my friends who have recently made a passage, I'll be going the way of the possum soon enough. The memory of the suffering animal and the hungry crows kept floating across the screen of my mind. I watched with a detached interest and worried about my lack of empathy.

I interrupted Lori's monologue and told her that I wasn't being a good listener because I'd been thinking about a possum that died in the street yesterday and she said,

Our Possum? How big was it?

Not very big, I answered, It was thin, like a ferret.

Oh no, it's the baby, she replied as she began to tear up.

I suppose I don't feel empathy because I don't have a relationship with the possums that frequent our bushes. I keep my distance, but Lori knows everyone in this neighborhood.



a pocket full of rye

Daniel McGinn

Once upon a time there was a squirrel
that used to sit in the old woman's bird bath
that she filled each morning with seeds.

There weren't many birds that came to her yard,
mostly sparrows and finches
which didn't eat sunflower seeds.

The squirrel's favorite thing to eat were seeds
that were shaped like little bird tongues tucked
into dark shells that were the color of night.

Soon the squirrel began coming around every day,
following the old woman around the yard at first
but eventually following her into her home

which always smelled of cinnamon and nutmeg.
The old woman loved to bake cobbler.
The squirrel loved cobbler too.

The squirrel was always underfoot whenever she
was baking or eating or trying
to mind her own business. This became an irritation

to the old woman who wore an apron
even when she went to bed. She looked like someone
who had lived in a fairy tale. It made her happy

at first to have company, after living so many years
in isolation, but soon enough she grew weary
of the attention from the little rodent.

What else could she do but bake the squirrel into a pie?
Just like she'd done to every crow and blackbird
that had every visited the birdseed bath in her backyard.



ritual magic

Scott Ferry

every morning i hold my antidepressant
pill in my lips while i fish out my water

it is a tiny machine which sings to the fish
and allows them to swim peacefully in my water

every morning i swim as a tiny machine
into the air with whales and squids as shiny as jails

as the anger or fear rises in my tide i remember the pill
spinning its bright wings through the water

mackerel and seastars swish sweet
serotonin prayers through my machine

dark blood of the sky can't reach the me
inside me slowly sparkling its gills

the machine has what it needs to breathe
among fires and terrible flying gods

water takes the pill in and it makes safe
the boiling sky the fish the beaked birds

body now a blind tide—
song a sweep of salt



on the duwamish river

Scott Ferry

waterbirdvibrato trainbrakescreech
delayedjethowl craneraisingfreight
motorcycleshift semigrowlinglow
birdclicksagain riverwavesconfessing
apologiestomyself godnotnanswering
kneeachcreptius heavyfeetondust
skythickwithsky skythinwithwind



lurk (an abecedarian)

Alexis Rhone Fancher

After the move in,
Before
Chaos ensued,
Delight consumed us.
Each day, your cock
Filled me with
Greedy pleasure.
Half-drunk, delirious.
I was happy. You, ignorant of what was to come,
Just beamed.
Kinky, blithely
Lust-filled days, awash in our sweaty juice.
Mostly, we danced.
Naughty in bed, and
Out. We fucked in every room.
Pleased, eyes locked, or from behind.
Quenched. Too late, we
Realized the danger. Too late, we
Sussed the long-term devastation.
Truth?
Under everything, the rats lurked,
Voyeurs, scratching inside the walls.
Waiting to destroy our nude paradise,
X-out all we thought we'd achieved.
You, thinking this place was heaven; me, on a
Zip line to hell.



rape reality

Alexis Rhone Fancher

(for aficionados of 50 shades)

not the feather bed.
handcuffs
edged in lace.
back alley.
punch in the face.
not the slow tease
soft caress.
perfect teeth.
fragrant breath.
swoop and grab
street slab gritty
where the dogs piss.
throws her down.
bludgeons.
not a coax. no
sweet surrender.

repeat offender.



dealing with big willie

Frank Zahn

Clinton Rinehart attended his father's funeral in Kansas City under guard. On the way back to the penitentiary in Jefferson City, Missouri, he searched his mind for a way to protect Bennie Garcia from Bull Heinrick and the other cons who worked in the butcher shop. Rumor had it they were going to come after Bennie again in the laundry room. Bull Heinrick hated Mexicans, and he had not stopped talking about how much he liked fucking Bennie in his tight little ass and listening to him squeal like a pig.

Clinton wanted to arrange something that would protect Bennie and at the same time avoid confrontation. He knew he could take Bull Heinrick or any of the other butcher shop cons in a fight, but a fight or any other kind of altercation might put a black mark on his record and jeopardize his chances of parole.

During morning exercise in the yard the following day, Clinton approached Big Willie Tanner, an inmate who controlled most of what went on in the facility and everyone feared, including the guards. Big Willie sat on a bench in a corner of the yard, smoking a cigar. Bull Heinrick, his enforcer, stood close by, his arms folded over his chest.

