
Typehouse
Literary Magazine
Volume 6, No. 2, Issue 17

An aspiring cartoonist who loved The Far Side as a kid, ***Ryan Cassidy*** *has a dream of becoming the next Gary Larson. He also has a dream that he is being chased by zombies but can't seem to run fast enough to get away. Ryan lives in Boston with his wife, daughter, and soon-to-arrive twin sons. He loves being a dad, if for no other reason, because dad jokes come naturally to him. See more of Ryan's cartoons @thegaggery on Instagram.*

Sometimes Y

An allegory for the transgender bathroom access debate in America. Figuring out which restroom to use is often a challenge for non-binary people who don't identify fully as a male or female. In this piece, the letter Y, who doesn't identify fully as a consonant or vowel, has a head scratching moment when faced with its own standard binary restroom choice.

Aaron Wallace *is a poet who served as a combat medic, rape crisis counselor, and women's health coordinator. Since Aaron's discharge in 2013 he has graduated from Jacksonville University with Honors and is a current member of Lesley University's Master of Fine Arts program. His work has been published in The Wrath-Bearing Tree, The Deadly Writers Patrol, and is forthcoming in North Dakota Quarterly. Aaron currently resides in Jacksonville, Florida, with his wonderful wife Darby and their dogs, Bailey and Benji.*

Watching the War from My Living Room

Aaron Wallace

How many body bags do the Pentagon bean counters order?
I'm sure they have an algorithm that the news could talk about

instead of showing another soldier's final flight with ads
for adult diapers and non-stick pans to follow. The government

doesn't call them body bags, of course, but GOVT DOD SPEC BLACK
DISASTER BAG - 6 HANDLE are on a spreadsheet at forty dollars

and seventy-five cents a unit. I'll drink a body bag's worth tonight.
Is there a bulk discount on the booze? No, just the bags they use

to carry the bodies to the Blackhawks. The taxpayers watching
get their money's worth, clutching their couch cushions as six men

struggle to ensure that the bag stays level and doesn't sink in the middle.
The second soldier on the right is learning what dead weight means.

I know that if a soldier doesn't wear gloves the handles imprint
the skin, no different than the loop at the top of a child's backpack,

and I know that veterans don't watch the salutes and flags, they watch the
soldiers standing behind the flight line's chain link fence. The ones who know

what it means to click their heels in case the desert is Oz, in case the only way out isn't with a flag draped over PVC Vinyl, or a casket because I've been

home for five years and I'm still clicking my heels
because there is still a crisscross pattern in my skin,
from the first time I carried someone to their flight home.

Teresa Milbrodt *is the author of two short story collections, Bearded Women: Stories (Chizine Publications), and Work Opportunities: Stories (Portage Press), a novel, The Patron Saint of Unattractive People (Boxfire Press), and a flash fiction collection, Larissa Takes Flight: Stories (Booth Books). Her stories, essays, and poetry have been published widely in literary magazines. She is addicted to coffee, long walks with her MP3 player, frozen yogurt, and anything by George Saunders.*

Colchester

Teresa Milbrodt

It's been a long morning and I have a headache from too much time spent peering at my computer screen – the ophthalmologist said the glare doesn't help my sight – then my great-aunt waltzes in the library's front entrance with her dragon. I don't want a confrontation, but working at the circulation desk means playing gatekeeper. I talked with her last week, and said we couldn't allow Colchester inside because of the strict no-animals policy aside from guide dogs and guide dragons, which have their fire glands removed. My aunt nodded, seeming to understand, but apparently she assumed she'd have to work harder so I'd let them browse the shelves. Colchester is green with light blue wings and about the size of a bulldog – rather small as dragons go – but he's a sweetheart, very cuddly, though he still has his fire gland because my aunt said she liked the added protection. She's willing to sacrifice curtains and carpets and sweaters.

"Nice to see you, Auntie," I say, slipping around the circulation desk to head her off at the pass. "Remember, you'll need to leave Colchester outside by the bike rack."

"He won't be a bother at all," she says, smiling at me in her innocent old lady way. She dressed the part in a pink jacket and long lavender skirt with the matching scarf, gray hair swept up in a bun. My aunt carries an odor of mothballs, coffee, and hand lotion that follows her like a cloud. A kind woman, but one who's used to getting her way.

"I know he's well-behaved," I say, bending down to scratch between Colchester's wings since he's rubbing against my leg. "But you were talking about his indigestion attacks last week. Even a smoky little burp would make the fire alarms go off."

"I've put him on antacids," she says. "The vet said they should do the trick."

"Bike rack, Auntie," I say, standing up and squinting at her.

"I'm doing genealogical research," she says. "I have to use the

reference books, and if Colchester is on his own for too long he starts whining." We stare at each other. Colchester sniffles. My aunt bought him two months ago, after her anxiety attacks got worse. There were a few burglaries in her apartment complex, so he's supposed to be for emotional support and has the documents from her therapist to prove it, but that doesn't mean she can drag him into every library and bookstore and rare documents archive. We have a good sprinkler system, and hope never to use it.

"Mind if I meet your friends?" says Doug as he rolls out from behind the reference desk.

"This is my Great-Aunt Katherine and Colchester," I say. "Who was just going to step out to the bike rack."

"He doesn't like being without me," says my aunt.

I sigh. Her emotional support animal needs emotional support?

"We have to be very careful with our rare documents," says Doug, bending down to scratch Colchester, who has balanced his forearms on Doug's knee. Doug says animals either love wheelchairs or are terrified by them. He nods to let me know he's got this, and I'm happy to bow out and let someone else deal with my aunt. Often being a librarian isn't about books but customer service, and as anyone in customer service knows, some days it's easier to be polite than others.

As Doug and my aunt talk, I resume checking books in and keep my mouth shut.

"Colchester is important for my emotional functioning," says my aunt, clenching her fist around Colchester's leash. He's purring as Doug scratches him. Doug remains as cool as the proverbial cucumber, explaining that maybe he can show her online genealogy resources so she doesn't need to use our rare books.

I glance up at him and then back down to the print enlargement machine beside my computer, which makes reading the tiny call numbers on books feasible for me. The head of finance bitched about how expensive it was until I reminded him that I'm in charge of our annual book sale and the wine and cheese tasting, our two biggest fundraisers. Jeannie, our head librarian, and Alice who also works in circulation mentioned that they'd use it, too, especially at the end of the day when they start to get eyestrain. The finance guy is still bitching quietly about the expense, and that I requested more braille texts for the library, like I'm the only person in the world who will ever use them. He's in his own office universe all day, moping over spreadsheets, so perhaps I shouldn't expect him to understand the real world.

"He's on antacids for his stomach," my aunt says for the twentieth time as she barters for books. "And I have a certificate to prove he's an emotional support animal." She digs a folded piece of paper out of her purse. I wonder how often she's tried to bring Colchester into places where he's not allowed. People fake those documents so they can bring their animals on

planes and not buy seats for them, even if a gryphon will crowd out anyone sitting next to it with those huge lion paws and eagle wings. That doesn't even take into account what happens if the gryphon isn't well-trained and starts yodeling halfway through the flight to San Francisco, and certain passengers happen to have forgotten their magnifying glass and are terrifically frustrated by trying to read a too-tiny-print novel. Yes, I'll admit to my prejudices, but I'd rather sit next to a panicked person than a calm one with a yodeling gryphon.

After fifteen or twenty minutes – entirely too long in my opinion – Doug talks with Jeannie and gets a one-day exception for my aunt and Colchester since she wants to look at a county history book that isn't online. He rolls back to the reference desk and my aunt flounces over to a table with Colchester. I'm not pleased. It's not that my authority is shot to hell, but when my aunt peers at the circulation desk I can tell she's giving me a self-satisfied smirk even if I can't see her features clearly. For once I'm glad for the blurred vision.

During my afternoon coffee break, I have words with Doug.

"It's just for one day," he says, "and it's a small dragon. Have a little compassion." He's teasing and not, but I bristle anyway.

"I have a lot of compassion, but you don't know my aunt. She's going to expect this exception from now on. It's not just that rules are rules, it's that all of her curtains smell like smoke and have char marks. Even if dragons can be the nicest creatures in the world, that doesn't stop a book from going up in flames."

"She says Colchester took his antacids this morning," he says. "And I told her she couldn't bring him in again."

"Famous last words," I say.

"I'll kick her out next time," he says. "Promise."

"Fine," I say, rubbing my temples. Stupid eyestrain. I need to give myself more breaks from those damn computers, and buy a braille screen reader than I can use at home and bring into work. I'd think about requesting one, but the finance guy would go into conniptions. Besides, it would be nice to have in the evenings when I'd rather read with my fingers than my eyes.

"I'll buy your beer after work," Doug says. We've been going to Wednesday night happy hours at the bar down the street to decompress and chat.

"But not just to pacify me," I say.

"Because you bought last time," he says.

I nod a grudging yes, then slurp down the rest of my coffee because I need to choose a book for this afternoon's story time and say hello to the kids when they arrive. Sometimes I'm more patient with kids than adults, and I've ordered some braille children's books so I can practice my reading skills.

I was born three months premature and my eyes weren't fully formed,

so my right retina partially detached from the back of my eye. I've only ever been able to see blurry colors on that side, and the vision in my left eye has never been great, though I've functioned as a sighted person with a very strong glasses prescription. But now I'm developing cataracts, according to my ophthalmologist, and my cornea is warped in odd ways that contact lenses haven't been able to correct. The world is going hazy, images doubling, but at least with braille I don't have to hold the book an inch from my nose.

The little kids think I'm magic, though I've shown them how I read little dots with my fingers. It's taken three years of practice to get this good, but today I have to field questions about my aunt before I start reading. She's still at her table, taking notes while Colchester sleeps. At least I've anticipated the kids' queries ahead of time:

Why does that lady have a dragon?

Why can she bring her dragon to the library and I can't bring mine?

Can I bring my dragon next time?

These are logical queries for six-year-olds, and ones that are hard to answer well.

"The dragon is her special helper," I say.

"Is the dragon helping her read?"

"It does other things," I say, breezing over what those are exactly. I open the book and start reading, hope the kids are distracted by my words and fingers grazing over the page. Their bright faces are peach blobs, but at least they're quieter.

Doug is one of my friends who remembers that I'm almost blind in my right eye, so he rolls on my left when we walk to the bar after work. He transfers himself to the booth, since he says his butt muscles fall asleep after being in one position for too long.

"Colchester behaved himself just fine," Doug reminds me after we order.

"I'll let you field the sphinxes and unicorns that everyone will try to get past us next," I say.

"Always wanted to be a zookeeper," says Doug.

"If I need to buy a cane when my vision gets worse, should I get one with a sword inside?"

"Why not?" he says.

"It's heavier and you can't fold it up."

"It'd be a great conversation piece." Doug pats my arm and I lean against him a little. We've been in this space for a while – friends who exchange touches without crossing the boundary into a deeper relationship, which means we trade off buying beer and coffee and muffins, but a full-scale relationship is too much of a risk. At least I think that's the unspoken agreement. Every workplace has enough drama without throwing heartbreak into the mix, and libraries with our constant funding woes and levy campaigns

are no exception.

Doug and I part with a long hug, and I have just enough pride not to ask for a ride home. It's only three blocks to my townhouse, but it's dusk and my night vision is getting worse. Before long I'll need a lift. Or a cane.

Mrs. Herman, the lady who lives next door to me, has a sphinx, a small one, who sidles up to the fence for a few back scratches when I arrive. For a sphinx she's very soft – not the usual coarse lion fur. Bitsy isn't a bad guard sphinx, since her shriek when she sees a salesperson or stranger is loud enough to wake me up from a nap in the living room. I've cared for her a couple times when Mrs. Herman was on vacation. She eats cornflakes and hot dogs and shits little piles of sand that you have to scatter across the backyard. It was nice to sit with her in the living room, reading with one hand and stroking her with the other, but pets are a care commitment, and sometimes I have to work late. I wouldn't always be able to take a dog or dragon for walks, and what if it got underfoot? It's easy to put off getting a four-footed companion when I have Bitsy next door to alleviate those cravings.

I haven't dated in a few years for similar reasons – it takes time to get to know someone, explain my impairment, and that I don't mind braille. Usually I'm too tired or jaded about my dating potential to miss constant company, but other times I need it, like last year when my mom passed away. I went home to help Dad with the funeral and be strong and mostly tearless for him. It was only when I came back that I realized I didn't have a mother to call when I was having a bad day, or when we broke a fundraising record. I cried for a week, but had to band-aid my invisible wounds at work.

Once I let myself get teary in front of Doug at the bar, but I didn't want to consume his evening blotting my eyes with napkins and saying, "A heart attack. Shit. She was too young."

Doug said I could call any time and he'd come over, but I preferred to sit on Mrs. Herman's front step and hug Bitsy who sat still as a sun-warmed stone. I still don't know what to make of it, how a tiny blood clot no one noticed could take her life. Everyone sees my glasses and how I hold books three inches from my face to read, but I must remind myself that too often bodies have problems floating just under our skin.

Mom was an animal lover, but when she passed away she was down to two dragons, three dogs, and a sphinx. They romped around the yard, thwarting Dad's plans for a vegetable garden, but he said that was one of the side effects of being married to my mother. She brought home any stray creature someone found roaming around the newspaper parking lot. Mom sold ad space for the paper and was good at wheedling and making deals. That's how she convinced my dad to let them all be inside pets. Our carpets took a beating from those claws, but all the animals cuddled on the couch with Dad after she died. He said it was good therapy, and really heavy.

Mom would have let Colchester in the library, but she also said I was

a stickler, and she was a softie. If you'd smashed us together maybe it would have been the right balance, but that night rule-abiding me calls my grandma to tell her about Great-Aunt Katherine and Colchester.

"She'll be bossy until the end," says Grandma.

"Doug gave her too much leeway," I say.

"Probably," says Grandma, "but she did have an awful scare with those break-ins. I wanted her to stay longer with me since she was so flighty, but that dragon made a difference."

