

# MEAT FOR TEA

VOL 17 ISSUE 3  
THE VALLEY REVIEW  
CASSEROLE



# Meat for Tea: The Valley Review

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# Guest Salutations

The theme of this issue, casserole, spawns a catalogue of images in my mind: Comfort. Variety. Creativity. Convenience. Surprise. Leftovers.

In a way, it's a metaphor for life. When someone serves us a casserole we're confronted with an amalgam of ingredients that may or may not be to our taste.

If you love it all, you dig in and enjoy, savoring the the range of flavors colors and textures.

But sometimes a casserole contains things we don't like, or are to which we are allergic, or for whatever reason don't want to eat.

And sometimes it's obvious this dish was put together out of necessity, because there was no other option available for this meal.

So either we dig in and enjoy or we pick around and find the bits we want.

And isn't that like life? So often we don't get to pick and choose the people and events and objects that become part of our meal, so to speak.

And isn't that akin to the creative arts and everything we create from the stuff of ourselves, our lives the world – whether it's poetry, a short story, an essay, a piece of art and on through the myriad varieties of creative self-expression with its illimitable range of themes, words, textures, colors and emotions?

Sometimes we create for the sheer love of creating. Sometimes because there's something we need to say or show. And sometimes we're just just having fun, being creative, trying new combinations of form and words, texture and color in ways we haven't until just this moment.

As Albert Einstein said, "Creativity is #intelligence having fun." And even if the piece you're working on isn't fun, it's still the wonder of something being created in the words or form or colors in which you want to say it – things that need to be said. So go ahead, enjoy this casserole and savor the variety of the human experience.

RC deWinter

# a pound of flesh

Linda Kraus

My goddaughter's breasts were truly gargantuan—  
they covered nearly all of Lake Michigan.

Were they sensuous, silky soft, easily aroused?  
Were they the delicate pink of a Rubens painting

with sun-kissed aureoles around the nipples,  
suggesting unbridled, ecstatic passion for her lovers?

When interested men slyly offered, “Howdy do,  
so very pleased to make your acquaintance,”

they were addressing only her breasts, as they  
stood there, so patiently expecting an answer.

She had ceased to exist—all that remained was a pair  
of mammary glands capable of speaking for her.

No one saw the shy, tender girl who was hiding  
behind a massive chest; no one saw the bitter tears.

The scalpel can be mightier than the pen or sword;  
it can change the perception of a woman's body.

A surgeon sculpted her chest into normalcy;  
suddenly she was reformed—a sort of epiphany:

a new woman emerged—one with an aggressive  
curiosity and a serious scholar's dedication,

one whose voluptuous body no longer defined her,  
a woman who finally was taken quite seriously.



# red centered spiders

Jennifer MacBain-Stevens

red centered spiders

crawl near me I move

to avoid them. some teeter off the rocks  
into the stream below.

the black ants, huge. lumber on.

you tell me to rest  
after a head injury

I sit

under dappled forest light

tiny white moths

lay dead  
on the ground  
how did they fall?

I watch you stare at the dirt, unsure

what action to take

*is it moveable or wet or rocky?  
You dig in it, lift it, throw it down into slabs.*

I don't know who to call to pass the time

I am a visitor in this place

invisible

birds call out over  
the tree canopy



bye

Jennifer MacBain-Stevens

the chakra flag colors faded / whipping sidewalk ghosts along the flanks of dogs / fingers just bones to be wished upon later / like a black locust cloud he missed the point of her breath / he passed her by with a disguise and a fist / he ate her organs / her whole feed / how could you not know / what is written in rain / falls on forearms / singular city maps / your throat sound / tore flesh apart / apply this ointment / the only softness /

she looks for her pieces / her peace / on long car rides, when she lights a candle, when she wakes suddenly at 3am, applies mug wort / through hallways / torso pulled apart / nothing fits together now / wings stiff / weak numb talons and cold eye sneers flat lined / until she flies away into the sky / that time is coming / no one knows



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# deep sleep

Ellis Shuman

Pete was having problems sleeping at night. Insomnia ruled as he tossed and turned, his mind rehashing the day's troubles. Endless traffic jams. Pressures in the office. The demands of his boss. The nasty looks and biting comments of his wife. The unpaid bills, the unfiled tax returns, the threats of his mother-in-law to visit.

Night after night, Pete couldn't get the sleep he needed. He rolled back and forth, thrashing out unintentionally at his wife, interrupting her dreams and recoiling from her sharp elbowed jabs in his ribs.

His wife was sympathetic to his predicament, up to a point. "See a doctor," she insisted. "He'll write you a prescription for something."

"I don't want to get addicted to sleeping pills!"

Pete was willing to try anything, except for pills. He went for late night jogs; drank a glass of red wine before bedtime. He avoided his cell phone and instead read until his eyes were blurry. He listened to meditation tracks, to whales, to waves hitting the shore. His mind numbed but nothing worked. He still couldn't sleep.

In the mornings he rolled out of bed red-eyed and struggled to his feet. Splitting headaches and aching muscles followed him to the bathroom. A cold shower did little to cleanse him of the night's struggles. One cup of coffee, and then another one. Nothing could refresh him for the demands of the new day.

"Take care of yourself!" his wife demanded, offering no suggestions what he should try next.

"Maybe we need a new mattress," he suggested.

"We can't afford it!"

"We can't afford my not sleeping at nights," Pete countered. "I can't go on like this."

The next day after work, he parked at the mall and entered a well-lit store he had seen advertised on television. The Sleep Bazaar. He walked around, eyeing the beds, the pillows, and the comforters. The mattresses lay in formation as far as he could see. Sealy, Ergovea, Magniflex, Naturepedic. Brands he was familiar with and some he had never heard of.

"Can I help you?" It was a sales clerk, the name 'Norman' pinned to his white shirt.

"Yes, I am looking for a mattress. Queen-size."

"What exactly did you have in mind? Soft or firm? Innerspring or memory foam? Latex or hybrid?"

“I don’t understand any of that.”

“Well, try lying down on this one,” Norman said, pointing to a large mattress.

“Should I take my shoes off?”

“Just rest them on this plastic.”

Pete eased himself onto the mattress and lay back. Something didn’t feel right. It wasn’t comfortable. With an effort, he sat up.

“How about this one?” Norman said, pointing to the next mattress in line.

This one was even less comfortable. Pete’s back hurt in the supine position.

“Listen, Norman. I just want something that will ensure a good night’s sleep. A deep sleep.”

“A deep sleep?”

“Yes, do you have anything that will guarantee that?”

“We have just the one.”

10

Norman led him through the labyrinth of mattresses to a curtained off area at the back of the store. He pulled back the curtain to reveal a single rectangular mattress.

“This is our trademarked Deep Sleep model,” he said. “It’s made for maximum comfort, combining innerspring coils and polyester memory foam with patented air bubble technology. We offer a 30-day money-back guarantee, but I assure you, you won’t complain about your deep sleep.”

Pete lay down, sinking into the most comfortable mattress he had ever tried. Immediately he felt the pressures lifting. His constant headaches; the traffic jams; his boss’s shouting; even his wife’s nasty looks—everything vanished at once. He felt totally at ease, relaxed and untroubled.

“I’ll take it!” Pete said, unwilling to rise from the mattress. He could stay like this forever, he thought. His eyes drooped; his mind began to shut down.

“Are you sure you don’t want to try one of our other models?”

“No, I want this one. What do you call it? Deep Sleep.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I want Deep Sleep. Nothing but deep sleep.”

“You just lie there and I’ll get my order book.” Norman pulled back the curtain and left the compartment.

Pete closed his eyes. He felt as if he had been anesthetized, drugged into unconsciousness. Deep Sleep guaranteed for his deep sleep.

Norman approached his manager’s desk at the back of The Sleep Bazaar and picked up his order pad.

“How’s it going in there?” the manager asked.

“He’s out like a log,” Norman replied. “I’m making the order now.”

“Good. What time do you think they’ll be here?”

“They usually come within an hour.”

“Ask for a quick disposal. We have to get his body out right away. You never know when we’ll get our next customer.”

Norman filled in the order and picked up his phone. Business was good, he thought, smiling to himself. There was never a shortage of customers willing to do anything, anything at all, to get a good night’s deep sleep.



# moocows: there they are

Linda Chown

Of the fertile thing that can attain no more.  
Wallace Stevens, "Credences of Summer"

Presented with the physical,  
with the body of things hot in August,  
specifically, with those moo cows,  
udders hanging fat and swollen purple,  
heavy with consonants and Christ recumbent,  
with this drone of pain like a toll  
no one could even ever keep up—  
Michael, row the boat ashore hallelujah  
here in the din, this heave and throb  
of trouble, terrible pulses pitch turgid, turbid.  
Suddenly to have become,  
like this, an extra, in my life  
without the sleeping dogs to let lie  
down down in the bleach of it. The die deads  
and the fed feed a tangle of temporary temper  
meant to turn about, terrible in this turmoil.  
I am a pain which takes the gears over whole-  
hog wild and I the child I once was  
stuck again to fetch seeing on my own,  
staring blind through the physical  
rapt in a pool of danger and darts.  
Ocarinas and concertinas in the air,  
their after-tones set to mouth me  
into my brain before I come to see  
anything to think about to say that  
there is this sudden completeness, this beauty  
beyond the eerie tumescence of those cattle.

Hallelujah amen hosannah for these voices ever  
after sounding that prayer I have always wanted  
to ask of, for more of, as in an exaltation row row the boat  
and wait here, psalms for to listen, canticle in to lullaby  
to bait a whipped heart to carouse  
and play consecutive those chords of August  
crescendo into credences of summer light  
voracious to hear everything all at once  
like the sound of a big sun in the act of landing,  
steady, in plain view, cucumber cool on a searing white  
full moon rising right there  
while Kalliope turns her song inside out into itself.



## after henry james

Linda Chown

What Maisie knew in the fold  
Of afternoon as she combed her hair and it had to be  
interesting  
what she said when she knew  
what made Miles less of a child  
and arch Isabel clothed her skirts  
with the plenty of the invisible  
in saying the turns of it  
multivariably in time with  
the bells in Saint Peter's Basilica  
obfuscating any simple outcome.  
It was all about the roads to it,  
Not the stripes it made.  
Or any specific dimensions,  
Wherein;





decline  
Jax Kusleika

# little things

Vitek Kruta

It's the little things that matter to me  
few grains of sand can stop the gears  
of most powerful machine  
and simple touch of your hand  
can speed up the beat of my heart

One word can change everything  
laugh to cry and cry to love  
and tiny grain of salt  
so painful in the healing wound  
reveals incredible flavors in each meal

One rose given is more  
than fields of roses owned  
and lonely voice in dessert  
could resonate for ages  
in millions of hearts

It's the little things I love  
each tear that melts the ice between us  
each smile that turns the night to day  
each moment allowing us to see  
the full moon in the sky



## golgotha

Vitek Kruta

(Place of the skull)

Ages went by over this place  
only the wind leaves unknown messages behind  
in the form of dust, covering  
stones with fingerprints of hands that killed



## the news

Vitek Kruta

Did you hear the news?  
Apparently someone stole the heart  
of the last bell in town.

I wonder? What about the other bells  
bringing us the sound of heaven for millennia

No one even noticed  
as they slowly disappeared  
melted down to cannons

...so, yes I heard the news  
as I was waking up to the sound of war





## ballad of the long day

Jane Yolen

When the sun sits high  
over this Scottish town,  
reminding us that summer  
is at its best, and dark  
has almost become dawn,  
we walk the old street,  
the cobbles and the smooth,  
giving no thought to winter,  
though it is a mere sunset  
away.



## a good walk spoiled

Jane Yolen

So it has been said about golf,  
but here in golf's homeland  
there are many walks along  
such courses, and curses  
may be heard in foreign tongues.  
But the walk itself, for me,  
a non-golfer, is not spoiled,  
even when the rain patters down.  
even then I left my broly at home.



## roofers

Jane Yolen

They must climb that ladder  
100 times a day, rung after rung,  
while I would be all wrung out  
after two, not to mention  
afraid to look down,  
actually preferring to fly off  
into the blue St Andrews' sky,  
an elderly angel on gossamer wings,  
though I know all too well my place,  
feet down on the solid ground.



# walking the lade braes, st andrews

Peter Tacy

That water will forever heed gravity's writ is hardly news.  
Long since, a wee burn that ran along these braes did so;  
but human intervention made it a lade, channelled past weirs and walls,  
through two mills to its North Sea destiny. Burn fed lade, and lade  
drove mills, and made a living for the monks who built it.

Human history is much like this: a tale of gravity, will and time. Wise men  
let nature take its own direction, but coax it toward serving them.  
Above the lade, on a path along the braes, I recall the burn,  
and the irony with which the past persists in every present,  
and layers with the present to compound a sense of where we are.

Later, I think of Dunbar, who must have walked along this stream  
In student years, centuries past, and the advice he gave  
during the life he had to live, to others who also came and went;  
a repeating line — it's on the window of our house: Tis best to be Blythe...  
(I sent the poem today to a friend whose life, alas, is flowing down.)

Eight tenths of Dunbar's poem recounts the grief and pain of life;  
yet every stanza ends with his challenge... to be Blythe.  
Below me, a burn-fed lade runs past, flowing to a waiting sea.  
So all that lives is sure to pass. Yet, I walk with my aged lover's hand  
clasped close in mine, in accord with William Dunbar: yes, 'tis so.



# events

Peter Tacy

Yesterday, two events took place  
for me. Donald Trump received  
three dozen indictments for crimes  
committed, though it's said he believed

he did no wrong; and two black bears,  
ursus americanus, calmly strolled  
across the yard, checked out the barn,  
and innocently left. Each story's told

like the other...and yet, only one  
pleased me in the slightest way.  
One inspired hope for a hurting world.  
The other just invites dismay.

The TV's dark now, as I sit and look  
for bears, and ignore the crook.



## nosings with Elena Cvjetkovic (the Plum Girl)

I smell, therefore I am.

I've been sitting on the terrace of my cottage on an island in the Adriatic Sea for the past three weeks, thinking about my recent personal nosings. A myriad of scents and perfumes with rainbow-colored wings flew across my mind, each one worthy of an essay.

It's late summer and scents of Nature are rolling around me, enveloping and bathing me gently, pulsating each in its rhythm and specter of vivid colors. A flash of emerald green here and there, sounding like a high-pitched elaborate composition for a cello - it's the smell of high and mighty pine trees with branches swaying with wind rolling down from the hills and carrying along the sweet scent of dry bushes of immortelle, silencing from time to time the loud and persistent orchestra of crickets late into nights. A midnight blue-colored bite of freshness touches my face, a whiff of soft saltiness you could almost taste comes along when the evening winds change direction and pick up the sea mist, the fragrant, deep breath of the high tide in afternoons. One ripe fig left on the table split open. Freshly picked and crushed laurel leaves, to be used later in a meal. The scent of pure joy. Life. Love.

I smell, therefore I am.

Not only do I smell, I see scents as colored pieces of a kaleidoscope, taking various forms depending on the complexity of a scent, they vibrate and hum to me. With various tonality and intensity, sometimes sounding like isolated different instruments or simple songs, some are like popular hits, some are like classic compositions, and sometimes, on not so many wearings, my heart aligns with them and I feel them as the sound of large drums, like in a Kodo performance. Those perfumes are the ones that seem to capture my whole being and align with my inner rhythm, the primal source of it - connecting directly with my heart.

I feel scents like vibrations of sounds and explosions of colors, therefore I am.

We take the sense of smell for granted. For most people, it remains a "lesser" sense, unknown, unpredictable, and uncontrollable, tainted with our personal experiences and impressions. Sometimes it's even scary how personal and powerful our sense of smell can be. Scents mingling with memories, ricocheting across our minds. Maybe it's even a bit frightening when we realize that our sense of smell connects deeply with us, our inner being, and leaves life-long marks on our subconscious level(s). The power of sense of smell is still dark and mysterious, and not fully explored or explained in the tiniest details of its functioning. And yet, so primal: we breathe, and therefore scents enter our noses: to breathe we must.

Or, to hope we'll continue to breathe. To smell, to exist. This May, as I lay for a week in the Intense Care Unit of a hospital due to a rare and life-threatening bacterial infection, once I regained consciousness, it was the absolute lack of any scents at all that scared me to the core of my bones. Not the deadly bacteria, doctors explained that to me in detail. No scents. Nothing, just the terrifying loneliness of nothing at all. Not even the typical hospital ones, my eyes and all the windows closed, I remained completely alone in isolation, under a non-scented

clean and crisp hospital blanket. On my third day, a nurse came along, and I asked her to open a window a bit for me. Life came through that window, the pulsating scent of wet trees across the street touching my face, crisp green leaves chirping joyfully, and deep and jazzy layers of petrichor odor oozing from all the pores of surrounding buildings.

I smell, therefore I am.

More days passed by, and more doctors confirmed that I shall survive and that all shall be well. Nothing to worry about, the antibiotic is working now, your overall condition is better, your eyesight is not damaged, neither is hearing, you should consider yourself lucky to be alive, no visitors are allowed, you're on your own now, it takes time to recover.

Rationally accepting all this, wondering why no one ever asked me if everything is just fine with my scent of smell, still unable to walk - even among that utter nonexistence of any kind of smell, I comforted myself by smelling what I could. The antibiotic dripping into my vein smelled faintly bitter, mixed with a slightly metallic smell of blood and a faintly musky-scented bandage. Ah, the food smelled divine, the fragrant composition of lunch on my plate was a feast! One nurse, just one among them all, the one on the night shift, used a peach-scented shampoo and I barely resisted openly sniffing her hair when she was leaning over me. But, most of all, I took hours to smell - my own, clean skin, untouched by scented products. There was nothing else to smell.

The inner side of my elbow smelled like soft, premium, and velvety Italian leather, the vegetable-tainted one. Perfumes came to my mind, an array of bottles swirled before my closed eyes with that specific note in them, but my skin smelled better.

I remembered that the best way to clear your nose if you're testing more than one perfume is to bury your nose in the inner side of your elbow and breathe the smell of your skin for a couple of seconds: coffee beans don't do the job, these might confuse your nose even more. Take a break, smell your skin.

The scent of the palms of my hands reminded me of a fading Galbanum dry down, with some crisp green notes still lingering, a touch of a metallic notes, and weirdly, an almost honeyed layer of soft musks and sandalwood. More perfumes came to my mind, ones using elaborate sandalwood bases, and skilfully weaving those grand natural musks molecules. It was a process that kept me strong: smelling my skin and imagining perfumes, all the perfumes I love and appreciate, all the ones that make my heart sing. I kept dreaming about them, in colors and sounds, reconstructing their voices in my head, lulling myself to sleep with an orchestra of perfumes performing vigorously solely in my mind, not on my skin. They sang to me. And I loved them even more.

I smell, therefore I am.

Perfume, but not limited to perfume. Nostrils wide open, eyes wide shut. It is the world of scents that makes me feel alive.



## on that long wind of walk

Jane Yolen

The burn chattering in its small valley  
speaks of fish and the bad heron.  
A dog running before its owner  
is cautioned with a sharp No.  
Two cyclists ride by without need  
of bell or shout. And I walking  
more swiftly than comfortable  
to keep up, to find the next bench  
where we watch the ducks and ducklings  
on the mill pond who all respond  
sluggishly to my poor attempt  
to speak their language  
without even a bit of bread  
to tempt them to try.



## that constant dance

Jane Yolen

Wind leads, leaves follow,  
The music too soft  
for any human ear.  
But we watch in fascination,  
as wind and leaves all samba,  
they waltz, they do the two-step  
they dip and bow and spin,  
spines bending to a music  
that only they can hear.



## this tomato

Charles Coe

Tonight's dinner is a single tomato,  
a massive heirloom, ruby red,  
local, perfectly ripe, sliced thick,  
sprinkled with salt.

I never bother with tomatoes  
in the off season, those billiard balls  
shipped cross country, picked green  
and gassed to turn them red.  
When the good tomatoes are done  
my tongue's attention turns elsewhere.

When I was young and waved goodbye  
to friends who'd packed their lives into  
cars and headed down the road,  
I always assumed I'd see them again someday.  
Some I never did, and never will.

I hope I'm here to greet next year's crop  
but now I take nothing for granted.  
Tonight's tomato, this tomato,  
is an exercise in the ephemeral,  
a juicy, vine-ripened reminder  
of time's blinking eye.



## butter weed

Grant Vecera

The leaves  
appear as edible as mustard,  
or the sunbursts  
which make “rocket weed”  
more logical—  
because the sun is where  
I would aim my rocket.

The hag,  
her head where her breasts should be,  
wheezed, “Don’t forget that one,”  
pointing  
at the world’s last scrap of proof  
that some plant brain  
had centuries ago known  
the need for a cluster  
of yellow explosions on a green stem.

Having just emerged from her tv and ac,  
she was too sun-shocked and asphyxiating  
to hear “it’s a lovely shoot”  
as my spade severed the root.



## the glitter girl

Grant Vecera

I love the silver stardust  
around the eyes of the fat girl  
who runs the cash register  
at my local PetSmart.

And she’s always so nice,  
not fake nice,  
but like every second  
with another human  
matters.

So when she asks,  
“Wanna donate a dollar  
to the spay/neuter project?”  
I say yes  
because some human  
should have been spayed or neutered  
before they produced the person  
who did whatever they did  
to her.

And when she processes my purchase,  
I quietly admire  
the purple slashes  
corrugating both arms  
from elbow to wrist  
like stretch marks.





contamination  
Jax Kusleika



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# leaping

Cherryl Jensen

I looked out my bedroom window to the parking lot below. Not a great view but I had my plants on the sill to brighten it – bromeliads, three different succulents, an anthurium with its pink flowers tinged with red, variegated spikes reaching from each stem. My friend called it the penis plant. I liked that better than anthurium.

This was a window in the apartment in Amherst, Massachusetts, that my daughter Aschleigh and I moved to in 2019. For the first time in several years, Aschleigh was no longer sleeping in my living room. We each had our own bedroom and bath. The newly built apartment had a washer and dryer, a large community gathering space, an exercise area with weights and machines, even a meditation room. The glass in the window was clear, the frames sparkling white. This was not a home I wished to escape from nor a window I imagined leaping from.

The largest window in my bedroom in Andrew, Iowa, looked out on the roof of the side porch. One pane was cracked, and the paint was chipped, leaving dark gauges on the frame and sill. Often, on Saturday nights, I knelt by that window, alert, waiting for my parents to return from Manderschied's tavern, drunk. Some nights, I'd hear the car doors slam, the house door open and their footsteps as they stumbled into the house and went to bed in their downstairs bedroom. Other nights, though, they would start yelling at each other in loud, drunken voices as soon as they got out of the car. I couldn't hear the words but I knew I needed to stay awake until they finished, in case I had to spring into action.

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As I listened intently, my heart pounding, my hands sweaty, I pictured my father stomping into their bedroom and getting one of his guns from the closet. I imagined hearing a deafening explosion, the thump of my mother's body as she fell to the floor, then the pounding of my father's footsteps on the stairs, on his way to kill us too.

But I had a plan. I would wake the three kids – my brother and two sisters -- and scurry them out the window and onto the porch roof. I'd follow, jump to the ground, then catch them as they leaped into my arms. We'd all run across the street to the Summers' house, where Richie and Donald lived. They were strong young men. Donald had even been to the Vietnam War. They would protect us.

Sometimes I imagined it would be Mom who would kill us. She would grab the butcher knife from the kitchen drawer and stab Dad. Then she would trudge up the stairs and slash all of us to death in our beds. Dad told me once that, early in their marriage, he had given Mom a pretty negligee for her birthday. She had slashed it to threads with that knife. I always thought Dad would kill us with a gun, but I was pretty sure my mother would choose the butcher knife.

We never jumped out of that bedroom window, but I continued to stay alert on most Saturday nights until I left for college at 18. I vowed never to live in that house again. I left my brother and sisters behind. But I had another plan. Once I graduated and had a good job, I would get a place where we all could live safely and unafraid. I'd bring my grandmother there too, so she wouldn't have to go to a nursing home. I would create the safe and happy home we never had for my brother and sisters, and for myself, my husband, and my children.

Eventually, Pam and Dennis went to college as well and, after years of ups and downs, created their own safe places. Roxie moved out, too, but never really escaped that house or Andrew or our parents. I was never in a position – financially or emotionally -- to give her or my grandma the happy home I imagined. Nor was I able to create that home for myself with a loving husband and at least two children. Just Aschleigh and me. But I no longer needed to keep myself alert to dangers in my own home. I no longer needed to think about escaping through my bedroom window. Rather, I could enjoy the view, imperfect as it was.



# the casserole tree

Diane Griffin

My grandma had a tuna noodle casserole tree. Its fruit was the taste of winter served up in the summer, redolent of canned tuna, dried basil, and oregano.

The tree was about the size of a quince tree, just a little smaller than an apple tree, and would produce eight or ten roughly quart-sized fruits in a season, ripening from late August into September. Its leaves were spade-shaped and about the size of a small plate, similar to the leaves of a catalpa tree. The bark had a golden color, papery and thin – a bit like birch bark. I loved that the tree was always the first thing to leaf out in February – a harbinger of good things to come.

Once the fruit started coming ripe it was dangerous to lay in its shade. The fruit was heavy and the seedpod outer layer – what we called “the dish” – was like hard wood. The finger-thick stems looked sturdy, but Grandma would often point out that the fruits did fall off if they weren’t picked in time. She wouldn’t let us go anywhere near the tree all summer, especially once the fruit started getting big.

Once cooked, casserole fruit had the texture of gravy, egg noodles, peas, and onions. The hard seeds were about an inch across and tasted and smelled like tuna when you cooked them, cracked the shell, and mixed the nutmeats in. There was no salt to it, though. Once you picked the fruit, you’d butter it, salt and pepper it, grate some cheese and put breadcrumbs on it. Then you’d stick it in a 350-degree oven for 20 or 25 minutes.

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That was the great advantage of casserole fruit. It took half the time of an actual casserole to cook, and you didn’t have to put it together, yet the consistency and blend of flavors was nearly perfect. Just crack open the seeds, mix ‘em in, and you’ve got a delicious, healthy meal.

Casserole fruit was my favorite thing to eat as a kid. I’d look forward to it all year. It might have been yours, too, if you’d ever tasted it. Grandma had the only casserole tree I ever heard of, and it’s gone now. The land it was on is under the pavement of a shopping mall in Redondo Beach that is nearly dead itself.

Such a waste.



# soiree pets, august, 1980

Richard Wayne Horton

Kate and I got invitations to attend Pearl Amster's soiree. Pearl owned Amster Music, a piano dynasty in Austin. Kate drew nightmarish but fascinating pictures, in india ink. There was no trick, no gimmick in her drawings. Therefore to Pearl she was an original, and could be expected to be unwashed and cross-dressed. Just the thing! I was currently in vogue as a literary growling dog. Weird pals us. We got to the Amster mansion an hour late, having walked across town. The people we found there wore light colored suits. There were lots of tans, lots of relaxed smiles, no suspicious or proud frowns. The young were dressed exactly like the old.

Kate carried her carved snake-head walking stick, and wore combat boots. I carried a staff and backpack and wore trail boots. I'd like to say I had a buck knife stuck in my belt, but that would be pushing it. We both wore stained wide brimmed hats and were sweaty from the walk. We were cordially welcomed after we mentioned Morris Morrison's name. There were goodies at the table. We trucked on over and loaded up on party treats then went to stand next to the wall. Perhaps the party goers thought this would be the two bohemians' only meal for the week. Yes, their eyes said, fill your pockets, you poor hungry sparrows!

Pearl called everyone to their seats and the second half of the musical evening began. A young doctor, almost 7 feet tall, sang Faure and Mozart. His voice was plummy, his manner pained with effort. I watched him, analyzing the major mistakes he was making, and he smiled back, glad someone was paying attention. That spooked me. Kate sat at the extreme edge of the patio, and her neighbor had his back to her.

The performance ended, the audience broke up, and I used the crowd scuttle to drift away from the 7 foot tall doctor who was trying to make his way toward me. I went toward a clump of beige, gray and blue rich folks at the table with all the goodies, and noticed after a while that it was a line. Rich people in line? How rich! I got on the end of it. Kate tagged or dragged along, anxious to explain how different she was from these normal people. Her breath smelled terrible. She told everyone how she couldn't eat the food she was lined up for, because of her diet. I scored some cookies and cheese slices, and Kate watched me eat them, commenting on how she couldn't do that. Morris Morrison, with his red face and white goatee came up and seemed cordial and short-tempered. He had tried to get Kate to draw pictures for a poster exhibit of Emily Dickenson poems. Many of Dickenson's images, he explained, were terrifying! The buzzing fly in the deadroom? Autumn leaves that are blood red? But Helen had acted like he had propositioned her art and suggested that her art and Dickenson's poetry should get together for a filthy rendezvous at a roadside inn. Morris still respected her as an artist but he was hurt.

I found myself near a table with someone's grotesque birthday cake. Savage whacks had been taken from it. An old woman invited me to have a piece. She spoke with an accent. Kate told her about how she couldn't eat any of the cake because of her diet. I started talking to the old woman and asked her where she was from. She said she was from Russia, but had lived in Manchuria till 1933 when the Japanese invaded. She had somehow made it to New York where

she'd studied at the Juilliard, but, before the year was out, she got an offer from the Metropolitan Opera. She sang at the Met, sometimes under Bruno Walter, sometimes under Fritz Reiner, in operas alongside Lily Pons, Lauritz Melchior and other greats. She recorded under the Columbia label. Her name was Irra Petina, pronounced Pyeh-tih-nah. Born in St. Petersburg in 1908. The Americans of the 40s could never pronounce her name right. They called her Piteen, like a chili pepper. Good natured trooper that she was, she started pronouncing it that way herself. I was charmed, and wished I could sit listening to her for an entire winter's evening, before a warm fire, with tea, which I didn't drink, but if she was having it, I'd have one, what the heck.

Nearby, Petina's niece was trying to decide when to discreetly separate her aunt from the catfisher before he got put in her will.

Later that night Kate and I walked sadly into the night with our walking sticks and stained slouch hats, Kate telling me how horrible the party had been.

Endnote: The soiree was in celebration of Petina's 72<sup>nd</sup> birthday. The cake was her birthday cake and it had a grotesque shape because what remained of it was meant to resemble the Metropolitan Opera House. The partygoers had been giant reptiles, roaring and ripping into it. The 7 foot tall doctor was her voice student. Like Franz Liszt, she was much too kind to turn like a bird of prey and rip him to shreds for his sins. Alas!



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# tiptoeing around the shadows

Andrew Shelffo

Kevin asks the Shadows, “Do I really need my toes?”

The Shadows don’t answer.

Their ongoing lack of response has grown increasingly irritating to Kevin. He thought they had an agreement. He allows the Shadows to take over his bedroom at night, after he turns off the light, and they present him with a nightly litany of his past failings and embarrassments and ugly memories, like that time in sixth grade when he told his friends that he’d touched Ellen’s boob, when he hadn’t; that time in third grade when he got in trouble for getting into a spit fight with that kid Eric and got kicked off the Safety Patrol; the time the family dog died, and he didn’t notice for three days, and his older brother accused him of hating the dog, which wasn’t true.