"Whadda you want, Rinehart?" Bull asked, glaring at Clinton.

"I want to talk to the man. Okay with you, Big Willie?"

Big Willie flicked the ash from his cigar. "I'm a lifer, so I ain't goin' nowhere."

Clinton asked point-blank what it would take to ensure Bennie's safety.

Bull snickered. "Why the fuck do you care? You plannin' on making the little spic your bitch?"

"Not everyone is a pervert like you, Heinrick," Clinton said. "Besides, I'm not talking to you."

Bull clenched his fists and moved toward Clinton. Clinton responded in kind.

Big Willie jumped to his feet and stood between them. "Both of you back off," he said. "Now!"

Bull backed away, and Clinton relaxed.

Big Willie returned to his seat on the bench. "I got a grandkid named Billy—Billy Tanner," he said without looking at Clinton. "His old man, my son, got himself killed in an armed robbery, and his old lady ran off. Billy's nine years old or close to it and been livin' with my sister down in the West Bottoms of Kansas City. She's a dooper—fuckin' every lowlife with a ten spot to feed her habit. If the kid stays with her much longer, he's gonna be no good for life. Maybe you got people on the outside what can help him."

"Maybe," Clinton said. "Maybe I do."

"Well, if you do, we can deal," Big Willie said, then told Clinton his sister's name and where she lived.

"Thanks, Big Willie," Clinton said. "I'll get back to you."

"Soon as I get word my grandkid's in a good place, that little spic of yours is safe."

Clinton turned and walked away. He hurried inside, slipped a five-dollar bill to a guard, and told the guard he wanted to make a quick phone call. The guard took Clinton into a room with a phone and waited while he placed his call.

"Hi, Momma," Clinton said when Momma answered the phone. "It's Clinton. I want to make sure you're coming to see me during visiting hours this Saturday."

"Of course, I'm comin'."

"Which one of my wayward brothers is driving you this time?"

"Well, Mark Allen is out of the question. He went back to California a couple of days after Papa's funeral. And Eddie can't get away. So, that leaves Harry. He's driving me. We'll get there at a little before two in the afternoon."

~~*

Momma's mouth dropped open when Clinton told her and Harry that Bull Heinrick and the other cons in the butcher shop had taken turns raping Bennie Garcia in the laundry room.

"Oh, my good Lord in heaven above!" Momma said. "That's the most vile and wicked thing I've ever heard. I sure hope there's no chance of somethin' like that happenin' to you, Clinton."

"Don't worry, Momma," Clinton said. "That's the advantage of coming in here with a reputation for knowing how to stick up for myself. Nobody messes with me."

Clinton told Momma and Harry about the deal he was trying to make with Big Willie.

Harry suggested he and Momma call Child Welfare and have the boy taken away from Big Willie's sister.

Clinton frowned. "That's not what Big Willie has in mind."

"Then what does he want?" Harry asked.

"Momma, could you take care of the kid for a while?" Clinton asked. "I'll take him to live with me as soon as I get out of here on parole and make enough money to support him."

"No way!" Harry said. "Momma is too old to take that on."

"Now you wait just a minute, Harry Wayne Rinehart!" Momma said. "I'm not so old and infirmed that I can't decide things for myself. And as a matter of fact, I might like havin' a boy around the house again."

She looked at Clinton and added, "But before I decide, I want to see the boy and talk to him."

Clinton suggested Harry offer Big Willie's sister money for the boy. "She's on drugs, Harry, and my guess is she'd let you and Momma have anything she's got to get money for another fix. I just hope she hasn't started tricking the kid out yet to guys who like young boys."

Momma gasped. "Oh, my good Lord in heaven above!" she said. "That's even more vile and wicked than what you told us those awful men did to that poor young man in the laundry room."

Two days later, Harry called Clinton and told him that he had given Big Willie's sister a hundred dollars for Billy.

"What's he like?" Clinton asked.

"He's skinny with curly, dark brown hair, and perky eyes," Harry said. "He was a bit leery of Momma and me at first, but after Momma talked with him for a while, he got over it. Momma took to him immediately, and when she took his hand and told him he was coming to live with her, he grinned from ear to ear. We had no problem with Big Willie's sister. She took the hundred bucks I offered her and told us she was glad to get rid of the kid. She said she was moving to St. Louis with her new boyfriend. My guess is the new boyfriend is also her new pimp."

"Did you tell Momma's and my attorney about taking the boy?" Clinton asked.

"Yeah, Momma and I both did."

"What'd he say?"