"And a lot of char marks," I say. "I don't see why she doesn't move if it's so unsafe."

"Not many other places she can afford on that railroad pension," says Grandma. "I'm lucky your grandpa and I got this place paid for before he passed, or I might be in the same situation. But she don't want to come live with me. She don't even want me over to help her tidy up. Says her floors are her business."

"I guess," I sigh. I think great-aunt Katherine lives on frozen meals and canned soup and would benefit from dinner guests, but she and Grandma talk on the phone every night.

"She's been asking me about how to get the smoke smell out of sweaters," says Grandma, "so we chat about laundry."

I'm not sure how my aunt got Colchester past the landlord, but I assume she's given up on keeping the security deposit. Then again, the burglaries in her apartment complex would have scared anyone – not much was taken, but there was a lot of aimless spite. The intruders spilled juice all over carpets and couches, threw food at walls, and broke plates and pictures frames. Maybe they'd lift the computer or a TV, but that was it. The destruction without reason was what kept my aunt up so many nights. People who did that wouldn't care about hitting an old lady. If I scream loud enough, I tell myself, Bitsy and Mrs. Herman will hear and call the police. I also triple-check the door locks at night.

After my chat with Grandma I feel less aggravated, and walk downtown for an ice cream, or just a stretch. At night I wear my bright babydoll pink sweatshirt, a color I hate, but one that screams *Look at me, I'm in the middle of the crosswalk, turn on your fucking headlights.*

The sweatshirt bears nearly-invisible time markers that I can only see when I squint – Bitsy's fur, a couple ice cream stains, dirt on the left cuff from the time I tripped on the sidewalk crack and literally fell on my face, scratching my glasses lens so badly it had to be replaced. Sadly it was the left lens, the one I actually use. This was the shirt I was wearing when the car grazed past me by inches last week when I was in the crosswalk, and they were turning. I was too startled to yell a few expletives. I have a right to be walking late, lost in my interior world, and it shouldn't be my responsibility to look out for fucking cars. Someone should learn something from this. I say

it's them, though Mom would have yelled at me to be careful because I have to watch out for all the stupid in the world. It's not going to eradicate itself.

Last week wasn't the first time a car almost made a left into me, but drivers don't know I can't see them. If I used a cane, they might get the signal. And I might not get hit. But I don't want to stick out until I have to. At least tonight my walk is streetlight yellow and uneventful, and I reward myself with ice cream for not chastising my aunt. Yet.

#

A week later, Doug is at a conference on integrated library systems – he always goes to technology events for us – when my aunt comes back with Colchester. I can't read her expression when she peers at the reference desk and sees Doug isn't there, but she'll have to deal with her evil great-niece.

"Auntie," I sigh, "It's lovely to see both of you, but Colchester has to be by the bike rack."

"I need to use that county history book," she says. "Where's the young man who helped me last time?"

"Out for the day," I say. "I'm sure Colchester will be fine outside while you copy whatever pages you need."

"He has to be with me," she says in a tone that I can only call a whine. "And he gets lonely."

"I can have one of our high school volunteers sit with him," I say. "We can't make exceptions to that rule, and he's a fire hazard."

"We were fine before," she says, peering over my shoulder like Doug might be hiding behind the circulation desk.

"And Doug told you that would be the last time," I say.

"It's a public library and I have a right to use it like anyone else," she says more loudly.

"I didn't say you couldn't use it," I say, "but you'll have to leave Colchester outside. Those are the rules that anyone who uses the library has to follow."

"He gets the hiccups when he's with strangers and I'm not around," she says. "Last time he nearly caught a tree on fire."

I close my eyes. I want to ask why she doesn't get the fire glands taken out if her support dragon is so damn flighty, but that's an extended discussion I don't want to have. If Doug were here he'd gently negotiate, or he'd give her another exception and it wouldn't be my problem. But now she figures I'll give in to avoid hauling her and Colchester out the front door. She's right.

"Which book do you need, and for how long?" I say in a low voice. I know I will regret this.

I let her retrieve the book while I stay at the circulation desk with Colchester.

"Really," I say, "this is nothing personal. I like you, I'm just worried

about setting a precedent, and everyone wanting to bring their manticore. I'm sure you'll be on your best behavior. But I hope she gave you your antacids today."

Colchester snorts, which I take to signify understanding rather than contempt.

I let my aunt and Colchester sit in the reading section near the circulation desk, where there are no book displays or posters or paper of any sort, aside from her book and notebook. I go about my duties – reviewing books for the teen book club, deciding which children's books I should ask for in braille, pointing our high school volunteer Lena to the next cart of books to be shelved when she returns with an empty cart.

The afternoon turns mundane – I say hello to the high school crowd when they bound inside and sit near my aunt, in their usual nook with upholstered chairs and couches. I remind them to keep it to a dull roar, but moments later the commotion comes from my aunt's table, her almost imperceptible sniffles that turn into a sob, then an all-out bawl. I skirt out from behind the desk to see what's gotten to her, but Colchester is licking her face with his thin pink tongue. After a few moments she stops crying, stroking his scales and scratching under his wing. I sigh and wonder what she just read.

Seconds after I return to the circulation desk, I hear a croaking noise that I later determine was a dragon burp. My aunt's tote bag and a section of carpet are smoldering. She screams and I run for the fire extinguisher on the wall, pull out the pin and pray I remember how to use it. The foam spray coats her purse with a heavy cloud of white. I cough a few times from the exertion and smoke. The finance director is not going to be pleased about the damaged carpet.

My aunt is crying again, warbling how she's sorry, so sorry, and Colchester took his antacids this morning and she'll pay for the damage to the table and chairs and floor. I walk closer, and squint to see the table and a chair have indeed charred a different color than they were before. And my aunt will reimburse us with her tiny pension?

I feel the eyes of eight high school students upon me, which means I must save my spontaneous combustion for later. On the phone with Grandma. But for now, a level tone.

"Calm down," I say. "Take Colchester outside. I'll be there in a minute, and we'll figure things out."

Colchester rubs against my legs and makes a noise somewhere between a growl and a purr. My aunt shuffles out of the library, while Laurie the children's librarian inspects the damage and melting hill of foam where my aunt's purse used to be. Laurie announces that we can sand and re-stain the chair and table. The carpet will take more creativity, but she thinks there are old scraps in the back room. We can do a patch job, and with strategic

table placement, no one should know.

"I'll find those fans in the storage room to get rid of the smoke smell," she says.

When I march outside I'm still fuming, stride too fast and almost trip on the door frame, then cuss to myself. My aunt doesn't notice.

"I'm so sorry," she says, clutching a damp wad of tissues she must have had in her pocket. Colchester rubs against her legs.

"Okay," I say, handing her the pad of paper I brought. "Write down that you will pay for the cost of repairs, and you promise never to bring Colchester into the library again. Ever." My aunt nods and sniffles, takes the pad from me and starts scribbling. If Laurie and I put in some extra time this weekend I don't think the damage will cost my aunt much of anything, I just want a signed statement that she won't haul Colchester past me a third time.

I show her scrawled promise to Jeannie, after Laurie and I have cordoned off the damage with chairs and book carts. Laurie tells us (again) not to worry, this is an easy project and she refinished a whole dining room set last year and still has a bunch of stain and sandpaper and brushes and drop cloths. Jeannie keeps her hand over her mouth but nods at Laurie. I feel a red rise of shame in my cheeks and volunteer to come in after hours to assist with the patch job, then plod behind the circulation desk, almost tripping on the carpet bump we still haven't gotten fixed. As long as Laurie and I are doing repairs, there are seven bumps on the first floor that could use some attention. My feet have found them all.

I call Doug that night and tell him about my aunt and Colchester in a tone of voice that suggests I am not pleased. After a pause he asks if I'd like to come over to his place for a drink. I say sure, whatever. He says he'll pick me up.

I wash my face, brush my hair, and try to look presentable after a frazzling day. In the bathroom mirror my face is blurred enough so I can't see the wrinkles or tired lines unless I press my nose to the glass.

"That should have been on my watch," Doug says when he arrives. He has a nice van with a lift and his chair locks in place behind the steering wheel, so he doesn't have to get out to drive. "I'll help stain the furniture this weekend."

"Damn straight you will," I say. "At least the book she was using is okay. I don't think it got foam on it."

"I'll be meaner to patrons in the future," he says.

"Don't make me sound like a witch. I'm trying to keep the library from going up in flames."

"Sorry," he says quietly. "You're right. I was too lenient."

"What do you have to drink at your place?" I say.

"What do you want?" he says. "I make a great fireball."

I glare at him.

"Really," he says, "cinnamon liquor. It's good."

Doug bartended when he was in college so he's a decent mixologist, but I ask for a cosmopolitan. While he's playing with gin and ice, I tell him about the carpet bumps that have been tripping me up on the first floor, and the idiot driver who almost ran into me a couple weeks ago, and how I wish it were easier for people to see that I can't see.

"Maybe I should get a pirate eye patch instead of a cane," I say. "Then I'd look more threatening."

"I think pirates are sexy," he says.

"Librarians aren't sexy?" I say.

"Pirate librarians would be even sexier," he says, handing me our drinks. I carry them to the coffee table, and we lounge on his couch and talk about the conference he attended, which was mostly sales pitches and not that informative, but they had good lasagna at lunch.

"You always think about food," I say.

"What else is there?" he says with a grin. It's not exactly an intimate line which is why I'm not expecting the kiss, but somehow we're both expecting the kiss because we lean forward just enough so our lips touch, softly at first then harder. He tastes like cinnamon vodka with a hint of shampoo since his hair got in my mouth. Doug pulls back, takes the drink from my hand, and sets our cocktails on the coffee table before we resume.

"I'm guessing we won't tell people about this," he says a few minutes later, his arm behind my shoulders, my hand on his knee.

"We have to decide what this is," I say. "Maybe after refinishing the chair."

"Want to come over for dinner tomorrow?"

"Sure," I say. This close I can see him clearly. "You'll have to give me a ride, though."

"Anytime," he says, nuzzling my neck. We relax back on the couch, drinks in hand, which makes me think I could share space with another person on certain nights. I appreciate independence – getting up and going to bed when I like, and not worrying that the music or television is too loud. But other times it would be nice to have someone around. Not to do anything special. Just to be.

#

When I take my evening walk the next day, I'm thinking about my mother and the one time I scared the shit out of her. I was six and we were walking toward the ice cream truck which had parked a little way up the street. I don't remember if there was a line forming, or if I was scared the truck would leave before I got my ice cream, but I let go of her hand and ran across the street and heard the squeal of brakes. A car seven feet away from me honked loud and made me jump. Maybe I didn't see it because of my almost-blind eye, or maybe I just wasn't looking, but I was mad since the car

scared me and the ice cream line was getting longer.

My mother must have screamed, though I don't remember hearing her, only how she grabbed my arm and yanked me back and said I wouldn't get ice cream if I didn't look both ways and always hold her hand. I cried all the way home. Mom must have been shaking, terrified of all the things I couldn't see, which is why she said I had to be extra special double careful from then on. Even when I was over thirty, I figured she still saw me as that six-year-old kid who moved too quickly. I know I have too much faith that people will obey traffic signs and the law, which is how accidents happen. But tonight I make it home without incident. I think of my mother and always look both ways.

#

Four days later the air around the circulation desk has that hazy chemical odor of furniture stain, and if you look closely there's a square of carpet under a rectangular table that looks a little brighter than the rest. Doug is back at reference and I'm checking in books when my aunt tiptoes in and mumbles about someone minding Colchester for a moment.

"I'll do it," says Doug and rolls outside before I can stop him.

My aunt doesn't spend much time picking out two large print mystery novels.

"We have a lot of large print books," I say. "You should check them out more often."

"Colchester likes it when I read to him," she says, straightening her glasses.

"Let me know what he thinks of these," I say.

"Nice day," Doug says when he rolls back inside. "Might sit out there when I'm on break." I agree that's not a bad idea, but don't expect to see my aunt and Colchester perched on a bench with her mystery novel. I sit beside my aunt, and Colchester rubs against my leg and makes that sort of growl purr.

"Your mother was always bringing strays home, even when she was a kid," my aunt says. "One time she hid a little sphinx in her bedroom, but it got out and chewed up your grandfather's best shoes. He wasn't happy about that."

"So you're saying animal smuggling runs in the family," I say, scratching Colchester between his wings.

"I'm saying we're determined," says my aunt. "Maybe you and your grandma and I should get coffee. We're due for a chat, us three."

"That would be nice," I say and mean it. Maybe I'll ask what they think about a pirate eye patch versus a cane. My aunt and grandma are bound to have opinions, though Doug says I'd look great with either. I'm willing to hear that, too.

Susanna Lang's *third collection of poems, Travel Notes from the River Styx, was released in 2017 from Terrapin Books. Her last collection was Tracing the Lines (Brick Road Poetry Press, 2013). A two-time Hambidge fellow, her poems have appeared in such publications as Little Star, Prairie Schooner, december, American Life in Poetry and Verse Daily. Her translations of poetry by Yves Bonnefoy include Words in Stone and The Origin of Language. She lives and teaches in Chicago.*

In Kasserine

Susanna Lang

in memoriam Abderrazak Zorgui

A man walks
then runs
sheathed in flames

but still coming
as if to embrace us –
what can we do

but run at his side?
Having prepared himself
for this moment, having poured

petrol into a bottle,
recorded his vow and turned
his own body into fuel,

would he want us
to smother the flames?
In Kasserine

he said before he lit the fire
there are people dying
of hunger. Why?

Even these flames
must have something
to consume.

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Six Impossible Things Before Breakfast

Renee Nicholson

One.
A White Queen lives in the hillsides outside Morgantown, West Virginia. Her skin smooth, pale. Her hair coiled, pinned, the color of spun gold. Tall, statuesque even, long limbed.

When she's not a queen, she's an honors student.

#

Two.
West Virginia: where I came to heal. Where my people are from.