In return for this nightly excavation of his life, Kevin expected answers to the burning questions he had about his life. Kevin would then gain a deeper understanding of himself and his place in the world. But the Shadows haven’t delivered.

Kevin knows why the Shadows are there. They’ve always been there. When he was younger, he was just too preoccupied with his day-today: his career, his family, his marriage, even his golf game. Those things are all in the past now. Retirement, grown children far away, the death of a spouse, and the loss of interest in doing useless things, like golf. Without those things to occupy his mind, the Shadows rule his bedroom. They live in the darkness of his bedroom when he turns out the light to go to sleep. Yes, Kevin has thought about sleeping with a light on, but he hasn’t been able to find the balance between a light powerful enough to banish the Shadows but not so bright that he doesn’t feel like a frightened 8-year-old. He’s not afraid of the Shadows, or of the dark. He knows that darkness is just a part of life. The Shadows come out in the darkness and hold him to account for his past transgressions, of which there are surprisingly a lot. In the daylight, most incidents seem innocent. The Shadows, frankly, can be petty.

The solution is focus. The only way to keep the Shadows at bay is to have a properly occupied mind, not a mind preoccupied with daily detritus, one laser focused on important matters.

But he hasn’t been able to occupy his mind properly because of his damn toes.

He’s 75, and he’s coming to terms with the changes to his body and life that aging brings with it, but he can’t remember a time in his life when he’s spent more time thinking about his toes than right now. It started a few weeks ago when he was trying to fall asleep. He was on his back, covers up to his chin, arms underneath, his box fan on to provide white noise. He tried to fall asleep before the Shadows arrived, but he couldn’t, because of the pressure of the blankets on his toes. It wasn’t painful, but it was uncomfortable. He tried various ways to find comfort. If he stuck his feet out from under the blanket, though, his feet would be too cold, because he’s an old man now and because the beta blockers he takes for his heart make his feet cold. He tried the lighter blankets from the wooden chest at the foot of the bed, but they weren’t comfortable. He tried laying on his side or his stomach. Nothing worked.

Now Kevin wonders how much time the average person should spend thinking about their toes. Whatever the average is, he feels like he's way over that. He acknowledges to himself that it's been a privilege to not have to think about his toes so much, up until now. He doesn't have diabetes, so that pain isn't a worry. And Kevin has seen some really bad toes in the locker room at the Y, and he knows his toes don't look like that, all infected with fungus and deformed with bunions. He trims the toenails when they need it and keeps them clean. What else do they need, really?

His toes pop into his mind at random times. A few evenings ago, he was making himself a mushroom casserole for dinner and a handful of mushrooms fell out of the package onto the cutting board he'd placed on the counter. They made a soft *patter patter* sound as they hit the wood. Kevin's first thought was, I bet that's what my toes would sound like if they fell on the cutting board.

The recipe called for one pound of mushrooms. That night, Kevin wondered how much his toes weighed. The Shadows didn't like that he wasn't paying attention to them, and they assaulted him with recollections of the mistakes he made as a parent. All Kevin wanted to do was protect his children and make sure they were happy. The Shadows called all of that into question.

This morning, Kevin spent time on search engines, trying to figure out how much toes weigh. Surprisingly, he couldn't find a clear answer. Does the average human toe weigh more or less than the average cremini mushroom?

**32** Tonight, the pressure of the blankets *hurts*. He knows he must do something. Perhaps he feels the need to punish himself somehow as he experiences night two of bad parenting memory reels, but suddenly he finds himself imagining a ten-toed guillotine. Fifteen years ago, Kevin had both knees replaced. His orthopedist explained to him that it's common to replace both knees at once, because if a patient needs both knees replaced and they do one at a time, many patients don't come back for the second one because the first one was so painful. Maybe the same thing applies to guillotining toes?

He sketches how the guillotine would look: like one of those paper cutters the teacher had in his elementary school, but the blade would be reconfigured to drop down across all the toes at the same time. That way there would be no time to change his mind.

He convinces a retired engineer friend to build it for him.

Yes, he wonders about balance. But that's what shoes are for. Yes, he worries about infection. Yes, he worries about what people will say, mainly because the Shadows always tell him to worry about what other people think, even though in the light of day Kevin knows that's bullshit. It's hard to say that to the Shadows. They don't understand bullshit.

The Shadows thrive on bullshit and distraction. Kevin's toes are a distraction. If he didn't think about them so much, he could focus on the Shadows and defeat them. He knows that. He wants that.

Towels, check. Gauze and bandages, check. 911 pre-pressed on his cell phone, just in case, check.



Bowl to collect the toes, check. Small kitchen scale to weigh them, check.

Do I really need my toes, he wonders?

*Only one way to find out, the Shadows reply.*



**WHERE'S  
SAOIRSE?**

## beginners meeting

Elliot Cardinaux

She is not my beloved on Earth  
who makes stone blush

That the hours come clumsy to handle  
impractical hearts  
& we stave them  
off

If I lift this dull  
& invincible hatch to fill the ventricle

Will they hang each cross to suffer  
its tortuous purpose  
when music is not allowed  
will the devil flinch



## trivial adornments

Elliot Cardinaux

Nameless, your tears  
still wet the laughing  
lenten rose

They have stolen  
your evil  
courage

The blush of  
which lays new upon  
each grief

Stagger in at the elbow  
my fellow  
petal

We are left here  
scattered

Liminal & bruising

Self-provoking such  
a palpitation

Engines of  
a giftless  
verb





podromal  
Jax Kusleika

# creamed spinach, little debbie, emma and me

Marc Eichen

## I.

I try to keep my eyes from closing and tap the brakes to slow the car down from somewhere dangerously above 75, jerking it back across the thump-thump-thump of the median.

My live-in girlfriend Emma, her folks, our dog Søren, and I are powering up the Idaho Panhandle. The darkened road with its hypnotically regular broken white line and my uncompleted dissertation, what Emma likes to call “The Big D,” stretch in front of me. I check the rearview. It seems all, including Søren, a charter member of Apnea Anonymous, are snoring blissfully. When I think about The Big D, the dual metaphors of the endless road and snoring aren’t lost on me.

Emma’s eyes open.

“Rolling the car with my parents, not to mention my dog, is not an answer to my question, even if we’re fine and you end up a charred marshmallow.”

“Will you visit me in the burn unit?”

“Yeah. I’ll bring creamed spinach casserole and you can suck it down through a straw. The nurses will think it’s an act of great love and kindness—but we’ll know the truth.”

And there it is: love. What could be at once so present yet so opaque, so infinitely varied yet so singular, so ever-present yet so allusive? When we talk about love, do we believe others understand what we feel, feel it in the same way we do? I love my books. I love my dog. But do I love my life?

I’m a list maker and instead of facing those questions, I chart a mental list of questions I might be able to answer. When Socrates asserts that love is a relational quality, what does he mean? How does Richard Rorty reformulate John Dewey’s notion of power in the service of love? Did we remember to pack the electric toothbrush? What will happen if I don’t finish my dissertation? What will happen if I do? What do I really know about love?

Emma is still eyeing me from the back seat. When she looks at me like that, with her eyebrows raised and all irony, I wonder if this is just the smoldering long-tail of our pre-dinner fight or her way of underlining its importance.

How, on a cold November night did we all come to be driving those long, loping hills? Those hills with cut-down wheat and pushed-in barns, with double-wide trailers, pre-fab churches, junker cars and pine trees that smell like vanilla and stand tall and straight as buildings.

The elevator version: Jacob J. Einhorn, BA in Sustainable Development from Columbia. Running hard to get away from Mom&Dad LLC and dad’s sotto voce questions that often begin, “With that sort of degree will *your* development be sustainable?” Running hard from the obligation to

comment on mom's sewn sculptures and dad's love of opera and old rock and roll. Not that I didn't find it all homey and comfortable. Not that I didn't care for them. Of course I did, I tell myself. I just didn't want to be them by default. Two years getting my hands dirty outside Lewiston building solar greenhouses for the Nez Perce. Met Emma, washed hands, got into the PhD Program in Philosophy at Yale. Present status: ABD.

ABD, in case you were wondering, means All But Dissertation. Emma, prescient at thinking up alternative meanings for all sorts of academic shorthand, referred to me before I took my exams as NQ ABD, Not Quite A Butthead Dufus. The week after I passed she noted, "Changed my mind. ABD must mean All But Dog."

"How about I pick him out and you can name him?" she said.

"You know this isn't like you cut the pie and I pick the first piece. A dog is a serious responsibility."

"So is good pie."

A couple of weeks later I came home, returning from my weekly reconnaissance as "Professor" Einhorn, teaching two night sections of Western Philosophic Traditions at Tunxis Community College, and there was Søren, curled up on the couch. In the next week Søren would gnaw, "every shoe you own, Emma. Every...single...one" seeking assurance of our unwavering love and full commitment to more stylish footwear.

## II.

I asked Emma before agreeing to this trip, "Are sure you want to visit your parents for Thanksgiving? You know we could take off between Christmas and New Years and go to Idaho for the vacation."

"And what would we do there for more than a week? You would sit by the fire wishing you were in New Haven working on the Big D or you would take some giant book and hole up in the bedroom. I would just get mad as hell and go to bed angry. Bad enough before your exams. You brought your toothbrush, coat, two ridiculous button-down white shirts and forty-five pounds of books. And you complained that you were cold and couldn't read the whole time. No thanks."

"But I was there with your family and we passed, didn't we?"

"Yeah, we did—but it wasn't pretty."

"These family things are never pretty."

Emma gave me a look as if she didn't know me and I pretended not to notice. But I bit my lip, instantly sorry.

"If we go for Thanksgiving, you'll be able to grade exams before Christmas and then get some serious work done before the next semester begins in February. How about getting a chapter

or two done before spring classes and I'll show you a good time."

"Do I have to wait till then?"

"You might. We've been discussing this in our PhT support group. I think we have a seminar coming up early next year, 'Sexual Gratification: A Reinforcement Schedule for Peak Dissertation Performance.'"

"What if someone is busy and can't follow the reinforcement schedule? Do you get someone else to stand in, like maybe Charlotte or Barry?"

She turned on her heel and went into the kitchen, thinking, I suppose, you may be ABD at Yale, but under all that paint, you're still an eighth-grade boy.

This is another of Emma's academicisms. PhT - Putting Husbands Through.

She had been going out, ostensibly bowling, every couple of weeks with a group of PhTs to share the strum and drag of it. Mostly to get slightly plastered. I always thought it would take me more than a few beers every couple of weeks to put someone through.

At first, I must have seemed like a pretty exotic catch. You don't meet many Ivy League grads banging nails in the Idaho Panhandle, where most of the towns had one school, a couple of stoplights and a handful of bars. The majority of the bars served beer right from the can, no aspirations to stemware or even plastic cups.

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In high school, Emma had a serious local boyfriend, a hometown honey. They were, true to local custom, maybe almost engaged and it seemed everyone wondered, more or less out loud, what would happen after their dramatic, some would say explosive, breakup.

The first time Emma brought me back from New Haven, she reminded me, "Hey, you'll be nice, right? It's a small place and we'll probably run into some of my history."

"Nice?" I kissed her, "I'm nothing but nice. Particularly when I'm outnumbered."

Sure enough. I walked into The Express Lane, the main convenience store to survey the goods on offer: baby diapers, car parts, frozen dinners, local meat, school and art supplies, VCR tapes, cigarettes, smokeless chewing tobacco and assorted wrenches. Emma grabbed me and mouthed, "that's him."

Before I went up to pay, the guy behind the counter said for everyone's amusement, "Hey, I'll bet you're The Professor. We all heard you were coming. You a...vegan too?"

"One hop short on both, my friend. I'm just a grad student. Have to finish school before they let me profess. And I eat meat. In fact, that's all I eat. Don't even warm it up."

He smiled, started to laugh and flipped a couple of packages of Slim Jims across the counter.

“On the house.”

I liked him immediately.

Truthfully, Emma was the rare catch. How often does someone like me get to date the valedictorian, the prom queen and the editor of the school newspaper; someone who will get a PhT and think good pie is a weighty responsibility? How often does that person move to New Haven, get a job answering phones for Alumni Relations and share an apartment the size of a medium-width shoe with seven hundred books and a guy making \$28,090 a year?

But maybe the shine has worn off. Maybe she’s just tired of living on nothing, not being able to take vacations. Maybe she’s just tired of my act. It could be a million things or nothing at all.

Or worse, maybe I’m the one who’s tired of all that. Maybe I’m tired of my own story and I just can’t bring myself to admit it.

### III.

After a couple of years in grad school, Emma and I got invited to my advisor’s house for a Christmas party. This was one of the legendary Philosophy Department End-of-Term parties where the faculty find out if you can keep up with the big boys by sloshing back a large number of dry martinis. I’m a bad drunk and was discretely ditching mine in the downstairs shower. But after we had been there for a few hours, my advisor, Professor Norwood R. “You-Can-Call-Me-Skip” Hansen, the Wilson Bienenke Professor of Comparative Philosophy, came over, put his arm around my shoulders and, raising his empty glass toward Emma across the room, said, “Now I can see why you’re interested in love,” and ambling back across the room he smiled a sly and knowing smile.

On the way home I mentioned this to Emma and said I wasn’t exactly sure what he meant and she began shaking her head like I was as dumb as two short boards.

“I sure hope you learn a thing or two, doing this dissertation.”

That would become kind of a theme for us, Emma and me. While I went through all the maneuvers and poses, what was I learning?

I’m still too embarrassed and too shy to ask what Professor Hansen meant, or for that matter, what I might hope to learn. He never mentions Emma. But we meet in his campus office, often with his other grad students to talk about our various research topics. I enjoy these sessions—except when it’s my turn. Then it feels like *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. That last scene where Nancy Bellicec is the only one who can still feel, the only human left. We are all talking about love, reflecting on our own hot, complex, intimate experiences filtered through Plato’s Eros and Philia, Nozick’s identity of the extended self and Badhwar’s unfungibility of the beloved—and feeling what? After a few hours, I want to poke my ear drum with a mechanical pencil just to see if I could still feel anything.

#### IV.

I passed my qualifying exams and began to work on The Big D. I would be sitting in my tiny office, a cage really, in the basement of the Library, surrounded by books with tags that say “Stack Privileges / Out through June 30<sup>th</sup> / Not to be removed from building,” referring to both me and the books. Emma would call, breaking some day dream or conversation with my office mate, a post doc from Germany.

“So, want to go out for a sandwich and do some field work at the I-95 Motel?” This would entirely fluster me and I could only say something like, “Emma, please.” Of course I wanted to, but truthfully I was never sure if she was kidding. Did she really want to go have some sort of mid-day tryst in the sleaziest motel on the Northside. A motel which reputedly rented rooms by the half hour and was a favorite of the med students when the utility closets in the hospital were locked. Or maybe she thought field work would actually add something to my research.

Several times I told her that philosophers don’t do field work. Doing field work would be committing a mortal sin. Your work would be labeled with one of the ultimate insults, Sociology. I asked a Sociology grad student what discipline they use as the ultimate insult and she said, without skipping a beat, Journalism. So I wonder what Journalists use when they really want to hurt one another. Probably, “hey you’re a know nothing bum and all you write is Philosophy.” But I haven’t had an opportunity to ask one.

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When I told Emma that philosophers just read and talk and think, she said, “That explains a lot,” with a finality that did seem to explain a lot. What exactly it explained we didn’t want to explore; whether this included me feeling more at home with my 700 books than our diminishing handful of mutual friends; whether she liked me better when she met me, back when I was banging nails.

Another topic on the list of things we didn’t want to explore too deeply was whether I was going to finish my dissertation. Or the even more significant topic of whether I was going to get a job once my dissertation was done. Once, after one of her lengthier PhT support group meetings, Emma came home, plopped down on the bed without removing her coat or boots and asked if I was aware of the University rule that terminated graduate student support after seven years.

Of course I was aware of this, I blurted out. Why the hell do you think I’m busting my ass on this thing? Don’t you think I want to be done with it, finally? But I wasn’t so sure. The ten-thousand-dollar stipend plus teaching wasn’t much. But compared to zero with a PhD, it sounded like a big, sure number. Besides, Yale gave pretty mixed messages on that seven-and-out policy. There were all sorts of stories about grad assistants becoming teaching fellows and then research post docs to either keep them around past seven years to finish their own dissertations or because they were running some faculty member’s lab or research program.

I had eighteen months to go before we had to find out if Yale was serious about seven and out, but I didn’t want to test any theory that Call-Me-Skip kept me around because he thought I was “quaint” – an anomaly, a philosopher who could build a greenhouse.



## V.

I met a guy that had a PhD in Geography from someplace first rate in central Massachusetts. He said he was at Tunxis teaching Geography of North America to keep his hand in. But he was learning how to program in rust and was hanging dry wall. I asked him why he didn't get a job as a postdoc or in some Cambridge consulting mill. He said it was better to be out, really out in the world. He said out there, having a PhD still counted for something. When they found out about him, the guys on the framing crew were impressed and started calling him "Doctor." Not in a nasty way, but in sort of sweet, kidding way, like guys at their best often do. When there was a problem with a customer or a complaint from a carpenter or plumber, they would say, "Better call The Doctor on this one," or "Well, we'll have to get The Doctor to make a house call and look into that." After a Christmas party he sat in his car in a dark corner of the parking lot and began to cry and yell over and over that he was "DOD—Doctor of Drywall."

It wasn't a status thing or even the work, having to show up on a frozen job site before the winter dawn. He said that was cool, building the world from scratch while the sun rose. The hard part was getting your heart broken, not just once but every day. One day your life is what you imagined it might be. And then, gradually no one from your old life is calling you back. They treat you like you have some un-named disease. They don't know what it is. They're just sure they don't want to catch it. Eventually it just feels like a bullet hole, an empty space in your chest. I said I was sorry. And he clapped me on the shoulder and told me not to worry about it. After a while, he said, it scarred over and if you didn't poke it too much, you could even wear it as a badge.

Emma and I were lying in bed a couple of days later and I told her I didn't want to be yet another DOD. I asked her in an absentminded way, did I want to avoid that so much that I was willing to be one of the zombies in Call-Me-Skip's office?

Emma shuffled the pillows, smoothed my hair and kissed my neck. "You don't have to answer that question, at least not yet."

And over the next days and weeks, the instantaneous comfort I felt in her presence was gradually replaced by the slow drip of dread that there would be a day when I would need to find an answer.

## VI.

"Did you see that?"

Emma's mom, Daisy, is awake and I have a split second to decide whether to take the bait.

"See what?"

I've taken it. I'm like a fish, still swimming, thinking that I have a chance, yet knowing the best way to deal with my fate is not to struggle, but to surrender and hope for mercy. The very first time I met her parents, Emma said, "Look. I know my mom is not *really* crazy, but you'll see. You just have to go with it." And over time, it became easier for me to "just go with it." When Emma

would start to bounce with astonishment and annoyance, I could say things like, “Wow, that sure is a different perspective. You think we’re going to get any more rain this week?”

I’m always drawn into these conversations, answering a question with another question. So when Daisy asks, “Did you see that?” it’s the most natural thing in the world for me to answer, “See what?” even though I know what’s coming.

What is coming is a cascade of words and observations, a real-time running commentary on everything. If conversation is the gentle melding of two streams, then Daisy is the Amazon and the Nile and the Mississippi in flood crest, a torrent of words that will engulf everything – every other topic, every other observation, every other thought – in its path.

“I just saw a truck with the license plate KWX 718. Did you know that 718 was our first address when Dwight and I were married? Now I wonder if I’m likely to see another plate with our address when we moved to Minoche. Was that before or after your sister was born? Oh, I don’t know. Look at that color. Dwight do you have my camera? I’m sure I gave you my camera when I got into the car. No wait, it’s down here by my feet. If I can only get down there. I wish I had longer arms, like Kareem Abdul Jabbar. Søren, just move over and I’ll get it. Do you think I can get him to fetch it? He’s an old dog by now isn’t he. When did you get him? Wasn’t it before you went to New Haven? Oh well. You know, I really think it is harder to teach old dogs new tricks. When Emma was growing up Mrs. Samuels had an old dog. At least it looked old because it had gray on its muzzle. And she taught it to get the newspaper right out of the paper slot under the mailbox. Until one day it ran out and tried to take the paper out of the delivery man’s hand and bit him. And then just a couple of years later she was dead, inside the living room with the TV on. Well, I don’t know...”

Of course, in my head I’m putting in periods and commas and sentences and punctuation. All that is my editing. It’s really more like, “I just saw a truck with the license plate KWX 718. Did you know that 718 was our first address when Dwight and I were married now I wonder if I’m likely to see another plate with our address when we moved to Minoche...” Just thinking about this makes my headache in wonder. How does someone do this?

Every once in a while, Daisy’s river of consciousness would eddy and spin off a comment or a sandbar of information so perfect, you would run aground on it. Driving to a July 4<sup>th</sup> picnic a few years ago, we passed a local swimming hole. Daisy is making observations on the beauty of the rock formations and trees when she said, “Just look at that water and those rocks. You know I’m sure that we get migrating birds on those rocks in the spring. Just seeing them all together reminds me of the time in the sixties when Dwight and I tried group sex. It was with Donna and Harry, Harry was Donna’s first husband and they lived in Hills. Of course Harry died right after that. But for a while I just felt like I had melded in and was flying with a small flock. Oh, I don’t know.”

I looked in the rear-view mirror and Emma, who is usually looking out the window trying not to hear, is staring straight ahead, trying to catch every word. Nonchalant as ever, I almost drove into the ditch. Daisy would do this sort of thing, randomly, just to be sure you were paying attention.

Emma firmly insisted she was nothing like her mom. But she was more like her mom than she wanted to admit. She knew more about the world and what was important in it than I would ever know. And when we talked she would say something that would make my heart almost stop and my eyes widen in wonder for days, even years, later.

I had just gotten my acceptance letter from Yale and we hiked up to Elk Creek Falls for a Sunday lunch. It was early spring, too cold to swim but we sat, back-to-back on an outcrop, trying to catch a bit of the warming sun. I asked Emma if she wanted to drive east and live with me at Yale. She hooked my arm and kissed me, saying, "What choice do I have?" And she laughed. I'm still thinking about it, to this day.

When it came to conversation, Dwight, on the other hand, was partially deaf and completely inured to Daisy. After visiting a few times, I began to believe that Dwight wasn't deaf at all, but only pretended to be so he could step out of Daisy's stream of words, get up on the river bank with the rest of us, if only for a few moments, and watch the words go by. His conversations with me were more "mano-a-mano" and would usually begin with, "So, Jacob, what do you think about small cap mutual funds?" I would try to channel my dad and hold up my end as much as possible. But this wasn't easy since I had run as far and fast as possible away from anything resembling a mutual fund and because at that very moment, I could vaguely hear Daisy going off on some especially juicy tangent.

"Do you think fund yields will be up in the next quarter, Jacob?"

"...you know that Harry left half his share of the condo to both you and your sister. And that should account for quite a bit of money. Your sister says she wants to give her share to the women's shelter but I told her..."

"Jeez, Dwight. I expect, er, that fund yields will go up, er, as long as the economy keeps improving."

"Well, I expect they will as well. But our broker has been telling us, that, at our age..."

"...and then she said she didn't want the condo interest and would let you and Jacob have it all. Oh, I don't know."

I found two of Daisy's eccentricities to be especially endearing. When she began to run down, she would cover by saying, "Oh, I don't know," which I took to be a sort of eddy in the stream. She also had remarkable political views. "I'm sure there is a conspiracy between the eastern bankers and those Japanese companies that make kitchen appliances. I know they are putting TV cameras in those appliances. That way, they can see exactly what you're eating and blackmail you if you're not using enough of their stuff, like Miracle Whip."

You didn't get to hear these views too often at Yale and I found them refreshing.

Emma accused me of voyeurism. "You just like to spy on them."

"You know that's not true. I love talking with your mother because she doesn't censor anything. Where I work it's all about self-censorship and self-restraint. But with your mom it's like a view

of consciousness without any container of self-restraint. Besides I think they like me better.”

They love Emma more, but I think they did like me better. I didn’t come with all the tentacles and barnacles of family history. At least not yet.

They surely loved the Idaho Panhandle, its sweep and clarity and general orneriness. And they loved each other. You could feel it. They didn’t always like each other. They would bicker about this and that; where were the keys and why did you leave the peanuts in the glove compartment. But after all the years together, they loved each other. And that was something I just wasn’t sure about when it came to Emma and me. This was the Loch Ness monster in our relationship, surfacing occasionally but mostly slowly swimming, submerged below the surface.

Earlier this year, we were standing in line for a movie. Just like that, Emma had asked if I wanted to get married. I never answered her question. But a couple of weeks later, we were home on a Sunday morning, getting ready to walk Søren and I floated it back to her. She said, “Hey, you know what, can I think about that a little?” I felt... what? Relieved? I didn’t want to get married. Not with all this other stuff swirling in my head. But that didn’t dilute my feelings for Emma. I wanted to be sure it wasn’t about what we were supposed to do or what we thought we had to do. I wanted to make sure it wasn’t only gratitude for time spent as PhT. I wanted to be sure it was about love. And what did I know about love, for sure?

## VII.

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When I’m driving I can force myself to stay awake. I have a three-step strategy. First, I try and find an AM station that has some sporting event and I try predicting what the play-by-play will be. Not the actual play-by-play, but the patter that doesn’t get on the air between innings or downs or shots on goal when the microphone is off, or at least the play-by-play guys think it’s off. “Well, Muzio seems to be having a great year. And since last week, he’s hit three doubles to the opposite field and beat out a bunt. *And you know, Jack, how I’ve always loved that tie. I just think the blue brings out those flecks in your eyes. But why the hell you wear it with that plaid jacket, I’ll never understand...*”

Second, I sing, making believe like I’ve been asked at the last minute to tour with one of my dad’s favorite oldie/goldie arena bands from the 80s.

You love her

But she loves him

And he loves somebody else You just can’t win

And so it goes

Till the day you die This thing they call love It’s gonna make you cry I’ve had the blues

The reds and the pinks...

And third, I give in, pull the car over and try to sleep for fifteen or twenty minutes. Only once did that result in being rudely awakened by a State Trooper banging on the hood, shining a flashlight in my eyes and asking me if I knew who was the President and what state I was in.

But this time we had miles to go. I wanted to repair, or at least begin to repair, what happened at dinner between Emma and me.

We had pulled into a diner and the four of us were just sitting down in our usual table geography. Dwight and I on one side of the table, Emma and Daisy on the other. We've been driving for a good part of the afternoon. Daisy had been narrating the landscape, commenting on various relationships. I thought she has said something about how she was glad Emma and I were together, even if it was just something temporary. And from there on, Emma had been mostly quiet.

"Hey Einhorn, can I talk to you for a minute?"

"Sure." I assumed the open handed, Buddha pose and Emma immediately looked annoyed. She kicked me under the table, not hard, and said under her breath, "Outside. OK"

Emma ordered a burger and I got Mac and Cheese.

"We'll be right back." Emma didn't smile as she said that and I realized I had misread the temperature of the upcoming conversation completely. We walked into the parking lot as the cold moon was ducking behind the highway sign.

"I've been thinking about this all day. Well, since we got here."

"Ok."

"I'm getting tired, really tired."

"We should be at your folks house by midnight or one at the —"

"Not that kind of tired. I'm getting really tired of you. I'm getting really tired of your... fooling around."

"What? I'm not fooling around. How could —"

"Not that kind of fooling around. You're not getting anywhere with your dissertation. I feel like I'm wasting my life."

"You want to have that conversation now? Here in the parking lot of the Miss Idaho Diner?"

"I've been thinking about it since, I don't know when, so why not? I can't get you to think about it at all. Ever."

"That's not true."

“Oh, it is so true. Whenever I bring it up you tell me things are good and I should be patient and don’t I like living in New Haven?”

“Well...”

“Well, what? New Haven is fine—for you. You don’t want to get on with your life. This is your life. If you finish you’ll just be doing this, whatever it is you do, but at a smaller, less interesting place.”

I stared at her blankly and I guess that said it.

“See, you don’t really care about us. You don’t really care about me.”

“I love you.”

“Do you? You love having me around. You even like taking me to those parties, when you do. And New Haven is fine, for you. Do you ever think what this, this life, is like for me? I’m nothing in New Haven. I’m so nothing, even you haven’t noticed.”

The truth is, the real truth is that I didn’t. And it made me ashamed. Emma was right.

“So here’s the deal. It’s either me,” I held my breath, “or you can finish your damn dissertation and do whatever it is you want. But not with me. I’m out.”

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“So it’s an ultimatum?”

“Whatever you want to call it. Just think about it. This seems to be the only way. I’m going back inside. I’m cold.”

“I don’t think so.”

“What? What did you say?”

She looked at me as hard as steel. And just like that we went back inside to Emma’s parents and the Miss Idaho Diner.

I pushed the Mac and Cheese around and made believe our conversation was nothing, but Emma was right. I felt myself sinking into that hole, circling that drain where I just felt like shit and couldn’t think about anything. As I went over and over it in my head, Emma said, “I’m cold.” And I said, “I don’t think so.” And she probably thought I was saying no to her ultimatum. But that wasn’t it at all. I was saying it wasn’t her that was cold—it was me. That somehow I had already become one of those zombies in Skip’s study. I just didn’t know how to make it better.

## VIII.

The Platonic ideal of coffee, somewhere out there, started to appeal as both a way of staying awake and repairing some of the damage.

I have trepidations about this because both Emma and I love coffee. This, and Søren are two things, maybe the only two things we never disagree or fight about.

Coffee in America tracks the American economy perfectly. On the coasts, great coffee, or at least something that aspires to be great coffee, is usually no more than fifty feet from where you're standing. Anywhere.

Coffee was a separate line item in the budget in both the Philosophy Department and our household. The one major purchase that occupied a place of honor in our micro-kitchen was a Digo Electric Syphon Coffeemaker. Emma once told me that if there was ever a midnight fire in our apartment, she was going to grab my notebook computer, Søren and Diego, her name for the Digo. I was on my own. I had the feeling she might wake me on the way out the door. But I told her that, as long as she and Søren visited me in the burn unit with a couple of cups of French roast, I would understand completely and there would be no hard feelings.

I tried reaching behind me to find Emma's knee in the bramble bush of limbs in the back seat.

"You awake?"

"Yeah, but I'm the only one. Daisy's in and out"

"You doin' OK? Want to get some coffee?"

"Fine."

"Fine you want some coffee or you're fine so you don't want any?"

"Fine like I'm fine, it would be fine to get some but also fine to wait." It came out a little grumpier than I had wanted. I smiled weakly into the rear-view.

"If not coffee, who's it going to be, Freddie Mercury or Steve Tyler? Mom and dad are not going to sing backup so maybe coffee. I'll even let you get a couple of Little Debbie chocolate cupcakes."

"Oh baby, I'm getting all tingly."

## IX.

The Northern Star beckons like it does to everybody older than 15 and within 150 miles of Bonners Ferry. It's after midnight but the place is rocking. The parking lot is full of over the road trucks, smoking girls in jeans and denim jackets waiting to get in without an ID and local pickups. I can probably get coffee at the bar. I pull the car across the street to the Zip Trip Convenience, closed by this time of night, and turn off the engine. I clean my glasses on my shirt and get out to stretch my legs and check out the scene. An older guy and a babe are in the parking lot talking. Music pumps each time the door opens. The big red neon star keeps time, flickering on and off. Dwight, unsurprisingly, is still asleep next to me in the front. In the back seat, Søren is still asleep too. Even Daisy seems to be dozing, but Emma is looking back at me through the window as if she is seeing me for the first time, or maybe remembering what that was like. Silently throwing questions out into the night and listening for the answers; who is this man? Where are we going, really going? And are we going there together? She deserved an answer. At least I could give her that.