"He didn't like it a bit," Harry said. "He told us it wasn't legal, but from the moment Momma saw Billy, there was no arguing with her. I've never seen her so determined or so happy. The mother in her clicked into gear again, and she was rarin' to go. And Billy, well, he's so damn happy to have all that Momma can give him that he's not about to give her any trouble. She fixed up Mark Allen's old room for him and bought him all kinds of clothes. And she fixes all kinds of food for him. His favorites are fried chicken, cheeseburgers with French fries, and strawberry shortcake with vanilla ice cream. She says she's going to put some meat on his bones. The kid's in heaven."

"How about school at Hartman? Does he like it?"

"He's just okay with school, but he likes the girls. He likes them a lot, and they're crazy about him from what Momma says."

Clinton chuckled. "Sounds like Eddie."

Harry laughed. "Yeah, it does, and like Eddie, it might get him into trouble one of these days."

“How are you doing?” Harry asked.

“I’m okay. And what you’ve told me about Billy makes my day,” Clinton said. “It sounds like living with Momma is working out just fine.”

“It sure is. It’s a shame, though, that he has to grow up in our old neighborhood. But then, it’s better than growing up in the West Bottoms. Besides, he’s at my house, playing with my son Jason as much as he is at Momma’s house—at least on weekends. So he’s exposed to the advantages of living in a better area of the City. And if he needs a man around to help him with guy things, I’m around just like Papa was for us.”

Two days after Clinton and Harry talked, Big Willie put the word out that anyone who harmed Bennie Garcia in any way would answer to him. During afternoon exercise in the yard, he shook hands with Clinton.

“I got word from people I know in Kansas City that my grandson is in good hands,” he said. “You thank your Momma for me. She sounds like a mighty fine woman. You’re too young and dumb to appreciate it, Rinehart, but you and your people have just made yourselves a friend for life.”

*



the contract

Imogen Arate

When you are a vampire, you travel between Transylvania and Paris. That's just what you do.

The contrast between the eerie calm of your home turf, the zany comedy of staff squirreling away the odd stranded tourist into the many hidden corridors of your family's imposing fortress, which too many reviewers want to downgrade to castle status, and the luscious night life of the City of Lights, backlit by ubiquitous Haussmann-era Second-Empire architecture, netted great ratings, with which no one wanted to meddle.

You suppress your urge to venture into more ancient lands, though you've heard whispers of covenants boasting worry-free feeding frenzies in war-torn or overpopulated territories further east and south. But your Netflix contract has a strict moral clause and stipulates on-camera mystery that veers more into the licentious than gore. (That's reserved for action or sci-fi, since the subscribers are more interested in the titillation that can simulate cardio while sitting comfortably than being confronted by devastating reality, from which their current station in life still affords a reassuring distance.)

On camera, you're a strict no-kill romancer. A little flash of teeth and a few love bites have translated to never-ending fan mails that require a dedicated PR rep and a line of fetish wear whose profit has restored your home to its former glory. In exchange for keeping you in the style you've been accustomed to since birth—both births—you bite back your taste for the exotic and swallow the bitter compromise between the ongoing need for a large fleet of staff and your wandering soul, which is, as you often remind yourself in more depressive states, how you ended up paler than and outlasting your entire clan.

Yet, tonight offers one of those rare gifts as you let the letter you just read slip from your hands to free fly through the balding branches of the nearby forest. The execs have green-lit your latest pitch, and they'll be moving you to America!

As you soar toward the inviting light of the moon, you glimpse your estate, which you know you'll miss, although the anticipation of new adventure quickly dissipates that forlorn thought. You let your mind lick the pungent taste of tent-dwellers on Skid Row you had the fortune to sample, after your pitch meetings in L.A., and wonder if Philadelphia would afford you a similar carefree feeding ground, after COVID had supposedly cleared out the streets.