I never thought I'd be a ballet teacher. I never thought that if I were to become a ballet teacher that I would teach ballet in Morgantown, West Virginia. And definitely not one who would train a White Queen. I don't just mean a student that gets a role in a community ballet production, who suffers the slings and arrows of strange alliances and competing studio politics. I don't just mean a student who gets invited to schools in big, faraway cities. The White Queen of which I speak is more than just a white queen.

When I train a student, some of what comes out is unique to her. And some is what's been passed to me, and those who taught me, and those who trained those who taught me, like the looking glass always reflecting backwards, until we reach the actual royal courts where the stylish Catherine de Medici wed one of the Bourbon kings. She brought much with her from Italy many things, including her balleti master. The French said, ballet, and were mad for it.

And so the art traveled to Denmark, England, Russia, where it took its various accents until it crossed an ocean to New York. From there is spread across the wide continent, even to the crooks and valleys where I now live. Of course, I didn't bring ballet here, just the teachings of it picked up from teachers in South Florida and Northern Michigan and Milwaukee and New York. I brought their particular sautés and port de bras and pirouettes. Their pithy sayings and hard-fast rules.

I never set out to teach ballet. Maybe it found me. When it did, I studied pedagogy, curated libraries of books, DVDs, music, workshops, certifications. Articulation in words and in movement. I need to know how everything worked, relearn what my own body once knew. Here, at the barre, I give plié, tendu, fondu, grand battement in a dialect made my own.

#

Three.

Sophisticated, elegant, fair. Adjectives jump to their feet in service to the White Queen. Her deep concentration and meticulous technique keep her preoccupied. She is wholly unaware of her beauty, which, I suppose, is the way of the true royal.

In the Alice books, the White Queen lives in Wonderland, or Through the Looking Glass. Maybe she really believed six impossible things before breakfast. Then, tea and biscuits.

#

Four.

My White Queen does not miss – not class, not corrections, and never the chance to perform. She adores grace in all its forms. She loves épaulement, épaulé, all the shouldered movements, all the texture and drama. Renaissance painters would clamor for her simple croisée devant, cheek poised to be kissed. Defiant écarté, as if looking in a pocket mirror high above her head.

My younger self, buried under a broken body and graying bun, still understands. I remember performance as doing the thing in front of others for the push and thrill, that rush of *will I get it just right*? Different high-stakes perfection than the mirror and teacher and other pupils.

I taught the White Queen her pirouettes. She swore she'd never be a turner. I once believed the same – *not a turner* – until one day I was.

#

Five.

A long dormant past awoke, a Sleeping Beauty, not of body but of mind and soul. I remember a different self as the White Queen attacks her dégagé at the barre. Later they become allegro steps, jumps. Assemblé. Glissade. Light. Quick. Fast. Jumping is strength tempered by grace, beauty fortified with speed.

When I watch, I almost remember it in my own body, like searching for the word on the tip of the tongue. But the word never comes, never uttered. The White Queen moves silent over the floor in brisk, fleeting steps.

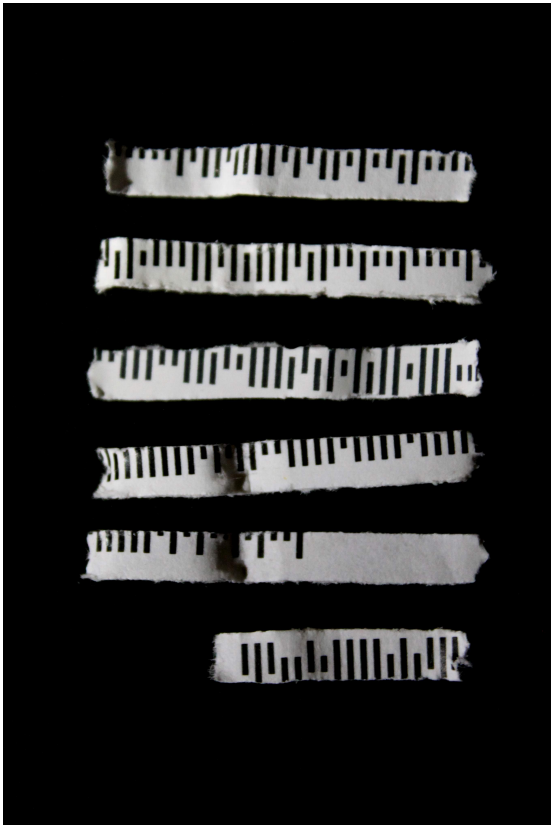
#

Six.

When the White Queen inevitably relinquishes her crown, her platter tutu, hangs her well-worn slippers, it will still be my job to give exercises at the barre and center. It will still be my job to usher the hopefuls through ritual that is pointe work. New, fresh faces, eager, my charges for a few hours, as if this is how the princess and the duchess find themselves royal. Sometimes it is just technique and work and sweat and tears.

Among them, perhaps, not a White Queen but a Red. I only have clues. *Divide a loaf by a knife: what's the answer to that?* It's a language of queens, and ballet their movement. All the mysteries to be unlocked. Perhaps only a queen truly knows. I was once enveloped in white.

Jury S. Judge *is an internationally published artist, writer, poet, photographer, and cartoonist. Her Astronomy Comedy cartoons are published in The Lowell Observer. Her artwork has been widely featured in publications such as, "Permafrost," "New Plains Review," "Oddball Magazine," and "Glassworks." She has been interviewed on the television news program, NAZ Today for her work as a political cartoonist. She graduated Magna Cum Laude with a BFA from the University of Houston-Clear Lake in 2014.*



Five and a Half Pianos
A combination of found art and photography

The story of this piece began with a terrible error; I regrettably fed something important to me in my shredder. In my desperation of trying to reassemble what I lost by digging through the myriad shreds of documents and junk mail, I came across several pieces that captured my attention. Those pieces became "Five and a Half Pianos." By pure chance and my love of patterns, the detritus of everyday life became repurposed as art.

Nick Mansito *is the author of two books of poetry: Miscellaneous Debris and 3rd & 7th – both published by BlazeVOX[books]. He is an Assistant Professor of English at Chattanooga State Community College. He has currently secured the position of bass player for a band called Bring Your Beats, though they are thinking about changing their name to Free Beer. He resides in Chattanooga with his wife and their three cats – Scabby Tabby, Monkey Butt, and Sir Hemertons of the Longtooth.*

How to Be a Known Southern Poet

Nick Mansito

Be old and white.

Your last name cannot end with a vowel.

Your accent must be southern, but not so southern it's south of the border.

When asked to read, make sure you wear glasses, a navy blue blazer with elbow patches, a baby blue button up, some kind of patterned tie, and khaki pants with leather loafers. Jeans are better though. They will make you seem cool and hip, relaxed and approachable.

Write about the days you were young, smashing dandelions with sticks or swimming in the river. Or write about the fantastic vistas of your wealthy friends, or about diabetes and your aging prostate.

Talk about how you were influenced by Keats or Yeats, extol the virtue of sonnets, pine for their disappearance like a lost lover, that privileged blond, queen of country club blow offs, the diamond encrusted shoulder you'll never kiss.

Colonize haikus.

Do not write about how your uncles were kidnapped and imprisoned in the jungle.

Do not write about the poor selling fish on broken streets.

Do not write about living in a language other than English.

And definitely don’t write about your dark skin, or how Africa weaseled its way into your blood.

Don’t mention that your race is as southern as it gets.

Make sure to use big words like punctilious and impetigo, capricious and ecclesiastical.

Make jokes that really aren’t funny, but don’t worry, they will all laugh, because you are known.

Alexander Schell *is a writer from Brooklyn, New York. He is currently an undergraduate at SUNY New Paltz, where he is studying literature. He writes in order to teach himself new things about the world and as a means to express himself to a larger audience. Alexander has been published previously in The Long Island Literary Journal.*

The Preservation of Life in the Atomic Age

Alexander Schell

Below are the last words of nine of eighty seven people who died in a box in Kentucky. Most of the final words said aboard Southwestern Flight 6897 were unfortunately very uninteresting. More of the usual pleading with God, or "I love you and the kids so very much," and "Mommy? Mommy, I'm scared!" Some people are so unoriginal, and terribly uninteresting. They'll make good atoms, at least. I will provide the names of all those who had something semi-interesting to say, but nothing more, with the exceptions of August Levine and Laika Aliyev and Henry Krall and Julia Romm. As an aside, I will also very briefly discuss a woman named Olivia Stein, because her mind was beautiful.

In any case here they are, in no particular order.

The thoughts that tend to perform a lovely ballet in one's mind when one is hurtling towards the earth in an aluminum box at speeds no one ever really had any business reaching are strange, in that they are mostly the same thoughts one might have while waiting for the bus. For example, August Levine thought of two things over and over again before he and eighty-six other people slammed into some poor corn farmer's crop, in their ludicrously fast aluminum box.

First he felt a profound regret, because he never asked Olivia Stein, a girl he dated briefly in his senior year of high school, any really thoughtful questions, such as whether or not she believed that we were truly alone in the universe. She did not, for the record. She believed so surely that we were not alone, in fact, that she would dedicate her entire life to proving it, so that everyone else might live with the comforting notion that no one is ever really alone, because no matter how many humans may despise them, there was always the off chance that they might get along swimmingly with an extraterrestrial.

Coincidentally, twelve years to the day after August Levine died mostly alone in rural Kentucky, Olivia Stein and a team of six other astronomers and astrophysicists would prove indefinitely that we are not alone. Furthermore, she and her team would discover that no extraterrestrial had poor enough sense to step into a metal box which had even the slightest chance of making all of its passengers into fertilizer for next year's corn. The aliens she would discover, you see, lived miles below the surface of the liquid methane oceans of the moon Titan, and the smallest of them was as large as the things whose names we might preface with "Giant"on Earth. These massive aquatic creatures have relatively small brains, and full bellies, and they are quite satisfied with that. They are not plagued by a curious regard for what might be lurking beyond their moon, or even above the surface of their vast oceanic homes. In this way they are quite smart, despite their relatively small brains.

Because they never shot themselves into places where they couldn't breathe in boxes.

The second thing that August Levine thought of was this: the colors of the morning sky, which melded in such a way that the horizon looked uncannily similar to bruised skin. He would have liked for the sky to look a bit prettier, if he was to die. Not a single molecule or ray of light in the atmosphere cared, though. Maintaining a livable atmosphere is hard work, and rays of light and molecules very rarely have time to watch such inconsequential things as apes wasting the lives they have been so graciously gifted. At most they might pause for a moment and make the air very still. They might say something like "Tsk tsk. There they go again."

The last thing Paul Mendoza said was, "Is it too late to order a god damned scotch?" It was.

The air molecules and rays of light were still fast asleep when August's family car was speeding down the interstate. It was three a.m., eastern time. He had a five a.m. flight. Not by his choice. His father booked the flight. Typically, when someone else books your flight, they tend not to think about how dreadful it might be to wake up at an hour when some people are only just reaching their beds, and to drag oneself away from sleep at such an ungodly hour. They think even less of how dreadful it may be to drive to New Jersey in the dark, or to drive to New Jersey at all. The only thing they tend to see is the cheapest option.

August Levine was a Roman Catholic. Not a devout one, but he was baptized, and received the Eucharist on the occasions when he went to church, and he sometimes prayed, in times when his patience was tested, or just when the mood struck him before bed. Being a Roman Catholic, August believed that there was a Heaven, for people whom The Almighty judged as worthy,

and a Hell, for people whom The Almighty judged as human. In the case that he was judged to be human to a fault, for all of the lies he has told and the juice he has spilled, August believed wholeheartedly that his personal circle of Hell would look like one of three places, or perhaps all three at once if he was found to have lived an especially vile life. These three places were the city of Los Angeles, Times Square, and the passenger seat of a white minivan, which is being driven by his mother. This thought performed a lackluster ballet in his mind a few times while his mother utilized every dirty word she could think of to describe the driver of a pickup truck who neglected to use his turn signal while merging into her lane.

August would find out only a few hours later that he was wrong on all counts, and then some. There was, in fact, no such thing as Hell, at least not in the sense that one might be tortured by a tall, red, eccentric man for all eternity. In all actuality that was just a lie told by Puritans to convince children that they shouldn't do things such as have sex before marriage or wear their pants too loosely. Really, it shouldn't be any wonder to anyone how a people such as the Puritans could come up with as drab a concept as Hell.

Actually, while we're on the subject, there's no such thing as a Heaven, either. And The Almighty is not a judgmental man in a loincloth. The Almighty is simply everything, all of the things that bring a bit of light to an otherwise dark and rapidly expanding universe. When anything dies, even the massive aliens on the moon Titan, the dead thing's conscious mind is squeezed tightly in the effort that it takes to die, and they become something new and beautiful: an atom. What kind of atom they become depends entirely on how hard they had to work in order to die. August Levine was young, and lean, and strong. It took a great deal of effort on the universe's part to kill him, and thus he became quite a heavy atom, one which we call Uranium. The old woman sitting next to August would become Oxygen, and immediately upon dying she would feel immense regret at having trapped her fellow Oxygens in a tank in an effort to prolong her life. Her name was Patricia Wright, and the last conversation she ever had was with August.

"Young man, do you know Our Father?"

"Yes, I do."

"Would you like to pray with me?"

August stared at her and then through her, to the window and the bruised sky. He could not see God.

"I'm sorry ma'am, I don't think I do." Patricia smiled, and saw the reason why in the blacks of his eyes.

"I'm sorry my dear."

August raised his hand, as if to toast to life, and whispered.

"It ain't over yet, ma'am."

After this he turned away and fell in love with a flight attendant. Patricia prayed. "And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us-"

And then she was delivered.

Olivia Stein heard about the death of August Levine the same way that most people in America heard about his death, and furthermore the deaths of eighty-six other people. She was fixing herself the same breakfast she ate most every day, which was oatmeal made with milk, a glass of room temperature water, and a meticulously peeled clementine. She took two pills with breakfast every day. One was a group of iron ghosts squeezed together very tightly, but not nearly as tightly as when they became the twenty-sixth element in the first place. The second prevented her body from releasing an egg during ovulation.