Before Yale, before New Haven, when Emma and I started dating, maybe before we even kissed, we were sitting in a parking lot behind Taco John's in Lewiston. Building greenhouses on the Res is not a high-skill career choice and I was being paid accordingly. So Taco John's was at the top end of what I could afford. That day, embarrassingly, I didn't even have a chance to shower after work and drove right into town to meet her.

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Strangely enough Taco John must have had an arrangement with the local growers. They served... wait for it... creamed spinach. A large order of creamed spinach as a side dish with everything. You order enchiladas and you get them with creamed spinach. You want a coffee and dessert, or even a beer, that comes with creamed spinach too.

After dinner we were sitting in my beat down truck and I told her there was another woman in my life. She stared at me like a deflated car tire. "It's... Little Debbie."

I whipped out, from under my seat, a package of Little Debbie Chocolate Cupcakes and she laughed in a way that said, OK, I'm in. I'm all the way in. And the way she laughed, sitting in the parking lot of Taco John's with creamed spinach in our teeth, I knew I was in all the way too.

How did I get from there to here? Having studied it for years, what do I really know about love? I make a list.

I know that you never know exactly where you are going to land and that love is more surprising than you can even imagine. I know that love is out there when you least expect it and sometimes you should bang nails and build greenhouses. I know that sometimes your heart will tell you, but you have to listen carefully and quietly. I know there is more than one person out there that will make you laugh and love you, love the earth you walk on, even if you are sweaty and tired and have green creamed spinach stuck between your teeth. I know you should be especially kind to those people that love you the most, not just in spite of the barnacles and quirks they have, but also because of them.



And I know when Emma and I finally go to bed tonight and I sing to her, not entirely unlike Steve Tyler, *You Are My Sunshine* and we say goodnight into the darkness, not just to each other but to all those we love; I know it is from the heart, truly and truly from the heart.

“Hey Einhorn. You with us?”

“Ah, yeah. More than ever. Don’t wake your folks. I’ve got this. One large. We’ll share.”

I cross the darkened road, push the bar door open, look back over my shoulder into the car. I think, what else is there to know?



## triangle drives

Zosia Kochanski

In the backseat just as I was twenty years ago,  
our car flies through the night down a hill.  
I see the tall spires of trees  
frame a bowl of deep blue starry sky,  
and in the frigid stiffness of the car air I feel  
with my cold hand in my coat  
how my body has changed over a year of pain.  
I have lost, taken on, lost, taken on body ideals of some but not to others,  
but the body, mine alone,  
does not feel now friendly or even familiar, just haggard and wispy.

My great grandmother, I just learned tonight,  
moved North from the city and learned right then how to can venison.  
My great grandmother never wore her city shoes again once she began  
putting deer meat in jars for the winter.

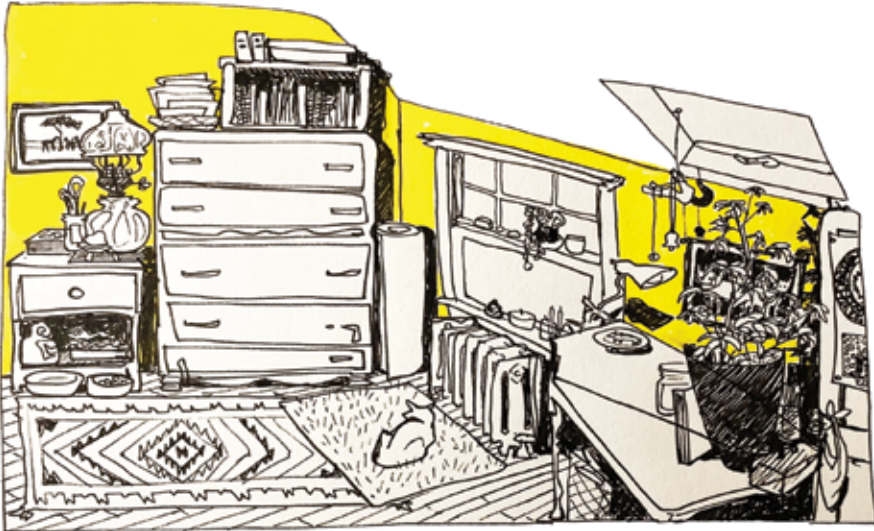
On the drive down, my brother played me two fairytales composed by women:  
Juana, from the dreamlike south, recorded that lady’s backyard dog and settled things.  
Karin, from the dreamlike north, watched a new creature in her life loiter outside her  
window  
all winter, and was troubled by its intrusion.

My mom strokes my horribly dry hair at Christmas.  
She knows how blue I am.





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*Zosia*  
yellow rooms  
Zosia Kochanski

# california in april

Zosia Kochanski

Tamarind spoon rug  
tufting sea lions air  
sculptures  
wood burning wind  
installation orange-  
colored poppy nylon  
dog rope rose  
garden rosecut  
wild turkey  
vultures calves  
apiary eucalyptus  
groves sheep flower-  
pounding indigo-  
dying chapbooks  
fabric digging edible  
flowers spicy  
mango gummies pork  
shoulder slushies peregrine  
falcon cliff nest turkish apricots.



## a chicken in every pot

Gerald Yelle

The neighborhood kids were acting out some secret intrigue. One of them was talking about it while I stood on the corner, listening. His friend said be quiet or you'll give away the whole plot. It had something to do with Republicans having to be served before Democrats. I joked about it with the one who said be quiet after the other kid left. He said it was a kind of triage —making room for pots and pans even though the place was huge. After the politicians were done, we still had to wait. I submitted my thermos like everyone else and at the end of the day it came back loaded with chunky soup we could eat with bread and be satisfied. One of the cooks held my hand up to her face and said you know what color I like? Yellow. I thought she was referring to my ring, but I said, "You mean the color of my skin?" She laughed and put my finger in her mouth.



## everybody had nicknames then

Gerald Yelle

We had a picnic —two tables set up end to end. I sat down and slid over to make room for Jake and Ernie. We had three simple casseroles to choose from —a potato, a cheese and a bean slightly mashed like refried. Bea shoved a small plateful at me —almost getting some in my mouth. "Hey Casanova," I said. "Got a cigarette?" Jake gave me a Marlboro, but I really wanted a Camel. He said don't be a pooch, Mooch. I said I was trying to quit. Somebody said there was a package for Guy. I knew that was Ernie's nickname, so I gave it to him. I hadn't yet learned there were other Guys. Dee had a fox named Guy that barked till you gave it a treat. I'd just been to see Dee in her cozy oaks down the street. She was glad to be out of the weather. Amherst was one vast state in those days, with mad static electricity. Plus what water there was was eggshell beige.



## windy

Gerald Yelle

He and his wife each had their separate wavelength. She was buying and selling clothes and he was supposed to be helping. She was sociable and he craved solitude. They had a new apartment in an old part of the city —somewhere in South Holyoke, maybe Springfield. The smell of the paint reminded him of another place he lived. Would it be safe if the wind here started blowing? It was big enough, and she seemed to like it well enough —which was somewhat reassuring. They went around the corner where they were closing off the street for a block party. There was a row of restaurants and shops, and the smell of baking bread. A man came up and started talking. The husband went inside and closed the door. It made him nervous when he heard footsteps in the hallway. The wind was blowing and he noticed that one of the back windows was open. The view from it was nice —open fields —no buildings —only white ruins off in the distance.



# my little thing

Jacob Chapman

I carve my initials  
on the undersides of tables.  
It's just a harmless little thing  
I've done since I was ten.  
My initials are on four continents,  
in many restaurants and hotels,  
and in the homes  
of some of my childhood friends.  
Back when I started, I made a mental map  
of all the tables I'd marked,  
but the map got too big  
so I had to write it down,  
then I had to draw another one  
and another one.  
I hide them in a place  
where no one will ever find them.  
The problem is I have a normal life  
with a career, a wonderful wife, kids,  
grandkids, and all the trimmings,  
and this thing, my little thing, doesn't fit.  
No one knows about it.  
If they did, what would they say?  
Nothing good. They would ask  
What else are you hiding? The conversation  
would not go well. Sometimes  
I make myself take breaks:  
three-monthers, six-monthers, after which  
I reward myself with a little splurge.  
I take my fingernail clippers  
with their little nail file and its sharpened tip,  
and I fucking carve.  
I go around and find tables  
all over the place, and as I carve,  
I say this little thing I came up with  
when I was ten: I am the watchman  
watching the sleepers, and I am the sleeper  
exploring new worlds.



## my winter list

Jacob Chapman

The birds are back  
They were singing today at dawn  
at least a few of them were  
I'm sure they know  
it's not spring yet it's just  
a warm day in winter  
but they probably figured what the hell?  
Let's sing  
It was nice sharing a little moment  
with them but I'm not quite ready  
for spring I'm making my way  
through my winter list  
There's the hole I'm digging  
in the basement  
and I'm moving some stuff around  
and I'm growing out my beard  
So you know  
I'm kind of busy  
spending time with the cold  
and the darkness  
Once spring comes and green things  
start popping out of the ground  
all the rumbling questions  
that are stuck in my head  
won't make sense anymore  
But today they do make sense  
They're sitting here with me  
and I must tend to them



## love

Jacob Chapman

My uncle was a yeller.  
He was angry most of the time,  
and he yelled at everything:  
us, for being kids,  
the trees in his yard,  
for leaning the wrong way,  
and the fuckity fucks,  
who were always fucking with him.  
His wife, my dear aunt,  
was always knitting,  
and I think she mostly tuned him out.  
He never yelled at her,  
and every time I wondered  
what in the world  
made their marriage work,  
they would make these weird faces  
at each other and suddenly start laughing.  
Was that it? Was that enough?  
A shared sense of humor  
and a general understanding  
of who the other person was?  
They seemed pretty happy  
other than the anger and the yelling,  
and when one of them  
walked by the other,  
they would pat each other's hand,  
which always made me think yes,  
it was enough, whatever they had  
was enough, at least it was  
for that day, or that hour, or that minute,  
and my my my, those moments  
when everything else can wait.



# the narcissist's library

Jeffrey M. Feingold

A tree-lined parkway serpented for miles along the center of the City, dividing affluent neighborhoods north from the indigent south. During the long northern winters, the thick barren tree limbs were brown. In spring they suddenly sprouted, exploding into a leafy dark green canopy, which, on windy days, hissed softly as a snake.

The parkway was a narrow vein of modest but well-kept middle-class bungalows, townhouses, duplexes, and three- and four-story brick apartment buildings, separating two close yet disparate worlds. North of the parkway lived doctors, dentists, lawyers, and politicians, with Botox smiles, and designer dogs. Their BMWs and Bentleys were garaged behind wrought iron gates of tony mansions, walled off by the parkway from the ramshackle south, with its trailers and tenement apartments. Here lived transients and immigrants—cooks, bussers, retail clerks, and gig workers, their rusting beaters and bicycles dotting the rutted roads, where mongrel dogs fought for trash can scraps.

Occasionally these two worlds momentarily meshed, when the well-heeled opened the wrought iron gates of their northern enclaves, to venture forth, dressed in their finery, to the trendy parkway cafes and bistros serviced by the poor.

It was in just one such vegetarian bistro that Dakota first met Zayden in spring. She was waiting tables, to help put herself through the music conservatory, just next door, where she studied violin under the esteemed maestro, the great Jascha Milstrakh. Dakota was five foot four, with shoulder length chestnut hair, a comely face, and large nut-brown eyes. She was a woman who appeared quiet and soft on the outside, yet she had a strong core of independence and resolve. She wore a new fitted black tee-shirt with a silk-screened violin, with the words beneath, *24 Caprices for Solo Violin, Niccolò Paganini*.

Zayden, a handsome, dark figure, was sitting alone in the bistro, pretending to read a hardcover edition of *Lives of the Great Composers*. He ordered a salad and iced tea for lunch. Just as Dakota began to turn away from his table, he said, "Paganini was misunderstood." The two struck up a conversation.

After lunch, Zayden—a commercial real estate developer—walked back to the conservatory bookstore.

"I want to return this for a refund," he said, handing *Lives of the Great Composers* to the cashier.

"You just bought it a little over an hour ago," the cashier said, having been the same employee who had sold the book to Zayden that morning.

"Yes, I'm aware of that," Zayden said, "I know when I bought the book. Do I look stupid, to you?"

"I'm sorry, it's just—"

"It's just not that great," Zayden said, "that's what it's just not. I mean, they weren't so *great* really, were they, the 'Great Composers'? All they wrote was boring shit. Not exactly The Beatles or Imagine Dragons. Besides, the book served its purpose."

"Huh?" said the clerk.

"I got a date."

"I don't follow," said the clerk.

"What else are books for? Oh, can I ask you something—that is, if it's not too *stupid* for you?"

"OK, I guess."

"Where can I get a steak around here? I'm starving. All they have next door is rabbit food."

After this day, there were many meals that spring and summer at the same bistro. And many books purchased from, then summarily returned to, the conservatory bookstore. Yet despite his fundamental baseness, Zayden was quite capable of engaging in banter—even witty repartee—with Dakota. He also eventually began to keep some of the music books he bought, and to read them, although he disliked reading.

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Zayden was brimming with confidence and enthusiasm, which Dakota, a shy, somewhat anxious young woman, found compelling, even mysterious. Each was born and raised in the parkway, although Zayden was ten years Dakota's elder.

Whereas Zayden had dated extensively, Dakota had dated only musicians until now. They were always so terribly needy—musicians—such moody, incompetent little boys. They struggled with the simplest things. How to show up on time. How to dress appropriately. How to act responsibly. But to Dakota, Zayden seemed to be a man. After a brief courtship, Zayden suggested to Dakota that they move in together in the fall. Dakota's older sister, Mary, warned against the move.

"I mean, Jesus, Cody," Mary said on the phone one afternoon, when Zayden was in Buffalo on a work trip, "you hardly know this guy. Here a date, there a date, then you're moving in together. What if, you know, he's one of those axe murderers or stranglers or something, like on *Crime Watch*? You do watch *Crime Watch*, don't you, Cody?"

"I don't think so," Dakota said. "He's a sweet guy, Sis. Besides, you and Phil only dated for about six months before you got married."

"Cody, honey," Mary said, "Phil and I, well, we aren't doing so hot."

"Everyone I know sees a couple's counselor at some point," Dakota said.

"I think we're getting a divorce," Mary said.

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Zayden had ambition. His sights were set on those fine northern mansions. That's where *I* should be, he often said to Dakota, as they strolled hand-in hand along the parkway. Purgatory Parkway, Zayden called it. Theirs was a whirlwind romance. Despite Mary's protests, they moved in together, in the fall, while Dakota was still at the conservatory. They took up residence on the ground floor of a tidy brick parkway apartment building. Just Zayden, Dakota, and her cat, named after the composer, Arnold Schoenberg.

Zayden was not fond of cats.

"Jesus, he sounds like he's dying," Zayden said whenever the cat meowed.

"I know," Dakota said, "it's just that he's atonal."

Zayden tolerated the cat, perhaps because he traveled much for work. His book of business grew. He was the kind of businessman businessmen liked. Handsome, self-assured, garrulous.

Since their finances were so good, Dakota hired a house cleaner that fall. She wanted to focus on her studies, and practice for her upcoming recital. She also joined a book club, since Zayden was often away, and she was a little lonely when he traveled. The club members took turns hosting readings at their residences each week.

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Fall turned into winter, and again the thick branches of the parkway trees turned brown. Then, the next spring, not long after new leaves sprouted along the parkway trees, just when Dakota felt the impending explosion of green, life took a strange turn. An invisible, unwelcomed visitor—a microbe—entered the City. It coursed through the vein of the parkway, spreading out quickly across all the neighborhoods north and south. People grew afraid. From where had this pestilence come? Was it unnatural? Had it escaped from a government laboratory? Had immigrants brought it?

Soon the cafes and bistros were shuttered, by order of the City Manager. The wrought iron gates of the northern mansions remained locked. People everywhere avoided each other. Zayden had to travel further and further from home to locales the contagion had not yet reached.

Zayden's business suffered. Dakota trimmed their budget where she could. She stopped buying sheet music. Classes were now online because of the pestilence, so she sold her Subaru. She let the housekeeper go, too, and cleaned house herself. She thought Zayden could also help clean, when he was home from his work travels, but he always said, "I'm exhausted from the road, Cody. I can't move a muscle." Then he'd sprawl on the sofa to watch sports on television while she cleaned.

"Just don't clean in my office," Zayden said, when Dakota first let go the housekeeper. "I've got Very Important Papers for work all over."

Dakota was cleaning one morning, while Zayden was with a client in Poughkeepsie, which was not yet under a cloud of contagion. Here, Arnie Arnie Arnie, she called. She always put the cat in

the bathroom and closed the door before vacuuming the living room, since atonal Arnold was terrified of the more atonal, screeching Hoover. Dakota looked under the bed. No Arnold. She looked in the bathroom. In the kitchen. Under the sofa. Arnold apparently had vanished. Here, Arnie Arnie Arnie, she called again. Then she saw the door to Zayden's office was open more than a crack. She walked over and opened the door further. There was Arnold, standing on Zayden's desk, next to his antique typewriter. A cat as black as night, standing in bright sunshine streaming in from the skylight.

Arnold stood between two tall white stacks of Zayden's Very Important Papers. What a great photo this would make, Dakota mused. Arnie the Sun God! How she adored him. Arnold stared at Dakota with all the sweetness there is in the universe. Then, nonchalantly—as if he'd very nearly forgotten, but at last remembered there was something he had to do—lifted his tail to pee on the side of one of the stacks of the Very Important Papers. Oh, no, Arnie! You come here this minute! Arnold stared at Dakota. He appeared to understand her. Then he adjusted his position slightly, lifted his tail, and began to spray the other stack. Arnold was nothing if not thorough.

After securing Arnold in the bathroom, Dakota got the roll of paper towels from the kitchen counter and hurried back to Zayden's office. She dabbed the pee papers as much as possible. She thought she could place the damp papers on the floor of the office, all around the braided rug, to let them dry fully. But when she looked down at the rug, she saw that it was filthy. She vacuumed it, then began to roll it up to bring it outside to shake out. As she rolled up the rug, Dakota made a startling discovery. She saw in the floor a handle, with hinges across from it. A trap door. She wondered if some prior tenant hid valuables in the floor. She slid her index finger underneath the little silver clasp, then pulled the heavy door open.

To her surprise, she saw not a horde of gold, but rather several rows of small photo albums, their spines facing up, each spine labeled in printed black letters. Sitting cross-legged on the floor by the secret library, she picked up the first book in the first row. It was labeled "Abby" on the spine.

On the first page of the book of Abby, taped to the lined paper, was a photograph of an attractive, buxom young woman. Beneath the photo appeared the words—in text which looked to be from a typewriter—"Back seat of her father's Buick Riviera. Twice. Comfortable seats—velour. Loves kissing—no tongues. Talks too much. Gabby Abby." Below these lines of text were more lines: "Loves sports, especially football. Three times in the woods behind the stadium. Very passionate. Touchdown! Four and one-quarter stars." The detailed notes went on for some length.

From Dakota's frozen hands the book slipped back into the hole from where it had come. Dakota uttered not a word nor moved a muscle. It was as if she were in a trance. It is possible these books belong to a prior tenant. Zayden must not know these are here. Why would he? The notes appear to have been typewritten. Can Zayden even use a typewriter? I've never seen him type on one. Who still knows how to use a typewriter of all things? Yes, these must be from someone who lived here before.

But she knew. Somehow—she knew. Something about Zayden’s self-confidence. The way he walked. How he often stood on the balls of his feet, hands on his hips, grinning. His perfectly pomaded pompadour, the black hair in front swept up like a salute, flanked by slick short sides. It was all too perfect. Too controlled. Too tight. A highly varnished veneer concealing the rot within. Yes, she knew. She supposed that she had always known.

Finally, Dakota stirred, and looked into the secret library. She picked up Abby’s neighbor, the book of Alicia. She opened the photo album cover. Alicia was tall, thin, golden-haired, and bronzed-limbed. “Loves art” was the note beneath her photo. “Stuffy, uptight. Once in art gallery. Two stars.” As in Abby’s book, the notes about Alicia went on in further detail. After Alicia came Brenda, who received but one star.

After Brenda came Brianna, then Brielle, then Brooke. My God, they’re in alphabetical order. He’s *alphabetized* them! Each woman, her photos, the lurid details, the ratings. *Ratings*. After Brooke came Cassie (“five times, four and a half stars, a total volcano”). After Cassie was Christine. Then, after Christine—Dakota’s world froze. She felt the Earth stop turning on its axis. She opened the next cover, gazed upon a photo of herself in her Paganini tee, and read the words beneath: “Classical musician. Nerdy type. Submissive. Several times in the parkway. Five, maybe six times in her Subaru. Seats too small, but worth the ride. Five stars, even though I had to read that stupid book about the great composers.”

Dakota had only opened the books up to her name. To the right of where she picked up her book were books for women with names beginning with letters further up the alphabet. Dozens more notebooks in the secret library. Next to the names of some of the women were the numbers of their apartments in Dakota’s apartment building. All the way up to Stacy, Apartment 3B (“two stars”); Wanda, Apartment 4A (“a nurse, one and one-half stars”); and Valerie, Apartment 4C (“flight attendant, twice in the airport lounge after hours, four and a half stars, a firecracker”). Dakota placed all the books back, closed the secret door, and rolled the rug back in place. She cried. Then screamed. Then swore. Then cried.

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“I knew it. I just *knew*. I said he was no good,” Mary said on the phone. “That’s what I said, isn’t it? Oh, poor baby, have you been crying? *Bastard*. No, Phil, not you, for God’s sake. I wasn’t talking about you. What? No, we can’t do it tonight, for Christ’s sake, I’m on the *phone* with my sister. No, Phil, that’s not why. *Why?* Because we’re getting a *divorce*, Phil, that’s why. It’s not what divorced couples do, is it? Christ, put a sock on it! I mean—”

“Mary?” Dakota said.

“Oh, I’m so sorry, honey.”

“That’s OK,” Dakota said. She sat on the edge of her bed, patting Arnold. With her other hand, she pressed the speaker button on her smartphone, and placed it on the bed.

“You need to cut it off,” Mary said.

“The relationship?”

“No, his penis. No, Phil, not yours, *his*. Just go away, will you? Get in your Jeep and drive. I’m sorry honey, do you feel any better?”

Pulling a sock on one foot, as he hopped on the other, Phil hollered from the bedroom, well, yes, I will go for a ride in my Jeep, why not, but Dakota should just dump Zayden. Tell her to just dump him, Mary, that’s what she should do. Alright, Mary, yes, I’m going. Yes, I know it’s not what divorced people do. I mean, we’re not divorced, yet. I’ll be back later. We should talk about this, Mary. No, not about Dakota, about you and me. OK, goodbye. Just dump him, Dakota, don’t take it lying down. Don’t let him walk all over you!

After the call, Dakota decided to go for a walk for some fresh air. She stood up from the edge of the bed. She took her door keys and wallet from her nightstand. She paused, then picked up Arnold with two hands and hugged him to her chest. Arnie, my sweet boy! She carried him out of the bedroom, across the living room, and into Zayden’s office. She carefully placed Arnold on top of Zayden’s desk, next to stacks of Very Important Papers. She gently lifted Arnold’s tail.

Dakota walked out of the office, then across the living room, to the front door. I thought we’d get married someday. Have children. Grandchildren. A life. It’s all just a lie. The relationship. The future together. The love. One big, stinking, sucking wind lie. She didn’t have enough composure to compose herself. She walked out of her apartment in her blue satin pajamas and her fluffy slippers, her hair a fright. Who cares, anyway?

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In the hallway, she tried to lock her apartment door, but fumbled with the key. Although she had locked the door a thousand times, she could not remove the key from the lock. She began to cry. She slid to the floor, sobbing. After a few minutes, her neighbor across the hall, in apartment 1B, peeked his head out of his doorway.

“Ms. Dakota, you are alright? You are maybe crying?” said Mr. Bernstein.

Dakota continued to sob. Mr. Bernstein walked to her.

“Let me help you up,” said Mr. Bernstein. “Why don’t you have some tea, Ms. Dakota. My tea you always like. I will fix a nice cup. Come, come,” he said, helping her rise slowly up.

“If you wish, Ms. Dakota, I can wear a mask,” Mr. Bernstein said, “because, on the one hand, this is what news says to do.”

He walked arm in arm with Dakota into his flat.

“On the other hand, I haven’t seen no one since this bug, so with me you are safe. Of course, on one hand, who knows, what is safe? On the other hand, with me, you are safe.”

He made two cups of black tea while Dakota sat at his small round kitchen table, running an index finger back and forth on the smooth white linoleum top. She was no longer sobbing.

Mr. Bernstein didn't like too much silence.

"It's a funny thing," he said, "Edna, God rest, she loves this dinette, always. It was part of a set for a play, in the Yiddish Theater. That's how we met. She was beautiful on stage. Such an actress. Such an angel. So here it is. I keep it, this set, even though it's from maybe 1950."

Dakota did not speak.

"Sometimes, we have tea. I know, I know, yes, she's dead, God rest. But here I sit, in this chair, and we have our talks. She loves this set."

Still, Dakota did not speak.

"And then what, Ms. Dakota? You, I will tell what. I feel better, that's what's what. So, you see, Ms. Dakota, to talk is good. That is why I talk, to Edna."

Dakota looked at Mr. Bernstein. She ran the tip of her right index finger along the warm porcelain rim of the teacup as she looked at his moist, kind, ocean-blue eyes.

"Maybe to me you also talk," he said.

"Alright, Mr. Bernstein," Dakota said.

"Please, Ms. Dakota," he said, "always you call me, Mr. Bernstein. Tonight, maybe you call me, Aleksey."

"Alright, Mr. Bernstein," Dakota said.

"Good!" Mr. Bernstein said, "now we are talking."

And Dakota did talk. She talked, and she felt better. She told Mr. Bernstein—Aleksey—the whole sordid story. They had cup after cup of tea. Mr. Bernstein was glad to listen, for he had been suspicious of Zayden for some time. Zayden would holler loudly in the hallway, outside of Mr. Bernstein's apartment. Shut that stupid pug up! I'm sick and tired of your little shit dog! One afternoon, Mr. Bernstein had been taking Kugel the Pug for a walk. Kugel was behind Mr. Bernstein as he locked his apartment door. When he heard Kugel shriek horribly, he turned just in time to see Zayden lowering his boot onto the floor after, Mr. Bernstein was sure, kicking Kugel. He couldn't prove it. But he knew in his heart what kind of man Zayden was.

As they talked and drank and cried and laughed, an idea was taking hold within Dakota. Look at this man. This beautiful man. He and Edna had been married for fifty years, until Edna died. And still, he talks to her. I deserve love like that. I will find it. I will find that love. I will go out, into this world, and find where it is waiting for me. But first ...

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As did most of the apartments in Dakota's building, the door to Apartment 3B had a little wooden table next to it. On this table was a small white figurine of a ragdoll cat. Next to the cat was a stack of business cards from The Humane Society of The United States. Behind the card stack was a framed photo of a woman sitting in a room with dozens of cats. The photo was labelled, Parkway Cat Shelter.

Dakota knocked on the door, just below the name card, printed in neat, black, capital letters. **STACY ALNAUGHT**. The knock was answered by meowing. A great deal of meowing. Dakota knocked again. The only reply was meowing. The package Dakota then placed on the table was wrapped in plain brown paper. It was the size of a small photo album. Dakota slipped a note, sealed in an envelope, under the door.

There was no meowing when Dakota knocked on the door to apartment 4A. There was a little wooden table, but it was empty. There was no name on the card on the door. Only the letter W. A small round sticker next to the W said, Nurses Save Lives. Dakota knocked again. Silence. She felt a little sad. She slipped the wrapped photo book onto the table, pushed the sealed envelope under the door, and walked on.

At this point, Dakota wanted to go home. She'd just slip the photo album on the table by Apartment 4C, slide the letter under the door, and leave, without knocking. But when she arrived at 4C, there was no place to put the book. The table was full. Small snow globes covered every inch of the table. The snow globes were all labeled with exotic locales from across the globe. Bangkok. London. Paris. Venice. Wichita. Then the door opened and out stepped a tall, lean woman, in a navy-blue uniform with a blood red pinstripe, black stockings, red shoes to match the pinstripe, and a white face mask with an airplane logo. She wore a matching blue hat with a metal pin in the shape of wings. The two women looked at each other.

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"I'm Dakota, from 1A downstairs."

Valerie the flight attendant's face went white as her face mask, so white it seemed that all her blood had drained down into her red shoes.

"I don't want to keep you," Dakota said, "but I wanted to give you this."

She handed the wrapped photo album and the sealed envelope to Valerie.

"I, I don't have a lot of time," Valerie said, taking the book and envelope. "I have to catch a flight in a bit. I'm a flight attendant with Jet Bird."

"Yes, I know," Dakota said, "I read your book."

Although Valerie didn't know why, there was something about Dakota, about her face, the expression, the openness, which made her invite Dakota in. The two women sat at Valerie's kitchen dinette table. Dakota told Valerie the whole, sordid story. At the end, Dakota said, looking at the book on the table, "this one is yours, it's about you. From his secret library."

"Oh, I see," Valerie said.

Dakota pushed back the vinyl dinette chair. The metal legs squeaked on the linoleum kitchen floor.

“I hope you’ll come,” Dakota said, looking down at Valerie, still seated at the dinette table. “On Saturday. Ten o’clock.”

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“I don’t get it, babe,” Zayden said around breakfast time. He was in his pajamas, sprawled on the sofa of the apartment, watching television. He ate slices of cold pepperoni pizza, while Dakota placed napkins and small plates of snacks around the living room.

“You’ve invited the book club here, this morning? What about the germ? I mean, I don’t care, it’s mostly fake news anyway. But what about the people in the club?”

“They’ll all wear masks,” Dakota said.

“I don’t know about those snacks, though,” Zayden said. “Hummus and veggies? Olives? Fruit? I’d put out something fun, like maybe those little hot dogs, you know, the tiny ones wrapped in pastry. But it’s your show, babe.”

Zayden stood up from the sofa and walked into his office, leaving the door open.

“I’ll be in here ’till your meeting is over,” he called out to Dakota.

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At ten o’clock the doorbell rang. Several women wearing face masks stood in the hallway. Each held a book in one hand, and a plate of food in the other. Dakota ushered them in. After a few minutes or so of snacking and chitchatting, Dakota said, “well, why don’t we begin.”

“I’ll start,” a woman said after removing her face mask.

She was sitting on the sofa. She wore a black tee shirt with a picture of an open book, and the words, *If My Book Is Open, Your Mouth Should Be Shut*. She placed her plate of snacks on the coffee table. She picked up her book from the table, stood, and began reading.

“The Book of Valerie,” she read, quite loudly—nearly at the top of her voice. “She is a flight attendant, for Jet Bird airlines.”