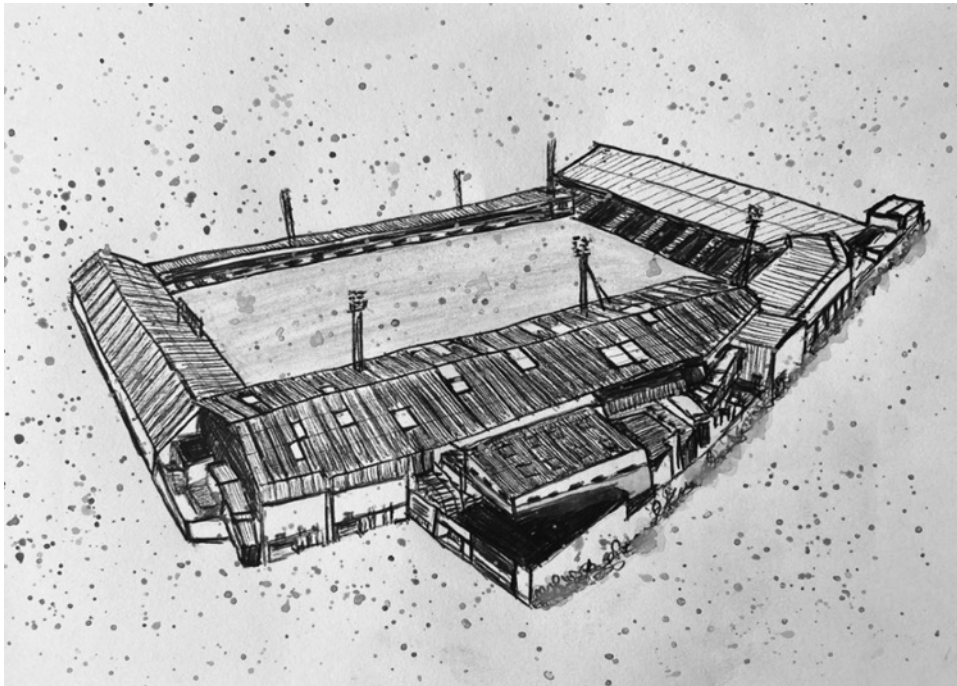
But you're a news junkie and you know that the moratorium on evictions have gone the way of the dodo, and inflation has spared no one, which reminds you that some of your ungrateful new hires have been moaning about a raise. When your family ruled the region, the mere possibility of living near their fortress walls conferred higher social status and was traded in the blackmarket like currency.

You fondly remember the tender flesh of a particular virginal young daughter a tenant farmer traded for more fertile land. This sent you on a gloomy spiral as it reminded you of the fact that you'd now be labelled a pedophile for partaking in pleasure-making with similar-age fan girls and boys lusting after you on your social-media feeds, whose new-fangled expressions have sent

you into the sprawling underworld of the Urban Dictionary. How you've foregone the thrill of the hunt in exchange for eons of screen time simply to keep up with the exponential growth of derivatives in contemporary lingo!

You comfort yourself with the thought of the latest wars and climate-related disasters that will keep churning the refugee supply chain with fresh meat. *Why not to the Land of the Free?* Doesn't everyone deserve a fresh start, just like you?

You make a mental note of googling news about the local homeless population after returning home from your current flight and tag on a further note about refugees traveling up through Latin America. *Don't forget the daily busloads being sent to New York.* Given the shooting schedule of the previous three seasons, you're sure to have enough downtime to visit those lands. Hunger turns your attention from those highly anticipated research projects, and you decide to make the most of the short duration before your departure for the new world.



Contributors' Notes

Imogen Arate is an award-winning Asian-American poet and writer and the Executive Director of Poets and Muses (<https://poetsandmuses.com>), which hosts a poetry podcast that won second place at National Federation of Press Women's 2020 Communications Contest, where Imogen had served as a national-level poetry judge in 2021 and 2022. You can follow her @PoetsandMuses and @ImogenArate on Twitter and Instagram.

Nadia Arioli is the cofounder and editor in chief of Thimble Literary Magazine. A three-time nominee for Best of the Net, Arioli's poetry can be found in Cider Press Review, Rust + Moth, McNeese Review, Penn Review, Mom Egg, and elsewhere. Essays have been nominated for Best of the Net and the Pushcart Prize and can be found in Hunger Mountain, Heavy Feather Review, SOFTBLOW, and elsewhere. Artwork has appeared in Permafrost, Kissing Dynamite, Pithead Chapel, and Poetry Northwest. Arioli's forthcoming collections are with Dancing Girl Press and Fernwood Press.

Laura Wolf Benziker is a parent and small business owner making a messy go of it in Portland Maine. Her work has appeared in Lit 202, Clackamas Literary Review, and others. She was longlisted for the Desperate Literature Short Fiction Prize.

Oleander Blume is an openly transgender Author and Illustrator with a passion for all forms of drawn or animated visual media. A seemingly unconventional hobby for your average commercial truck driver, he enjoys spending his free time writing and creating artwork for his debut young adult series, *Caring for Your Clown*, among one of the many creative pursuits he has. Oleander hopes that with his writing and art, he can bring positive and nuanced representation for queer individuals, and help non-queer demographics reach an understanding through empathy. We are all human, after all.

Eliot Cardinaux is a writer, translator, pianist, composer, and improviser. The author of one poetry collection, *On the Long Blue Night* (Dos Madres Press, 2023), he holds an undergraduate degree in music from New England Conservatory, and MFA in poetry from UMass Amherst. His poems have appeared in Jacket2, Café Review, Fortnightly Review, Spectra Poets., Talisman, Caliban Online, Bloodroot, The Arts Fuse, Spoon River Poetry Review, and other journals. His translations have appeared in Solstice and Tupelo Quarterly. He is also the founder of The Bodily Press, an independent chapbook press and record label.