As she made the final preparations of her meal, peeling the clementine meticulously and then dipping her hand under the faucet to make sure that her water would be the right temperature, her attention was captured by the news story playing on the television. An attractive White woman in a very nice blouse who was sitting next to an attractive African-American man in a very nice suit said this:

"Although it is unclear at this time what exactly caused Southwestern Flight 6897's engines to fail simultaneously, the aircraft's black box has been recovered and steps are being taken in order to determine whether the crash was due to human or mechanical error."

I'll take this moment as an aside to say that it was, as most errors tend to be, a human error. Although I find this phrasing peculiar, because who designs the planes which so often fail mechanically? Certainly not an atom, as they are far too small and far too busy.

"At approximately 7:15 a.m. Monday morning, the plane crashed into a field in rural Kentucky en route to Austin, Texas from LaGuardia National Airport. All eighty-two passengers aboard the aircraft, as well as the flight crew and pilots, have been confirmed dead. Coming up on the screen now is a list of the disclosed names of passengers aboard the flight. We here at News 3 would like to extend our full sympathies to the family and friends of those who died in this tragic accident."

Olivia thought that she should at least watch the list scroll down her television. She thought that maybe she could honor the victims in that way. Looking at their names, at the very least. All of them would be just that, names on a list without a face or a life ever attached to them, but at least she would know their names, if only for a few seconds before she stirred her oatmeal. She did not plan on knowing one of the names, on being intimately familiar with it.

The name was sixteenth in the lineup, and it was of course August Levine, age twenty-one.

By no means was Olivia Stein obligated to feel profound sadness or anger at the passing of this young man. It would have made no difference to

him, and besides no one is obligated to feel anything about anyone, really. But at one time in her life, Olivia loved August very much, and she broke both of their hearts when she told him that she would be going far away to study the stars, and she could not take her love for him with her. August was foolish in the same way that most young men are, in that they believe themselves to be the center of the universe. Olivia, being a budding astrophysicist, knew that he was, in fact, not.

Both Olivia and August would go on to heal from each other, and to love again, and to thrive academically, and to die and become very heavy atoms. But hearing August's name and knowing that it was no longer attached to the person she knew and loved years ago made Olivia do something quite strange, something she would not do again until she first laid eyes upon a low resolution photograph of the massive aquatic aliens on Saturn's largest moon. The thing she did was this: Olivia stopped thinking altogether. Her brain produced no electrical signals other than those necessary to keep her alive. She only stared at August's name and felt no emotion, and no absence of emotion.

And then, when August's and the fifteen names before his and the seventy one names after faded from the screen, Olivia remembered the last time she saw August Levine. It was sixth months after they had both graduated. Olivia happened to run into a former teacher in the street, and they were catching up. August happened to be walking by, and he greeted the teacher, who politely waved at him. August wasn't much of a student in his youth. Olivia turned around, because of that sinister human curiosity, and though she was surprised and her heart-rate suddenly picked up, she said hello. August, in turn, stumbled on his own feet, and said nothing. And that was that.

While it is perfectly reasonable to draw the conclusion that, in terms of the bigger, universal picture, human things such as love and hate and how one takes their coffee are quite unimportant. After all we are specks on a speck gliding along in an unfathomably massive and dark ocean of everything and nothing. Many of the greatest and most respected of human thinkers have come to this very conclusion. Men like Friedrich Nietzsche explained to the masses that nothing matters, and children nodded their heads and laced their shoes and repeated after them.

"Nothing matters, mother."

"Is that so?"

"Yes and no. Haven't you been listening?"

To these men and the children who worship them, I say this: if everyone lived as though they were already dead, we would have no heavy atoms at all, and the balance of the universe would be in a great deal of

trouble. August Levine became a uranium atom because he loved life very much. He loved being human. He loved his family, and his dog, and the Dallas Cowboys, and gouda cheese, and the word "effervescent," and beluga whales, and New York summers.

And though he would never admit it to anyone before his death, August Levine still loved Olivia Stein. Of course he did. We all leave something behind, even if it adds up to nothing at all.

The wealthiest person on Southwestern 6897, the one who left the most behind, was an art collector named Laika Aliyev. Laika owned a lavish penthouse apartment which overlooked the west side of Central Park, and which she covered from top to bottom in modern art pieces and the lesser known works of men and women whose names you've surely heard before. She booked a seat in the first row on the left of this plane because she had just learned the night before that a very old man had in his possession a beautifully preserved Edward Hopper original. Over the phone, the old man, named Robert, sounded tired, and a small dog yipped incessantly over every other word. "I'm certainly not going to say no to buying such a piece, but I must ask, how could one bring themselves to part with a painting like that?" Laika always asked this question, or one very similar to it.

"Miss *yip* Aliyev-"

"Please, call me Laika." Laika preferred to be on a first name basis with anyone she did business with. This caused some of her colleagues to call her utterly unprofessional. Then again, her colleagues regularly bought straight lines and blotches of paint on stretched canvases for pocket change and resold them to the unassuming masses for millions of dollars, so their judgements didn't hurt her much.

"Right. Laika *yip,* my wife *yip* bought this *yip* from *yip* a yard sale in *yip* South Dakota twenty-two years ago. She stared at it *yip* every morning and tried to *yip* emulate it, tried to sit as *yip* if she were the subject of this painting, and it never failed to make her *yip* smile like a child. She *yip* died two months ago, and every time I wake up and look at this painting I try and try and try, but *yip* I just can't see her in it. And *yip* I can't stand the *yip* guilt of that, Laika. It's *yip* either I go or this *yip* painting does. I ain't *yip* meant to have it, same as Oliver Twist *yip* ain't meant to have a daddy."

This expression was new to Laika. She thought maybe it was a Texan turn of phrase. This assumption was wrong. Robert just wasn't exactly all there.

"I see. My condolences, Robert. Your wife sounds like an extraordinary woman, I would have liked to meet her."

"Laika, if *yip* my wife were alive to meet you, your wallet wouldn't *yip* come within ten feet *yip* of this here painting."

"Hm. That is fair. I'll see you on Monday. Take care."

The painting, for the record, is an early draft of *Morning Sun*. Robert sold it to a man named Jonathan Silverman, whom he referred to as "Mr. Silverman."

Two hours before she died, Laika Aliyev took her seat in the first row on the left of the doomed plane. She had chosen to stare out the window, and had to very politely ask the young man already settled in the middle of the row if he could excuse her, so that she might get to her seat, please. The young man was a southern gentleman by the name of Henry Krall, who happened to be a second cousin of Robert on his mother's side. Henry was also a veterinarian with a PhD in mammalogy, a father of two boys, a raging alcoholic, and a member of the Austin chapter of the International Association for Bear Research and Management. Henry was in New York for two months as a guest lecturer at NYU. His classes consisted of no more than sixteen grad students, each one of them passionate about the preservation of the North American Grizzly Bear, or the Buffalo, or the Mountain Lion, or some other large and beautiful and American creature.

The title of his lecture was "The Preservation of Indigenous American Species in the Age of Industrialism." From what I hear, it was quite interesting.

Henry adored the city of New York. It is true, there aren't many bears running around Manhattan, and the weather in December and January was bitter. But Henry loved the absolute disregard for the actions of anyone else which the inhabitants of the city perpetually displayed. In his two months renting a studio apartment in the Lower East Side, Henry consumed more single malt whiskey than he had ever before. Some nights, around three a.m., he would roam First Avenue reeking of alcohol and pretending that he was a bear, going so far as to walk on all fours and growl and paw at garbage and pigeons and homeless men trying to get some sleep on sheets of cardboard. When the old and dirty men stirred and swore and cried in frustration, Henry did not take pity, nor did he take another sip, because his bottle had long been empty. Instead, the man-bear sat beside the damned and sang a tune which his drunkard father used to sing for him. The song was written by Henry Krall Sr.'s college roommate and dear friend Adam, who was cut down from his own bedroom at thirty five.

You take the high road,
I'll take the low road.
We'll get to
Scotlaaaaaaand
before ye.

We'll have the best wives,
We'll drink your whiskey

We'll leave a stain
Oooooonnnnn
The hist'ries

Funny such a man should die sober, and very human indeed.

The last thing Laika Aliyev said was directed towards Henry. She was bewildered when the engine failed and the pilot apologized profusely. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, I can't control it! God, I'm sorry." Robert Sutton. Those were his last words. Laika's mind shut off like Olivia Stein's, and she stared blankly out the window at the ugly bruised sky which was rapidly falling away from her. It looked like a Monet. She turned to Henry Krall and whimpered. "Where are we going?" Henry Krall was checking his breast pocket for a flask, though he knew there was nothing there except for his weak heart which was beating far too slowly. He sighed and turned to the aristocrat beside him.

"To Scotland, my dear."

Seems they took the low road.

The passenger behind Henry Krall was named Alexander Schell. He smiled at Kentucky and said "alright." And then he was as dead as he longed to be last year. C'est la vie.

Oh, how we long for loving to be easy. How we wish for it to be a reasonable and analytical thing. The moment before the plane hit the ground in Kentucky, August Levine fell madly in love with a flight attendant named Jane, who demanded that the passengers get into crash position in a very stern but surprisingly calm voice, considering that she was also facing certain death. As the old women and southern men in suits around him braced themselves to find some semblance of comfort between their knees, August sat completely upright, mesmerized by the woman standing before him, directing him to look away. But he could not. He was perplexed by what he found in her eyes. He could see, as clear as the bruised sky outside, that she knew she and everyone else on the plane were going to die. They were, after all, descending at terminal velocity towards the ground with nothing but corn and the Bible Belt's fear of God almighty to break their fall. And yet, her voice did not once waver, and she kept her tears from falling. Jane lied straight to his and eighty-one other people's faces, and August Levine loved her for it. Her last words were, "Everyone keep your heads down! Here we go!" Such professionalism in the face of atomization.

Oh, how we long for loving to be easy.

On to Julia. I'll make this one quick.

Darling little Julia Romm was born on a plane owned by Southwestern, and thus would fly free for the rest of her life on the airline. At least she got the chance to take advantage just once. Her father cradled her the whole way through. She did not cry during takeoff, or when the engines quit. She stared at the old man sitting across from her for hours, and six minutes before impact, she said her first word. It was "hat." Her parents were so proud that they wept. And then she was Nitrogen, one of the lucky few who drift off into space and see the end of all things.

J. Malcolm Garcia *is a freelance writer and the author most recently of Riding Through Katrina With The Red Baron's Ghost (Skyhorse Publishing 2017).*

Hello, I Do Not Come Violently To Your Country

J. Malcolm Garcia

Please help me
I'm still the same
Lost in a different world
So close
But
So far away
Maybe,
if I close my eyes it will all disappear
No
Still here
Great big wall
Please
Somebody
Anybody
Help me

Excerpted with permission from the poem "Lost In A Different World," by Felix Alvarez

December 12, 2018

Despite everything, dropping out of the Army, brawling and drinking his way behind bars and then, after serving three years in a Utah prison, deported ass out to Mexico, fifty-five-year-old Felix Alvarez sees each day as an opportunity to observe the desperation of his fellow human beings and determine from the hard-won lessons of his own bruised life who among them he can help. So, I am not surprised when, out of dozens of Central American migrants, he zeroes in on one Honduran woman with an infant outside a tent on a Tijuana street in what he dismissively calls a bar district (--The hookers are another street over, he says) and recommends I talk to her, ignoring my suggestions of other people (--No, I don't like his look, No, he's busy with his

family, No, they look half asleep), not because he thinks she'd be a good interview (how would he know?) but because he understands a homeless woman with a small girl in a country not her own is a woman in need, more need than he experienced after his expulsion from the U.S., and he sees me, a reporter, as the necessary bridge to begin a conversation that will allow him to hear her story and, if he can, offer her assistance.

Border wall between Mexico and U.S., Playas de Tijuana

--What is your name? I ask her.

--Ariché Ferrer Gomez.

Her voice rises barely above a whisper. Rumpled clothes and stuffed animals tangled in blankets clutter the claustrophobic interior of her damp tent. A church group, the name of which she does not know, gave her the tent, its multicolored panels catching the afternoon sunlight that waxes her tent and the others around it in a hot glare before it vanishes into shadows cast by apartments protected by gates and decorative window grilles that despite their stylish design indicate nothing less than fear and the frantic desire to keep out those who lurk on the periphery of the camp: the intoxicated Mexican women wearing platform shoes and wigs the texture of straw; the skeletal, tattooed young men with shaved heads, lounging against cars, arms folded, their hooded stares following each passerby, the outstretched bodies of inebriated dope fiends, their legs swollen from drugs cut with something toxic, Felix explains, the skin splitting like torn cloth, and through this maze of destitution and implied violence, Ariché followed other migrants here to Cinco de Mayo Street where local authorities opened the Benito Juarez Sports Complex, with

its worn baseball field, playground and two outdoor basketball courts, to about five hundred migrants.

City workers built showers and arranged portable toilets beneath an old scoreboard. Charitable organizations issued tents and clothes and food from pickups, and police, alternating between vigilance and boredom, lingered on the edge of the emerging, makeshift village while more migrants arrived in Tijuana seeking asylum in the U.S.

Immigration opponents north of the border soon took notice. In California, hate crimes against Latinos increased by more than half. The right-wing magazine, *The New American*, in an October 2018 headline asked, "Will Migrant Caravan Kill Your Child – With Disease?" During that year's midterm elections, President Donald Trump warned of an impending "invasion."

The number of asylum seekers jumped almost seventy percent from 2017 to 2018. Nearly ninety-three thousand people cited a credible fear of being targeted because of their race, religion, nationality, political opinions or social group, the first step in winning asylum. That is up from nearly fifty-six thousand migrants who asked for asylum in 2017. Only a limited number of people can apply for asylum in a single day. In Southern California, at San Ysidro, the nation's busiest port, sixty to one hundred asylum claims per day are processed. Meanwhile, as many as five thousand migrants remain stranded in Tijuana, stuck on a waiting list. Only tent percent of cases are granted.