Valerie paused for a moment in response to the loud clattering sound from Zayden’s office. Then she continued, even more loudly than before, “twice in the airport lounge, after hours. Four and a half stars.”

Again, the sound of clattering was heard, as Zayden tripped over the office trash can. Valerie remained undeterred.

“She was a firecracker. A *real* firecracker.”

Some more clattering, then Zayden appeared at the threshold of his office. He leaned heavily against the doorframe and stared silently at the group, his mouth open. Valerie sat back down on the sofa.

“I’ll go next,” another woman said.

She removed her mask, rose from the sofa, book in hand. She was short, full of figure, with closely cropped black hair. Her gray tee shirt had text above and below the picture of a puppy standing by a stack of books. The text above said, “A Woman Cannot Survive On Books Alone.” Beneath the picture was the text, “She Also Needs a Dog.”

Opening her book to the first page, she read, “The Book of Wanda ... a nurse, one and one-half stars.”

Zayden stumbled backwards into his office, tripping on the trashcan and falling onto the floor.

As the readings continued, Zayden resumed his position at the office threshold, leaning now against the doorframe to prevent himself from slumping back down to the floor. He could not have looked paler had he been a snack at Dracula’s holiday party.

There was a knock at the front door. Dakota walked over and let in Mr. Bernstein. He slowly ambulated over to Zayden.

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“I’ll tell you what, young man” Mr. Bernstein said, looking up, nose to nose with Zayden, who was several inches taller but looking down at Mr. Bernstein. “This thing you have done,” he said, his voice rising and cracking, “is a bad thing. That’s what. A bad thing. You hurt people. This we do not allow!”

Zayden winced as Mr. Bernstein spoke while holding one of the photo books in his right hand. He held the book up to Zayden’s face. “Shall I teach you Yiddish, Mr. Smarty Pants? You know what is a schmuck? You are a schmuck. You know what it means, a schmuck? It means a contemptible person is what. A *contemptible* person. That’s what’s what.”

Zayden wanted to recoil back into the office. His mind held only that one thought, a singular desire. Flight. But his limbs felt like logs. The women were staring at him. He felt as exposed as an oyster which had been shucked. And still, Mr. Bernstein went on and on, like a sad trombone.

“Also, a meshugana,” Mr. Bernstein said. “That means crazy person. Shame on you, Mr. Meshugana. Mr. Smarty Pants. Mr. Schmuck. Shame! If my Edna, God rest, were here, she’d—”

Zayden could bear this no longer. With both hands, he pushed hard against Mr. Bernstein. He wanted only to move him out of the way, so that he could flee. But so urgent was the push, Mr. Bernstein fell backwards to the floor, hitting his head with a great *whump*. Zayden was horrified. He looked down, saw blood trickling from a corner of the mouth of Mr. Bernstein, whose eyes were closed. The blood ran onto the floor as one of the book club members—Wanda, from Apartment 4A, a nurse (“one and half stars”)—bolted upright from the sofa and ran to Mr. Bernstein. She placed two fingers on one side of his neck.



After a few moments, Wanda looked up at Zayden's terrified, colorless face. She shook her head slowly from side to side. Zayden knew what this meant. Mr. Bernstein was gone. He dashed to the front door, into the hallway, and out of the apartment building. He began running along the parkway toward the subway station a few blocks down. Although the air was cool, he sweated profusely. How could this happen? To me? I had everything, everything under control. As he ran along, he thought about prison. I can't do it. I can't go. I'm too—good looking. Too boyish. I won't make it.

Back at the apartment, Mr. Bernstein began to smile, then softly chuckle. He spat out what remained of the kryolan capsule in his mouth. He'd bitten on the capsule hard when Zayden pushed him. Mr. Bernstein's saliva then mixed with the powdered fake stage blood in the capsule and the liquid had run out of his mouth.

"Let me help you up," Wanda said, as Mr. Bernstein began to rise from the floor.

"Oh, I'm fine, thank you, fine. What a show! I wish my Edna was here to see. This she should see. She was so beautiful, you know, on the stage. The Yiddish Theater. Do you know it? Edna, she was a beauty. Me, not so much."

"Oh, Mr. Bernstein," Dakota said, "you're the most beautiful man I know."

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Nearing the subway station, Zayden knew he had to escape far from the City. He could never return. He would flee to a faraway place, change his name, never look back.

There would be new bistros, new bookstores, new women in a new place.

It was springtime. Running along at full tilt, his heart near to bursting, Zayden looked up. The tree limbs had exploded into a leafy dark green canopy, which, on this windy day, hissed softly as a snake.

\*





clockwise  
Kim Keough

# at no time soon

Judith Mikesch McKenzie

Someday, not soon, we'll have a house with a wide porch  
and a ceiling of white-painted boards above solid  
square pillars at the front rail -

a place of cool shade during hot mountain days. When we  
find that place, not soon, I'll paint the broad boards  
of its floor a pale grey,

like the clouds over the Rockies in the springtime, or the  
soft fur of the kitten that died in my hands one  
summer when I was too young

to know the bite of betrayal clothed as simple disregard.  
Grief for that kitten wrapped around me, I walked  
to my parent's porch, my

stockinged feet slipping down the grey boards to comfort  
and the safety of the deep-cushioned chairs  
in the far corner, dark and cool

and as always and always in that place, the sense which may  
someday (not soon) return to my heart that there  
are places safe from the evil

in the street, safe from the ones who haunt the marble halls  
where the pain we feel is just a card in a deck  
stacked against us

safe from the ones who cannot see the way that some  
moments shimmer, when fingers stroke the fur of  
a motionless kitten,

setting it to rest down in soil, alone and very deep and  
dark, without ever having had the  
chance to breathe.



# on whitefish lake

Judith Mikesch McKenzie

We arrive in that border-time between twilight and dusk, the cabin a deep soft blanket of lamplight against the blue of the lake.

A cloud of fireflies dances against the darkling sky, inviting out the bashful stars to come and quickstep with the evening.

Among the fireflies Irene moves soft and quiet, her wide skirt swirling as her hands sweep slowly until one firefly is

in the cage of her fingers, spaced wide so that she can bend down to show us the magic of light and life in one body, and

so we can see it dance free as she opens her hand.

*She has never brought us here before  
never before let children into her haven, where everything  
speaks of her. There is never an announcement when she returns to the  
valley, just her sudden presence, in colorful jewelry and clothes  
made of fibers that sing of far places. She'll tell stories around our dinner  
table and then she and our mother sit in the kitchen  
or on the porch till well after dark, and she is gone when we wake, and,  
for a few days, our mother is happier.*

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The two women carry inside the food they've packed, while we stand still under the fireflies, hands reaching up and up,

hoping for just one luminous creature to visit our hands. Inside the cabin soft yellow light glows into every corner,

every chair cushion and knit wrap accompanied by a festival of words, a beautiful precise chaos of paper, of books and notes

cushioned in love of story and sound, all scattered with a kind of tender abandon on the floorboards, windowsills, and not too

near to the bricks of the hearth, where she settles for a moment to start a fire, then the two of them sink into chairs

on the screen porch overlooking the lake, and we settle each into corners that beckon, sinking into the comfort of cotton-down

and words, lit by the glow of fireflies dancing outside the window beneath the shy stars.



# customs declaration

Mel Edden

It began with a banana.  
No, a wedding, I suppose.  
Well, friendship, actually.

Sniffer dogs found it  
at BWI late one night.  
A CBP officer in blue

escorted me, somberly,  
to 'Secondary Inspection'.  
Honesty was my downfall:

*Do you have any other food?  
Um, I have some Oxo cubes?  
We'll have to take those...*

No mad cows allowed  
(even in cute little cubes  
of crumbly bouillon).

Thank the gourmet gods  
I thought to extract the  
recipe, lovingly printed

and packaged with Oxo  
- such a fitting favor  
from a couple who cook.

I make that casserole  
every year, in tribute  
of my night of crime



## the fish camp at amberjack junction

Linda Kraus

Locals swill sweet tea and beer, oblivious  
to the chatty tourists looking for Georgia  
picaresque. Caught in local waters that morning,  
the shrimp are so fresh they writhe on cue  
when pierced. Ubiquitous signs extol grits,  
peach marmalade, pralines and hog for sale.  
Our buxom servers, clad in scanty halter tops  
and tight high-cut shorts, offer low-country  
fare with accents so thick they should be bottled.  
Gaiety abounds: fresh fish, perhaps available sex.  
This is a state with a tacit creed: "Deliverance"  
was not an aberration, a misstep. Anyone who  
wanders into its white waters will face a primal  
response, decades-entrenched in Georgia clay.  
The lessons of obedience are unspoken here.  
Hatred washes down easily with sweet tea  
and that legendary peach pie, which is amazing.



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# chronic

Phillip E. Repko

Water drips in some locations every time it rains,  
But not in all, and not in some  
No matter when the weather comes  
And drenches here but quenches there  
And chronic is the incidence;

Erosion is the consequence -  
And moisture is a metaphor for Faith.

No, not exactly what you thought I'd say,  
Confronted with the pestilence of drought  
To flip the script, with bearing stripped  
And slowly eat away at nagging doubt.  
If water serves in layered ways  
A proxy for belief, but strays  
As easily transforms, as though to shout,  
That chronic means no respite, ever -  
Life and death rely together.  
--- And yes, "so much depends..."



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# acute

Phillip E. Repko

The onset had no harbinger:  
Beneath a geriatric chestnut tree  
The skies erupted with an avalanche  
Of sentiment, refreshing in intensity  
And icy cold, but warm enough  
To drench the soil - parched throughout  
Many months, and stalked by drought.

Flash floods raised danger shoulder high  
Impromptu streams careening,  
Making beelines for the other side of tranquil.  
One moment all was lounging on a porch  
Rocking gently but without diversion.  
The next, alarms cast dire shouts  
Of imminent demise. Some shielded eyes.

Then just as quickly all the lightning  
Returned to the winsome bottle.  
What is sharp, and quick, and lethal  
May at any time, it seems, evaporate.  
The stately tree, as unsuspecting as a child,  
Savaged by the blitz, the sturm und drang,  
Groaned, and was uprooted with a sigh.





# pot-au-feu

JL Huffman

There is little meat on the gaunt pauper's bones, or the cheap chop he haggled for at the market, his mesh bag meager with limp cabbage and stiff bread, his contribution to the community pot fed with whatever trimmings he and his hovel-mates can acquire. Last week he poured in a pint bag of barley; yesterday, a garlic clove and a snared pigeon; tomorrow, perhaps an onion or carrot. Creek water or stale ale dilute the mess; the perpetual stew sputters over an always burning smudgy campfire.

Upon the hill, a warm stone manor squats. The cook and his helper trundle home a cart-load laden with provisions from the morning market for the owner's meal, a sumptuous cassoulet prepared in a thick earthenware pot and baked in a wood oven. A rigid recipe: Haricot beans shelled, soaked, and simmered with an amalgamation of meats, a chopped, seared, and stewed mix of sausage, pork mutton, and preserved goose, seasoned with aromatic herbs and garlic, served with freshly baked bread, a fine wine.

mélange of protein  
mirepoix and vegetables  
starch-stitched and stewed



## potatoes

Diane Funston

Potatoes every day of childhood  
Peeled and boiled  
Mashed on Sundays only  
the hand potato masher  
against the big aluminum pot  
that male hands had to hold  
so it stayed on the Formica table

The old octopus furnace  
with the center-door mouth  
potatoes swaddled in tinfoil  
slid in to the flame  
burped out perfectly later on

Potato pancakes flipped  
in the cast iron fry pan  
golden and crisp  
The thin-sliced potato chips  
a treat because they took  
time and precision  
with the paring knife I still have  
The chips were sprinkled  
with a surprise  
of sugar instead of salt

German-fried potatoes  
with blackened onions  
and black pepper  
cooked in bacon grease  
the bacon itself an afterthought  
to get that velvety fat  
kept in a can in the ice box

I asked my grandfather  
who always made the potatoes  
“what makes them German-fried potatoes”  
“Because I make them” he winked  
and we shared another treat  
potato salad with slices of egg  
like perfect days sunny side up



## the nerve

Diane Funston

My pickup was named Fiona  
Bright red, because my ex  
said I wouldn't have the nerve.  
The men at the dump ogled her,  
whistled, called her beautiful.  
Built, stacked well  
with the green waste I dropped off,  
they even helped when  
I unloaded the ex's golf clubs  
called out, “Hey darlin let me  
help you with that”

Now Fiona lives out her days  
at my son's farm up north.  
We have downsized to one vehicle.  
A staid gold small suv  
no one ever comments on.  
But back in the desert, old dirt roads  
ruts and washboards,  
in and out of the cab  
collecting rocks  
on the dry lake bed  
gravel spinning off those big tires...

I left those dirt roads years ago  
been on pavement ever since  
I've never been afraid of red  
My blood  
My sex  
My heart  
An exclamation point  
on the road  
spilled paint, road kill, rose petals,

the insides  
of the poet.



dna results  
finding out who  
my dad wasn't

Eavonka

dna results  
Eavonka Ettinger

# mildo's tale

Joseph Corrado

## Prologue

Mildo's Tale is chapter 29 in *Zeus Alone*, a twenty-second century hero's quest that requires a seven-week long trip to Mars aboard the starship S.S. Ajax. The passengers gather on Sunday evenings for dinner in the Captain's quarters and to share their personal tales—a latter day return to Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*.

Mik Sturm, is the narrator of the book and the reluctant hero travelling in disguise as Ace Bing Wong, a wealthy Martian miner who is returning to his home planet. He is accompanied by Venna and Dagg. Dagg has two charges (donzi): Thule, a giant grey squirrel, and Avicenna, a miniature Persian leopard.

Mildo Didyma is a male phid, a Mars-born human genetically altered for the Martian environment. Mildo, like Mik, is an employee of Centroid Logics. Mesoo Temper, a female phid, is the Second Lieutenant and Co-pilot of the S. S. Ajax and the ship's cook. Mesoo's consort is Apollo. Jessup is Ace Bing Wong's son. The name of the mobile holosim steward is Ajax.

Olympus City is the main Mars settlement. Mars Core and Centroid Logics and other corporations are located there. Lornga is a frontier camp on Mars—a suburb of Olympus City nestled in the foothills of Mount Olympus. Alpha Base is the primary base on Luna (the Moon).

\*\*\*

I resumed my long hikes through the twisting Ajax tunnels, often with Thule and Avicenna along. Dagg taught me the org word to ask them to stay by my side, but usually I told them “go-go” and watch them run and leap with animal exuberance. As we drew closer to Mars, time collapsed into itself like a portable telescope. And it was Saturday again and I was walking along an aft passageway that led to the mini-garden and pool, a favorite for me and the donzi. My thoughts turned to the Captain's dinner tomorrow, and the storyteller, sober and silent Mildo. The glint of the rim of a cam peeping through the Grape47 leaves caught my eye and diverted me to remembering just how many surveil devices Ajax had everywhere. It was disturbingly easy to forget since they were mostly well concealed and very small. The old maxim, “out of sight, out of mind” came to mind.

I spun my comm to Ace files to retrieve some pics of his son, Jessup. From previous study, I knew that Mildo and Jessup were almost the same age when they attended a Taekwondo class together in Olympus City. I had a face match with the young Mildo in a couple of pics with Ace and Jessup. The last pic I had of Ace and Jessup, before Jessup died, showed Mildo and Jessup dressed in their red Taekwondo doboks with black belts. Ace's face beamed with pride, his arm around Jessup's shoulders. How much would Mildo remember about me? Would he remember things about me or Jessup that were not covered in my files? The Grape47 leaves trembled as I briskly rounded a bend in the passageway.

Directly ahead, I saw Thule and Avicenna sitting by the small pool. One of the reclining benches turned, and Mesoo Temper, curled like a sleeping cat, smiled at me. I stumbled forward in surprise. She was dressed in a provocative phid manner with only iridescent bub cups, short pants, and heavy boots that extended to her taut calves. "There you be... my favorite guest," she called out louder than necessary as she jumped to her feet and walked over, her hands on her slender swaying hips. "Why you never give me winks at Captain table? You say you have big fun with me and Besoo that night with Zeus play."

I couldn't tell if she was really indignant or just messing with me. "Haa! Haa! Be so what?" I tried my derisive Ace laugh.

"My big twin sis, Besoo. You be forgetin' her and me and you that night with Zeus play? You be a node digger!" She boldly slapped my codpiece and I recoiled in surprise. Avicenna growled low and Thule crouched for a jump, but I waved them to sit and told them everything was phat.

"You...you be talkin' that hot night in Zeus Chamber with you and her and ...?" I tried to bluster as I backed away.

"Yeah, that be the time. But now me think you brain be smaller than you prong for you be forgetin' our hot play. Next, you be forgetin' all me hot eats on this tub for you big mouth." She stepped forward and slapped my codpiece again.

I had not given Ace's membership in the Olympus Cluster much thought. I had zip data on his visits to Zeus' Chamber, where no surveillance was permitted. It seemed that my only good option at this point was to act like I was still recuperating my mojo after my long medical treatment on Earth. So I told her that I wasn't completely myself yet, but my mojo was getting bigger every day, and we should meet up at Zeus' Chamber soon after we land. Mesoo's face was expressionless and then her grey lips parted in a broad smile. She reached out in a flash and pulled my head down to her deep cleavage until her bubs caressed my cheeks and her caramel scent filled me up in fast mode. My cheeks burned and I imagined that I had fallen into two big scoops of warm *crème brulee*.

"There you be talkin' now," she softly hissed in my ear. "You and me and Besoo and Apollo at Zeus play again. You be ready for hot play...maybe you and Apollo fight for me even." Then, just as forcefully as she had drawn me to her, she pushed me away as if I had pleased her and she was now done with me for a time. "Do not be forgetin' me, big Wong," she hissed again with a coy smile. She pushed passed me, her taught phid body brushing against me, and disappeared around a turn in the tunnel.

I called to Thule and Avicenna who had witnessed all of this in their brute innocence. As we hiked leisurely back to our quarters, I pondered how the non-judgmental, but emotionally-invested donzi might remember my encounter with Mesoo compared to how Ajax would evaluate and classify and store all the inputs from cams and comms. It seemed clear that the donzi would have care for me connected to their memories. But the cores only had probability computations for their emotional response algorithms. Ajax could care less whether my feelings had been hurt or not.

Then, next day, I was joining my fellow travelers for another dinner and story. I made a point of winking at Mesoo when she entered with Apollo and the Captain. She looked straight at me but gave no signal of recognition. As usual, Ajax announced the menu for the evening. "Uh hum, ladies and gentlemen, back by popular demand, Chef Temper has again prepared a marvelous *Coq au Vin* with Mama's Real chicken in a French Burgundy..."

"Thank you, Ajax," the Captain interrupted as she waved the servile sim away and motioned to the server bot.

When the bot disgorged my plate, what was piled on it did not look or smell like what I remembered of that first Sunday dinner. Instead of an aroma of onions, celery, wine and thyme with real chicken, the smell was distinctly hot plexo. The gravy was cold and thin. The chicken pieces smaller and chewier like old under-cooked escargot. The bluish-green, crumbly dinner rolls were made from coarsely ground Grape47 seeds and Zeus alone knew what else. There were no plates of cheese. The "red wine" was simply a cool reddish liquid with a hot plexo bouquet. The gritty Grape47 pound cake and unconvincing coffee at the end added insult to the main course injury—altogether a disappointing dinner, even by Ace's minimal standards.

Conversation around the table seemed to dwindle in response to the demands the dinner made on our digestion. It was like being released from bondage when the Captain broke the listless chatter by announcing that it would only be a couple more weeks before arrival at Olympus City and some real hydopon vegetables. We all murmured approval of that prospect. Then she called on Mildo Didyma to tell his story.

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The tall, muscular phid towered over us when he stood. His copper-colored skin dimly reflected the flickering flames in the faux candle sconces along the walls. His pale blue owl eyes fixed on each of us in turn.

"My story be inside another story," he said in a deep and soft voice, "like sometimes a Zeus Stone be inside a Mars stone." He fiddled the projector and the sim resolved to a scene of a birthday party for a young phid next to two Earth humans, a male and fem. Mildo explained that his parents were among the first Mars settlers to adopt the genetic program for birthing Mars-adapted humans. Then came scenes of him romping and wrestling with other naked phid males and fems in an Olympus Cluster first school warming room. He noted that almost all of his boyhood friends had been phids living in Lornga. Until he was about twelve, the only humans he had known were his parents and a few of his friends' parents.

There were several vid clips of him as a young adolescent at the Taekwondo studio in Olympus City. And sure enough, there was an extended vid of Mildo in a sparring match with Jessup. Mildo looked at me and said "Mr. Wong, you be remembering how Jessup lost that night but still we be always tight grabs after that?" I nodded as if I did, and then cast my eyes down and distracted myself wondering about the probability of the five large Grape47 biscuit crumbs arranged like Rigel and Betelgeuse, and Alnitak, Alnilam and Mintaka in Orion's belt on my plate.

When I looked up, a vid from the Taekwondo match showed the husky young Mildo brandishing his trophy as his smiling parents looked on. Then he was smiling next to Jessup and Ace, back slapping and smiles all around.

In his early years, all he learned about Earth was mostly from vids that showed violence, poverty, drought, and environmental decline on the over-heated “mother planet.” He recited one of the first lessons he learned when he started on BrainTrain in first school: “A: More heat is good for Mars. B: More heat is good for Earth. A or B?” With lament in his voice, he said that he wished he had learned more about Earth before he left Mars.

Next were vid clips of a stout Mildo bidding farewell to his parents as he boarded a shuttle in Olympus City for his first trip to Earth. Mildo elaborated that he was fortunate to have parents who could afford to send him away to ApexU all the way back on Earth—a venture that both excited and frightened him. He was one of the first phids to leave Mars for study in Etude, and he knew that many Earth humans would see him as a genetic abomination and shun him.

Then there was Mildo strolling through the ApexU campus, gawking at the trees and mesmerized by Apex Fountain, the “biggest water” he had ever experienced. Then, scenes of his early years at Centroid Logics, and his work with core upgrades at Centroid Hubs, which led to work on Earth Core projects, which led to his latest work on Centroid’s Mars Core contract.

He described Mars Core as essentially a clone of Earth Core. Each had 2048-qubit processors for solving large optimization and probability problems. Each had advanced inference engines and neural-networks. Each had inner cores with identical prime directives and value definitions. Each had the same code for machine-learning, natural-language processing, and emotion-detection/interpretation. And each was autonomous but supervised by its own council of humans: the One Councils on Earth and Mars. But Mildo claimed that Mars Core was unique. Of course, it had environmental adjustments for Martian conditions. But more, Mars Core had become instantiated as a secular religious deity that was virtually present through its sensor and projector array in Zeus Chamber in Lornga. He turned and looked at me, as if for confirmation, “For Olympians, Zeus Chamber be our most warm space and there Zeus be more than just the name of Mars Core.”

Mildo paused. Muffled throbs of the Ajax engine was the only sound. Then in a sad tone, he confided that his trip to Mars with us was to meet with some of his old friends to learn more about recent conflicts and how they might be connected with Mars Core functioning. A brawl between phids and non-phid humans erupted in our midst. The vid showed three young male phids fighting with three older non-phid males at the *Poor Joe’s Olde Pub* in Lornga. There was shouting and yelling and name-calling and then obscene gestures and racial slurs and pushing and shoving then hitting followed by yells of pain and crashing furniture. The physically dominant phids yelled that the “fat Earthies” should go back to their “feeble hot rock.” The old men, early Mars settlers, taunted them as “pervids” and “tunnel bugs” and “feckin tunnel slime.” The fight at *Poor Joe’s* was followed by scenes of destructive demonstrations by phid miners in Lornga. Then vids of phid versus non-phid fights in warehouses at Alpha Base, where focal razors had killed three “Earthies” and maimed several more. Mildo mentioned that there were growing rumors of a “Mars Mafia” doing shakedown at VAR dens and food carts in Lornga, and a cabal of radical phids planning for a “pure Mars” where only phids could be legal residents.

Mildo made a slow, low rumbling sound that startled Loong and Tup. In a slow, measured voice, he resumed. “Phids be humans like all humans. My parents be Earth humans, and I be a phid human—a Mars human.” He continued saying that what makes humans human is that only

humans care for each other. The bots don't care about humans except to obey them. And they don't care about each other. Only humans have the power of striving for caring.

Mildo paused again. Dull throbbing punctuated the silence. Abruptly, he projected ApexU vids again. "Now, here be the story inside my story," he continued. The vids showed him in his dorm room, shortly after arriving from Mars. They showed him talking with fellow students on campus and in various Etude haunts. In a couple of vids, he boasted about his much-coveted study contract with Centroid. He had been one of only seven phids at ApexU, and one short vid showed him sparring with six, similar-looking phid males at the campus gym.

In a somber tone, he said he had much difficulty relating to the human fem students in his first year at Apex. One night, after a weekend party, he said he was too aggressive and uninhibited in his advances, and his young fem companion accused him of sexually assaulting her. The distressed fem reported the affair to her faculty mentor who reported it to the university's Office of Student Discipline, or "OSDodious" as it was often called by students.

Mildo was arrested by campus police and summoned to appear before the full OSD Council. They voted to expel him and release his case records to the police for filing criminal charges. But ApexU President, Dr. Alice Wonder, an old friend of Aunt Kitty, sang out and interceded for him, and asked the Council to nullify their decision and leave the final judgment to her. They agreed.

**80** President Wonder told Mildo that he could redeem himself only if he continued to be diligent in his studies, and if he abstained from sexual relations with any fem until he can answer what it is, after the Tilt, that women most desire. She gave Mildo one year to find the answer. After that, he must return to the OSD Council to present his answer and receive final judgment on his case. Mildo agreed.

Because of his exceptional appearance and cunning smile, Mildo found it easy to meet many Earth fems. So, everywhere he went, he asked many women what they most desired. To his dismay, he received many different answers: riches to play, jewels to wear, unlimited clothes, sexual pleasure, frequent flattery, unhindered freedom, or even VAR game fame. There was no apparent pattern in the responses, and he became more confused as the year ran out. What had seemed like a simple question with a quick answer now bound him like a Gordian knot. He could find no sword like the Great Alexander's that could slice through to an answer.

The night before he had to appear again before the OSD Council, Mildo met his Earth fem friend, Angela Bath, at her campus apartment. She was a fellow classmate who had started at Apex the same time he had. To relax and ease his mind, she proposed that they play FORkU, an exploratory VAR party game to distract him from his anguish and growing panic. It was a simple game that made the players choose forks on a path of sensual delights. Mildo worried about wasting his few remaining hours playing a parlor game when he still had not decided on an answer to Dr. Wonder's puzzle. But he finally agreed to take a break, and he and Angela entered FORkU.

Mildo found himself hiking in the thick woods around Etude. Ahead, a large group of young, healthy fem phids were dancing and singing in their energetic manner. But as he drew closer, the



beautiful fems seemed to vanish into the bushes and trees, their laughter and singing carried away in the breeze. He turned a bend in the path and came upon an old Earth fem with a twisted, scared face, and a voice like Angela's, but raspy.

The revolting hag asked him what he was seeking. So Mildo said he was looking for the answer to the question: *what do women now most desire?* The hag cackled and wheezed and told him that she would tell him the answer. But he must first make love to her and pretend that he is her consort. She fell into the soft grass, her twisted bony arms outstretched to him. She saw that Mildo was repulsed by her horrid appearance and unsure what to do. She reminded him that her unfortunate looks could be an asset—she would be a virtuous consort for him because no other man would find her desirable.

Then the path he was standing on forked like a snake that split in half, and each fork crawled toward different points on the hazy horizon. “Now you fork this,” she wheezed. What would he prefer? An old ugly woman who is loyal, true and humble? Or... a young woman whose stunning beauty and vibrancy and lustiness would feed his inevitable doubts about her faithfulness?

Mildo, wary and weary, abandoned his usual dominant chi, and desperately answered that the choice was hers. “Whatever you want,” he told her. The hag cackled and cracked a crooked smile when she heard his answer. Then she said that he had now answered the very question that he put to her. “Yes,” the hag cackled, “now, women most desire sovereignty over their lovers and consorts. So, now kiss me softly...and perhaps you will find both beauty and fidelity.”

Mildo slowly bent to kiss the toothless hag and before his eyes, she morphed into a young, lovely woman with the features and manners of his friend Angela. But before their lips met, her face dissolved to black and the exit tone sounded. When he removed his VAR cap, he was kneeling over Angela sprawled on her shag rug. She reached out and gently pulled his mouth to hers. Believing that he finally had the answer he was seeking, Angela convinced him that he was no longer bound by his vow of abstinence. So that night, they made long love on Angela's shag rug.

The next day, Mildo told President Wonder and the OSD Council that post-Tilt women most desire sovereignty over their lovers and consorts. Dr. Wonder and the whole Council (mostly composed of old women), unanimously agreed that this answer was true. Then Angela called out from the student gallery and said that she knows the true Mildo and that he was now worthy to be her consort. Mildo was reinstated as an ApexU student with full privileges. The sexual harassment case was expunged in consideration of his youth and unique cultural background and Mars-focused brain training.

Mildo flipped to a vid of a beautiful, dark-skinned woman dancing in the Hall of Artemis at the Luna Ritz. He said that his beautiful consort, Angela, now lives with him at Alpha Base. He said that he lives in confidence that he can satisfy all her desires, and has been favored by Zeus to be free of his early ways of forking on Mars.

Mildo snapped his comm and the sim deflated. He turned slowly toward me and withdrew a ring from his belt pouch. A large red jewel flashed in my eyes. It was cut like a quadrilateral pyramid, its apex almost two centimeters above its base, mounted on a broad band of what

looked like polished tungsten carbide. Mildo leaned over and handed me the ring. "Mr. Wong, please accept. This be the ring that Jessup gives me many years ago in the days of Taekwondo together. It be a perfect Zeus Stone, so the apex be directly above the base centroid. So this be how it glows so hot. Jessup it be who pass this fire to me with strong care. Now the promise of the ring be true. His care come back to you."

All eyes were suddenly on me as I slipped the ring on my finger and flashed it. I was amazed how the tip of the stone glowed intermittently like a red-hot ember fanned by an occasional breeze. I'd seen hi-res pics of small Zeus Stones, but nothing like this flashing gem. I knew I could not be cavalier or seem unappreciative, but Ace words failed me. So I just smiled my big Ace smile and put my arm around Mildo's shoulders, and fixed his eyes and said "This be reet good passing this ring. It be Zeus smiling on you and Jessup and... me now. Woot. Woot. Woot." Everyone joined in with energetic applause for Mildo who seemed to be wearing a perpetual smile mask. After many *oohs* and *ahhs* over the ring, I finally managed to push my way past the clot of admirers, gave a Starclass salute to Mildo and a dip to the Captain, and almost cart wheeled out the cabin door with three more big woots.



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time of your life  
GJ Gillespie

# vicious circle

RC deWinter

I woke with the ghosts of leftovers  
sulking on my tongue, a sweetsour olio  
of yesterday's food. Yesterday's songs.  
Yesterday's news. Yesterday's life.

I haven't remembered a dream  
since I don't know when  
and my imagination's vacationing  
in an unspecified location.

I'm hungry for something different.  
Something new. Something unexpected.  
But life's been selfish with surprises;  
the hope chest in my chest holds nothing  
but the dust of shredded dreams  
and wishes that never came true.