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* is available from Human Error Publishing. He plays guitar in the band Camel City Drivers.

Linda Chown has published a lot, poetry and prose, critical theorizing and reviews. She has travelled a lot and loved a lot. Now, in days of health issues, she re-finds the wonder of music, of discovery, of people, of love.

Since 2012, **Carla Manene Cooke** (she/her) has facilitated writing groups in and from her home in Northampton, Massachusetts. Her poetry has appeared in the literary journals Silkworm, Persimmon Tree, Meat for Tea, Starry Starry Kite, Naugatuck River Review, and Wordpeace—and in Forbes Library virtual exhibits (“In This Together” and “Home”). A member of the Straw Dog Writers Guild, she is a freelance copy editor, wordsmith, and 2022 Pushcart nominee.

Carolyn A. Cushing is a lyric poet inspired by nature and focused on the places where life and death meet. She seeks out ways to collaborate with fellow writers and artists as well as share poetry in dynamic formats such as the Poetry Oracle and Chapbook in the Street. A recipient of grants from the Easthampton Cultural Council and Massachusetts Cultural Council, Carolyn was also a finalist for the Philbrick Poetry Award of the Providence Athenaeum (2012) and the Tarantula Poetry Contest of Pilgrimage Journal (2018). She is the 2023-2025 Poet Laureate of Easthampton, Massachusetts. Find her online at www.soulpathsanctuary.com/poetry

RC deWinter's poetry is widely anthologized, notably in *New York City Haiku* (NYTimes, 2/2017 Connecticut Shakespeare Festival Anthology (River Bend Bookshop Press, 12/2021), in print: *2River*, (Event Magazine), *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 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.

Ernest Brute is .5 of spoken word/sound duo, Ernest Brute + Object Echo. Find them on facebook, youtube, and/or bandcamp.

Alexis Rhone Fancher is published in *Best American Poetry*, *Rattle*, *Verse Daily*, *The American Journal of Poetry*, *Diode*, *Plume*, *Tinderbox*, and elsewhere. She's authored nine poetry collections, most recently, *DUETS w/Cynthia Atkins*, (Small Harbor Press), *Junkie Wife* (Moon Tide Press), *The Dead Kid Poems* (KYSO Flash Press), *Stiletto Killer* (Edizione Italia) and *EROTIC: New & Selected* (NYQ Books). BRAZEN, her next full-length collection drops in February 2023, again from New York Quarterly. Her photographs are featured worldwide. A multiple Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net nominee, Alexis is poetry editor of *Cultural Daily*. www.alexishonefancher.com

Scott Ferry helps our Veterans heal as a RN in the Seattle area. Upcoming in early 2024, his collaboration with the California poet Daniel McGinn called *Fill Me With Birds* will be published by Meat For Tea Press.

Sarah Das Gupta is an English teacher who has taught in UK, India and Tanzania. She lived in Kolkata for some years. Her interests include equestrian sports, the countryside, Medieval History and Ghosts. She has had work published in journals and magazines online and in print, in 12 countries, including US, UK, Canada, Australia, India, Germany, Croatia and Romania.

Gary Grossman, Professor Emeritus of Ecology, University of Georgia, has poems in 41 literary reviews. Short fiction in *MacQueen's Quinterly* and creative non-fiction in *Tamarind Literary Magazine* His short fiction "Mindfulness" was nominated by *MacQueen's* for inclusion in *The Best Small Fictions 2023*. For 10 years Gary wrote "Ask Dr. Trout" for *American Angler Magazine*. Gary's poetry book *Lyrical Years* is available from Kelsay Press, and his second, *What I Meant to Say Was...* will be released by Impspired Press (Dec. 2023). His graphic memoir *My Life in Fish—One Scientist's Journey...* will be reissued by Impspired in 2024.

John Guzowski's poems about his parents' experiences as slave laborers in Nazi Germany appear in his award-winning memoir *Echoes of Tattered Tongues*. His most recent books of poems are *Mad Monk Ikkyu*, *True Confessions*, and *Small Talk: Writing about God and Writing and Me* (available at snakenationpress.org). He is also the author of the *Hank and Marvin Mysteries* and a columnist for the *Dziennik Zwiazkowy*, the oldest Polish newspaper in America.

Kimberly Hoff is an essayist and poet who writes through the lenses of nature and human experience. She forges connections to the natural world through both her writing and her work as an environmental educator. Kim believes that the more we know about each other, ourselves, and the world around us, the more likely we'll be, not merely to accept, but to revere the Earth and all who dwell within and upon it. Kim's essays have been published in *Grist Journal* online; *The Journal of Wild Culture*; *Panorama: The Journal of Travel, Place, and Nature*; and *Northern Woodlands Magazine*.