Far from the political posturing in Washington, the mild winter weather that had for months settled over Southern California and Tijuana turned cold and wet. It rained for several days the last week of November and the downpour turned the sports complex into a swamp and the migrants relocated to Cinco de Mayo Street itself, abandoning soiled clothes and children's toys in mounds of drenched refuse that fouled the air when the rain stopped and still remained, moldering in the heat beneath blue skies, when Felix and I showed up this morning one week later.

Another shelter in an old dance hall across town recently opened with accommodations that Mexican officials declared would include a "roof and a dry floor." Felix has heard rumors that the government wants all the migrants on Cinco de May to relocate there.

Ariché does not know about the new shelter and does not appear to care. Her blank expression suggests she has lost the capacity to feel, that what emotional fortitude she had vanished some time ago leaving only this blank slate of an inscrutable twenty-three-year-old. Her tent stands between two families. The men, preoccupied with their wives and children, pay little attention to her but their presence provides her with a modicum of security. Without them, she explains matter-of-factly, she would have had to find a boyfriend among the migrants for protection.

--Where's your daughter's father? I ask.

--My husband, Roberto, was murdered in May, she tells me.

In August 2018, he had left their home in the the La Mosquitia region of Honduras to buy food and never returned. The killing, police told Ariché, was a case of mistaken identity. A member of the gang Mara Salvatrucha, also known as MS 13, wanted to retaliate against someone who, unfortunately for Roberto, looked just like him. The police advised Ariché to be careful; the gang would likely come after her next. Why, she wanted to know, if it was a mistake? Trophy of war, the police said.

Ariché stayed with a friend for five weeks. She did not leave the house, lost tra ck of time and of the days of the week. Then her father told her about a large group of people leaving for the U.S. from San Pedro Sula. She left La Mosquitia at midnight by bus and three hours later joined about two hundred people waiting for buses to carry them north into Guatemala. From Guatemala, she and the other migrants walked into Mexico. She slept outside and thought of Roberto and cried. In the morning, men helped her carry her daughter, Leticia. Ariché developed blisters on her feet, cut them with a knife and resumed walking. She waded muddy rivers and lost a sack of clothes and her ID, and she climbed hills and fell, holding Leticia, and other migrants helped her up and she brushed off her squalling daughter and trudged onward. In this way, six weeks later, she reached Tijuana. She has yet to apply for asylum in the U.S. She doesn't know where to go. And what would she say?

--I just want a room and a job, she tells us, and to live unafraid.

Felix whispers to me, --I'm going to give her five dollars, in a tone of voice suggesting I should do the same. I dig into my pocket. A man leaning out of a tent watches us. We walk away and I slip Felix a five and he cups it in his hand and then we turn back and I ask Ariché another question as if that was the reason for our return.

--What kind of work do you do?

--I have a teaching certificate but in Honduras you need to know someone in the Ministry of Education to get hired by a school so I never taught. I cleaned the houses of rich people.

I shake her hand and then Felix does the same, slipping her the two fives.

--Papa, Leticia says, looking at Felix.

Ariché smiles.

--She calls all the men here, papa, she says.

Felix grins at Leticia. He tells Ariché he'll not forget her. He intends to speak with a pastor he knows about offering her shelter. The pastor takes in homeless people, Felix tells me. Ariché would have a room, people around to help with Leticia, and she'd be off the street. He doesn't think she has a chance for asylum because she has no proof Roberto was murdered. If the pastor agrees to take her, Felix will return here to see if she's interested. She

may not be. Here, on Cinco de Mayo Street, she belongs to a group of Central Americans who have experienced what she has. At the church, she would be alone among people who would have no idea what it's like to abandon your country. It's hard. Felix knows.

#

When I moved to San Diego in 2018 to write about families fleeing the violence of Central America, I inquired about a translator. I understand enough Spanish to get by but I'm not fluent. Contacts I had in Tijuana recommended Felix because his English and Spanish were excellent and – as a deportee – he needed work.

Felix was born in Culiacan, Mexico, more than fifteen hundred miles south of Tijuana on Mexico's Pacific coast, but he grew up in California. He barely remembers when his father left Mexico for the U.S. in a 1949 Plymouth he sold en route to pay for a smuggler. Two years later, when Felix was six, his father paid another smuggler to bring his wife and son. They rode in a Ford station wagon and Felix sat on his mother's lap. No one stopped them at the border and the smuggler drove straight through to East L.A. Felix and his mother joined his father in a house behind his paternal grandmother's home. He remembers how they shared a thirteen-inch black-and-white TV.

Felix's father gave him military toys and helmets to play soldier. When Felix was older, a pair of Bad Boy Heritage Boxing Gloves replaced the toys. He was thirteen when he first saw his father punch his mother. The old man was playing poker in their house and losing. He asked Felix's mother for money from her purse. When she refused, he threw a cup at her. Then he smacked her.

At night, Felix's parents argued. Sometimes his mother would call to him and no matter how deep his sleep, he'd wake up and run to their bedroom and pound on the door, yelling, Are you OK, Mom? and the fighting would stop. His father would shout, Yes, everything's fine, but Felix would not leave until his mother told him she was OK.

In high school, Felix boxed and played racquetball in Belvedere Community Regional Park. His friends called him Hubba Bubba, the brand name of the gum he chewed. His old man said he'd disown him if he joined a gang. He'd have Felix strip when he came home from school to see if he had tattoos or needle marks from drug use. He never did but he felt pressure to join a gang. At Montebello High School, Felix fought two to three gangbangers at a time to prove his independence. When he was fifteen, a kid with the Mara 18 gang shot at him as he walked off a school bus. He ran home and his father drove him to an aunt's house where he stayed until his father was confident the gang had not followed him. Felix transferred to another school, Baldwin Park High School. He still remembers the address: 4949 Bogart Street.

At eighteen, he saw for the first time the be-all-you-can-be recruitment

ads for the Army. The images of guys jumping out of helicopters impressed him. That's for me, he thought. He had a green card and a recruiter told him he'd become a citizen after boot camp. He enlisted in 1982. No one mentioned his status again and he didn't ask. He assumed, wrongly, that his enlistment had made him a citizen.

After he graduated from boot camp in Fort Knox, Tennessee, the Army stationed Felix in Fort Lee, Virginia. Six months later, his mother asked him to come home. Take care of me, she told him over the phone. Your father's beating me.

--I can't just leave, Mom.

--I need you, she repeated.

Felix asked his CO, Sergeant Johnson, for an emergency leave. You can't do that, Johnson told him. Felix insisted. It's my mother, he pleaded. Finally, Johnson advised him to request dismissal from the Army by claiming he could not adapt to military life. Felix followed his advice and received a general discharge under honorable conditions, which meant that his performance as a soldier had been satisfactory but that he had failed to meet all expectations of conduct. Upon appeal, his discharge was upgraded to honorable.

At home, he broke up fights between his parents, pulling his father off his mother. But as he gained the upper hand, his mother would strike Felix on the back of the head with a pot, a water hose, a newspaper, whatever was within reach.

--You're fucking up my life, he told his parents.

--I didn't tell you to come home, his father snapped back.

Felix started drinking. In 1998, drunk, Felix stole a Datsun 280Z, assaulted the cop who pulled him over and received a three-year prison sentence. At the time, Felix did not know about a 1996 law that called for the deportation of immigrants convicted of crimes that meet the definition of an aggravated assault and who serve a sentence of at least one year. Upon his release in 2001, immigration authorities deported him to Tijuana. He lived on the streets for three years until he connected with a group of deported veterans who had established a support house. In 2010, he entered California, got caught, served three years in prison for illegal entry and was deported again in 2013.

Felix tells me he knows what it's like to be Ariché. Well, he doesn't know what it's like to be a woman, but everything else about her he gets. He felt lost in Tijuana, dropped into a world unlike his own. When Ariché speaks, her accent alerts anyone listening that she did not grow up in Mexico, that her Spanish is not Mexican Spanish any more than the Spanish of Felix's East LA neighborhood is the Spanish of Tijuana. He was just a child when he moved to the U.S., a few years older than Leticia. His parents wanted a better life. So does Ariché. Hundreds of people are fleeing Central America. Why? He

answers his own question: For the promise of America. And yet they are no more wanted than him.

--That's some profound shit, he tells me.

#

December 19, 2018. Five o'clock in the morning, San Diego.

My cell phone ringing.

---Malcolm, this is Felix.

--(groggy) Hey.

--She's not there.

--Who?

--Ariché. I went back last night to tell her the pastor would meet with her but she was gone. The police are clearing the street and taking everyone to the new shelter.

--Everyone?

--A few are left.

--Meet me at the border at eight.

--OK.

#

Two hours later, Felix meets me on the Mexican side of San Ysidro. He tells me that two young men were found hanged in an apartment. He suspects cartel involvement. Two powerful drug trafficking organizations have been battling for control of the city's street drug sales: The Sinaloa cartel and a newer group, the Nueva Generación Jalisco. Tijuana recorded more than two thousand homicides in 2018. At night, in an apartment he shares with another veteran, Felix hears gunshots and car crashes and assumes its cartel members battling it out. Recently, he has been receiving phone calls from a private number. No one answers when he picks up. What's that about? he asks me.

In 2005, he sat in a Tijuana bar one night when a young woman started chatting him up. He told her he was a deported vet. You know how to use guns? she asked. Of course, Felix replied. I'd like you to meet someone, she said. She introduced him to stocky guy in a leather jacket. The guy said he had a job for him. Come with me and I'll give you a gun and then I'll tell you what I want you to do. Felix thought about it. He was broke and two years into his deportation but he wasn't going out with some dude he didn't know. Give me the weapon first, Felix said. The guy refused. Forget it then, Felix said. The guy left and the woman too. He never saw them again.

--One thing about Tijuana, he says. If someone here wants to kill you, they'll kill you. So the fact that I'm not dead means no one wants to kill me. So, I'm not worried.

He may not be but this morning he acts hypervigilant. Cutting through the bar district, he points to a man he believes is following us and steers us off the street and into an alley. The man, wearing ill-fitting, dirty clothes, stares at

us but keeps going in another direction. A dope fiend looking to roll American tourists, Felix suspects.

We continue walking, stepping over the bloated limbs of passed-out junkies, zigzagging our way between taco stands to Cinco de Mayo Street where I see that the tent village has been reduced to half its size. A flea market has taken over the space once occupied by tents. Felix notices young men among the remaining migrants gathering in groups. They had not been doing that before, he comments. Now, they've been here long enough to know they should stay together for protection. Soon, he believes, they'll be a gang, or others will assume they are, and then the fighting between Mexicans and the migrants will start.

The young men saunter beneath the same walled-off apartments and barred windows and flapping laundry lines I saw when we met Ariché. No movement of any kind among the drying blue jeans or on the balconies between which the laundry lines extend or inside the apartments. Even among the parked cars nothing stirs, as if the cars have been abandoned to the cats curled between the tires.

The camp, however, bustles with journalists roaming between tents shooting photos and video. Several stop and take pictures of Felix and me, presuming wrongly that we're migrants. It's a hot story. Any photo will do if the subject looks the part. With our long, gray hair and beards, our faded jeans and shoulder packs, Felix and I qualify fit the profile.

--Cigarette? a man asks Felix.

Felix digs into his coat pocket and gives him a smoke. Another man comes up beside him and demands to know what we're doing. We explain I'm a journalist and then he tells us to give him a dollar. Felix cusses him out and photographers converge on what they presume will be a fight between migrants but the two men raise their hands and back off. The photographers follow them.

Looking for a family to speak with, I observe a man standing in front of a tent with a young woman and baby boy. The man has on a brown T-shirt, jeans that hang loosely off his thin body. His toes poke out of torn sneakers. The woman tugs at her faded sweatshirt and pants as if to make them fit better. They ignore the activity around them, standing apart from the other families, squeezed up against their tent sorting clothes. Felix asks the man if I may speak to him and he agrees.

--My name is Ikal Espinoza, he says.

We shake hands. He speaks a little English and answers some of my questions without Felix's help. I ask him why he has come to Tijuana. As we talk, the commotion of the camp at times intrudes.

--I am here because of the high risk of life in Honduras, he says. In Honduras you live with fear. Any day someone can enter your house and kill you.

Ikal introduces us to his wife, Aurelia Maria Florex and their son, eighteen-month-old Eric. Until recently, Ikal and his family had lived in San Antonio de Cortés, in northwestern Honduras, with his father and mother. His mother kept a garden of purple, white and pink flowers, and birds called from papaya, avocado and bananas trees as Ikal walked through forests collecting wood for cooking.

In 2017, a member of MS 13 killed his two nephews, Miguel and Rafael. Ikal doesn't know why. Twenty-four-year-old Miguel worked as a security guard in a metal factory and was shot walking home. Rafael, just four years older, was murdered in front of his house. Ikal had been in the living room listening to a reggae CD when he heard two gunshots. He looked out a window and the shooter saw him and ran. Rafael lay on his stomach, blood spreading out from beneath him. Ikal didn't move. He had no intention of going outside, who would? He called the police.

Ikal pauses in his story and I overhear a man behind us speaking to a videographer.

--No one has to tell you to leave, the man says. You just know you can't go back because of things you've seen. Where will you live? I had a house. I lost it. I just left it. It was a poor house with a dirt floor, aluminum walls. I was sad but we have only one life, not two.

In early September 2018, a neighbor who knew the shooter told Ikal he had been released from prison. The shooter, he said, intended to kill him because Ikal had seen him shoot Rafael. Ikal and his family left that day and joined a group of migrants gathered in the western town of Corinto near the Guatemalan border. Ikal carried Eric on his shoulders. Sometimes people offered them rides, sometimes they caught a bus, but mostly they walked. Guatemalan police stood on the roadside but did not interfere. Ikal felt happy, his worries lifting with each step. He had the energy that comes with a goal like an athlete pursuing a medal, and he held up his arms as if he had won a trophy and laughed. At first his goal had been to escape Honduras. Now it was to reach the United States.