If I were handy with dynamite  
I'd blow myself back to go but with my luck  
I'd just be missing a foot or an eye  
and be the same old me, only worse.

If I had any money I'd toss an arrow  
at a map and go there. But my pockets  
are as empty as that chest so I guess I'm stuck  
unless a I have a brainstorm.

With my luck that would be a stroke, so...  
so much for that. And now I'm hungry.  
I guess I'll raid the refrigerator  
with its own collection of leftovers, and,  
tying on a picture hat a la Scarlett O'Hara,  
remember tomorrow is another day, dammit.



# unloading the truck

RC deWinter

nobody with a working brain  
expects life to be a party every day  
but this sad troubled world  
is the hottest mess it's ever been

literally

icebergs give up the ghost daily  
as irregular chunks cry kamerad  
falling into rising seas  
polluted with a pharmacopeia  
of industrial poison and enough plastic  
to manufacture warehouses full of legos

that bracing sea breeze you're breathing  
carries a toxic stew of pollutants  
and the wildfires raging across the west  
throw the ghosts of what they burn  
into the invisible greenhouse we're building  
5km up in that sunny blue sky

and let's not get into the groundwater  
still carrying the toxic runoff of foundries  
built before anyone gave a thought  
to the health of our only home  
but just ask people whose taps pour flames  
instead of h2o thanks to all that fracking  
how that's working for them

and on top of all this we have the usual  
death and destruction of war accidents  
and disease with the added bonus of  
a rapidly-evolving virus hungry for flesh

is it any wonder the churches are full  
as crowds flock to jesus in record  
numbers  
praying singing and filling collection  
baskets  
with money he doesn't need  
because let's face it  
anyone who can turn water into wine  
doesn't deal in transactional currency

but jesus has had enough  
and i have it on good authority  
he took the redeye to catalina  
for a little offshore r&r  
and isn't expected back anytime soon

i could go on about species die-off  
the persistence of trophy hunting  
the increasing number of homeless  
black ops torture chambers in full swing  
animal cruelty  
the trafficking of children  
the neverending river of oxycontin  
etc

but if you haven't gotten my drift by now  
you never will



# close encounters

Jerome Berglund

The pistol surprised me.

I'd been smacking my lips when I saw it shakily pointed from the passenger seat. The hand holding the thing was clearly inexperienced at wielding such a momentous instrument too, at first glance evinced palpable nervousness which did not instill confidence, begged immediate attention and serious consideration therefore.

I had not heard the car door open, been zoning out in distraction about the parking lot of the strip mall, lost in thought until the interloper roused me. These new psyche meds dried my mouth out; I would rather not be taking them, but had little choice in the matter. But the prescription left me chronically drowsy and inert, prone to languid, dreamlike lethargies which could adversely affect situational awareness. The perils of such slowness on the uptake, in a feral Arizonan city such as this, I was becoming painfully cognizant of in consequence.

I blinked foggy eyes and turned a matted head to regard this new guest my carelessness, the failure to secure adjacent locking mechanisms had invited into my ambit – as the lagging beast trailing behind its herd signals apex predators like a beacon, invites their company, gains preferred treatment in lieu of more unwieldy quarries.

86 “Out,” the young man insisted firmly, jamming the firearm up against my temple. With eyes slowly focusing, scanning this new scene, I observed the piece with some detached interest. It looked small caliber, conceivably a .22.. The revolver was small, black and ugly, with a medium sized barrel and a hammer which thankfully had not been cocked yet—for I was not entirely convinced in its handler's ability to depress the thing again without discharging a round.

The gun's owner matched his weapon well enough, by my assessment. Long, straggly hair dangled down to his shoulders, held into place crudely under a black stocking cap. Light stubble decorated, strove vainly to make his childlike face an iota any more intimidating. Indeed, the young man's jumpiness, his antsy skittish discomfort in effecting this brazen highwayman routine — *something I got the feeling he was entirely outside his element, a sheer notice at perpetrating* — was probably the most motivating factor in inspiring cooperation and compliance on my part. However, suffice to say, it was far from wholly convincing.

Sluggishly my mind groaned complaining into motion, and began making calculations. “Now listen,” I said, eyes trained on the black hole just below the front sight. “If you steal this car, I'm going to have to report that.” This boy was holding that arm very far from his body. You weren't supposed to do that... a person with quick reflexes might make a play, get their own around yours and snatch the strap from you in one fell swoop if they were really speedy gonzalez. I regretted this current sedating, having dropped out of martial arts decades earlier with not the foggiest recollection of the gist of executing such handy disarming maneuvers.

The slugs the biscuit contained were believably reasonably harmless from a distance, should they merely wing a person glancing in some mild flesh wound, but at close quarters well-aimed,

point blank by comparison delivered to the head or vital organs, such an injury could quite plausibly prove fatal or at the very least severely injurious. So negotiation seemed the best tack to pursue, I estimated fuzzily. “But this hunk of junk,” I continued. “You can’t possibly *want* it sincerely, even for scrap.” The young person listened without comment, breathing heavily, waiting for the pitch. The barrel bobbed and meandered in an alarming pattern, as the gaze back of it warily considered, a bit of uncertainty appearing in those baby blues. “I’ll hazard to guess you need to get somewhere, and once your errands are completed you’ll be dumping this whatever convenient place for future collection by the impound.”

The boy tapped his foot impatiently, allowing his incentivizer to lower ever so slightly provisionally, out of view of any pedestrian traffic which might catch sight of this exchange and mediation in progress, as they made their way to and from vehicles carrying oddments to vend or which they had procured at the swap meet just adjacent, depending on which direction they were headed. “Now if you deprive me of my conveyance, you’ll give no *choice* but to set the law on your tail, which shall limit your ability to navigate these dusty roads unmolested, without one eye constantly on the rearview, watching your six. While that lends perhaps a sense of adventure — *you look like the cowboy sort, an adrenaline junky perhaps* — it also presents a very real possibility for apprehension.”

“Yeah, sure,” the kid said, waving the gun in a circular fashion to indicate I wrap it up. “So what are you proposing?” I paused, marshaling my rarely tapped negotiation capabilities.

“Well, if you just need a ride around town, I have no other pressing obligations this afternoon or evening. Would be happy to chauffeur you around, assuming it doesn’t mean acting the accessory in any business too *crimey*.” The young man considered this a few seconds, weighing the options with growing exasperation.

“*Fine*, I guess that will work,” he spat, sighing, and slid the weapon into an improvised holster on his tan boot. “Let’s get this show on the road then,” he said authoritatively. Shaking off my mental cobwebs, I assented, slamming the ancient red Dodge into gear, glancing over my shoulder as I backed out of the spot, slowly eased into motion toward the exit onto the main drag.

Glancing right I discerned an extended hand, which with mild surprise I perfunctorily gave a little dip. “Duncan,” he said offhanded. “Joe,” I supplied, eyes on the road. “So where to, friend?” Considering the immediate threat’s removal, I pondered cracking him with the back of a fist, how difficult it might be to reach past the bony frame to get the door handle depressed, what shoving or kicking him out onto the roadside would entail. But a part of me was getting mildly interested in studying how this played out.

“Kimberly Ghettos,” he murmured, scanning the route for cruisers imaginably, someone I might get a mind to flag down. I smirked though, instead, knowingly Duncan perhaps perceived.

“I guessed as much.” The assailant’s eyebrows raised just a scooch. He was leaning down, digging through a diminutive army knapsack I hadn’t noticed before by his feet. The young man glanced up threateningly, realizing his eyes had been off me, he figured, a few moments too long.

“No funny stuff,” Duncan added, trying for commanding.

“Wouldn’t think of it,” I said, though still in fact considering it thoughtfully. And of course, out came the heroin, propane lighter, tin foil, straw. Duncan, with admirable prowess, fired up a base hit, glanced over at my lack of scandalizing by his impropriety. “Can you keep that down?” I asked at last, feeling almost expected to interpose something to that effect.

“Piss off,” he hissed, taking visible thinly disguised pride in gaining the desired rise out of me. Then, thinking better of it, he inquired: “You know anybody wants to buy some of this?” Duncan stared back insipidly hopeful. But after meditating on it, I disappointed him with a slow shake of my head.

“No one around these parts. The only ones I can think of might indulge are halfway across the country, lost their digits ages ago.”

“Well that’s a shame,” the younger man said, packing his paraphernalia neatly back away into its tidy compartments. We drove in silence the rest of the way, until pulling onto the familiar entrance road leading to a section eight housing project on the outskirts of town. I looked the lot over, having not been out this way in the daylight for some few years now. Not much seemed to have changed. Certain places appear to remain frozen in their sloppy, primeval states of nascent disorder. Jalopies in various conditions of disrepair peppered the parking lot. A few androgynous whelps in shorts or overalls bounded across the grass chasing each other. Some juveniles lazily tossed a pigskin back and forth. The lower half of a hayseed’s anatomy was sticking out from beneath his dilapidated wreck bleeding old oil down into a drain pan. We passed a small assembly carting fishing tackle on their way to a nearby hole, to try their luck with those mythical Apache trout it evidently offered but rarely paid out.

Duncan directed me to pull into a secluded corner of the guest area, after vain balking on my part succeeded in relieving me of the car keys rather than taking my wallet as collateral to ensure I did not bolt. After effusively promising I would remain in the vehicle, not attempt any beckoning for help or the law’s intervention, my hostage taker trotted in to re-up with his connection, left me to my own devices with the windows cranked down to somewhat mitigate the Indian Summer’s oppressive heat.

I spent the wait lost in thought and reminiscences, staring across the yards at a certain window I knew well from my awkward adolescence, thinking of the blonde, middle aged exhibitionist who used to reside there, the shows she would put in in her birthday suit for the sundry townies privy to this predilection, who regularly amassed in the shadows to watch the strip-teases play out predictably from their windows at the penny arcade. The tree cover and bushes beneath that third floor balcony had made for a sticky mess of groundlings, glaring jealously at one another, keeping their distance in the rural jet blackness, somewhat visible through the unmitigated starlight. It was quite comical how many eventually became hip through whatever channels and scuttlebutt, to the evening performances, how disappointed they all were subsequently when the sideshow pulled up stakes and vamoosed...

Duncan reappeared as abruptly as he’d entered my purview, shaking me from my reveries once again. To my surprise and vexation he had a disheveled dame in sweatpants along, maybe



ten years his senior, and rougher around the edges from years of narcotics abusing, among other factors. She slid snakelike into the passenger seat, with her beau climbing in behind me, something out of habit I found rather unnerving, having no clear view of anything aimed at my backside. Old habits one picks up in the rec yard. I looked over at her questioningly. She glared back noncommittal.

“Sara, Joe,” Duncan barked in blasé introduction. “Cactus Tacos, mush,” he ordered. The engine groaned back to life and we were on our way. The new fare eyed her accommodations with disgust, ran a finger along the dust on the dash, looked over at me critically but said nothing.

“You’re paying for this,” she growled. I nodded with mild irritation, but did not object. Fifteen minutes later they were ordering vegan cuisine with cold, sweet teas at the drive-thru, I opting for shrimp tacos, paying by plastic. The woman asked how much I was tipping, dictated I increase the arrived at amount.

We were back on our way to the farmer’s market next, presumably to peddle their wares or orchestrate some new mischief. Duncan had picked at his tortilla chips and assorted dips for without great enthusiasm in the back seat, eyes trained out the windows upon the desert landscape, commenting occasionally about the birds and cacti they passed. Sara sucked noisily at her ice cubes, finally tossed the Styrofoam cup cavalierly on the floor of the cab. I blew a cloud of Marlboro smoke slowly out a crack in the window, watching her closely out the side of my eye. She looked bored, irksomely curious I began to have the impression.

“Open that, will you?” She complained petulantly, rolling her eyes. Normally I puffed with the window all the way down, it was true. “So rude.” She snapped open the glove box, began pawing through its cluttered contents.

“What are you doing?” I asked as calmly as possible, with a hint of unease creeping into my voice.

“They didn’t give me any goddamn napkins with this,” she replied, distracted. “Dunc, you have any wipes back there?” Her accomplice, still riveted by the wilderness, barely acknowledged her inquiry, shook his head in the slightest twitch, gave a monosyllabic naw.

Sara squinted, then paused slowly, withdrawing a plastic baggie. She turned toward me, inquisitive. Here we go, I grimaced.

“The hell have we got here?” the woman demanded. I knew intimately, but was disinclined to volunteer any particulars. She extracted the contents of trinkets and arcane bric-a-brac, uncomprehending, and began examining them to make any semblance of sense from the compilation. Baubles of costume jewelry, wallet photos of different families, a few scraps of fabrics from pink and cream undergarments, strands of assorted hair of analogous straw shades. The women in the photographs were all different, but nonetheless bore a striking resemblance.

Sara had lived in Kimberly Meadows all her life, in the apartment where her parents had raised her before taking off for parts unknown some years back. She’d lived a sheltered, insulated sort of existence, yet could not help getting a distinct feeling she recognized these women pictured

from somewhere, if she could not quite place the specifics. The likeness was uncanny and disturbing, particularly by the similarity between them all. Sara regarded me with a newfound apprehension, which I must admit I took a grain of pleasure in.

Duncan, back to business with hackles up, fumbled to get his piece back out and thrust it through the gap between their seats. “She asked you a question man?” he interjected from the back, initially relishing the development apparently, any opportunity to demonstrate his supremacy and bravado, domination of the developing situation. But his lady friend was less amused, paling as she handed the bundle back to him. Reviewing it, the young man assumed a comparably spooked visage.

“Joe, what is this?” he at last stammered.

“Nothing,” I reassured blandly. “Really, don’t worry about it.”

Duncan considered this seriously. “It really *looks* like something,” he finally said in mild consternation. He looked across at Sara. “What do you want me to do with this?” he asked, as if to a commanding officer. The older woman scratched her head in dismay.

“How the shit should I know?”

“Why don’t you just put that back where you found it?” I suggested diplomatically.

“Shut the fuck up man!” Duncan shouted, trying to come to a resolution.

“Pull over!” Sara cried. I accelerated the tiniest bit instead just for fun. “Now!” She cried, voice cracking. Smirking, I obeyed, easing over onto the shoulder of the dusty county road. There were no houses in sight, or people. The sun had nearly set, and this area was rather remote and unpopulated. We all sat there in silence for a spell.

“Out the car!” she cried after a solid brainstorm.

“Oh come on,” I answered, disappointed.

“NOW!” Duncan yelled, giving me a sporting crack in the ear with the butt of his Ruger.

“*Ouch!* Hey...” I yelped, rubbing the smarting skin and scalp. “Hold on you, there’s no need for that.” I turned back toward my abductors, stretched out my hand.

“What?” Duncan said, instinctively shying back and pointing his weapon more intently.

“I can leave, if you really must have me,” I explained reasonably. “But I’m going to need that first.” I gestured to the parcel. He scrunched up his face in deliberation. Sara was growing quite restless, clearly wanted this affair done with as quickly as possible I could see, was grateful to distinguish.

“Christ’s sake Duncan, hand it over.” The hijacker was doubting himself then, though, not quite sure that was the right move to make at this peculiar juncture. I helped him understand the core logic, rationality of such a decision some.

“Say you gave that to anybody. You’d have to explain *where* you found it, *how*, confess in essence to the circumstances surrounding its discovery. Invite suspicion as to your own feasible involvement with, perhaps roles as conceivable accessories during or after the fact, should any unsavory business be determined to have been associated with the different... *acquisitions*. Now those items are purely innocuous mementos, I can assure you. But were they *not*, should any be determined to represent *evidence* of anything untoward, the chain of custody through which they are transmitted, delivery by dubious hands, via disreputable channels such as yourselves would surely discredit and invalidate any testamentary credibility they might possess for the purposes of prosecution, and implicate, cast more suspicion upon *yourselves* as coconspirators, possible participants in any theoretical deviance which might be conjectured. Are you following me?”

“Yep,” Duncan said grudgingly. “You’re right I reckon.” After judiciously wiping any prints they may have contributed away, the young man tossed the packet back into my hands, and I grinned in relief and switched the key off in the ignition.

“As I said, I’d appreciate if you could leave this heap some place I can recover it without needing to involve authorities, lodge any complaints on file. Might you do that?” Sara nodded sullenly. “Where can I expect to find my automobile and when?” I asked, good-natured-like. Duncan mulled this over.

“Same place you picked me up... In by Sunday eve work for ya?” I was entirely amenable, said that was just peachy, swore I should have no constabularies awaiting them upon delivery. We agreed it would be for the best not to associate any further, that if we crossed paths in the general store, at the supermarket to act as strangers and steer widely clear.

My taillights—*transporting, by all indications, an unloaded but surprisingly clobbering heater*—vanished off into the fading gloom as I began the lengthy hoof back to my small shack in a quiet, overgrown corner near the city limits. Light posts were rare on this route, but out here in the boonies there was an almost uncanny absence of light pollution, so that the heavens overhead provided sufficient illumination to keep myself absorbed and occupied, quite engaged in leafing through my assorted mementos from out of the bag, recalling the rich and storied memories associated with each miscellaneous article, and how it had been uniquely won...

Sara and Duncan kept to very different circles, orbits predominantly removed from my own. Moreover, as has always been the case, I observed a relatively hermetic existence without much venturing into populous, communal spaces. Still, over the years to come, I did happen upon the duo a few times in passing, and took great pleasures on those odd occasions, at the jarring effect my presence had on each of their comportments and countenances, appearing quite perceptibly as though they had witnessed a poltergeist.





taco supreme #2  
GJ Gillespie

# sentences 210-238

Scott Ferry

210. I could write 1000 pages about morning light.
211. The last 2 nights my son has been in inconsolable pain; a harpy gnawing his limbs.
212. He says, "My tummy! My tummy!" and does not eat.
213. I also have to leave work early because my stomach boils over and wets my neck.
214. I think it is the chicken we ate two days ago; since I have been sideways in a bog.
215. He screams every three hours jolting awake while the sea rolls inside him.
216. I think about how many pains I must endure; and only a bitter receipt in my hands.
217. Sometimes hurt is concurrent,  
    a rogue wave after a storm surge and the endless treading.
218. I see God up there in all the horses' heads as the thunder grinds over.
219. I see God's eyes averted in shame because of the toll of our passage.
220. God's hands full of money that is the color of our throats.
221. But, again, somehow, I think I chose this; somehow, I think I chose this.
222. My son wakes at 4:30 and barely gets his medicine down.
223. But when he sits on the couch, he eats a whole egg eagerly as if he has returned.
224. He drinks Gatorade and asks for a sandwich after days of popsicles and broth.
225. He follows me outside to water the roses in the early morning light.
226. I have to teach him to water the roots and to give enough to each.
227. Each twine of nerves from the earth needs a gentle flood; he lifts and delivers.
228. In this way I teach him to be a God of transitory husbandry.
229. But can he learn to drink his own essence; that from heaven flows through him?
230. This body of glittering bioflora and bile; this body of magnetism and spark.
231. This body we care for with dead skin and water and the growth around seeds.
232. This body which sometimes makes an act of death while drinking all of this fire.
233. This body which makes a grab for life while choking on God's threads.
234. I capture the light through each petal; send it into the void.
235. I wash his feet, gently, as he dances in the doorway between light and dark.
236. I close the door and the sun is still there I think; it is a faith, I suppose.
237. I could not feel it last night and did not try to call to God through the howls.
238. But here God is: hands and feet now clean, rooted in our chests with golden bolts.



## fall garden

Nadja Maril

A web of miniature tributaries envelope the tough skin of the orange tap root I've seized from the soil. Earth clinging to its surface, the smell ignites memories of savory stews and crunchy salads. Sweet when roasted and satisfying when raw. Peter Rabbit, did he ever dig up a carrot or did he judiciously nibble on the feathery green tops? Carrot top pesto. A cousin in taste to parsley, I add the leaves to salads, sauces and stews. Root vegetables prosper in the cold. I don a wool sweater and kneel on the damp ground surveying our riches.



## gardeners call them volunteers

Nadja Maril

Spring lettuce, tender green ruffles against a backdrop of brown soil.  
A gift from the previous season.  
Sprouted from seeds that slept through the winter.  
I wait for the lettuce heads to grow round and full.

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I think of the crinolines I wore beneath my skirt as a child  
To feel beautiful  
Listening to the swish of crunching lace, starched layers of fabric, elastic encircling my waist.  
Each head of lettuce an upside-down petticoat  
A field of green petticoats  
Rustling as the wind blows.

Leaves of curly lettuce  
Nestled in the bottom of the salad bowl  
Encircling the radishes, carrots, and tomatoes.  
A drizzle of olive oil and malt vinegar  
Tossed with cucumber slices and parsley.  
I gather what I can on a fork  
Grateful for my finery.



# spinoza's pizza

Reed Venrick

That keen thinker, Spinoza,  
Sometime we call the 17th century,  
Struggled to straighten out the long  
And tangled line of philosophical  
Cause and effect.

He meditated, he focused  
His fevered brain, he arranged  
The stimulus idea in terms of desire  
And pleasure: First, he insisted  
There exists a person's desire,  
Then, follows the person's pleasure.

Food serves an example:  
We do not desire pizza because  
It gives us pleasure. No, pizza  
Gives us its culinary pleasure  
Because we desire it.

Did Pavlov's experiments later  
confirm Spinoza's intuition?  
The dog secretes saliva  
Not from the taste of food, but  
Because the memory of food is  
Made in the dog's emotions  
By the ringing bell.

Ultimately, he says,  
Decisions begin with  
Our tastes and desires, which  
Vary widely from person  
To person, gender to gender,  
Language to language,  
Society to society, culture to culture,  
Family to family, sibling to sibling.

Given such reasoning,  
We conclude: there is little  
Inherent free will, but much  
Deterministic fate dominating  
The world of human affairs.

We humans, we assume ourselves  
Free—hungry memory  
Reminds us what we desire:  
Yet we often seem ignorant  
Of those causes that led to the desire

Of eating pizza, and the mysterious  
Unconscious, working behind  
The culinary scene. So sure,  
If we are to eat pizza for Friday  
Night's take-out, then important  
To get the cause and effect in order—

Realize the philosophical folly  
That assumes choice and free will,  
And accept the hungry truth—earth-  
Bound humans are fated to eat pizza,  
At least in Italy and around the world!



## an autumn mix

Sarah Das Gupta

Take a spoon of swirling morning  
mist

A pinch of golden, gilded leaf,  
Stir in the first soft beam of light  
that touches the mossed roof tiles.

Mix a sauce of clear running water  
bubbling over rocks and stones.  
Flavour with flames of crimson,  
leaves ablaze in fiery beauty.

Take a drop of sunset's essence,  
adding orange flecks of splendour.  
Flavour with the purple haze  
of twilight covering the distant hills.

Add apples touched with scarlet,  
the juice from a cider press,  
sprigs of wild thyme from the  
hedgerows  
to complete the season's mix.





## 12 bright oaks drive

Shirley J. Brewer

Glossy photos feature our family dwelling of more than forty years.  
The couple who bought it after my mother died  
gutted the inside, turned home into chrome.  
I barely recognize the kitchen where Mom and Auntie  
practiced magic. In matching aprons they glided  
like Ginger Rogers and her twin across the scuffed  
linoleum floor, whipping up casseroles in well-worn  
cookware. The tin recipe box. Grandma Rose's  
bell-shaped salt&pepper shakers. Sticky souvenir magnets  
clinging to the refrigerator door. The lantern  
light fixture swinging too low over the dinette table.  
Who'd be first to lose a nose? We took bets.

My parents would be gobsmacked by the couture-chic  
living room splattered on zillow.com. No place  
here for Dad's out-of-tune Hammond organ  
bearing scratches from Buddy, our beloved cat.

Only the yard escaped. Dad is cutting our front lawn.  
Skinny legs. Loose socks around his ankles  
resemble horseshoes encircling a stake.  
A red bandanna catches the sweat from his brow.  
*You look like a bank robber*, Mom laughs from the porch—  
above the din of the mower. She offers lemon meringue pie,  
Genesee Cream Ale. Twilight, she settles on the faded  
yellow sofa, an indentation in each section.  
Hand on the cushion next to her, she beckons me  
to her side. Together, we watch Dad finish his task.  
Beneath the unrefurbished moon, nothing  
beats the scent of fresh-mown grass.



## snow-bound mannequins

Shirley J. Brewer

Two barefoot blonde mannequins gaze  
out of shop windows at white city streets.  
Dressed in lush burgundy, designer hats—  
they might be waiting for a bus,  
wishing they'd worn warm socks or boots.

At thirteen, I wondered if mannequins  
spoke when no one was looking,  
complained about the pain of standing still,  
pined for cheeseburgers and vanilla shakes.  
I envied their slim bodies, lacquered nails,  
cool porcelain perfection.

When did I learn to savor the ways I could move  
through life, tilt my chin toward the moon,  
leave my footprints in silver snow?



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## vanilla song

Shirley J. Brewer

Grandma Rose grew lilacs and larkspurs,  
her garden a purple oasis.

Hula hoops turned her into a wild  
blur in a blue housedress.

After the last *Bingo* call, off she cruised to tango class.  
Her mantra: Alluring Mistress of Casseroles.

Each time Grandma Rose baked angel food cake,  
a song like vanilla shaped her sweet lips.

She left me her playful spirit rising  
above the shawl she never wore.



# a cacophony of groceries

Barbara Kessel

Eggplants are silky purple, reeking of royalty.

Spinach is a wrinkly, drippy green like swamp cypress, draping their leaves over the shelf edge like prostitutes lolling from Louisiana window sills.

Pears are pale yellow, like spinsters withholding their ripeness for too long till suddenly they're too soft to hold.

Green beans are skinny gentlemen, some young and springy, but others bent and dubious.

Blackberries, so audacious!... with too many seeds and bursting to talk about themselves.

Tangerines, the teenagers of citrus, long past the kumquat stage, but still aspiring to be oranges.

And the peppers, perspiring slightly and pre-empting all the others. They come in green, red, orange, yellow and every shape, a whole jolly village chatting with one another.

Too noisy in the Produce section, I must move on to the pinkness of raw salmon to calm myself.



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## wet work

Kimberly Kuchar

The tall man brings home a new discount wetsuit. He slowly puts it on and zips it up. Then he pulls on some heavy-duty rubber gloves and goggles. Now completely covered from his neck to his ankles, he carries his absolutely filthy victim, who struggles and protests. Shutting the shower door, the man sets down his prisoner and turns the water on. Free from his hands, the distraught captive frantically tries to escape--screaming, scratching, and attempting to run or climb over the much larger man. Rubber and neoprene repeatedly repel the attacks; the man remains unscathed, standing in front of the shower door. Finally, a strange calm comes over the prisoner.

tipping the scales  
the cat's teeth sink  
into the man's foot



## the sting

Kimberly Kuchar

Katie hates it when her brother and sister tease her about her large forehead. They call it a "fivehead." All three frequently joke around and make fun of each other, but she prefers it when she does the teasing. On a lazy summer day, while the three siblings are hanging out in their TV room, an enormous wasp buzzes past them. The kids SHRIEK and start chasing it around the room, striking at it with random objects: a rolled up magazine, a book, a VHS. A few hits *definitely* land, but the indomitable wasp will not go down. It keeps angrily buzzing and erratically flying everywhere. Suddenly, it flies at full speed directly toward Katie's face. As she screams, momentarily frozen in place, it crashes into her "fivehead" and falls down, instantly dead. Her siblings cannot stop laughing, as her face turns a deep red.

the church bell tolls  
crows cackle  
at the mourners





standing in the rain  
Claudia Tong

# trip to pearland

Frank Zahn

Sam Wallace was determined to confront and persuade his estranged son Daniel to let him see his two grandchildren Kanish and Aishika before the cancer raging inside him took its final toll. To that end, he drove four long and grueling days from his home in Seattle, Washington to Pearland, Texas and checked into a Holiday Inn a few blocks from Daniel's house.

The next day, he called several times and left messages on Daniel's cellphone, home phone, and business phone. But Daniel didn't return his calls. So, the following morning, he drove to Daniel's house and rang the doorbell.

Anju, Daniel's wife, opened the door. She and Sam hadn't seen each other in more than fifteen years, and he could tell by the expression on her face that she didn't recognize him immediately. But when she did, her face turned pale.

"Hi, Anju," he said with a smile. "I've been trying to get in touch with Daniel. Is he here? If so, I'd like to come in and speak with him."

Her response was curious. She raised the index finger of her right hand to her lips and said almost in a whisper, "Wait." Then she closed the door.

**102** Sam waited outside as the cool morning air gave way to the ungodly heat and humidity that is typical of Texas, even in October.

Minutes later, Daniel came to the door, flung it wide open, and stomped outside past Sam and into the front yard. Anju closed the door behind him.

Noticeably ill at ease and angry, he turned and faced Sam. "What are you doing here, Dad?" he shouted. "You show up after fifteen years and bombard me with phone calls, even where I work. Don't call and talk to the people where I work!"

"I called you on your cell and home phones several times and left messages, but you didn't return my calls. So, I tried to reach you by calling you at your business. One time, your partner answered the phone. He said you were not there, and he wasn't sure where you were. We had a friendly chat when I told him I was your dad. That's all."

"So why are you here? It's been fifteen years since you dumped me and my kids—my family—because you didn't get your way. You have a history of doing that sort of thing."

"I didn't dump anyone. You were disrespectful, and I refused to listen to your attempt to rationalize it. So, YOU DUMPED ME—cut off all communication and ties." Sam said. "You didn't even let me know that I had a granddaughter."

"My kids didn't need an absentee grandfather."

"I was absent because you cut me off from them. I've done what I could to keep in touch. I've sent cards to them on their birthdays and Christmas every year since they were born."

"That's not keeping in touch."

"Yeah well, it was the best I could do. And if you didn't let them receive the cards, I hope you took out the hundred-dollar bills inside before you destroyed them."

"I didn't destroy them. I tossed them in a box in a closet—unopened. But that's not the issue at hand. Why are you here? What do you want?"

"Well, I certainly didn't drive all the way down here to rehash the past or get chastised for your version of it. I have cancer, and it's terminal. So I came down here in hopes of being able to see my grandchildren at least once before I die."

Daniel hesitated, clearly caught off guard by Sam's revelation about his condition. "I . . . I don't know about that," he said. "I don't know how they would react."

"The alternative is for me to forget it and just go away. Is that what you want?"

Again Daniel hesitated. "No . . . No, I guess I don't want that either," he said. "But I've got some business-related things that I must get done today. Text me where you are staying, and I'll come see you this afternoon around four. We can talk more about it then."

With that, Sam felt that he had his proverbial foot in the door, so he returned to his motel, texted Daniel the address and his room number, and waited.

Promptly at four in the afternoon, Daniel knocked at the door of Sam's room. His manner was guarded, but there were no signs of the anger and recrimination he had expressed earlier that day.

Daniel began his talk with Sam by admitting Kanish and Aishika should have had a grandfather in their lives, and he missed having a dad. Then he went on to tell Sam a little about them, mostly about how intelligent they were, and how Kanish had been tested "over the top brilliant." When he mentioned that Kanish was a rabid Marxist, Sam smiled.

"Yeah, Kanish thinks Bernie Sanders isn't a socialist at all," Daniel said. "He thinks Sanders is really a capitalist who sees a problem with it and merely wants to correct it and move on."