Richard Wayne Horton has 2 Pushcart nominations and is the 2019-21 MA Beat Poet Laureate. His work has appeared in *Southern Pacific Review*, *Scryptic*, *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).

Paul Ilechko is a British American poet and occasional songwriter who lives with his partner in Lambertville, NJ. His work has appeared in many journals, including *The Bennington Review*, *The Night Heron Barks*, *deLuge*, *Stirring*, and *The Inflectionist Review*. He has also published several chapbooks.

Philip Kobylarz is an itinerant teacher of the language arts and writer of fiction, poetry, book reviews, and essays. He has worked as a journalist, a film critic, a veterinarian's assistant, a deliverer of furniture, and an ascetic. He has volunteered at the Union City Historical Museum. His work appears in such publications as Paris Review, Poetry, The Best American Poetry series, Massachusetts Review, and Lalitamba. He also published a collection of poetry entitled *rues* and a collection of short stories entitled *Now Leaving Nowheresville*. He spends his time in the East Bay, Huntington Beach, and in the monastery in which he lives with his cat KatdawgRocket 99, his dog Chibi, and any woman who is able to temporarily love him.

Aakriti Kuntal is a poet and visual artist from India whose work has been featured in various literary magazines and anthologies. She was a finalist for the RL Poetry Award 2018, won the Reuel International Prize 2017, and was nominated for the Best of the Net.

Christian Livermore's memoir in essays, *We Are Not Okay*, was published by Indie Blu(e) on October 1, 2022. The Los Angeles Review of Books called it 'ineffably important...relentless and courageous and entertaining and upsetting.' Her debut novel, *The Very Special Dead*, was published by Meat for Tea Press in October 2023, and she is also the author of a short story collection, *Girl, Lost and Found* (Alien Buddha Press, 2021). Her stories and essays have appeared in anthologies and literary journals including Longreads, Santa Fe Writers Project, Salt Hill Journal, The Texas Review, Meat for Tea.

Jeremy Macomber-Dubs is the guitarist, vocalist, and co-songwriter in Bunnies. Born and raised in Central Pennsylvania, he and his best friend/band-mate moved to Western Massachusetts in 2004 to play seven shows opening for the reunited Pixies. Bunnies decided to make a permanent home there where they've been playing shows and recording albums ever since. In 2011 and 2012, Dubs released two solo albums on Frank Black's label The Bureau Records, and in 2013 he sang on 5 new Pixies songs. Jeremy has also played drums for artists such as Severe Severe, Rabbit Rabbit, Problem With Dragons, and Black Francis.

If **Brian T Marchese** is known for anything, it would be for his having gigged and/or recorded as the drummer for dozens of bands and solo artists, mostly in Western Massachusetts, since the mid-nineties. But he also writes and records as Sitting Next to Brian, podcasts as Where's That Sound Coming From and manages the periodicals at Forbes Library. His heart beats for a child named Audrey, a woman named Jessica and a cat named Huey.

Anna Maeve, a jill of all trades hailing from the enchanting landscapes of New Zealand, has emerged as a vibrant voice in the world of art. In her thirties, Anna is on a perpetual quest to explore the intricate labyrinth of human emotions and the mysteries of the universe, much like her literary idols, Isaac Asimov, Stephen King, and Patricia Cornwell.

Katie Manning is a poet, professor of writing, and founding editor of Whale Road Review. She's the author of *Tasty Other* (Main Street Rag Poetry Book Award) and *Hereverent* (Agape Editions). Her poem "What to Expect" was featured on the Poetry Unbound podcast, and her poems have appeared in December, HAD, The Lascaux Review, New Letters, Poet Lore, SWWIM, Thimble, Verse Daily, and many other venues. Find her online at katiemanningpoet.com.

Daniel McGinn's work has appeared in The MacGuffin, Nerve Cowboy, Misfit, Spillway, and Anti-Heroine Chic along with numerous other magazines and anthologies. His most recent chapbook, *Drowning the Boy*, won the James Tate Poetry Prize for 2021 and was published by SurVision Magazine in Dublin Ireland. *Fill Me With Birds*: a free verse conversation written with Scott Ferry will be published by Meat For Tea in early 2024.

Denise McQuiston is an emerging collage artist in Western MA. Her love of collage is no greater than hunting down collage materials from old books and magazines in libraries, thrift stores, and tag sales. She finds collaging a contemplative practice similar to dream analysis. In her work time is suspended, things get torn, and edges blur as an image emerges. Collage holds the images and meanings. A dream is fleeting and its symbols and meanings can be lost. Denise is a member of the Quabbin Art Association in Western MA and a participant in Contemplative Collage.