Ikal's mood changed when he entered Mexico. The country seemed so big, the distance to the U.S. border vast. He felt small and overwhelmed. I'm in Mexico now, he told himself. I've left my home. He thought of his elderly parents. They did not even know how to use a cell phone. He communicated with them through a friend. Composing himself, he shifted Eric on his shoulders and resumed walking. They arrived in Tijuana six weeks later. He stayed in the Benito Juarez Sports Stadium until the November downpour and then moved to the street with everyone else, wedging cardboard beneath his tent to keep it dry. He applied for asylum and was put on a waiting list, number 1,425.

Ikal points to a man dressed as a clown selling sticks of blue and pink cotton candy. He weaves among the tents near us to the delight of

children. Another man sells coffee from a cart.

--I lived fourteen years in Miami before I got deported for a DUI, a woman tells him.

Ikal shakes his head at the woman's story but he has his own problems. He needs to feed his family as he waits for his asylum interview. Any job will do, provided he can bring his family. He won't leave them alone on the street. At night, he dreams ugly dreams. The previous night, he dreamt he fought off a man with a machete. He does not understand the source of this dream. At other times, fully awake and for no reason, memories of violence fill his mind so fully he feels as if he is back in Honduras.

When he was fifteen, he saw a headless body during recess. The police wrapped the corpse in plastic. An elderly woman examined the man's bare feet. That's my son, she said. The body lay close to a park. The mother didn't cry but Ikal knew she suffered inside by the expression in her eyes.

He remembers Pepe, a young man he saw shoot another young man, Elvis, for no reason. Ikal knew Pepe's father. He sat on the porch of his house and they would exchange pleasantries whenever Ikal passed by. Hello, how are you? It's a nice day. Yes, it's a nice day. One time, Pepe's father complained of being hungry and Ikal gave him beans. He was a humble old man. He held the bag of beans with both hands as if they were something fragile.

On the day of the killing, Elvis was walking home after getting off work at a metal factory. Pepe noticed him and got up from the porch, Excuse me, Poppa, he said. Then he turned to Ikal. You're going to see how I kill a man, he said. Pepe stopped Elvis and gave him a banana. Elvis took it and Pepe shouted, Who told you could have that? and shot him. Pepe laughed. Ikal felt as if the bullet had struck him. He sucked in his breath and his heart leaped and he vomited and ran. Ikal had attended school with Elvis. He was a simple, poor man, just nineteen. Black hair, maybe one hundred and seventy pounds. The police shot Pepe a few days later. Ikal doesn't know the details. Until he left Honduras, he continued to see Pepe's father on the porch, but the old man no longer spoke to him or anyone.

Felix appreciates the story of Pepe. He assumes his father was somewhat like his own. Pepe might have turned out okay but he probably had a screwed-up family. Like father like son. Dad, my life could have been so different, Felix had told his father after he was deported. His father made no comment but he would come to Tijuana and give him money when he could. He died in 2010.

A girl brushing her teeth bumps against me. She rinses her mouth from a bottle of water, spits. Some distance away, a woman screams from the back of a pickup parked on Cinco de Mayo Street, --Calm down! I'm just handing out clothes, as a glut of migrants converge on her. Photographers

close in, snap, snap.

--I'm going to talk to the pastor I know about Ikal, Felix tells me.

--OK.

--I'm going to help him out.

He looks at me expectantly.

I take out my wallet and give him a few ones.

--This is the last time, I say.

Felix gives Ikal the money and then asks if he has a cell phone. They exchange numbers.

#

December 26, 2018. Ten p.m. San Diego.

My cell phone rings:

--Malcolm, this is Felix.

--Yeah?

--They closed down Cinco de Mayo Street. I went there tonight to give food to Ikal. They've moved everybody to the dance hall.

--Have you heard from him?

--No. But he must be there.

--OK. See you in the morning. Eight o'clock.

#

I meet Felix at a taxi stand near downtown Tijuana. We ask a driver to take us to the dance hall on the city's east side, about a half-hour drive.

--These people come to Mexico and bring problems and conflict, the driver complains. Hondurans beg for money. They steal and fight. We have our own poor. How come we take care of Central Americans? I came from Mexico City when I was twelve. I worked. I made my way. Why can't they do the same?

--Have you met any migrants? Felix asks him.

--No, the driver says, but I know the way they are.

#

He drops us off at an intersection amid a cluster of shops near the dance hall. Felix buys five beef tacos and soup to give to Ikal and some candy for Eric. Exhaust fumes from trucks and buses mingle with dust, and the clanging bells of food carts pushed by elderly men and women compete with the noise of car horns. We make our way to the hall, a large, white stucco building at the bottom of a hill. Beneath an arch, a man distributes flyers from the Mexican government offering fifty thousand pesos, about twenty five hundred dollars, to migrants willing to return home. We wave the man off as he thrusts a flyer at us and enter a large open-air space. I imagine vendors gathered in this area when the hall was open and sold T-shirts and other souvenirs of the bands that played here.

Dancehall shelter for migrants in Tijuana

Now, tents on wood pallets fill every available space. Graffiti adorns sheets of cardboard: *Kill ICE*, *Canada, I'm still waiting for you to take me in*, *Escaping death is not a crime,* and I as I read the angry scrawl, I overhear men and women speaking with representatives of Save The Children and other NGOs:

--I'm from La Banco, El Salvador. There is no work. I have three children. I had to leave to take care of my kids. Every day there is stealing and death. Gangs take people off the bus and kill them.

--I lived near the capital where gangs are in charge. Even the cops, they are corrupt. I hear firecrackers and wake up. I think it's gunshots.

---MS 13 was going to kill my son because he wouldn't join them. They beat him in May and again in August. We left with just what we had on. Gangs have total control,

Nearby, men sit in a circle on crates playing cards and shooting dice, and they, too, talk about why they fled their homes:

--There was no going back. We walked six, eight hours a day with calluses on our feet, sometimes without food or water, in the sunlight, in the dark. At night it was cold. People fought over sweaters and jackets. I found a sweater that was dirty but I wore it until I found another one. It was dirty too but warmer.

Their conversations mingle with a kind of desperate commerce as families sell necklaces and wrist bands made from string beside tables where

women distribute apples and bananas.

--Just take one, just take one, they shout, their voices drowned by the tinny music coming from cassette players and the squawking of chickens and rampaging packs of barking dogs.

--I left Nicaragua because university students were disappearing protesting against President Ortega, a woman says as she takes a banana. Mothers would go to the jails looking for their children but they were not there. One neighborhood boy went on a protest and never came home. Others have sons beaten up and shot, the girls raped. Everyone is suspect. I took my son out of school. My husband would hit me, but he was a policeman and nothing happened to him. He laughed when I complained. If you file a complaint our son will be in danger, he told me, and that was his own son whose life he threatened, and boys kick a soccer ball, bouncing it on their knees while other boys sit and watch, and in the shadows of tents mothers hold babies. In Mexico, men touched me in my sleep. Not only me, but many women by themselves were molested at night. We were so tired we could not fend them off. One night, I dreamed the police came to my house and took my son and then I woke up to this man touching me.

Her woeful voice fades behind us as Felix and I enter a maze of pathways between tents, almost like streets dividing neighborhoods with some sections dubbed Little Honduras, Little Guatemala, Little El Salvador until we find by sheer chance Ikal's wife, Aurelia, and their son, Eric. Felix calls to her. Turning, Aurelia smiles. He hands her the food and candy he bought and we follow her into the tent-filled dance hall to find Ikal.

#

Before she knew Ikal, Aurelia had been married to a man who left her for another woman. In those days, she cleaned houses close to her home and never saw violence, but it still affected her. Gangs had killed her twenty-six-year-old nephew. His mother heard about it on the news. She used to have dreams that he would be shot. Just before Aurelia left Honduras, a man robbed an ice cream truck and killed her cousin. His mother was not surprised he had been shot but she had not expected him to die.

When Ikal told her, We have to leave, she brought nothing with her but diapers and baby food. In Mexico, people offered them rides, but so many migrants would converge on a car that the drivers often didn't stop. They slowed and only those migrants who could keep up jumped in. Many people fell and were run over. Cattle trucks were much easier to catch because migrants who had leaped on ahead of her would reach out and pull Aurelia aboard.

She has heard stories about children being separated from their families and worries that Eric may be taken from her if they reach the U.S. She left a four-year-old son, Pedro, from her first marriage, with her mother, who advised her not to take two small children on such a long journey. So

Pedro stayed because Aurelia's mother thought he would be easier for her to care for than eighteen-month-old Eric. Aurelia misses Pedro. She tries not to think of him too much or her heart will break and she'll go back.

#

We find Ikal standing below a second-floor balcony. Towels and drying clothes hang off a railing above his head. No light. Varying shades of shadow spread throughout the dance hall and it takes a moment for my eyes to adjust. A jumble of chairs and tables stand in one corner; a disc jockey's booth juts out from a wall. Around us, men and women emerge from a confusion of tents, snaking their way out of narrow openings, careful not to stumble into one another, hair askew, sticks of deodorant in one hand, combs and brushes in the other.

Ikal tells us that the police rousted him and the remaining migrants on Cinco de Mayo Street about two o'clock in the morning. They were allowed to take their tent and backpacks but nothing else. They climbed into pickups as garbage trucks descended and cleared the piles of abandoned clothes and toys.

He prefers the shelter to the street but he does not feel entirely safe. On Christmas Eve, people partied. One drunk woman fell off the balcony. The police came but left without comment. Ikal and Aurelia stayed in their tent holding Eric between them. Ikal overheard women propositioning men. At midnight, Mexican soldiers walked through the hall and told everyone to sleep or go to jail.

A man in a windbreaker, polo shirt, slacks and shined leather shoes approaches us. His carefully groomed mustache has been trimmed to a thin line. I presume he represents one of the NGOs until I see an insignia on his jacket for Mexico's National Institute of Migration. He does not introduce himself. He requests my ID in a demanding voice that suggests he deems me suspect for reasons I can't imagine. I show him my press badge. He examines it, uses his cell phone to look me up on Google. Finding my byline, he returns my ID, spins around and walks away, the sound of his shoes clicking evenly against the floor. As we resume talking to Ikal, he glances repeatedly in our direction.

Ikal ducks into his tent for a manila envelope. He withdraws a police report that, he says, proves his life was under threat in Honduras. Do we think it will be enough for asylum? Felix and I examine the paper: *Mr. Ikal Espinoza, entity 0507-1976-00356, filed a complaint on Twenty-Two December of the year Two Thousand and Seventeen for the crimes of death threats and intrigue, alleged to have been committed by Mr. Pedro Torres, who according to other complaints, operates a gang of criminals who have caused serious damage to families near our municipality, San Antonio de Cortes, Honduras, cases [the police] are still investigating.*

Nothing in the document confirms that Ikal's life was in danger. He

registered a grievance against a known bad guy, nothing more. I return the paper.

--I don't know, I say.

Felix tells him about the pastor he knows.

--You'd have a room and a safe place to leave Aurelia and Eric while you waited to apply for asylum, he explains. In the meantime, you could look for work.

Ikal likes the idea. Felix promises to talk with the pastor.

--You should call him, too, he tells Ikal, just to introduce yourself.

Dancehall shelter for migrants in Tijuana

He gives him a slip of a paper with a phone number. Then we hear the click of the immigration officer's shoes grow near as he approaches us again. Without a word he snatches the paper from Ikal, reads it, and looks at Felix with an arched eyebrow. Felix explains about the pastor.

--What's your name? I ask the official.

He ignores me, lets the paper slip from his fingers to the floor. He brushes his hands as if he'd held something dirty.

--You should look for work, he tells Ikal. The Mexican government won't put you up forever.

--I'm applying for asylum, Ikal responds.

--You have a five thousand-to-one chance to be accepted.

--You can't say that, Ikal snaps. You're not God.

The official smirks and walks off. Felix picks up the paper and returns it to Ikal.

--I'll talk to the pastor, he tells him.

#

January 3, 2018, 5 a.m.

My phone rings.

--Hello.

--Hey, Malcolm, guess what?

--What?

--Guess?

--What?

--Ikal crossed.

--He what?

--He crossed, man. He's in L.A. I called him to see if he'd spoken to the pastor and he told me he crossed! He didn't tell me much, he was too excited.

--Can you call him again?

--Yeah.

--I'll be over.

--Eight o'clock?

--Yeah.

I meet Felix in Parque Teniente Guerrero, a city park with manicured lawns, shaded walkways, a playground, fountain and picnic areas far from Cinco de Mayo Street and the bustle of downtown. Sprinklers have just shut off and the grass gleams in the sun. Evangelical preachers speak into microphones, their distorted voices breaking with static. A man walking a pit bull veers off the sidewalk and walks behind the bench where Felix and I sit beneath a palm tree. I don't think anything of it but Felix is certain the man wants to listen in on our conversation. We stop talking until he strolls out of earshot. Then Felix calls Ikal and we ask him how he got to L.A.

It began, Ikal tells us, the afternoon we last saw him. The Mexican immigration officer had angered him. No, not angered, he corrects himself. As a Christian, he doesn't get angry. But he didn't appreciate being spoken to in such a condescending manner. He was also worried about the holidays. If people had been drinking on Christmas, what would they be like New Year's Eve? He thought long and hard about that as he and Aurelia ate the food Felix brought them. When they finished, Ikal made a decision: We're leaving, he said. They brought only water and diapers for Eric. Catching a bus downtown, Ikal asked the driver for advice on where to enter the U.S. He suggested Playas de Tijuana, a neighborhood on the border. There, along a metal barrier, Ikal searched for an opening. An old man told him of a spot where workers had not completed a repair. Ikal followed the old man to a hole and crawled through, sliding down a concrete embankment. He called for Aurelia to follow.

About fifty yards away stood another fence. Near it, a U.S. Border Patrol Jeep idled. Ikal knocked on the driver's window. He explained in halting English to the surprised agent that he had fled Honduras for the

welfare of his family.

--I do not come violently to your country, he said.