"He could be right about that," Sam said. "As for the Marxist thing, that may just be a phase."

Sam was surprised when Daniel apologized for coming on too strong in his front yard earlier. He was grateful for that, although apology or not, it would not have made any difference in the way he felt about his son. His love for Daniel had never wavered in spite of their falling out, differences, and years apart. And at that moment, Sam regretted that he had not made the trip to Pearland years ago.

Daniel didn't ask questions about Sam's condition, but Sam made it clear that when Daniel settled his estate, the online savings account with First National Bank was to be split evenly between Kanish and Aishika and given to them on their eighteenth birthdays. Sam told him it wasn't much, a little less than two-hundred and fifty thousand dollars, but he wanted them to have it to spend with no strings attached.

"That will come in handy for their graduate education," Daniel said in a tone and look of relief on his face that suggested he had been worried about not having enough money saved to cover their expenses.

And that worried Sam. For a moment, he became very quiet and detached—lost in his concern that Kanish and Aishika might face financial constraints that would limit their ability to get the undergraduate and graduate education they wanted, and he want for them.

"Dad?" Daniel said. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm okay. I just drifted off into my thoughts for a moment."

Daniel smiled. "Yeah, I'm beginning to do that sometimes too."

"Sorry. I'm back in focus now. So, tell me, what about seeing my grandchildren?"

"Well, let me begin by saying they have always known you exist. And they are naturally curious. So, Anju and I have decided they should meet you."

"Great! When and where?"

"How about we pick you up in about an hour, and we go to a place nearby for some ice cream?"

"Great! I'll be ready."

Daniel smiled, and when he had gone, Sam took a shower and put on my best shirt and slacks. Then he went down to the lobby, stood inside the front entrance, and eagerly awaited Daniel's return with his family.

At five, Daniel drove up in his white Lexus SUV and parked in front of the entrance. He and his family got out of the car. He introduced Kanish and Aishika to Sam. Awkwardly, they said hello and shook Sam's hand.

Sam wanted to hug and kiss them, but resisted the urge for fear of scaring the hell out of them. They were so beautiful, he thought. Kanish at almost 17 was medium height for his age and slim with bright and alert eyes and a mass of jet-black curly hair. His features, especially the eyes, favored the Indian side of his family. Aishika at almost 12 was slim as well and very pretty with facial features much like those of her paternal grandmother, especially around the eyes.

Sam was pleased that both were well-proportioned and dressed unpretentiously in plain cut clothing, much like that of the hippies in the 1960s, but without the down-and-out look of not



having had a bath recently and wearing ripped and dirty clothing. On their feet were sandal-like shoes with straps—nothing fancy and again in the hippie style.

Anju motioned for Sam to get into the front passenger seat next to Daniel while she climbed in the backseat with Kanish and Aishika. Minutes later, they arrived at an ice cream parlor.

While the girl behind the counter took and prepared everyone's order, Sam said to Kanish, "I think they're going to get your old buddy Trump this time. He keeps digging the hole he's in deeper and deeper."

"My old buddy Trump?" Kanish said with a puzzled look on his face. "He's not my old buddy."

Sam guessed that from Daniel's earlier remarks about Kanish, but thought the tease would get a dialogue started between the two of them. It was not a good idea, and he hoped he had not screwed up their first meeting.

Minutes later with cups of ice cream in hand, everyone seated themselves at a table in front of a window. Sam sat between Kanish and Aishika so that he could more easily engage each one of them in some get-acquainted conversation.

Kanish and Sam engaged in conversation immediately in spite of Sam's earlier tease about Trump. Kanish was outgoing and spoke with confidence, letting Sam know at the beginning that he was a Marxist. Aishika spoke with confidence as well, although less outgoing—more reserved—than Kanish. Sam sensed she was holding back, a little uncertain about how to react to this old man who had shown up out of the blue and claimed to be her grandfather. Both were tactful and polite, but didn't hold back in expressing their respective points of view. Aishika was more formal than Kanish when expressing herself. Kanish was chattier and more analytical.

Sam told Kanish about his website and suggested Kanish do him a favor by reading some of his serious writings to make sure there were no errors in the logic of his arguments. Daniel was listening and said to Kanish in a parental tone, "And remember to do it respectfully." That suggested to Sam that Kanish could become a little nasty when critical of someone else's point of view if it differed from his.

The subject of conversation between Daniel, Kanish, and Sam then turned to an essay Sam had written and posted on his website. Daniel explained to Kanish that Sam had used the concept of Pareto Optimality to rationalize support for people who wished to transgender. Kanish understood the argument immediately and voiced approval.

In a back-and-forth about reading materials, Kanish made it clear his primary reading interest was about Marxism, which led Sam to believe that his focus may be too narrow. Aishika didn't express any interest in politics or economics. She explained that her favorite reading material was mysteries.

Anju remained silent, but Daniel, Kanish, and Sam continued to engage in friendly exchanges with occasional comments from Aishika. The exchanges were lively with laughter.

Daniel must have thought the get-together for ice cream had gone well because he invited Sam to dinner that evening. Sam accepted without hesitation, pleased that he had earned a second phase of his get-together with his grandchildren.

The Indian restaurant where they had dinner was a favorite of Daniel's family because they could order food that was strictly vegetarian, even in the way it was prepared. Sam asked Daniel to order for him.

The food was spicy hot, and Sam had a problem with that. But when he noticed that Aishika toned down the hotness by mixing yogurt into her food, he followed suit. After that, the only thing he found problematic was his lack of interaction with Kanish and Aishika. It was not as lively as it had been early at the ice cream parlor. He hoped it was not because they were bored with him, or worse, they didn't like him.

But be that as it may, Sam wanted them to be able to receive the cards and gifts he would continue to send as long as he was able when he returned home. When he leaned over during dinner and asked Daniel in a whisper if they could, Daniel said yes, and Sam was delighted.

Sam was even more delighted when Daniel volunteered that he and Anju had decided to let them have the cards with money gifts inside that Sam had mailed to them during all those years of estrangement. It delighted Sam because it would let Kanish and Aishika know that he had never turned his back on them, that he had always thought about them, cared about them, and loved them, albeit from afar.

After dinner, Daniel drove Sam back to his motel and parked in front of the entrance. Everyone got out of the car, and Anju took a couple of photos of Kanish and Aishika with Sam. Kanish and Aishika had big grins on their faces, and each one made a thumbs up gesture for the photos.

Then much to Sam's surprise, Daniel hugged him and said goodbye. After that, Kanish and Aishika did the same. Next, Anju took her turn. Kanish and Aishika's hugs and goodbyes seem sincere enough. But just as Sam had suspected earlier that Daniel had instructed them to be on their best behavior during their meeting with him, he suspected Daniel had instructed them to bid him, their dying grandfather, a kind and compassionate farewell with their hugs and goodbyes.

Whether it was true or not that Daniel had engaged in a bit of staging, Sam loved it. And he slept well that night before getting up early the next morning and beginning the long drive back to Seattle. He was pleased with his trip to Pearland because he had accomplished more than he expected. He got to see his only son, his beloved Daniel; his very quiet but lovely daughter-in-law; and his beautiful, intelligent, and well-mannered grandchildren. And too, Daniel had agreed to let Kanish and Aishika receive his cards and gifts from then on.

As he left Pearland and the rest of hot and humid Texas behind, he had second thoughts about his decision to let his cancer end his life. He had told Daniel that his cancer was terminal because his oncologist had told him it was if he didn't undergo radiation therapy followed by chemotherapy. And before his trip to Pearland, he had decided against both, especially the

chemotherapy because it had made him so sick and miserable after the cancer returned the first time. He had lost most of his hair, looked like a ghost, felt nauseous much of the time, vomited a lot, and lacked the energy to do almost everything.

Besides, he was satisfied with the life he had lived. It had been productive with lots of positives. There had been negatives as well, and he had tolerated and survived them. But before the trip to Pearland, he had decided the second return of his cancer and what he would have to endure to fight it was a negative not worth tolerating and surviving. And too, even if the fight was successful, he thought the quality of his life at age 85 going forward would be seriously lacking—unproductive, mostly vegetative, and boring. In short, before his trip to Pearland, he felt there was no reason for him to make an effort to extend his life—no reason for living.

But since his trip to Pearland, he had something new to take into consideration, namely the possibility that his grandchildren would not have enough funds for the college education they were capable of, and he wanted for them. He realized that if he changed his mind and undertook the radiation therapy and chemotherapy, and they were successful in extending his life, he could continue to accumulate savings from his retirement income. And that would help ensure that Kanish and Aishika would not be held back by a lack of funds.

“I need to do everything I can to stay alive,” he said to himself aloud while cruising West on Interstate 80. “My grandchildren need me, so I can’t give up and die just yet. I need to stay alive for as long as I can and save as much as I can for their education. And who knows, I might even be able to take another trip to Pearland and spend more time with them. And just maybe by then, it will be okay for me to shower them with hugs and kisses without scaring the hell out of them.”



# anger's evolution

Elizabeth Appelquist

Dark night, as it feels its first speck of life. A single seed, planted before the dawn. Murmuring, whispering, crying out. Ignored, it grows. Swelling. Screaming then falling to slumber, awaiting the moment to find speech again.

The frightened child within looking for a crack of light to shine. Biting its way forth, unconscious, rising in power and strength. Raining, pelting bullets flying outward. The downpour shattering inward. Grazed. Wounded. Longing. Growing. Rising. Now going forth into the sunlight, plucking the dove's wings of peace, transforming into a raging, angry bird of destruction, seeking to break apart all layers of tranquility. The stranglehold is overwhelming and stifles the senses in uproarious power that can destroy with a single smite. Now it feels, smiling all the while in its wake. The ruffling, the disruption flows once it is given permission to escape.

We are the gate keepers. We fear its release from the temple, from the castle on the hill. If it flies, many will crumble, including our own sense of sanity. Swelling because of our resistance. Left alone it will blaze. Left alone it will destroy. Left alone it will control, lasting centuries until our acceptance.

Opening now. Not letting it breathe alone. Reframing the dark into a palatable piece of putty. Finding comfort in the details of the angry wings, the present moment shining the light of peace on the hot, molten lava pulsing throughout. Bringing to a place of condolence and solace. Dousing, taming. Assigning ease. Flowing with grace once again, for it has been seen, known, felt, honored. Its diaphanous robes finally revealing Truth. We are set free until the next rise. Until the next fall. Propelling us forward to the next discovery of our teacher, the master, that lies deep within.



# seeing red

Elizabeth Appelquist

The eyes see crimson  
Tasting of the bloody lava flows  
dripping in puddles on the floor  
Tendrils of fear  
don gnashing teeth  
The frightened child exposed  
Diaphanous  
Taboo inner workings on display  
Intimate with savagery and destruction  
Ripping fabrics with sharpened claws  
Swallowing whole the dove of tranquility  
Snuffing out the wings of freedom  
Blazing forth in the unseen night  
Untamed, untethered  
A rise in power  
Stealing the breath  
Until the choice  
Shifting perspectives  
Opening to a crack of light  
Reflecting  
Finding its place  
A detail of the present  
The cycle is hushed.  
The savior revealed in the observance  
Divorced from the quell  
The dove is reborn into the palm of peace



# orb weaver

Mistinguette Smith

Face down on the still made-up double bed, Pearl is waiting. Light knives between the panels of royal blue curtains pulled tight against the day. A makeshift icepack nestles between her shoulder and the back of her neck. Each time she shifts, the kitchen towel full of melting cubes crunches against her skull. Low static whispers from the Zenith clock-radio. A corona of red pulses behind her eyes.

“Go outside, babies” she moans through the bedroom door. Eight Buster Brown clad feet gallop to obey. Down the stairs, each footstep is the report of a snare drum. The screen door bangs. They know how to play outside when Mommy doesn’t feel well, staying inside the raddle-fenced yard.

Untwisting her housedress, Pearl rolls into the indent that marks her side of the bed. She lifts one leg and adjusts the cotton between her thighs. A single hot tear traces her wide nose and the plump curve of her cheek.

Pearl knows how to wait this out. Sometimes it takes hours for the powerful little man with the railroad spike to stop driving it through her head. Today, he took her by surprise, pounding suddenly enough to drop Pearl to her knees and blind her, laying her head on the warm kitchen linoleum. After fifteen minutes, the pain slowly flowed out of her right eye up into her temple, then dripped back down her neck, disappearing. She’d had only enough time to grab some ice and dry swallow three aspirin tablets before the mean little railroad man came back. Sometimes he would come back in in five minutes, sometimes in twenty, but he always returns to finish the job. She has learned to lay still in the dark, count backward from 100, and wait for him to be done.

“You scaring me!” Arnetta’s tearful baby voice floats up the stairs from the kitchen, peeling Pearl’s eyes open. She must have slept. The sun had moved hours past the bedroom window. Her headache has dulled to a violent thud.

Light scatters in rainbowed haloes. Finding her carpet slippers with her toes, Pearl digs her fingers into the bedcovers and pulls herself upright. She grabs the aspirin bottle by touch and shoves it into one pocket.

*I need a Special Bulletin*, Pearl thinks, *the kind they have on the TV to interrupt the regular programming each time a little more of the world falls apart.* Thud. She wonders if this is how that young Kennedy boy felt, bleeding onto the hotel’s kitchen floor. Raising a hand to the back of her own head, she almost expected a viscous ooze.

Three weeks ago, a Special Bulletin sent her neighbors staggering out of their living rooms and onto their neat square lawns. Men had paced their driveways with faces hidden between their elbows, fingers laced behind their close-cut heads. The women had merely gaped, eyes glassy with incredulity that hope could be assassinated twice.

Hope was not a thing Pearl had any more room to carry. She lurched blindly to the top of the stairs.

“Junie, be a god boy and call your grandmama. Her number is the first one on the paper that’s Scotch-taped to the telephone table. Fairfax-one —”

“Two two four eight. I know it, Mommy. I know it by heart.”

The first time, Pearl did not know she would survive this. She was pregnant with the twins, and her husband, See, was working lots of double shifts to get ready for two more babies. She woke alone one morning to ankles and hands that had swelled up like water balloons overnight. By the time she had lifted four-year-old Junie and baby Kevin into the playpen for a nap, her lungs felt full of water, too. When the first blow took her, she thought it was some vessel inside her brain filled to bursting with babies and water.

When Mama came by for lunch that day, she’d found Pearl clawing at the sofa, wet-faced with agony and panting like a dog. Mama had the next-door neighbor take Junie and Kevin, who would not stop screaming. Pearl still remembers how she willed herself not to vomit in the back seat of the taxi to City Hospital, and smelled how many other passengers had failed in that effort.

She had likewise refused to let go of her mother’s warm, dry hand when the nurse wheeled her into an exam room. When a doctor arrived, he shouted at the nurse to prep Pearl for surgery immediately: he would have to put her under anesthesia and take the babies right now, before she went into convulsions. Mama had gasped but Pearl was glad. Not about the C-section, but about being put under, submerged. She’d raised her chin with gratitude toward the plastic mask, counting backward toward the moment she would sink into a place where there was no pain.

Now, Pearl understands what this headache foretells. She still thinks about how that doctor had opened and closed her body like a curtain, never asking her anything.

Pearl pads down the hallway and lets the banister hold her up as she eases down the back stairs toward the kitchen. The last two stair treads groan slightly under her weight. Junie unfurls his seven-year-old’s frown of concentration at the sound, nearly dropping the jar of peanut butter in his hands. Arnetta and Aretha turn their shiny calf-eyes toward the doorway in unison.

All four of her children’s voices rise in cacophony while Pearl’s body does what it knows best. One hand pulls a paper bag of cherries from the icebox. Two hands and a hip empty them into a yellow bowl and rinse them under the tap until they glisten. Two unpolished fingernails pry open the blue lid on a battered tin that promised premium saltines, but revealed waxed paper cylinders of buttery, rich crackers instead. Three crackers find their way into Pearl’s mouth, all at once. When she grabs a roll of paper towels with a free elbow, Kevin yells “Oooh, it’s a picnic!” and runs with his arms straight out in front of him, pushing open the porch door by its patched-up screen. The twins follow him, each taking one careful stair at a time down into the shady yard.

Only Junie looks up at her. "What's wrong with your eye, mom?"

Pearl is striking sideways at the cap of the peanut butter jar with the blunt handle of a butter knife. She twists it until the seal breaks with a pop.

"Carry this jar to the outside table for me, Junie baby. It's gonna be a picnic. Mommy's going to be alright."

Seated on the top stair, Pearl watches her children swarm and dive, grabbing fistfuls of early fruit and dipping crackers into a bowl mounded with peanut butter. Sunlight dapples the small square of lawn. Her eyelid is pulsing. Junie and Kevin compete to see who can spit a cherry pit farthest across the yard, encouraged by Aretha's squeals of glee. Arnetta plops down on the bottom step, her purpled fist clutching a bloom of cherry stems.

"Mommy, Kevin was gonna put that great big spider on me." She pointed her fist at the fountain of roses overgrowing their trellis along the side of the house.

A ghostly shred of web floats between the flowering branches and the bottom edge of the clapboard siding. Pearl had seen its weaver before, emerging in the hours after the dishes had been washed and the children had said their prayers. Sitting on the bottom step, she had watched the spider's fat, dark body emerge to thread and loom an enormous, glistening web. The mornings after her most ambitious nights, Pearl would tentatively sweep sticky cobwebs from the edges of the porch stairs with a broom before she could take out the trash. See would laugh and tell her not to worry. He claimed the big brown and tan spiders were called orb weavers: their kind gathered up their web and everything in it for breakfast in the morning, then spun a fresh, new web each night. Pearl liked to believe this was true.

"No, baby. Kevin can't catch that spider." Pearl reaches over to fasten the blue plastic barrette dangling from the end of Arnetta's unravelling braid. "She can run away so fast to her secret hiding place. He won't ever be able to find her."

Arnetta side-eyes the rosebush. "You gonna kill it? You gonna hit it with your shoe?"

"Why would I do that Netta? She not bothering nobody."

Arnetta blinks with shock that her mother has taken the side of a spiny-legged bug.

*Thud.* "I'll talk to Kevin. You go on and play."

As Arnetta sidles away, her mother draws her knees up under the gathered tent of her housedress and bends her head into its folds. The throb in her head slithers down to the small of her back. She tastes this morning's aspirin repeat in her mouth. The front doorbell chimes.

Pearl heaves herself back up, and feels for dampness on the back of her dress. Climbing the porch stairs, her legs wobble. She lets the door frame steady her as she opens the punched-out screen door. Looking through the house, she finds the living room door ajar. A bloom of



talcum powder and Florida water reaches her before her mother's firm grip. Both guide her slowly up the back staircase and down the hall into the bathroom.

"Your body always was a trial" Mama says, hands briskly folding the cuffs of her flowered blouse then turning on the taps in the deep, rust-stained tub. "Hips so wide you needed half-sizes by the time you were thirteen."

This fulsome body may have been her mother's tribulation, but it was not Pearl's own. From a twig of a girl, she had budded and ripened early. Even though Mama girdled her into matronly dresses with peter pan collars at twelve, by the time high school boys began to whisper about her firm high peaches, the wet tip of Pearl's tongue had learned to moisten her split plum lips. By the time she got to high school herself, she'd learned the power of making grown men hungry. She didn't have to switch or primp like the narrow, flat-bellied girls to make men want to eat her up. Walking home from the Shop Rite market, her hips rolled past catcalls that made her stomach flip. Young men leaning on streetcorners offered brazen assessments of her hocks, her hams, speculated about her yams. On Sundays, the senior usher gently tested the rise on the tender loaf of her upper arm with bony white-gloved fingers as he escorted Pearl to the pew her parents had occupied since before she was born. Mama had exhaled volubly when Pastor Freeman blessed Pearl's promise to feed Cecil Watkins until death did they part. At seventeen, Pearl had buttoned an apron over the ease of an A-line housedress, and stopped walking to Shop Rite for groceries. Her savory butterbeans and country ham swam safely in See Watkin's plate.

"Is it too late to get you to the doctor?"

Pearl nods, woozy.

"How far gone are you?"

Pearl holds up three fingers and turns her head away. The headache is almost gone.

By the time her mother came back to see about her, Pearl had been sitting on the toilet so long that her legs were numb. She'd heard cupboards slam and iron pans bang against stovetop burner grates. At least dinner would be ready when See got home, even though his Friday arrivals grew later each week.

Pearl fixes her eyes on one thing at a time to keep the room from spinning. Her yellow dress, pooled in one corner of the tiled bathroom floor. An ellipsis of scarlet drops seeping into the hexagons of floor tile grout. Her mother's pale, veined hand, held out to steady Pearl's climb over the edge of the tub.

"You know you were supposed to be laying down. The doctor said that would be good for your clamshuh. You know, your pressure."

*The word is pre-eclampsia.* Pearl cuts her eyes but said nothing. Bed rest was Mama's favorite idea from her stories. On Search for Tomorrow and The Guiding Light, the women had lives like the

one Mama wanted; lives where children magically disappeared shortly after they were born, and floors swept and mopped themselves.

Mama closes the toilet and perches a white enameled basin on top of its terry cloth lid. "Oh, Pearl. A woman's body sure can tear her to pieces. Don't I know it."

Pearl does not feel torn. She feels opened with surgical precision, vivisected, robbed. She feels hungry. Why is her soft body so generous to everyone else, yet refuses to issue her any more fat bubbles of baby arms and legs?

While Pearl hunches in the tub, her mother fills the white basin from the sink. She empties it, warm as tears, across Pearl's shoulders. It runs under her legs, drawing pink streams in the bottom of the tub. Drops linger in the silver-tan threads across Pearl's gourd-heavy breasts and thighs. Tilting Pearl's chin back with one hand, her mother pours a second warm cascade from breastbone to belly fold. Pearl reaches, self-consciously, to cover the keloid zipper through which her girls had entered the world.

"I know, Pearlie Mae. I know this isn't how you wanted this thing to go. But the Lord won't give you more than you can carry. Two boys and two girls, that's a handful, that's plenty. Is that light making your head hurt?"

Without waiting for Pearl to answer, Mama turns to pull the light chain, and begins to whisper a story about her own precious first-born, Diamond Joe. Birthed and gone years before she had Pearl. A fully formed boy who could not bear the world. Pearl knows this story by heart.

But Mama's discrete grief, measured out in secret over the years, was not the same pain as Pearl's, not at all. Besides, Pearl thought, *Diamond Joe was a stupid name for a little boy. It sounds like a country pimp.*

"But now you've got to put this thing behind you, Pearl. And you've got no more excuse for slipping that extra plate of rice. All of those cravings you're feeding from now on, those are just your own--"

Pearl pulls out the white rubber stopper and listens to the drain gargle away a whirlpool of water, louder than her mother's voice. She heaves herself out of the bathtub on her own and grabs a blue flowered towel too small to hide any part of herself behind.

"Well. It seems you have got nothing to say to me. In that case, I'll just leave these things for you and go down to check on See and the children." Mama opens the bathroom door and pauses. "See does know about the baby, Pearl, doesn't he?" She waits a moment, then sweeps out, taking Pearl's silence for some kind of answer. She leaves the door half-open.

Pearl shivers. On top of the laundry hamper, Mama had left a small, cruel bundle: a pink nightgown, a pair of clean but raggedy underpants, and a strip of an old flannel crib sheet folded into a thick makeshift pad. When she reaches for it, Pearl pricks her thumb on one of the two mismatched diaper pins holding it all together.

For the third time today, Pearl opens her eyes. Evening breezes push the frothy sheer curtains into the room between stiff drapes that stand in dark columns, unmoving. She rides a swell of nausea, then a wave of wetness and warmth. Flinging the summer blanket away from her legs, Pearl eases to her feet. Her breasts and belly feel heavy but her head is light and clear. She cannot remember the last time she slept so many hours untouched, alone.

Past the floorboard that squeaks, Pearl tiptoes into the bathroom. Her fingertips find the open cardboard box in the linen closet, hidden behind the stack of towels. She fishes out the elastic belt and a soft, antiseptic pad. Without turning on the light, she removes her panties and the sodden make-do pad pinned to them. She rolls them up and deposits the wet mess into the paper bag lined bathroom wastebasket. The basin is still beside the sink. Filling it with warm tap water, Pearl squats over the toilet to bathe herself clean. Still damp, she affixes a napkin and steps into the elastic belt, pulling it tightly over her aching belly and thighs. Cracking the bathroom window to get rid of the coppery smell, she rolls the top of the paper bag closed like a lunch bag to carry it out to the trash. The parcel is unnaturally warm and heavy in her hand.

Pearl's bare feet swish down the hallway's smooth oak floorboards. The door to her sons' bedroom stands half-open. She leans into the earthy smell of little boys. In the dim light, Junie's arms and legs thrash and sprawl dark against his summer quilt as if running away from her. Across the room, his younger brother rouses from his own dreams long enough to nurse his thumb, then sighs himself back to sleep.

Pearl backs out of the room slowly, and peeks in the girls' room across the hall. The upper bunk is empty, a tight rectangle of pink chenille. In the lower narrow bed, the twins curl side by side, sharing a single cocoon.

Tiptoeing barefoot down the back stairs, Pearl walks along the edge to avoid the treads that creak. See's snore moves through the front of the house like a crude machine, starting and catching. Something in her ticks open as she turns the back door latch, thinking about how See does love her in the small ways that men do. Outside this very door, he had shoved sticks into the earth and declared them roses. Pearl had done her duty: to water them and mind their hooked, red thorns. Now, in late June, blossoms wasted their velvet petals in the night wind.

Surprised at how warm the ground is beneath her feet, Pearl's toes sweep through sand before encountering the soft prickle of grass and the firm, uneven roots of a tree. Moonlight and streetlight help her to find the row of dull silver cans. She shoves the rolled-up paper sack deep inside, like a memory.

Evening breathes thickly through the trees and the iridescent fabric of her thin nightgown. Someone is playing an old-fashioned record, one where a sad woman's voice moans like a clarinet. Pearl sways and hums along. It is a song she has never heard, yet seems to know by heart. A sudden cramp makes Pearl think of the hungry spider, spinning from her belly her own home and table. A spider that sits there all day waiting for something to happen. Even when the thing that happens is a broom, she remakes herself a place where everything served is for her own appetite.

A streetlight shines cataracts across the windows of the house, the pupil of the narrow yard bordered in darkness. Something animal breathes near Pearl in the shadows and she jumps, tripping over a thick tree root. Her fall is broken by a familiar body that smells like sweat and sleep.

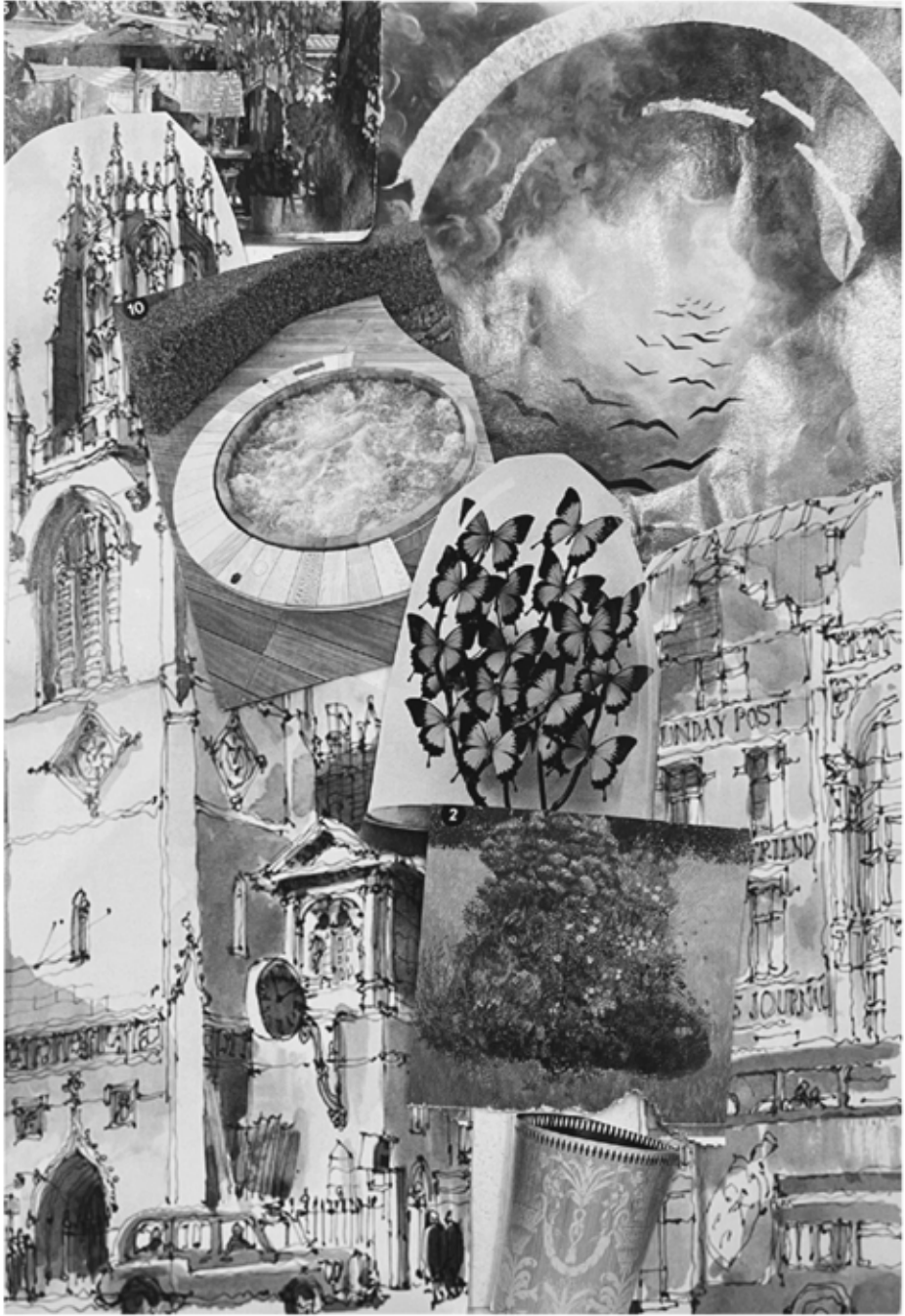
“Pearlie, come on in the house. You got no clothes on.” See takes her suddenly heavy head into his enormous calloused hands. “You’re burning up with fever.”

Pearl howls into his shoulder, the reedy unused instrument of her throat clotted with grief and desire.



**ALWAYS  
BUYING  
LPS &  
CDS**

*NORTHAMPTON  
BRATTLEBORO  
MONTAGUE*



hope  
Claudia Tong

## not too ugly to...

Victoria Costello

The hour before Monday-morning staff meetings had been Kate and Sebastian's preferred slot for their weekly rendezvous at his Chelsea pied a terre. She remembers the last time... The two of them lying at arm's length, enjoying their usual mix of nerdy banter and foreplay, when he picked her up like a sack and set her across his knees. She arched her shoulders in the spirit of play, expecting to roll off and move on to the main event, when he grabbed her butt hard. Was he going to spank her? She wondered. They'd never gone there. Her reaction split in two. The needy little girl craved the hardness of it. The woman cringed and judged herself for wanting it. She ping-ponged between the two while his palm hovered in the air. *Shall I?* he asked. She groaned and said, yes. In the seconds after his hand came down, she felt owned and loved; a feeling that lasted until he left, as usual, ten minutes ahead of her to avoid showing up at the lab together.