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, Solstice, Kestrel, Salamander, Paterson Literary Review, subTerrain, Jerry Jazz Musician, Nixes Mate Review, Lily Poetry Review, Last Stanza, and LEON Literary Review, among others, as well as several anthologies. His poems "Interview" and "And You" were included in an issue of Magma (UK) focused on teaching poetry to secondary school students. He lives with his wife, the visual artist Jane Wiley, in Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts.

Kelly Moyer can often be found wandering the mountains of North Carolina, where she resides with her husband and two philosopher kittens, Simone and Jean-Paul. *Hushpuppy*, her collection of short-form poetry, has recently been released by Nun Prophet Press.

Jose Oseguera's writing has been featured (or is forthcoming) in Emrys Journal, North Dakota Quarterly, The Literarian and Sonora Review. His work has also won the Nancy Dew Taylor Award, placed 2nd in the 2020 Hal Prize Contest. He's also the author of the poetry collections *The Milk of Your Blood* (2021) and *And This House is Only a Nest* (2024).

As a Marine, **R.L. (Pete) Peterson** served at American embassies in three foreign countries. His work has appeared over seventy-five times in publications as varied as Annals of America to Dead Mule School of Southern Literature, plus seven anthologies. *After Midnight – A Short Story Collection* (Pallamary Publishing) was released in 2019; *Leave the Night to God* (Pact Press) publishes November 2022

Theresa Pisani has been a Northern California oil painter, muralist and illustrator for many years. Her mission is to make the unseen seen.

Patrick T. Reardon is the author of fourteen books, including the poetry collections *Requiem for David* (Silver Birch), *Darkness on the Face of the Deep* (Kelsay), *The Lost Tribes* (Grey Book), *Let the Baby Sleep* (In Case of Emergency) and *Salt of the Earth: Doubts and Faith* (Kelsay). His memoir in prose poems *Puddin': The Autobiography of a Baby* was published by Third World Press with an introduction by Haki Madhubuti. For 32 years, Reardon was a Chicago Tribune reporter. His history book *The Loop: The "L" Tracks That Shaped and Saved Chicago* was published by Southern Illinois University Press.

Connolly Ryan was born and raised in Lower Manhattan New York. He is currently a professor of literature at University of Massachusetts. His poetry has been published in various journals including Bateau, Weber, Silkworm, The Contemporary West, Ditch, Umbrella, Citron, Harvard Review, Satire, Gravel, Scythe, Slope, Meat For Tea, Pannax Index, Satire and Old Crow. He is a recent recipient of a five hundred dollar poetry prize offered by Weber, The Contemporary West. He is also a multiple Pushcart nominee. He lives in Florence MA.

Susan Sensemann is an artist and writer who recently moved from Chicago to Easthampton. She is professor emerita at the University of Illinois at Chicago where she taught contemporary theory and painting. She has exhibited her work nationally and in galleries in Italy, Germany, and China among others. She has curated numerous exhibitions including "Pleasure Beyond Guilt," "Skew the Grid," and "Obsessions." Two short stories have been published in the Chicago Quarterly Review. Encountering History was nominated for a PEN Award for New Writers. Her collaborative projects and installations incorporate her poetry.

Rebecca Schrader is a performance artist, composer, cellist, filmmaker, painter, and writer based in Easthampton, MA. She builds large-scale, sculptural installations to stage original performance pieces, and collaborates with interdisciplinary artists around the region, playing shows at music venues, theaters, galleries, festivals, studios, bookstores, and more. She graduated from Amherst College in 2021 with a BA in English Language and Literature. Currently, she works as the registrar at the Northampton Community Music Center and co-directs the immersive theater company Cloudgaze Productions.

Harvey Silverman is a retired old coot who writes nonfiction primarily for his own enjoyment. His nonfiction stories have appeared in Queen's Quarterly, Avalon Literary Review, Ocotillo Review, and elsewhere.

Andrew Shelffo (he/him) is a writer, teacher, and storyteller who lives in Easthampton, Massachusetts.

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).

Claudia Tong is an artist based in London, dedicated to exploring storytelling and humanity. Her practice spans across a diverse range of genres and mediums, from landscape, architecture and illustrations to mixed media, visual computing and music. She has recently exhibited in the US, Italy, New Zealand, the UK and online. Claudia graduated from Brown University in computer science, and she is also a member of ArtCan and Assemblage Collective.

Tommy Twilite (aka Thomas Clark) is a poet, songwriter and retired firefighter who lives in Florence MA. He is the Co-founder and Director of the Florence Poets Society, and the Executive Editor of Silkworm. Tommy is the host of the Twilite Poetry Pub on WXOJ-FM Valley Free Radio, and served as the Beat Poet Laureate of Massachusetts from 2021-2023. His first full length collection, *Fifty Words for Rain* was published in 2021.

James Vescovi's writing has appeared in publications such as The Hudson Review, Georgetown Review, The New York Times, Creative Nonfiction, and The Saturday Evening Post. He has published two books of nonfiction.