The agent told Ikal and Aurelia to sit on the ground and take off their shoes, presumably, Ikal thought, so they would not run away. The agent spoke in a kind but firm tone. He knew only a little Spanish and gestured to make himself understood. Then he got on the radio and started shouting. In a few minutes another Jeep arrived to pick them up.

The second agent took Ikal and his family to Otay Mesa Detention Center, an Immigration and Customs Enforcement facility in San Diego. Ikal stayed in a cell apart from Aurelia and Eric but he could see them when he left his cell to be questioned. He thought the ICE agents were polite. They did not speak Spanish. He explained as best he could why he had left Honduras. He told them he would be killed if he went back.

Two days later, an officer escorted him out of his cell and asked him to sign three forms that were in English. Ikal did not know what they said but signed them. This officer spoke Spanish and explained to Ikal that he and his family were being released to a church-run shelter in Los Angeles. He and Aurelia would be required to wear ankle monitors. That afternoon, a representative of the shelter picked them up.

--My wife and I, we are just laughing, Ikal tells us, his giddy disbelief apparent in his voice. We're in the United States. It's a reality.

He looks forward to finding a job, a home. He understands he still must make a case for asylum before an immigration judge but he is convinced the judge will believe him just as the border agents did. From his first night in Otay Mesa to his evenings now in LA, he sleeps without waking. He tells us he left his nightmares at the border.

#

Felix and I catch a bus for Playa de Tijuana, known locally as La Playa. We laugh, imagining the shock of the border agent when Ikal knocked on his window. Felix believes that helped his case because by turning himself in Ikal showed he was an honest man.

- -Remember how he told that immigration guy, You can't say that, only God? Felix asks me. He had a look in his eyes. Words have power, man.

At La Playa, I see the wall that confronted Ikal ripple up and down hills stretching into the surf of the Pacific Ocean. Heaving, white-capped waves crash against it and seagulls rise in currents above the mist. The wall, composed of iron rods set at right angles with spaces in between, stands about twelve feet high with coils of wire mesh layering much of the top. Artists and advocates have painted sections of the wall with images of children flying balloons, butterflies, rainbows and the American flag turned upside down.

Freedom doesn't work unless we're all free, reads one piece of graffiti. *Immigration is not a crime. There's still hope for you, America. No ICE. Trump, we want you out*. Felix shows me where he and other deported

veterans signed their names.

Walking beside the wall, we watch workers laboring on one section where I could see a hole. Is this where Ikal crawled through? I wonder. Maybe, Felix says. He's happy for Ikal. He'd like to think he helped him reach the U.S. The food he gave him didn't hurt. Hard to make a risk-filled decision on an empty stomach, right? He'd sure like to be where Ikal is now.

Why him and not me? Felix asks himself. He had joined the military. OK, it didn't work out but he joined, that should count for something. He was a bad ass but that was a long time ago. He did his time. His lawyer told him he didn't have a chance to reenter the U.S. Not with an assault conviction. Why not? He's not the same person he was then. How long has he been deported? Seventeen years, not counting the time he did in prison when he was caught trying to cross in 2010. Yeah, seventeen. Man. All this time later, day by day, he's still dealing with it.

Felix doesn't know what he'll do. Maybe volunteer at an old folks home. He did that when he was in high school and earned extra credit. He's growing old, might as well size up some places. He may need one. He'd still like to know what happened to Ariché. Maybe he'll look for her.

We both stare through the slats at a barren stretch of California coast. A security corridor fifty yards wide stands between the wall and a second, taller fence. I wonder if Felix imagines his East L.A. home. I don't ask and he doesn't say.

Author's note: The names of some of the people have been changed to protect their privacy.

A Roman-born, Japanese Jewish linguaphile, ***Mimi Kawahara*** *lives in New York City. Her first story, "Twenty-Nine Questions for an Intelligent Designer," was published in Washington Square Review. "Listen If you Can," which appeared in StoryQuarterly, is adapted from her recently completed novel, "The Cicada's Song," a remembrance of things past and future. When not writing, Mimi sits with people on hospice.*

Toward the Sky

Mimi Kawahara

When you survive your child, you enter your own private multiverse. So while I stayed with Asha in the tsunami, I also counted the hours…days…weeks without her. I didn't set out to keep track; I simply could not fail to notice. At fifteen weeks I recalled her first laugh at that age. I made a funny face and she cracked up. She copied me and I cracked up. We went round and round, besotted. I relived her early months. In the middle of the night I reached for her, tried to pull her to my breast. At twenty-one weeks, when she began babbling along to Marvin Gaye, I put him on auto-repeat, like an entranced teenager. But time travel has side effects. Abiding in the memories began to nauseate me, especially after dark when I was most susceptible to their semblance of solace. Yet I could not bring myself to push Asha away, so I grew accustomed to this night nausea, the reclusive, heartless sister of morning sickness.

Thirty-eight weeks marked the duration of my pregnancy, except instead of celebrating the birth of my daughter I was observing a temporal inversion in which her gestation was wound backward past the point of conception into non-existence. But my memory refused to rest there, rushed forward to the days of her dragging Pudding, her stuffed bunny, around by the ear, sniffing for "cawots" in my mother's yard, to her dancing by the glass doors while Adele and I discussed breakfast in those final moments before the end of life as we had known it.

"Mama, look, the ocean is getting taller, like me!" I followed her gaze, then Adele and I looked at each other for a slow-motion millisecond before running for our lives. I scooped up Asha, Adele shouted to Izzy, we raced to the car, and Adele accelerated away from the shore.

To distract Asha from turning around to see the colossal wave hurtling toward us, I sang Itsy Bitsy Spider, walking my finger-legs up her arm. Izzy sat stock-still in the back seat. I saw Adele checking the rearview mirror, and recalled satellite footage of people in these circumstances. The water was too close; it would take a miracle to save us.

Asha was applauding the spider climbing “up the spout again” when we were swept under. Water, water everywhere. Along with doors ripped from their hinges, lumbering tables, acrobatic chairs, multicolored families of flip-flops and their closed-toed rubber cousins, plastic swarms, and a whimpering black Labrador, we joined the tsunami.

With Izzy’s help we extricated ourselves from the car, before being separated in the rushing torrent. I held Asha with all my might as we bobbed helplessly beside humpback books and hardy Tupperware. Spotting a lawn-chair cushion that would have made a perfect flotation device, I propped Asha in one arm as best I could while making a desperate lunge with the other, but the turbulence was too great, everything moving too fast. I’m not a strong enough swimmer to support twenty-nine extra pounds; Lord knows I didn’t mean to let go, but I was tossed into swirling chaos – and she was gone. After having my head slammed against the ground, I managed to right myself and grab onto a branch, to which I clung even after it was yanked into the maelstrom. I searched every which way for a glimpse of Asha’s pink-heart and yellow-face kissing emoji pjs – until I couldn’t hold on anymore.

Izzy, whose brother Marcus I had failed to save from lethal injection, was my miracle, though it didn’t feel that way at the time. Athletic and agile, he stationed himself atop a traffic light to search for us. With what must have been herculean effort, he carried me to dry land, depositing me next to a shirtless, beer-bellied man leaning against a stack of tires outside a service station. By way of thanks, I’m told I said, “You should have left me.” All I remember is that I had to find Asha. Apparently Izzy tried to dissuade me, to tell me he had seen her lifeless body, but I couldn’t hear him above Asha’s cries echoing in my head.

Adele’s miracle was Matteo, a swarthy Channing Tatum-lookalike who saw her arm dangling from a stranded eighteen-wheeler and took her to the home he shared with his wife, whose lazy eye Adele felt viewed her with suspicion.

According to my mother, Asha’s miracle was to wake up in heaven, spared the suffering of Earthly life. I prefer empirical miracles.
No one really wants to hear about another person’s grief. Even people who care about you, they’d just as soon be spared. Even your closest friend. Even mine. Adele was supposed to be there for me, but she wasn't.

While I traipsed through rubble and rotting flesh, sick with sorrow and self-recrimination, she was waited on hand and foot, then reunited with Liam, rising star of robotics, one exemplary man after another. I had to make do with tiny black curls of baby hair in a Ziploc bag.

I briefly considered genome synthesis, but beyond the inherent creepiness, it wouldn’t bring back Asha, it would produce a soulless replica. One might have supposed that laying waste most of the Earth – still our only home despite the endless hype of space colonization – would give us pause,

yet we forge heedlessly ahead into inhuman techno-terrain, inviting "humanoid" robots into our lives with no thought of unintended consequences.

Before the Renewal, as an optimistic if not Orwellian government official dubbed the long ordeal of reconstruction, the jaw-dropping devastation prompted talk of a postmodern stone age. But, I'm ashamed to say, my personal trauma loomed largest. During insomniac nights I battled the knit coverlet Mabel made to thank me for getting Elijah off death row – he would know neither freedom nor justice, but he would live, and she was overjoyed, her teardrops sparkling like diamonds in the spring light, my precious, rare jewels of success as a public defender. Both died in the Collapse, as inmates were left in their cells to drown or starve, poor neighborhoods likewise abandoned.

Why does tragedy exist? Because you are full of rage. Why are you full of rage? Because you are full of grief. Like the chorus of a dirge, these lines replayed in my head – for Asha, her father Farah, killed for running while black, my father, who died in Sing Sing, Elijah, Mabel, Marcus, every victim of racism, even the ignorant whites, the complicit whites, the progressive whites who feel sullied by their affiliation with the others, blamed for having been born the color of privilege, the whole human race, almost annihilated by avarice and tribalism, the survivors who have to bear the grief, myself.

Before Asha's death, I maintained a skeptical detachment from my family's Baptism; after, I railed against its futility, as if I had expected more. Proselytizing was my mother's calling, and her salvation, at least here on Earth. If I shared her faith, I might find comfort in the thought of Asha meeting her father in the Promised Land, but no such solace is available to me. Corinthians tells us "Love is patient, love is kind, it isn't jealous, it doesn't brag, it isn't arrogant..." But the Lord, who supposedly loves us, is jealous and vengeful, a parody of a deity who created us from his image in a funhouse mirror. Our father who art in heaven is just like my father, eternally absent.

I was accustomed to that neglected chamber of my heart and its echo of longing. But Asha's absence was a singular shock: acute and particular yet pervasive, more like an asphyxiating presence, especially in Adele's Central Park West apartment we had called home. Upon entering the foyer where Asha took her first steps and admired her costumed self in the full-length mirror, I grew short of breath; in the clawfoot tub where we had lounged in bubble heaven I choked on tears; and in our bed I lay gutted under a smothering blanket of grief throughout desolate nights. Despite the prewar walls, I often heard Adele laughing with Liam, who had returned from a sojourn with his noble British relatives, as if to crown my isolation.

While the holy trinity, like a (holey) Phrygian hat, revealed itself as

(wholly) hollow, offering neither deliverance nor liberty, Hans became my personal savior. I was born again as V, still for Vernie, valedictorian, and to my everlasting regret, vilomah (from Sanskrit for the parent of a dead child), but also, according to Hans, for verbose (rather like Emperor Joseph II telling Mozart that *The Abduction from the Seraglio* had too many notes, I retorted), volcaniclastic (type of rock inside my head, when he finds me obtuse), vernate (I have my moxie back, thank you, my pagan pal), and (ven ve have imbibed to excess) vonderfully vulgar.

Rescuing me from my gilded graveyard, Hans invited me to stay with him in his Hell's Kitchen rental. As I waited for him in Adele's haunted foyer, she waltzed in from the dining room where she was having Sunday brunch with her mother. "Are you sure you won't join us before you go?" Despite a lifetime of reading each other perfectly, I had no idea whether she was being gracious or wanted me to stay. The moment I sat down I regretted it; an alien in their blue-blood midst, I was incredulous that I had ever felt at home there. For once I appreciated Adele's habit of inhaling her food, and scarfed mine down to get the meal over with.

"And for dessert – " she began.

"I can't," I said.

"Just one second," she replied, dashing to the kitchen and returning with fortune cookies, a tradition we had relished since high school and a thoughtful gesture, but as helpful to me then as a psalm, or mimsy borogoves. What I wanted was a Newport, which I had given up for Asha and then vanished with her in the Collapse along with many crops and the consumer cornucopia of 21st century capitalism. Adele broke open the cookie nearer me and announced, "Here's yours: 'The palest ink is better than the best memory.'"

"I beg to differ," I said. "What's yours?"

"'One and one are sometimes eleven.' I like that, but what does it mean?"

Not in the mood for our customary speculation, I longed to disappear into a wormhole. Hans saved me as usual. "There's more than one way to skin a cat," he said, "but only one way to avoid a surcharge on the U-Haul, which we have to return before I collapse in a trail of crocodile tears. My date last night deprived me of precious sleep only to disqualify himself with crude verbification. Manhandle my bottom please, but the language, *non merci*. No matter how mouthwatering his six-pack, we will not be 'futuring' together."

In the ensuing months, the same seemed true of me and my best friend since fourth grade, as our futures diverged beyond any foreseeable prospect of reunion. While she luxuriated in Liam's adoration, I drowned in a sea of dolor. At night I thrashed in my REM tsunami, reaching for that seat cushion and losing my grip on Asha, searching for her amid the roiling mayhem, then blacking out and wishing in my sleep never to awaken, only to

awaken with the same wish, nauseated by my lurches from one nightmare to another. On Adele's occasional calls, she struck every jangling note in the pseudo-solicitous friend playbook, inviting me on excursions with her and Liam, as if to accentuate my spinsterhood (and avoid being alone with me), exhorting me to take up a hobby, as if diversion would diminish my sorrow, suggesting I adopt a pet, as if to replace my daughter with a dog. She even reminded me "not to wait for the setting sun," a fortune I received after Farah's death – she'd had no room for my grief then either – and to what was then the blessed comfort of my bulging belly, now an immiserating reminder of irretrievable loss. Adele's sun shone so brightly, she couldn't see that mine had already set. Thirty-nine weeks. Mercy, mercy me.