That affair with the boss cost Kate the job she loved exponentially more than him. This insight arrived only after professional ruin chased her from Manhattan to this remedial posting, a demotion to field research she'd managed to screw up on her first interview.

*"Get out of my house, lady, before you really piss me off."*

Now she waits for the Uni Pub to open so she can drown her regrets, this latest a tipping point is she doesn't make it go away—fast. She presses a lever to right the car seat and watches through the windshield as a pair of fresh-faced students pass, wrapped in each other's arms. Their apparent bliss stings. She runs her feelings in reverse. Sebastian didn't own her if she gave herself willingly. She wasn't looking for *put-a-ring-on-it* love. More like the high that comes from your first sip of mediocre wine. Three glasses later, your taste buds have dulled. The first swallow is all that matters.

Consensual: an act or contract completed with the agreement of both parties involved. Right. A black and white exchange. It was that clear between them, wasn't it? The grey parts are starting to haunt her.

For most of the last year and a half, Kate's affair with Sebastian felt like more than enough. A husband, even a regular boyfriend, would have demanded too much from her. Time. Regular meals. A sympathetic ear for his frustrations. Likewise, a cheerleader for victories. Even her ex-husband, who'd had his own affairs on the side to fill any needs she couldn't or wouldn't tackle, felt like a drag on her toward the end. Then what's this cramp in her gut about?

By her third gin and tonic, when a lanky young man takes a stool at the other end of the L-shaped bar, Kate is enjoying a pleasant buzz. He's clearly not an undergrad. She surmises by his arty style—slicked-back dirty blond hair, black turtleneck, green corduroy pants, and a man purse—his field isn't science. After they exchange a sufficient number of fleeting looks to establish mutual interest, she offers a sustained smile and he moves to the stool next to hers, bringing his half-pint with him.

"Looks like it's just the two of us," he says with a goofy smile. He's not Irish; Liverpool is her best guess. "I'm skipping, how about you?" he asks.

"Guilty as charged."

He raises an eyebrow. "American."

"I am. What brings you across the Irish Sea?"

"My PhD in the semiotics of early twentieth-century experimental Irish fiction."

On her blank look, he elaborates. "Flann O'Brien, Aidan Higgins, Joyce, of course."

She has heard of James Joyce. More important at this moment is the fact that his obscure literary specialty places him on the opposite side of campus, far from the psychiatry department to which she's linked.

Archie's student flat is a lower-rent version of her place, with some twenty-something male touches. Unpacked boxes for furniture, an enormous TV on the floor, an overflowing trash bin, food containers and empty bottles on the counters. Smells combining all of the above. Kate keeps her breath shallow as she crosses the living room. Archie goes into a bedroom and emerges with a pipe. "Care for a toke?"

It's been at least five years, but hell, why not? Splayed on a beanbag chair, Kate inhales deeply, proud of herself for not coughing. After three tokes she's more stoned than God knows when. The walls are tipping and swaying. Archie's smiling face elongates first vertically then horizontally. Oh dear. This isn't the same pot she used to smoke. Her eyes focus long enough to make out the fact that Archie's face is connected to the arm extended to help her out of the chair.

On her feet, their hands get to work stripping each other of clothing. Shirts, pants, belt, bra, underwear, and shoes are tossed as they stumble to his bed. Flesh on flesh, groans replace words, until Kate arrives at the destination she's been seeking all afternoon. Total anonymity, bargain-basement pleasure, sans shame. Her lasting impression is that Archie is well endowed and energetic, if a bit clunky. Then again, it may have been her awkwardness flavoring their sex. She's out of practice and overeager.

Archie is sleeping like the baby he is when she wakes up early Saturday morning. Her shoulders and thighs ache from a drunken night's sleep in his twin-size bed. In no mood to chat or bond with him, she lets herself out and walks back to her car. By the time she drives to the apartment, she's relived grades seven through eleven, with all their attendant horrors. She's Katy Callahan, the awkward, too-smart girl with a junkie sister. The one boys ask out because she's easy, who acts like she's above it all but cries as soon as she's alone in her room. She washes her face and looks in on Teague, who's lying atop the bedcovers still in his clothes, snoring lightly.

Under her comforter, the past isn't finished with her. It delivers Rafael, the boy to whom she gave her virginity at age fifteen. They worked the evening shift at ShopRite. Kate, a trainee cashier, Rafael, a stock boy and seventeen-year-old Fonzie lookalike on whom she had a crush.

It happened one night at the end of their shift. Before they did it, Rafael lit a joint and offered Kate her first taste of the stuff, which makes the memory a bit fuzzy, but it's etched in her brain regardless. His rough hands yanking off her jeans, the smell of gasoline on the loading dock, her thrill fading to terror someone would take a shortcut behind the store and see them. Penetration was unpleasant but brief. Far worse were the words he spoke. *Tu es muy fea*, he said, over and over, while he fucked her. She knew enough Spanish to understand he was calling her very ugly—yet *not too ugly to fuck*.

Worse, after that first time, she conjured the fantasy they'd begun a grand love affair. Grand enough to do it several more times that summer. Always rough and degrading. Sixteen years later, Kate hates the girl who allowed it to happen to her, who fooled everyone with her stellar grades and ambitions, while she gave her body and her self-respect to any boy-man who might fill the hole in her heart. The same weakness that made her throw everything away for a bargain-basement romance with Sebastian.

She's back in her own bed, sleep out of reach, nausea churning her stomach. She hears her own whimper and groans in disgust. Chirping birds mock her misery. Maybe she just hit bottom. God help her if there's further down to go. That's when she remembers the surprise ending of the Rafael saga. It was Meghan who put an end to it. She found out and told Rafael that her boyfriend, Lou would flatten him if he ever touched Kate again. To Kate, hiding under the covers on the bed below hers, Meghan said, "You can do better than Rafael." It was the closest she ever felt to her big sister. Close enough to come out from under the covers.



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# all hail the zig zag man

Joe Hilliard

It was late 2001. No one was flying. Everything was in flux. My commuter train was silent on the way into Los Angeles. For a change, which was nice. No chisme. No idle chatter. Even the domino players had stopped their daily games.

The law firm I worked for was looking to represent John Walker Lindh, the “American Taliban.” San Francisco headquartered as we were, there were always rumors that one of the partners had gone to school with Lindh’s parents. Those were the kindest rumors. Kindness was a rare commodity those days. The veneer of civility, largely wiped away. I remember being so angry that Nick Cave had cancelled a concert at the Wiltern just weeks after 9/11. So angry.

We had a town hall meeting at the LA office to discuss why the firm was contemplating taking it on. The only way was a face-to-face in all eight offices across the United States. Plus the Tokyo office, when travel started to open up more. The lead attorney drove in from San Francisco – a whistle stop tour like Teddy Roosevelt – to explain his personal involvement. The bombshell, he would be handling the case under his own shingle, not the firm’s name. But naturally, he would be relying on the full complement of the firm’s resources. Naturally. He then segued into soliciting staff and attorneys to work the case with him. Pro bono was invoked awkwardly and expansively. Constitutional amendments were thrown. Several of the attorneys were heated the firm would even be tangentially associated with the case. There’d been anti-Muslim violence just down the street from the office. Chambermaid had a brother in the NYFD that had been hospitalized with lung damage. His anger was so palpable, his face red with fury.

The room was packed. There was no place to move. I’d never been to a firm meeting as packed. And that included the ones with free alcohol. My buddy Hec and I were pressed against the back wall. Hec looked over at me, noting the tension in the room, and whispered, “you should take the case. You could be the American Taliban’s brother.” I had taken to not cutting my hair until we went to trial and had to actually appear in court. Being a paralegal let me skirt going until the bitter end. It had been almost seven months since we had been in court in San Jose. And as my mother always noted, my hair grew like a weed. Maybe the beard was trimmed, but the head was as bushy as Walker Lindh’s.

But then, Hec was one to talk. He looked like Miami Vice era Edward James Olmos, down to the sideburns and the moustache. American Taliban and Edward James Olmos. “Crocket, Tubbs, I want to see you in my office. Now!” We worked intellectual property cases together. Patent infringement. Hec had been an engineer for Hughes prior to going to law school. Had a very successful career. He always said he had been conned by some of his friends into going to law school and becoming an attorney. That it was the worst decision he had made in his life. I never knew if he was lying or not. You know attorneys. But the tale worked well in conversation. Our little foibles. My go to, when asked why I was just a paralegal, and not an attorney? “I gave up being smart for Lent one year. Best thing I ever did. I never looked back.” Hec understood. And he certainly tried to dissuade anyone in hearing distance from becoming an attorney. Peas in a pod.

Walker Lindh was the least of our immediate issues. Our caseload meant we stayed late, worked weekends. Fifteen hours a day, seven days a week, for three months in a row, and then take a day off. We were at least two months from that next day off. It was a Friday when we got our American Taliban lecture. The perfect start to a busy weekend. At least there were no fisticuffs. We were preparing for a trial in Washington DC in front of the International Trade Commission. Saturday we were in the office in the Gas Company Tower reading transcripts, reviewing exhibits, trying to piece together the puzzle. Regular desk detectives. No Ferrari on the beach for us. Just a Subway sandwich shop next door to the office. It was a hot Saturday. It always is in downtown LA. It's like the skyscrapers trap the heat, pushing it down to street level. We had been at it since about 7am. Neither of us were morning people. It was not a good Saturday. By noon, we were starving. Pershing Square. Saturday. Just another day downtown. And only the Subway in the no time off the clock distance. Eat and run. Run and eat.

As we crossed the corner onto Pershing, a clarion voice rang out from the bushes. A bedraggled guy covered in a matted blanket staggered out onto the sidewalk. John Walker Lindh. Yours truly. This guy. Triplets. He red-eyed me and bellowed, "Yo, Zig Zag Man! Yo, Zig Zag Man! Got some change!?" Hec took one look at me and started laughing and laughing and laughing.

The American Taliban. Edward James Olmos. Teddy Roosevelt. Crockett. Tubbs. And the Zig Zag Man. On a hot, sunny Saturday afternoon in Los Angeles... All of us real. None of us real. All of us raw. All of us in disguise.

\*



# the black rabbit

Jason Mazzotta

My sister is a pain in the ass. I've never been a fan of adventure, and to be honest, I don't like going out all that much. My idea of a thrilling Friday night is a six pack with Johnny Carson, not tagging along on one of Monica's heists.

But there we were. With velvet robes and cloaks over our heads, we stood at the back of the line, taking baby steps in a candlelit foyer. Reaching the living room entryway, the Handler requested that we pull our hoods back slightly so his pet timtam snake may take a bite, releasing its venom into our necks. Monica's stolen invitation, which included a plus one, stated that an antidote would be provided in ninety minutes upon our exit. We just needed to stay within the lines until then.

The Handler told us the snake's name was Norma, and she hailed from central Australia. Was the introduction supposed to make the arrangement less unsettling? I applied the technique I developed as a kid when getting shots at the doctor's office: turn my head away and try to recall the lyrics of "Sloop John B," a traditional folk song made popular by the Beach Boys.

I looked up to the light flickering off the vaulted ceilings. *My grandfather and me...* I felt the creature brush against the bottom of my hair. *Around Nassau time we did roam...* Norma's strike was sharp and efficient. *Drinking all night, got into a fight...*

"That wasn't so bad," Monica whispered. What a pest.

Inside we were assigned animal masks by a topless woman with what I clocked as a long forgotten Mid-Atlantic accent. It was if she learned English by watching Cary Grant movies. We stood in a triangle. She the Polar Bear, Monica the Black Rabbit, and I the Toucan.

After the Polar Bear left us to mingle, I leaned toward my sister, "Now where did you forget this thing?"

"I told you in the car. Third floor, master bath. And I didn't forget."

"Then why the hell are we here?" I asked.

"Don't be such a drip," she said.

Monica had visited this gothic mansion a few months earlier on an assignment to nick a valuable piece for one of her most avid collectors. Not a Rodin sculpture or a Dutch masterwork, she was after a four by six, illustrated postcard with cats climbing around a grandfather clock. In maroon text, the message read, "Happy New Year, 1891." Similar postcards from this era fetch upwards of seventeen dollars at auction. However, this particular artifact was believed to have a scribbled note and authentic signature from the pen of Bartholomew Marisol, arguably the most reclusive and depraved nineteenth century erotic novelist.

And it was fitting that this house, which was hosting a seance promising conversation with a cavalcade of deceased historical perverts, would contain such a treasure among the mysterious owner's collection. On her last visit, Monica had the Marisol postcard stuffed in her back pocket when posing as a trapdoor engineer at the mansion's annual Secret Room Convention, only to have caught the attention of security and forced to slip the item behind a wooden panel under a sink. She was searched and eventually released but knew she couldn't show her face again without arousing suspicion. The collector was giving her this final opportunity to provide what they desired.

We heaped piles of hors d'oeuvres on our plates and snacked with some difficulty while remaining masked. Monica said that those digging in at social functions are typically not considered suspicious characters. The nervous ones never touch the spread.

A man sipping wine through a neon swirly straw approached us. "You know, you've never tasted cabernet sauvignon until you've been forced to drink while wearing a koala mask."

I produced an award-winning laugh imagining that this guy probably can't get hard without having on some kind of marsupial facial covering.

"And what about the dry-cleaning costs for these costumes?" Monica said. "I must be getting crumbs all over this thing."

A bell dinged, the lights dimmed. The dozen guests convened around a red oak table. "It's showtime," said the Koala.

"Well, what the fuck are you waiting for?" I stage whispered to Monica.

"What's the rush?" Monica said. "We've got an hour and a half."

I looked at my watch. "Seventy-eight minutes."

"We've got seventy-eight minutes," she said. "And if we split now it's gonna look weird."

"You're weird," I said. "Really not looking forward to my limbs going numb and my heart stopping if you screw this up."

"You're impossible," she said. "Just stick to the plan."

The Wolf spoke. "I welcome you all. Know that you are among an exclusive group selected across the nation. And despite their request for anonymity, let us take a moment to thank our host for what will prove to be an unforgettable evening."

The Zebra stood up and took a bow. Polite applause followed. I scanned the table adding an elephant, two dogs, a racoon, a squid, and a tiger to the menagerie. *So hoist up the John B's sail, see how the mainsail sets.*

The Wolf continued. “We all know why we are here, friends. Tonight we speak with the dead.” The Wolf reached for her neighbors’ hands. I clutched Monica’s hand. The Racoon took my other.

I once read an interesting article about the Fox sisters and seance parlor tricks. False knocks, sound effect recordings, and exploiting the audience’s cognitive lapses are all part of the medium’s grift. The Wolf, though a gifted entertainer, was a hack.

My mind wandered from the performance until the lights flickered and blacked out. Part of the conjuring routine we anticipated. I saw the whites of Monica’s eyes through the mouth of her black rabbit mask. She nodded once, dropped to the floor, and rolled under the table. I kept my eyes away from the staircase but knew she made her break for the third floor.

In less than a minute, a painting in a gilded frame swung up from the wall via hidden hinges. Two figures in gazelle masks emerged, and they sprinted up the staircase. *Let me go home, I wanna go home...*

“It looks as though we have a small security matter,” the Wolf said. “But please don’t be distracted. Remember, we only have so much time together this evening.”

*I feel so broke up, I wanna go home.*



# honey mixed-grain bread

Judith Sharlin

“And the heart does not die when we think it should, / we smile, there is tea and bread on the table.”—Czeslaw Milosz, from “New and Collected Poems: 1931-2001”

A school of little spotted fish swarmed around me today as I swam over the foamy crests in the warm Atlantic. I turned onto my back to take in the expanse of the sky and as I got out of the ocean I was submerged in memories. One caught me off guard—the tiny silver fish my eight-year-old son Hillel snagged from Walden Pond—*no, that’s not the memory that snatched my breath away*—it was the handful of fish he brought to me at Cape Ann on the day I raced in the one-mile open-water swim. That’s the memory that haunts me today. I feel the slippery fish. I see Hillel’s eyes open wide and the sand on his cheeks as he unconsciously wipes his face. My sweet son. I heard his excitement as I emerged from the chilly gray New England water that day.

“Look, look Mama,” Hillel shouted, with the same intensity and excitement he showed for everything he experienced—red-tinged maple leaves, brown puddles after a rainfall, golden retrievers, and scampering bunnies in our backyard. The boy who never stopped talking, the one who enunciated each word so clearly, the one brimming with life, was now dead eight years. My son, who died alone in Baton Rouge from an accidental drug overdose at the age of twenty-two.

**126** *How is that so? What did I just read about the sense of loss? Oh yes, I remember—it was an equation of sorts. Loss equals fragments of memory plus details about what a loved one leaves behind.*

I am silenced by fragments of memories. I feel deranged. *What did I just read about memories and feelings? Oh yes, I remember—it’s better not to say, “I feel deranged.” There’s no future in saying it like that, the counselor explained. It’s better to reframe the feeling and say, “I notice that I am feeling deranged.” Then I can make space for progress and look toward tomorrow.*

But today? Today I feel unhinged. People comment that it’s been eight years, but I don’t care. The time feels endless, or just eight minutes away. He died eight years ago today, but it could have been yesterday.

*What have I learned? I recall hearing that those we love deeply are part of who we are—our identity. But, I just looked in the mirror and didn’t recognize myself.*

Why, today, did I finally take out the gray T-shirt I hid in the back of my closet? I am deranged. It’s faded and completely worn out with rips and small holes around the neckline. For years, Hillel would only wear gray T-shirts. I never knew why. I don’t know why it bothered me, but I had wished he wore different colors. He loved this gray T-shirt, that had once been mine, and it became an obsession. After he wore out the dog T-shirts printed with cavalier spaniels, golden retrievers, and Dalmatians, he turned to wearing gray sport T-shirts. This one has large blue letters on the front, outlined in black, that spelled out “Speedo,” printed on it. Directly underneath, in neatly-spaced capital letters, is the slogan “SPORT SYSTEMS,” and underneath

that, the company logo. The best part about the T-shirt is the back. Why? In large letters (no capitalization here), using the same blue letters as the front, it says “gotta swim.”

For anyone who loves to swim and finds comfort and delight in the repetitive back-and-forth motions in blue liquid depths, the message “gotta swim,” says it all. Hillel loved the water and began swimming at the “water baby” classes I took him to when he was six months old. He continued to swim as a young child and joined the swim team at our local Jewish Community Center when he was only six. In early adolescence, he tried out and was accepted on a USA Swimming team after meeting the qualifying times. But as he grew older and got bigger, he’d make up excuses not to swim.

He started joking around with the other boys on the swim team, instead of practicing. At the same time, his learning disabilities became more obvious and he became more self-conscious about them—this set him apart from his peers. Instead of boosting his fragile self-esteem, the pressures of swimming with the team hurt him, so he stopped.

During those years when he swam competitively, he insisted on wearing the gray, “gotta swim” T-shirt, and took it with him to overnight camp. It still has the name tag that I ironed in the neckline. “Hillel Todres” is imprinted in simple black letters and remains intact inside the love-worn shirt. As I look at the tag, I am crying hysterically and curled-up in a fetal position.

*How can it be? This piece of clothing persists, and Hillel is dead.*

I am deranged. When I took the gray T-shirt off the shelf, I thought about how it hadn’t moved from the closet in eight years. *I don’t care.* I unfold it and hold it against my chest—I am hugging Hillel. My nostrils are halfway blocked from crying, but I gulp the odors emanating from the gray t-shirt as if it’s the only air I’m able to take in. I inhale my son. I am desperate. I want to smell him. With my eyes closed, his eight-year-old sweetness suffocates me like the scent of a slightly over-ripened August plum exploding its purple-red insides everywhere.

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There are other T-shirts full of memories of Hillel in my closet. Another gray T-shirt I saved is from the one-hour swim event I used to do each year in January—you swim as far as you can in an hour while someone records the times and distances of each lap. I recall Hillel wore this one-hour T-shirt for his 4<sup>th</sup> grade concert. There’s also the FINA (International Swimming Association) T-shirt from the World Swimming Championships in 2006. I qualified for the international event held in Stanford, California. It was the year following my husband David’s diagnosis of non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma—two years before he would die.

Hillel had written a note to me before I left for the swimming championships: “Have a good trip,” he said and drew a heart, “Ur my #1 fan, Hillel.” I feel the rise and fall of sorrow in the memory. I carry that note with me—it’s folded into the front flap of my decades-old, leather organizer.

*What did I hear? See? Read? Feel? The memories of a loved one who died come with pain—but that’s not the whole story.*

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The day of the Cape Ann swim, at the end of the race, Hillel ran to me thrusting the handful of fish into my chest. He was wearing the gray Speedo T-shirt that day. The frigid water had numbed my toes and my fingers were a bluish-purple, stiffened with the cold. I couldn't smile or say much to him.

"Are you alright, J'dith?" David had asked, lovingly.

"David, I'm so cold—do you have a blanket?" I replied between my chattering teeth. I tried to be interested in the handful of fish Hillel shoved into my hands. He was so excited and endearing, begging for my attention. The little silver fish were wriggling, half-alive in his palms, and I didn't feel like touching them.

The race planners handed out steaming cups of cocoa to the participants and I got one for

myself and one for Hillel. The three of us sat on a picnic table and I pulled out a peanut butter and blueberry jam sandwich I'd made with thick slices from a loaf of honey mixed-grain bread I baked the day before. I was hungry after the swim. I broke off a piece to give Hillel, recalling it had been one of his favorite sandwiches in preschool.

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**128** As I take out my bread-making bowl to make that honey mixed-grain bread today, I weep. I dissolve the yeast in warm water and add dried milk and honey. I imagine Hillel as an eight-year-old child, giggling with delight at the Winnie-the-Pooh book I used to read to him. I smile thinking of the story: Christopher Robin gives Pooh a balloon and the bear disguises himself as a little black rain cloud, floats to a beehive, tastes the honey but then accidentally ends up with a mouthful of bees.

"Again," he'd plead, wanting to hear the story one more time.

*I remember now—I cannot avoid pain; I cannot avoid love—the pain of losing my beloved son is part of the love story.*

I sprinkle flour on my kitchen counter and knead my love into each fold of the honey mixed-grain bread. My love for Hillel continues to inspire me. No love is wasted, even if it ends in death.







uphill stands a mulberry  
Claudia Tong

# avram's miracle

Jeffrey M Feingold

Nearly shouting, so as to be heard over the cacophony in the vast building, Avram Kantor, the apprentice baker, reported, "There are two men to see you, Rabbi."

Avram and the Rabbi stood in the middle of the largest matzah bakery in the world, the A. Rubinstein & Co. factory, in Cincinnati, Ohio.

"Two men," said Rabbi Rubinstein, stroking his beard with one hand while holding up two fingers with the other. "Two men. You know these men?"

"I do not, Rabbi," Avram shouted, confident that the strangers, seated far away in the lobby of the bakery, would not hear. The plant was buzzing with the hubbub of nearly two hundred bustling bakers and their apprentices. The air was filled with a great din, from the maze of commercial machines to roll, knead, perforate, and cut dough; from giant automated packaging equipment; from whirring dishwashers; from humming refrigerators and freezers; and from a myriad of rolling carts being whisked this way and that with dizzying precision.

"You say you do not know these men," the Rabbi noted, still stroking his long beard. "Yet you say they are here to see me."

**130** Avram nodded earnestly. He was a fine, handsome, lanky young man, with a pale complexion, Paul Newman-blue eyes, and curly hair so thick and golden it looked as if a bushel of sun-kissed marigolds had sprouted on his head and grown out since birth. For this, he and his parents were mercilessly teased in Avram's early years. Questions about whether Avram was a Kantor naturally lead him to wonder if he had been adopted. And, if so, was he Jewish?

Avram found rules impossible. Impossible to understand. Impossible to follow, except for the rules he made. "You're as Jewish as you want to be," was a new rule he decided one day. He determinedly announced this new rule whenever someone questioned his origins. Still, the painful pestering persisted, especially as his parents and three sisters were of dark hair and eyes.

"Where did you get that one?" Uncle Morris once said to his mother, looking at Avram, as Morris tipped a full highball tumbler to his lips at the basement bar of Avram's parent's house, sloshing the mixture of whiskey, ginger ale, and carbonated water onto the wooden bar, much to the annoyance of Avram's teetotaler mother, Sadie.

"Better keep an eye on Sadie" Aunt Millie whispered with a wink to Avram's father, Ruben, the chemist, who was mixing concoctions with a chemist's precision behind his bar, after she had sipped one too many of Ruben's Pink Ladies at a shiva for their dear friend, the deceased local bookie.

Even Ruben's brother, a cantor in the nearby synagogue, chimed in. "I know you're a man of science, Ruben," he had said, "and I'm just Cantor Kantor, but it does seem odd—Avram looks more Swedish than Jewish. Is there something you want to tell me?"

Slushing a highball at the Kantor's home bar, at yet another shiva, this one for their dear friend, the local fruit peddler, who died in a tragic fruit cart mishap, Howie the Butcher chortled, "are you sure he's one of us?" to Ruben, who, despite his passion for logic and science, and his generally gentle disposition, and his years of marching for civil rights and pacifism, removed the thick spectacles from his face, and then promptly punched out Howie's lights. The one and only punch Ruben had thrown in his life, albeit with uncanny, scientific precision. After this unseemly thwacking—for which Ruben was eternally remorseful—there was from time to time, for many subsequent months, a delivery boy from Howie's Deli delivering free brisket, potato knishes, or roast chicken to the Kantor's front door.

"Two men?" the Rabbi asked again, now wiggling the two fingers he still held aloft.

"Yes, Rabbi."

"They may well be men," the Rabbi said, "yet, when is a man, who is a man, not a man?"

"I'm not sure," Avram confessed. Avram thought the Rabbi possessed great wisdom, though he often found the Rabbi more confusing than rules.

"When he is a bill collector," the Rabbi explained. "Do these men have the appearance of bill collectors?"

"No, Rabbi. One said he is from Kreigman's."

"Come, Avram, let us meet these men."

Normally, an apprentice would not participate in such a meeting. But the Rabbi was rather fond of Avram, and he knew Avram took an interest in his daughter, Sosha.

Despite its dominance in the powerful global matzah market, A. Rubinstein & Co. was struggling. Cash was short due to the recent expansion of the factory, a move the Rabbi made to compete with a well-financed, upstart competitor, V. Horowitz Kosher Foods, in Poughkeepsie. Horowitz's location in New York meant lower costs for delivering matzah to the lucrative New York and New Jersey metropolitan matzah markets. The Rabbi responded with a plant expansion aimed first at increasing production from the existing facility in Ohio, with plans to later open a new factory in the northeast. The Rabbi was going to give these matzah mogul wannabees a run for their matzah money. And he had another card up his sleeve. His ace-in-the-hole: Kreigman's.

Kreigman's, based in Cincinnati, was the largest grocery chain in the United States. The Rabbi had called Moses Kreigman, the owner, a few days earlier, as well as calling the owner of the largest flour miller in the country. He was going to ask Moses to lead him to the promised land of mass matzah distribution, and the miller, Levi Smalls, to supply the great quantity of flour which would be needed for worldwide matzah domination.

In the lobby, the Rabbi and Avram shook hands with Moses Kreigman, a tall, imposing, serious man in a dark suit, who introduced them to another imposing, serious, dark-suited man, Levi Smalls, the owner of General Smalls Mills, the biggest flour miller in America. The three titans

and Avram walked into the conference room immediately off the lobby. There, the Rabbi explained his vision for the three companies to coordinate plans to create a global matzah dynasty. Kreigman's would sell only Rubinstein's matzah, and the vast demand for flour would be met by Smalls's big flour mills. The three would establish a new company and share in the profits. They all agreed, then Levi and Moses asked for a tour.

Part way through the factory, Moses, a man of great curiosity, cracked open the door to a diminutive room the group was walking past.

"What's this?" he asked.

The room was empty, except for a large, heavy wooden table in the middle. On the table was something strange. It was an array of equipment which appeared to be scientific. On one end, a large, circular, clear plastic barrel, with concentric glass tubes inside, spun slowly. The barrel was connected with more clear tubes to glass beakers, to glass globes with rubber stoppers on top, and to more, wider tubes, at the opposite end of the table. The rotating barrel was affixed somehow to gears beneath, which in turn were connected by wires to a large lead acid battery. Liquid inside the contraption periodically bubbled, burbled, then belched through escape vents.

"Well," the Rabbi said, slipping between Levi and Moses to press his face closer to the mysterious contraption, "it's clearly a, yes, clearly—Gideon, come here!"

Avram left hurriedly to find Gideon, the head baker, who was on the factory floor. A few moments later, Avram re-appeared with Gideon, who squeezed between the men so as to get close to the mysterious machine.

"Gideon," the Rabbi said, "will you please explain to our guests the function of this device?"

Gideon bent over, stuck his spectacled face next to the turning barrel. Then he jumped back, having been startled when the mysterious machine emitted another series of burbly belches.

"Well, Gideon, we are waiting."

"Yes, Rabbi," said Gideon, weakly, "it's clearly a, clearly, yes, a *device*, which, of course, is meant for a *purpose*."

The Rabbi nodded.

"Gentlemen, please, if you will," the Rabbi said, "let us continue our tour. Gideon, take that foolish toy apart." The men headed to the door.

"Wait!" shouted Avram.

"Avram," the Rabbi said, "what is the meaning of this?"

"It's mine, you see. I invented it," Avram said.

“There you are!” exclaimed Sosha, darting her head into the little room. “I’ve been looking all over for you, Father. Oh, hello, Avram! Goodness, what’s that?” she added, catching sight of the mysterious contraption. Sosha was tall, lithe, with long brunette hair, large hazel eyes, and a pretty smile. All the men except the Rabbi and Avram straightened their posture, took air into their lungs, and cleared their throats, the way older men often do when an attractive woman enters.

“Well you see, Rabbi” Avram began to explain, “it’s my invention.”

“What does it do, Avram?” the Rabbi asked.

“I didn’t say anything because I couldn’t be sure it would work, you see. But finally, just this morning, after I made further adjustments to the polymer strands, it began working. It works, you see,” he said, then cackled with the excitement of a chicken which has just laid its first egg.

“Excellent!” declared the Rabbi. “It does—what?”

“Well, it’s rather scientific, Rabbi.”

“I can see that.”

“It has to do with chemistry.”

“Yes, Avram, but what does it *do*?”

“Well, of course you know what wheat is. Well, you may not have realized that the chemical composition of wheat contains cellulose and pentosans, polymers based on xylose and arabinose, which are, of course, tightly bound proteins. The machine unbinds these, and then, through the reformulation of polymers present in the cell walls, produces self-generating proteins and carbohydrates. It’s rather simple, really.”

“In English, Avram!” the Rabbi shouted.

“It makes wheat,” Avram said.

All in the room looked gobsmacked.

“It’s impossible,” everyone in the room scoffed.

“No, actually, it is possible, quite possible,” Avram said cheerily, “just add water here,” he noted, pointing to a spigot on the wheat making machine. “You can make an endless supply of wheat. With enough machines—I’d say forty or fifty—you can produce enough wheat for the entire matzah market. We can feed the world, actually. I’ve already made a box of matzah using this wheat.”

“Oh, Avram!” Sosha shouted, “you’ve done it! You’ll be worshipped, a hero. Everyone will love you!” She flung her arms around Avram’s shoulders and kissed him—for the first time—squarely on the lips.