Dr. Thomas Reed Willemain is former academic, software entrepreneur and intelligence officer. His poetry has appeared in Sheila-Na-Gig, Two Thirds North, Closed Eye Open, Dillydoun Review Poetry and elsewhere. He holds degrees from Princeton University and Massachusetts Institute of Technology. A native of western Massachusetts, he lives with his wife and son near the Mohawk River in upstate New York.

Gerald Yelle is a member of the Florence, Massachusetts Poets Society and lives in Amherst, Massachusetts. His books include *The Holyoke Diaries*, and *Dreaming Alone and with Others*. He has chapbooks: *No Place I Would Rather Be*, *A Box of Rooms*, and *Industries Built on Words*.

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).

The author of 17 nonfiction books as well as essays in the New York Times Magazine, Ms., Next Avenue and NPR, **Marcia Yudkin** advocates for introverts through her newsletter, Introvert UpThink (<https://www.introvertupthink.com/>). She lives in Goshen, Massachusetts (population 960).

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 in his home among the evergreens in Vancouver, Washington. For details, visit his website www.frankzahn.com.

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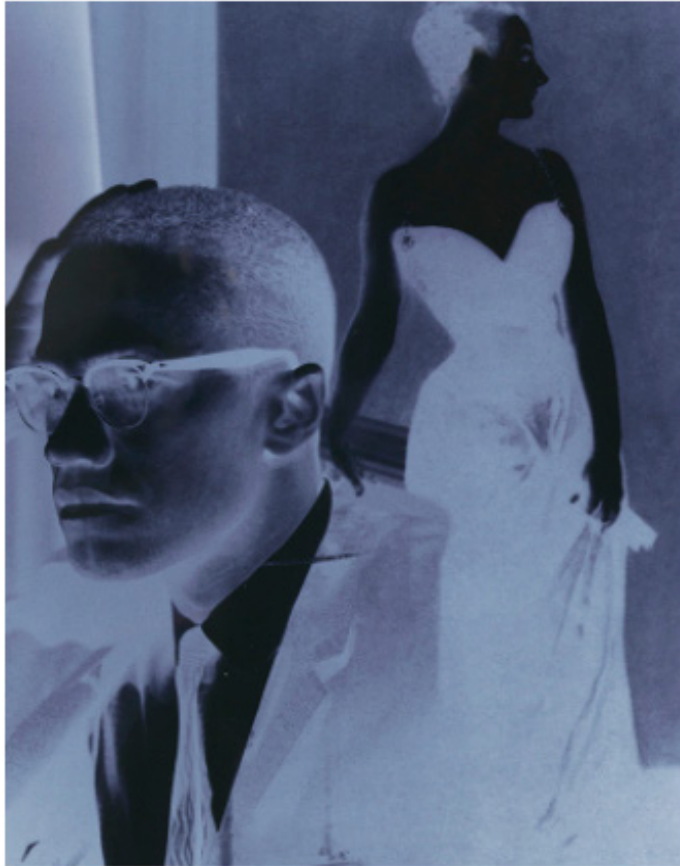
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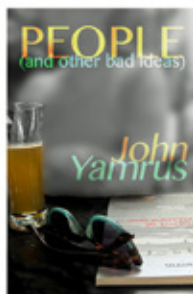
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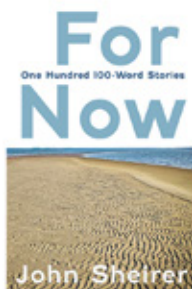
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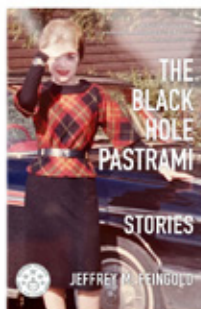
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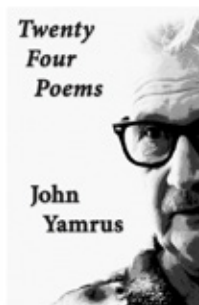
Christian Livermore
The Very Special Dead



Jeffrey Feingold
The Black Hole Pastrami



Jerome Berglund
Funny Pages



John Yamrus
Twenty Four Poems



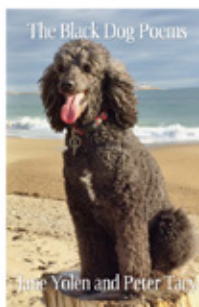
Lindsay Adkins
Fixing the Halo



Rick Paar
*God Bless America
and Breakfast Burritos to Go*



Linda Kraus
*Popcorn Icons
and Other Poems Celebrating Movies*



Jane Yolen and Peter Tacy
The Black Dog Poems



Scott Ferry, Lillian Necakov, Lauren Scharhag
Midnight Glossolalia

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