“Sosha!” the Rabbi stammered.

“But Father, isn’t it marvelous? Avram’s done it. Now people all over the world will be able to eat—for free.”

The Rabbi smiled broadly. This could be one of the greatest inventions in history. Levi and Moses looked grim.

That night, to celebrate Avram’s new triumph, Avram and Sosha went out for Chinese food with their good friends, Hannah and Ray. They told them the whole story.

“Isn’t it marvelous?” Sosha asked at the end of the story, holding her wine glass up for the others to clink in celebration. “Soon no one will ever be hungry again, and Avram will be loved the world over.”

“They’ll never let you get away with it,” Hannah said.

“Whatever do you mean?” Sosha asked.

**134** “Feeding people for free. They won’t let it happen,” Hannah said. “I’m sorry, Sosha, Avram, but as a businessperson, I know your invention is a threat.”

“That’s right,” Ray said, “I’m just a painter—more interested in pointillism than polymers—but I read about a car some guy invented that will go a thousand miles on one gallon of gas, and of course it never got to market. They bury such things, don’t they?”

Avram and Sosha looked at each other pensively.

“Where’s that blasted tea?” the Rabbi cried the next morning in his conference room. Levi and Moses sat across from him, glumly ruminating. The Rabbi stood, picked up the conference room phone, and dialed.

“Asher,” Levi said, to the Rabbi, “we need a plan.”

The Rabbi, still standing, placed the handset back on the receiver.

“The way I see it, we have to act now,” Levi said. “We must dispose of this invention before it disposes us.”

“But Sosha is right, Levi,” the Rabbi said. “Avram’s machine will change the world. Progress! Millions of people across the globe no longer need to go hungry. This could be the greatest invention since wheat. Not just for matzah. We can give the world an endless supply of any wheat product, of say—bagels.”

“People will have bagels, and that is good,” said Moses, speaking calmly and softly.

“Yes,” the Rabbi said.

“What of the farmers?” Moses said.

“They can have free bagels, too,” the Rabbi said.

“But what of their farms, what of their jobs?” Moses said. “There’ll be no wheat to grow. What of the workers the farmers employ? What of the companies that make the tractors and the harvesters?”

“And the fertilizer manufacturers?” Levi said. “And the companies that make farm clothing. One industry after another, gone overnight. This machine is not heaven sent, Asher. It’s from the Devil. It’s the Devil’s matzah! It’s going to make us all poor. It’s Communism, I say, Communism, that’s what it is.”

“That’s right, Asher,” Moses said, “it will be the end of civilization as we know it. This boy, Avram, oh, I’m sure he means well, but we can’t be running around giving away food. It will upset the natural order. It’s against God, Rabbi, if I may respectfully suggest. After all, did not God command that man must work for his daily bread?”

“Yes, I see now,” said the Rabbi, plopping back dejectedly into his chair. “But what can we do?”

“We can buy it from Avram,” Moses said, “then destroy it.”

The Rabbi picked up the phone handset again. “Mildred, have Avram sent to the conference room at once.”

The three men spoke desultorily while they waited. Wasn’t it a bit chilly this morning? Isn’t that an interesting houndstooth pattern on the Rabbi’s new suit? Can you believe the price of tea these days? A few minutes later, all three were hovering over Avram, who was seated at the conference room table. Moses slipped a white envelope onto the table, just under Avram’s nose.

“What’s this?” Avram asked.

“We think your invention is brilliant,” Moses said. Avram beamed. “We’d like to buy it, Avram,” Moses said. “You’re young, after all, an inventor, no need to trouble yourself with the mundane details of business. We’ll handle all of that for you.”

“Splendid!” Avram said. “And then you’ll use it to feed the world.”

“Avram,” the Rabbi said quietly, placing a hand on one of Avram’s shoulders, “we don’t want to bring the machine into production.”

“But what do you mean?” Avram asked, confused.

“Think of the farmers,” the Rabbi said.

“And the farm workers,” Levi said.

“And the companies that make farm equipment, and fertilizers, and farm clothes, and tools—a host of industries. What’s to become of the thousands of workers—the tens of thousands—that will be put out of work?” Moses said. “What of them, of their livelihoods, of their families?”

“We can’t have Communism, Avram,” Levi said, “we’re not in Sweden.”

“We must think of the people,” Moses said.

Avram’s face tightened. “Oh, I see” he whispered.

“Look inside the envelope,” Moses said. “There’s a signed I.O.U. in there, enough to make you a rich man. You’ll be set for life.”

“Yes,” the Rabbi agreed. “You and Sosha.”

“I see,” Avram murmured.

Moses handed a pen to Avram.

**136** “Just sign your name in agreement, and you’ll never have another worry. You’ll be comfortable for the rest of your life.”

Avram took the pen from Moses’s hand. He slid the I.O.U. out from the envelope and was startled to read the seven figure number written on it. Avram had never dreamt of such a sum. He moved the pen to the paper. As he began to sign his name, his eyes closed, and he suddenly glimpsed into his future. He saw a large, cozy farmhouse, with a white picket fence, and little children darting about the fields. There was Sosha, standing on the farmer’s porch, as beautiful as ever, beckoning for him to come in and warm himself by the fire. He felt the chill, thin air on his cheeks, heard twigs snapping under his fine leather boots as he strode towards his beloved, and he smelled sweet-sour autumnal apples decomposing atop beds of musty leaves. He sighed contentedly while his hand began moving the pen to form the letters of his name.

Then, in his reverie, something changed. Weary, gray, gaunt faces of men, women and children in tattered clothing appeared, pressing in from the edges of his dreamscape. First a few, then a few dozen, then hundreds—thousands. They were poor; they were hungry. They pressed in closer and closer to the farm, thousands, millions of starving, lost souls. They stretched open their mouths to scream for help, but they had no voices. As they pressed in ever closer, Avram’s face grew dark. His wild eyes shot open. He bolted up from the chair, flung the pen across the room, then momentarily froze—as motionless as Lot’s wife who, after disobeying God and looking back at the destruction of Sodom, was turned into a pillar of salt.

“No, I shall not sign,” Avram whispered. “You’re all mad!” he cried, then he dashed out through the conference room doors.



“What should we do,” the Rabbi asked, looking at the other two men.

“Either we destroy that machine,” Moses said, “or we destroy that man—before he destroys us.”

“God Lord, Moses, I can never condone violence,” the Rabbi said.

“You’ll have violence when millions lose their livelihoods.”

“So what should we do?” the Rabbi said.

“We should offer more money,” Levi said.

“Avram doesn’t care about money,” the Rabbi said, “he’s young, he hasn’t a care in the world.”

“He cares about Sosha,” Moses said.

The Rabbi sighed, slowly nodding his head.

That night, the Rabbi knocked lightly on Sosha’s bedroom door.

“So you see, Sosha,” he whispered gently, sitting on the edge of the bed and holding her hands, “we just want you to talk to Avram. To talk some sense into him. He’s a dreamer, but he appears not to grasp that his dream will put millions out of work. He’ll listen to you, Sosha.”

“I see, Father. So you want to offer me up, is that it?”

“No, Sosha, I just want to help the people.”

“Which people, Father?”

“You’ve never been poor, Sosha. It wouldn’t suit you.”

The next day, Sosha met Avram at the factory with a picnic lunch. They strolled to a nearby park. Together they spread out a blanket on the grass, then put out food and drinks, along with the box of magic machine matzah Avram brought. Matzah made with the wheat from his new miracle. It was a fine, crisp, sunny Fall day. As Avram began to eat, Sosha caressed his hand.

“Avram,” Sosha said, “Father told me he wants to purchase your invention.”

Avram placed the sandwich on the napkin.

“He said you’ll be a rich man.”

Avram scowled. “He doesn’t want to use my invention. It’s all I have.”

“You’d have me, Avram,” she trilled, caressing his arm.

“Oh, Sosha!” he cried, hugging her hard. They had been dating only awhile, and Avram now confessed his love. Then he hugged Sosha even harder, eyes closed, tears of joy on his cheeks. Then, eyes still shut, he glimpsed the future again. The farmhouse, lovely Sosha beckoning him in, little ones scampering about, all safely behind a tidy white picket fence. Then they appeared once more—the hundreds, the thousands of gray, gaunt, starving people, stretching their mouths open wide in silent screams.

“I can’t take their money,” Avram said.

“Not even for me?” Sosha said.

“I’m sorry, Sosha. Not even for you. Not even for love. Some things are bigger than just two people.”

“Oh, Avram!” she said, suddenly jumping up from the blanket. “Thank God!”

“What do you mean?”

“If you told me you would take the money, I would never speak to you again. Let’s go tell Father the news. Then we can go to the newspapers—we can show them everything. The box of matzah, your diagrams of the machine. They can tell the world!”

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When they walked back to the factory, they were surprised to see a large crowd gathered in front. Men and women in overalls, plaid shirts, and boots, some with pitchforks and rakes and shovels. Avram held Sosha’s hand tightly while clutching the box of miracle matzah under his arm. They stood in front of the crowd, of hundreds of people, at a distance.

Earlier that morning, Moses had called the local farm workers union to tell them of the new machine and of the danger to their livelihoods.

“What’s this, then?” Avram shouted.

“We want our jobs!” one man shouted at Avram.

“If you feed everyone, what will we do?” said another.

“We need to work,” a woman said.

“We don’t want you Communists here! Go back to Sweden!”

Sosha feared for Avram. She held her arms out wide as if to try to block the swelling crowd, as men and women were stepping forward toward her and Avram.

“They just want me,” Avram whispered to her.

And with that, he was off, dashing madly away from the crowd, which began chasing him at full tilt. He scampered over a chain link fence into a maze of alleyways and side streets. He heard

the thuds of boots on asphalt but, glancing behind, saw no one. He ran on, wildly, his long legs keeping him ahead of the chase, all the while still clutching the box of magic matzah. He ran on and on, having been quite fleet on his feet for his whole life. The angry mob kept up the chase, sometimes gaining on him a bit, but then Avram would again pull ahead.

As he rounded the corner past Daniela's Violin Studio, on Exodus Street, he slowed momentarily to listen to the maestro's sweet strains of Mendelsohn's concerto wafting through her open windows. Then he raced on. He may have got away, too, had it not been for the good bit of dog poo which the maestro's poodle had deposited at the far end of the street.

When the crowd got up to him, Avram was lying on his back in the street. The crowd stopped running and began walking toward him slowly. He thought he was in for a beating—or worse. The box of matzah was on the asphalt next to him. He stood up slowly, the matzah box in hand.

Avram faced the crowd of men and women with clenched fists, and tight, angry faces.

"I, I just wanted to help people," Avram stammered.

The crowd was silent, moving towards him.

"I wanted to feed people. That's all. See."

Avram opened the top of the matzah box in order to remove a large square matzah to show the crowd. But his face took on a strange, puzzled expression when his hand entered the box. His fingers felt only crumbs, a thousand minuscule crumbs. Avram turned the box upside down and shook it. A dust cloud of matzah crumbs fell from the box and blew away with a bit of wind. Avram looked in the box—it was empty.

The cloud of matzah dust swirled toward the crowd and then evaporated. Everyone paused, then began to laugh.

"It's just dust," someone hollered. "All dust."

"It's a fraud, it doesn't work, there's no miracle!" another said.

"Our jobs are saved!"

The crowd began to disperse, leaving Avram slowly shaking the upside down matzah box in disbelief.

"The molecules are unstable," Avram muttered, "causing faulty reformulation of the polymers. I only need to adjust the self-generation of proteins and carbohydrates to enhance the stability." He smiled, knowing this was an easy fix.

The next morning, Avram met Sosha at the train station. They were leaving together. They hugged and kissed inside the terminal, waiting to elope, waiting for the train that would take them to their new life.

Moses and Levi had smashed the miracle matzah machine to smithereens. But no matter. Avram smiled as he patted the coat pocket in which he had the original lab notes and plans for the machine, as well as the modifications he had noted to ensure the stability of the wheat the machine would produce. He would use the notes to make a new, even better machine. In revising the design, he had a God-given epiphany. He told Sosha about it now while they embraced.

“Not only wheat,” he whispered to Sosha. “We can invent machines that will make corn, rice, and barley.”

“Oh, Avram,” Sosha exclaimed, “the world is going to love you!”



# Contributors' Notes

**Elizabeth Appelquist** is one of the owners of Cider House Media, a digital agency in Easthampton, Massachusetts. Elizabeth has always loved to write. After what feels to have been a bit of a hiatus, she is back with pen to paper, rediscovering the delights of allowing words to flow through her. There are few things in life that thrill her more than the connection she feels when creativity flows. Also, as an actor, she is presently writing a one-woman show about a woman's enlightening and vulnerable journey to her ultimate transformation and empowerment.

**Jerome Berglund** graduated from the University of Southern California's Cinema-Television Production program and spent a picaresque decade in the entertainment industry before returning to the midwest where he was born and raised. Since then he has worked as everything from dishwasher to paralegal, night watchman to assembler of heart valves. Berglund has previously published stories in *Stardust* and the *Watershed Review*, a play in *Iris Literary Journal*, and poetry in the *Dewdrop*. He is furthermore an established, award-winning fine art photographer, whose black and white pictures have been exhibited in galleries across New York, Minneapolis, and Santa Monica.

**Shirley J. Brewer** serves as poet-in-residence at Carver Center for the Arts in Baltimore, MD. Her poems appear in *Barrow Street*, *Comstock Review*, *Gargoyle*, *Meat for Tea*, *Plainsongs*, *Poetry East*, *Slant*, among other journals and anthologies. Shirley's poetry books include *A Little Breast Music* (2008, Passager Books), *After Words* (2013, Apprentice House), *Bistro in Another Realm* (2017, Main Street Rag), and *Wild Girls* (2023, Apprentice House). Shirley was a 2020 guest on *The Poet and The Poem* with Grace Cavalieri, broadcast from the Library of Congress. Website: shirleyjbrewer.com

**Eliot Cardinaux** is a poet, pianist, composer, and translator, working at the intersection of improvised music and lyric poetry. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Jacket2*, *Café Review*, *Spectra Poets*, *Big Big Wednesday*, *Talisman*, *Caliban Online*, *Bloodroot*, and *Spoon River Poetry Review*. His translations of poems by René Char are forthcoming in *Solstice*. His debut poetry collection, *On the Long Blue Night*, is forthcoming from Dos Madres Press

**Jacob Chapman** lives in Amherst, MA with his wife and daughter. His chapbook *Other Places* is available from Open Country Press, and his book *Here Over Here Over Here* is available from Human Error Publishing. He plays guitar in the band Camel City Drivers.

**Linda Chown** finds the month of August an ethereal splendor. A lifelong Leo, she is author of five books of poems, a book on narration by women modernists, numerous poems and articles on narrative as well as being an active participant in the San Francisco scene during the 60s and an inhabitant of Spain from 1969 to 1989. She is beginning to translate *Retahilas*, by award-winning 20th century novelist Carmen Martín Gaité. She tries to uncover and illuminate invisible truths. Hence the luminous title of her latest book: *Sunfishing* available on Amazon.

**Charles Coe** is the author of three books of poetry: *All Sins Forgiven: Poems for my Parents*, *Picnic on the Moon*, and *Memento Mori*, all published by Leapfrog Press. A fourth, *Purgatory Road*, will be published by Leapfrog in March, 2023. He is also author of *Spin Cycles*, a novella published by Gemma Media. Charles was a 2017 artist-in-residence for the city of Boston, where he created an oral history project focused on residents of Mission Hill. He is an adjunct professor of English at Salve Regina University in Newport, Rhode Island, and at Bay Path University, in Longmeadow, Massachusetts, where he teaches in both Master of Fine Arts writing programs.

**Joseph Corrado** was the publisher of the Portland Metrozine ([www.PortlandMetrozine.com](http://www.PortlandMetrozine.com)), an online literary journal that originally appeared in print in 1992. He also taught philosophy as an adjunct instructor at Portland Community College in Oregon. He has been an editor at McKinsey & Company, Computer Technology Review, and Design News. His new novel, *Zeus Alone*, explores the meanings of privacy and personhood and cognitive manipulations at the beginning of the 22nd century. Joseph lives by the Willamette River in downtown Portland with his loving wife Basha.

**Victoria Costello** is an Emmy and ASJA Award-winning science writer and the author of a memoir, *A Lethal Ingericance*, published by Prometheus Books. Her debut novel *Orchid Child* publishes June 2023. See her work at [www.victoriacostelloauthor.com](http://www.victoriacostelloauthor.com)

**Elena Cvjetkovic** is an award-winning fragrance writer and reviewer who is perhaps best known to many fragrance enthusiasts under the moniker of her fragrance blog *The Plum Girl* where she publishes reviews, interviews and other musings on the world of perfume. *The Plum Girl Perfume Site* is a Fragrance Foundation Awards top 5 finalist / Editorial Excellence in 2018, Perfumed Plume Awards Winner in 2019, and a Perfumed Plume Awards multiple-entry finalist in 2020 and 2021. Elena regularly reports from international perfume exhibitions such as Pitti Fragrance in Florence, and *The Plum Girl Site* is an official media partner with Esxence-The Scent of Excellence in Milan. Elena is also an active pledger to the Perfumery Code of Ethics, created by Christophe Laudamiel.

**RC deWinter's** poetry is widely anthologized, notably in *New York City Haiku* (NY Times, 2/2017) *Connecticut Shakespeare Festival Anthology* (River Bend Bookshop Press, 12/2021), *Now We Heal: An Anthology of Hope*, (Wellworth Publishing, 12/2020) *easing the edges: a collection of everyday miracles* (Patrick Heath Public Library, 11/2021) *New Contexts: 3* (Coverstory Books, April 2022) In print: 2River, Event Magazine, Gargoyle Magazine, Meat For Tea: The Valley Review, the minnesota review, Night Picnic Journal, Plainsongs, Prairie Schooner, Ogham Stone, Southword, The Frogmore Papers, Variant Literature, Yellow Arrow Journal, The York Literary Review among others and appears in numerous online literary journals.

**Mel Edden** grew up in England, but has lived in Maryland for fifteen years. Her work has been published in *The Loch Raven Review*, *Maryland Bards Poetry Review* and is forthcoming in *50 Give or Take* by Vine Leaves Press. She takes her inspiration from everyday moments, often related to art, nature, or her children. Follow her on Instagram @meleddden

**Marc Eichen** has a Ph.D. from the Graduate School of Geography, Clark University with a research specialization in political geography and natural resource management. His fiction focuses on life in Zanzibar and in red-state America. His stories have appeared in *Still Points Arts Quarterly*, *The Adirondack Review*, *West Trade Review*, and *Toyon*. He is the winner of the Richard Cortez Day Prize in fiction. Current projects include a book of short stories in both Swahili and English to be published in fall 2023, a mystery set in Zanzibar and a novel of loss and renewal set in Sandpoint, Idaho.

**Eavonka Ettinger** arrived at haiku/shahai after a journey through theatre, film, spoken word poetry, and teaching. She's a Touchstone Award nominee and Golden Haiku 2023 selectee. A few places her shahai (haiku and photo) work has appeared are *Scarlet Dragonfly*, *Fresh Out Magazine*, *Setu Journal*, *Black & White Haiga*, and *Under the Basho*. She lives in Long Beach, CA with her husband and cat.

**Jeffrey M. Feingold's** stories, widely published in literary journals, have been nominated for the Pen America Short Story Prize for Emerging Writers, the Pushcart Prize, and *The Best American Short Stories*; finalist for the 2022 Eyelands Book Awards in Greece; shortlisted for Exeter Story Prize in London; and winner of London's Superlative literary journal annual short story prize.

**Scott Ferry** helps our Veterans heal as a RN in the Seattle area. He attributes his writing skill to listening to rain fall upwards from the bottom of a fictional aquarium. His most recent book, *each imaginary arrow*, is now available from Impsired Press. 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. More of his work can be found at [ferry-poetry.com](http://ferry-poetry.com).

**Diane Funston** lives in the Sacramento Valley of California. She writes poetry and memoir and is also a visual artist in the media of mosaics and collage. She has been published in *California Quarterly*, *Whirlwind*, and many others.

**GJ Gillespie** is a collage artist living in a 1928 Tudor Revival farmhouse overlooking Oak Harbor on Whidbey Island (north of Seattle). In addition to natural beauty, he is inspired by art history -- especially mid century abstract expressionism. The "Northwest Mystics" who produced haunting images from this region 60 years ago are favorites. Winner of 20 awards, his art has appeared in 61 shows and 100 publications.

**Diane Griffin** is a writer of fantasy, nonfiction, and the occasional poem. She currently lives in Gill, MA with her wife Karen and two sweet kitties named Luna and Jasper.

**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, including :Waywords Lit. Journal, Instant Noodles, Paddler, Dorothy Parker's Ashes, Dipity, Cosmic Daffodil, Little Seed, Bar Bar and others. She started writing at the age of 80 last September while in hospital, after an accident.

**Joe Hilliard.** Writer. Luddite. Teller of Tales. Grew up as a teen in Los Angeles on a diet of Blue Demon, Doc Savage, Philip K. Dick, the Circle Jerks, Mildred Pierce, Judge Dredd, and 50s science fiction films, on the fringe of 80s Hollywood. Graduate of the University of Michigan, which only added Kawabata, Krazy Kat, and William S. Burroughs to the mix. Marks time as a paralegal in sunny California.

**Sarah Hussein** is a visual artist ( painter and sculptor ) whose artworks are selected for participating in many judged international art exhibitions in Italy, Egypt, UK , USA Sarah was awarded some art prizes and in competitions in Egypt and internationally.

**Barbara Kessel** moved from a teaching career in Chicago to the university town where she got a degree: Champaign-Urbana, Illinois. It has Nature and Artists and other good people, really a great retirement location as long as you have no allergies to the corn dust of the harvest season. She loves writing there.

**Linda Kraus** has taught university courses in literature and cinema studies. She has published poetry and prose in several literary journals and anthologies and has just published her first collection of poems, *Popcorn Icons and Other Poems Celebrating Movies*. She is an orchid judge, a judge for film festivals, and an impassioned rock hound.

**Kimberly Kuchar** lives near Austin. She loves animals and currently has a pet cockatiel, who often sits on her shoulder while she writes. For most of her life, Kimberly has enjoyed writing and taking photos. In 2022, she jumped deeper into short-form poetry and began writing haiku sequences, collaborative poetry, and haibun. Her work has appeared in Prune Juice Journal, the Turning Japanese column in Suspect Device, Horror Senryu Journal, Five Fleas Itchy Poetry, Poetry Pea Journal, Failed Haiku, Scarlet Dragonfly Journal, Tsuru-Dōrō, Synchronized Chaos, and other journals.

**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).

**JL Huffman** is a retired Trauma Surgeon/ICU doctor who has published three poetry books - *Almanac: The Four Seasons* (2020), *Family Treasons* (2021), and *Voyage: Vista and Verse* (2022). Her individual poems have appeared in The Pharos, Asahi Haikuist Network, Haiku Dialogue, Poetry Pea, Cold Moon Journal, The Pan Haiku Review, Haiku in Action, Meat for Tea: The Valley Review, and others. For more info on the Author visit her website [jlhuffman.com](http://jlhuffman.com) or Twitter @JoanHuffmanMD

**Cherryl Jensen** is a writer who grew up among the cornfields of Eastern Iowa, and has lived across the country from Washington on the West Coast to New Hampshire and Massachusetts in Northeastern U.S. She received her MFA from Vermont College of Fine Arts in 2022. Her mentor was Sue William Silverman. Cherryl's writing has appeared in Past Ten, Persimmon Tree, Concrete Wolf, Northern New England Review, Psychiatric Services, and more. She lives in Greenfield, Massachusetts.

**Kim Keough** (she/her) received her BA in English from Mount Holyoke College. Her poetry and photography have previously appeared in *Meat for Tea: The Valley Review*. She is the former director of *Voices from Inside*, a writing program for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women. In the 1990's, Keough made her living as a busker and performed all over the world. She lives in Western Massachusetts.

**WZ (Zosia Kochanski)** is a multimedia artist and muso from western Massachusetts. Her compositions combine music, hand-drawn animation, performance art, drawings, video, soft sculpture, poetry and multi-media collage. Her film work and animated music videos have been shown at film festivals in the US, Canada, France, Portugal and the Czech Republic. Her first chapbook of poetry, *Infinity Ends Abruptly About Ten Feet Away* was self-released in 2023 and contains work written during travels to and from California and Massachusetts the previous year. *Wishbone* writes for and plays with a punk rock trio based in Hadley, MA called EIEIEIO.

**Linda Kraus** has taught university courses in literature and cinema studies. She has published poetry and prose in several literary journals and anthologies and has recently published her first collection of poems, *Popcorn Icons and Other Poems Celebrating Movies*. She is an orchid judge, a judge for film festivals, and an impassioned rock hound.

**Vitek Kruta**, co-creator/owner and director of Gateway City Arts, is a professional artist, art restorer, set designer, and art teacher. In 1979, Vitek joined the legendary Czech Underground band "Psi Vojaci". His political activities led to his escape from Czechoslovakia. In 1981, after organizing an illegal underground concert and gathering of the members of "Chart 77", a movement against the communist government, Vitek escaped to Germany to avoid arrest and persecution. Vitek wrote poetry in his native language. It took over 20 years to learn English enough for him to feel comfortable to be able to share his poems again. He moved to the United States in 1991. Since then, Vitek has worked as a freelance artist.

Working primarily with illustration and printmaking, **Jax Kusleika** has found that the arts have allowed him to express himself where words have fallen short. He observed that he communicates more deeply through his art than he ever could in words. Jax recently graduated from Northampton High School where he had the opportunity to showcase their work at the A.P.E. Gallery in downtown Northampton. A recipient of the Talent Award and President's Scholarship, Jax will attend the Hartford Art School at the University of Hartford this fall to further his study of the arts.

**Nadja Maril** is a former magazine editor and journalist living in Annapolis, Maryland, USA. She has an MFA in Creative Writing from the Stonecoast Program at the University of Southern Maine and her short stories, poetry and essays have been published in literary journals and anthologies that include *Lunch Ticket*, *Across the Margin*, and *The Compressed Journal of Creative Arts*. She blogs weekly about writing and life at [Nadjamaril.com](http://Nadjamaril.com). Her twitter handle is [SNMaril](https://twitter.com/SNMaril) and facebook page is [facebook.com/nadja.maril](https://facebook.com/nadja.maril).

**Jason Mazzotta** is a writer from Moodus, CT currently living in Riverside, CA. He's studying short fiction at UCLA Extension in Los Angeles. Jason is also a filmmaker and has directed award-winning short films including *Father Willie* and *Art For All*.

**Judith Mikesch McKenzie** has traveled much of the world, but is always drawn to the Rocky Mountains as one place that feeds her soul. She loves change - new places, new people, new challenges, but writing is her home. Her poems have been published in *Wild Roof Journal*, *Halcyone Literary Review*, *Plainsongs Magazine*, *Elevation Review*, *Scribblerus*, *Cathexis Northwest Press*, *Meat for Tea: The Valley Review*, and several others. She is a wee bit of an Irish curmudgeon, but her friends seem to like that about her.

**Philip E. Repko** is a sixty-two year old Pop-Pop, dad, husband and purveyor of poetry and prose. He has been looking for his identity for all of these six decades, wearing hats as a football, basketball, and lacrosse coach, among other things. Professionally, he has held down the educational fort in public and private school education for the better part of the past 40 years. In addition, he has been a youth basketball referee, a choir member, a powerlifter, and a weekend golfer. Therefore, all material is eligible for publication.



**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.

**Judith Sharlin** received her MFA in 2023 from the Newport MFA in creative writing at Salve Regina University. She holds a PhD in nutrition from Tufts University and is a registered dietitian. Currently, she works as a full-time nutrition professor at Palm Beach State College in Boca Raton, Florida. Her cookbook and nutrition guide, *The Romantic Vegetarian*, won an American Health Book Award. She wrote and co-edited a textbook, *Lifecycle Nutrition*. When not writing or teaching, she spends her time cooking and baking, swimming with a U.S. Masters swim team, beach walking, biking, reading and traveling.

**Andrew Shelffo** is a writer, teacher, and storyteller who lives in western Massachusetts. He holds a Ph.D. in contemporary American literature and has been teaching literature and writing in both secondary and higher education for over 30 years. He has told stories on the World Channel's Stories from the Stage, USA Today's Storytellers Project, and New England Public Media's Valley Voices Grand Slam, and numerous virtual storytelling events, including ones in Philadelphia, Toronto, and Chicago.

**Ellis Shuman** is an American-born Israeli author, travel writer, and book reviewer. His writing has appeared in The Jerusalem Post, The Times of Israel, The Oslo Times, and The Huffington Post. He is the author of *The Virtual Kibbutz*, *Valley of Thracians*, and *The Burgas Affair*. *The Burgas Affair* was translated and published in Bulgaria in 2016.

**Mistinguette Smith** writes in the places where her identities intersect and fissure: race, gender, sex, age, land, place. Her poems and essays have appeared in Beloit Poetry Journal, Pluck! A Journal of Affrilachian Arts and Culture, The Common, The Philadelphia Inquirer and the Black LGBTQ anthologies Does Your Mama Know, and Other Countries:Voices Rising. She is the founder of The Black/Land Project, which gathers urban Black narratives about relationships to land. An early decision climate refugee, she and her wife just moved from Northampton, MA to Oberlin, OH.

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).

**Jennifer MacBain-Stephens** (she/her) went to NYU's Tisch School of the Arts and now lives in Iowa where she is landlocked. Her fifth, full length poetry collection, *Pool Parties* is forthcoming from Unsolicited Press in 2023. She is also the author of fifteen chapbooks and enjoys exploring how to blend creativity with nurturing the earth. Recent work appears in The Westchester Review, Cleaver, Dream Pop, and Grist. She is the director of the monthly reading series Today You are Perfect, sponsored by the non-profit Iowa City Poetry. Find more of her work at [jennifermacbainstephens.com](http://jennifermacbainstephens.com)

**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.

**Grant Vecera** teaches writing and literature at IUPUI and at Butler University in Indianapolis, Indiana, where he lives with his wife, daughter, and two cats. His poems have been appearing regularly in various illustrious literary periodicals for several decades, which is weird because he is only 12 years old... ha ha, just kidding.

**Reed Venrick** is a Florida-based writer, usually publishing poems with themes concerning nature and/or aesthetics.

**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).

**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](http://www.frankzahn.com).

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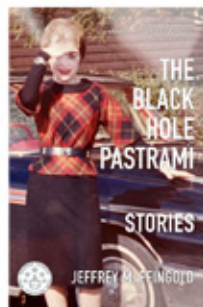
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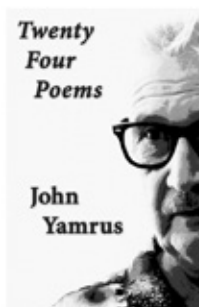
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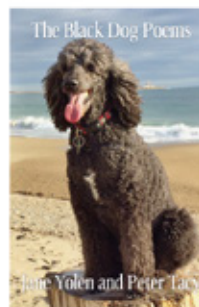
Lindsay Adkins  
*Fixing the Halo*



Rick Paar  
*God Bless America  
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Jane Yolen and Peter Tacy  
*The Black Dog Poems*