After depleting my modest savings, I had to find a new job. Along with the mountains of debris and rivers of toxic waste, the employment landscape was reconfigured by the Collapse, offering an array of unappealing opportunities, from water purification to corpse disposal to construction. Hans, my full-service savior, wangled a spot for me on his aquaponics team, notwithstanding the fact that my plants invariably suffered death by dehydration. While aspiring to stardom in musical theatre (an oddly disproportionate number of whose fans survived the Collapse, or perhaps the trauma reduced many who would previously have turned up their noses at Mamma Mia! into abject admirers), he supported himself as a green thumb at ReGen (short for Regenerative Residences), my hiring true to their mission to enlist everyone in building a sustainable future of eco-villages. It would never occur to their survivalist spirits that I might not have wanted to sustain my childless future.

Introducing me to the intricacies of closed-loop food production, Hans explained, "Our public term of art is 'waste-to-resource' system, but privately we favor 'feces to food' or 'poop to pabulum.'"

"How about excrement to edibles? No, I've got it: ordure to hors d'oeuvres."

"I knew my venerable V was the girl for the job," Hans said, pleased by this affirmation of his judgment.

"But what's IBC? Industrial Bowel Conversion?"

"I want to say 'Illustrious Balls and Cock,' but my eminent position as team manager requires that I introduce you to the banalities of our future: IBC stands for Intermediate Bulk Container, as ungainly as a hippo in arabesque, but perfect for family systems."

Transported through a vilomah's wrinkle in space-time to my mother's living room, I watched Asha fall in and out of arabesque, brandishing her pink boa, her tutued toddler body of intermediate bulk struggling to maintain her balance, then tumbling dramatically onto the blue shag carpet, my mother clapping with inordinate pride and predicting Asha would usher in a new era of vaudeville.

"Yoo-hoo, my voguish vixen, where are you?" Hans asked in his dulcet falsetto.

"Sorry, got it, intermediate bulk."

"Food grade, don't you know."

"Do I need to know?"

"I'm afraid so. We face stiff competition from Aerofarms."

"I thought the whole point was that we're all in this sustainability boat together."

"They're vegan fanatics who want to wipe us off the map," he explained.

"Because of our perch or our profit margin?"

"Both. So steel yourself, this business is not for the fish of heart."

"Wait, you're vegan, why don't you work with them?"

"That was the original plan," he allowed.

"But you changed your mind?" I probed.

"Isn't that what it's for?" he quipped. Perhaps because I wasn't on guard against unwanted counsel, the playful question struck me as profound. He went on, as was his wont. "Let me count the reasons: aquaponics creates a natural ecosystem whereas aeroponics is chemical-driven; our method is more efficient and easier to maintain; our colleagues are less fixated, more balanced folk; and most people are not vegan."

For ReGen, the Collapse was the opportunity of its founders' wildest wet dreams, a black swan with wings of gold. The company had always fancied itself "humanity's lifeline," its "power-positive homes" using renewable energy, less water than traditional farming, and no arable land. Now, with vast swaths of the planet designated as Dead Zone due to lethal levels of radioactivity and post-industrial toxicity, the lifeline slogan had acquired the gravity of truth. ReGen veterans welcomed me with fossil-fuel-free warmth, while covertly looking down their verdant noses at latecomers to environmentalism, which made me want to repurpose my bell siphon to gouge out their prescient Caucasian eyes. Had they faced mass incarceration or systemic police brutality, they too might have cared more about the imminent danger to their fathers and sons than the hypothetical damage of the next pipeline. Although climate change has killed exponentially more people than I could have saved, the melting glaciers faster than the grinding wheels of justice, it's hard for me to see my capital cases as misguided, even when in retrospect it's easy to say we should all have been working together *before* worldwide catastrophe, the way people do after hurricanes and earthquakes. Still, I'm not sorry I fought for Marcus; I'm sorry I lost.

"Speaking of carnivores, barramundi and tilapia are cannibals, so you have to watch for size differences," Hans continued. "If the bigger fish can get his mouth around the smaller one, the little guy is a goner, in the mother of all swallows. Rocket Man devoured Honky Cat before he could swish his orange

fins to safety."

"Aerofarms sounds better all the time," I teased.

"Blasphemy," he replied. "Have a little faith, my vacillating vertebrate."

With Hans I rediscovered how to laugh. Rather than a mother reduced to woebegone wretch, he saw me as a whole person. And as the son of a white woman and a black man, he knew the daily indignities borne by people of color, even as he spoke of the new "latte majority – one of the many ways I was ahead of my time."

"What does that make me?" I asked him.

"You, my dear, are a vibrant gem of vintage ebony."

"It's a shame you don't like girls."

"Honey, I worship girls. For almost all practical purposes, I *am* a girl," he replied, batting his eyelashes. Despite the deck stacked against gay black men, he thrived without dictates from an ancient text or new age guru, but simply as a *mode de vie*. If I couldn't match that, at least I could appreciate his humor.

Adele and I had our laughs and a long history, and at times she felt like family, but at other times her whiteness surrounded her like an immense moat, unbridgeable by wordplay or camaraderie. I didn't want her pale skin; I just didn't want to be punished for not having it.

Once upon a time she was the person who singlehandedly rescued me from that fate, who accepted me, loved me, for exactly who I was. As if my darker-than-a-brown-paper-bag complexion weren't conspicuous enough, with my cornrows and Filene's Basement dress, I was a dead giveaway as the new scholarship student at Select Prep. Most of the lily-white class received me with a show of public civility and not-so-private snickers, but on my third day, Adele, bored by the pre-teeny-boppers who revered her blond beauty and Lilly Pulitzer glamour, plopped into the empty chair next to me in homeroom. Surprised to have a neighbor, I glanced up from *The Phantom Tollbooth*.

"Wanna get out of the Doldrums?" she asked with a sly grin.

"I'm surrounded by Mountains of Ignorance," I answered.

"Let's not jump to Conclusions," she replied, "Come to my house and leave Expectations behind."

So began blissful years of linguaphilia à deux. We gathered favorite characters into our own fantasies, words our many-splendored building blocks, and devised a neologistic dialect. ("I'm traught as a noodle," Adele announced one afternoon. "I'm so fatuated with Arthur I wish he'd move to Mars," I replied. We dropped prefixes to form opposites – such as traught from distraught, meaning calm, relaxed, content, and fatuated from infatuated, meaning possessed by fierce but short-lived repulsion. Thinking I'd get the better of him, I told Arthur – the token (barely) black boy who made a fool of himself trying to fit in – he was too streperous, but hardly missing a beat, he

countered, “You make me ultant,” converting my intense antipathy to instant “pathy.”

At Adele’s side, I metamorphosed from untouchable trespasser to exotic guest in the eyes of our classmates, whose stares acquired a grudging, bewildered respect that tempered their disdain. I didn’t care about them; Adele filled my world by making space for me in hers, until my mother sent me back to public school and forbade me to see Adele after we were caught shoplifting, demoting me from air-conditioned AP classes to a sweaty warehouse of kids more adept with weapons than words where I faced ridicule for my “white talk” and “high-and-mighty” attitude. The only place I seemed to belong was in the future Adele and I inhabited in our correspondence where we reunited at Barnard, which in fact we did, until she left to model in Europe where she met Liam. But by then I had found my social sea legs, so I wasn’t lost without her. On the contrary, as my commitment to racial justice deepened, her lifestyle began to seem inexcusably frivolous.

But after I lost Asha’s father to a cop’s bullet, she took us in, and was a devoted “aunt,” rocking Asha back to sleep in the middle of the night when I had to be well-rested for a court appearance, looking after her when I visited Marcus on death row in North Carolina, buying her a dollhouse fit for a mini-Marie Antoinette that was Asha’s pride and joy. Still, even when Adele and I shared the same address, we occupied distinct domains, other residents mistaking me for a maid or sitter and redirecting me to the service entrance. With Asha’s death, the disparity in our fortunes grew too vast for me to bear, Adele’s Patek Philippe privilege an ever-present intimation that the universe wasn’t indifferent to my fate but partial to my anguish.

Eventually I managed to find unexpected inklings of pleasure in the fish at ReGen, particularly the regal Koi Hans dubbed Meiji, who lifted his brilliant red head out of the water to eat from my hand. Two or three evenings a week Hans and I shared dinner; the others I wept with Pudding. My grief felt boundless. Racism had taken my partner, the Collapse, my child, and its aftermath, my best friend. I tried to tell myself that friendships run their course, like any relationship, but ours hadn’t been like any relationship. When she said I made her “spondent,” I knew what she meant. We played Scrabble with gleeful abandon, our only objective a satisfying board. Our shared interests brought soul-swelling joy, and our differences – our taste in men, for example – freed us from competition. During recess at school, I used to style her luminous silken hair, which felt like it came from a fairy tale, my fingers gliding magically through its delicate luster, so unlike the dense, disobedient mess I combatted every morning with pick comb and grease. Then my breasts grew before hers, and she touched them with awe. We had “awake-overs,” the point of which was to stay up later than her parents and sneak out to 7-Eleven. In the wee hours, “Slurpee” was our mantra; we’d repeat it until we convulsed

in laughing fits.

I missed my ivory sister, wished she would turn up with old jokes and new fortunes.

Then came a voicemail from Izzy: "Hey Vern, you know Liam – uh… he died…fighting a wildfire near the Hudson house, Adele said. She's up there now. I didn't go 'cause they need me at the lab. Bye." A natural coder, Izzy had no such affinity for human language, his tone doubtful that words could capture his meaning. Liam had been his adoptive dad, the only father he'd ever known, and his professional mentor. Having lost his birth mother to crack and his big brother to capital punishment, he'd mastered the manly art of hiding his feelings. But I knew every halting syllable held a heavy load of heartache.

Why Liam wouldn't have let his acclaimed humanoids manage the fire beats me. He built them to free us from dangerous and menial labor, also as companions and caretakers, but above all, in my humble opinion, because he could. Maybe despite his revolutionary genius, he succumbed to traditional machismo.

So it's my turn to show up for Adele even though she wasn't there for me. More than a decade her senior, Liam had seemed like a hybrid of lover and father. For family, I had only my mother, who, on my bluest days, was all that stood between me and my bottle of sleeping pills. How could I even consider causing her the very pain I found insupportable? Yet I did consider it.

Had you asked me then, I would have thought that losing my mother would send me over the edge, but when she died, I discovered that I still wanted to live. I was a particle stuck at the point where I lost Asha, but I was also a wave flowing all the while further from that fatal point. Though I have felt as small and insubstantial as an electron, not obliged to live on subatomic terms, I transcended the wave-particle duality and its existential torment, mourning my mother and moving on at last.

Hans doesn't waste time on such nonsense. He forges ahead willy-nilly. And it's not as though he had it easy. When he was nine, he went to get his bicycle from the garage and found his father in a pool of blood, pistol a few feet away, near Hans' kickstand. He grew up sewing doll costumes and enduring ridicule from his brothers, while his mother worked two jobs, and then, about to enjoy retirement, died in the Collapse. Yet I've never seen him indulge in self-pity.

I decided to bring Adele lunch from Happy Lotus, our Chinese favorite, envisioning her feeling the emptiness of the palatial apartment without Liam's large presence, hoping the familiar food would comfort her.

First surprise: She answered the door with a mischievous smile.

Second surprise: She said, "I have a surprise for you."

Third surprise: Liam appeared behind her. "Hello Vern," he said in his upper-class accent.

I could not even stammer a reply as they looked at me expectantly. But my disorienting confusion soon gave way to understanding: Liam had left a humanoid successor. Searching for words, I grappled with the oddity of knowing that the silicon-based substitute for Liam lacked sentience, yet being unable talk to Adele as if we were alone while it towered over us. It felt disrespectful to Liam's memory to disregard his doppelganger, but it also felt disrespectful to his humanity to pretend that this prettified machine could replace him.

"Quite a surprise," I finally managed to say. "I brought lunch."

"Here, I'll set it out for you and give you girls some privacy," the humanoid said, reaching to relieve me of the bag of food and reminding me that Liam had endowed it with his intelligence and social graces.

I felt grateful – and sick to my stomach. I had thought I was making a condolence call, but Adele seemed to have skipped mourning and moved past melancholia into a simulated pipe dream.

"Isn't he amazing?" she asked, her eyes childlike wide.

He gave me the heebie-jeebies, but I couldn't say that. "He sure is," I replied with as much enthusiasm as I could muster.

"I know you're not a humanoid fan, but can't you be glad for me?"

Ugh. She was asking too much. I took a deep breath, not at all sure I could be glad for her. Before I could find words, she went on.

"He holds me just the way Liam did, I mean, *literally*, it feels exactly the same. I feel Liam's love in his meticulously calibrated touch."

I wanted to say she was "literally" unrecognizable to me, but that would have violated the spirit of my visit. So, again I shoveled down my food. Before long, the humanoid cleared our plates and joined us at the table. Adele opened the cookie nearer me and announced, "Here's yours: 'Count not what is lost, but what is left.'"

"I think that's yours," I said, privately blaming the humanoid for placing the cookies incorrectly, its ersatz equanimity rousing my irrationality.

"Or it's not about death, but time," Adele suggested.

I wished time would propel me elsewhere. Toward that end, I split the other cookie. "Let's see: 'A mountain cannot turn, but a road can,'" I read, thinking I might have spoken too soon, as that one also suited her.

"Maybe you're right," she said, annoyingly, as if I didn't already know she thought I should turn toward the synthetic surrogate to my left.

"Maybe you are both meant to turn toward what is left," the pseudo-Liam proposed.

Turning toward him, I said, "And so we shall," doing my best to sound jovial.

She thanked me for coming, as she might have done on any day in the twenty-plus years she had been with Liam. Later, in the safety of solitude, I stopped trying to be the bigger person and let myself note that Adele got to

have the outstanding partner *and* his replacement *and* the solicitude of her best friend. I had a stomachache from eating too fast.

Thank goodness I have Hans – as comrade, escort, and handyman (he can fix anything as well as a humanoid, with cleverer commentary). We don't share a bed, but, though I never would have believed it, I have outgrown my interest in sex. My appetite for a juicy burger is undiminished, however, which inspired Hans to suggest that I apply to run the burgeoning bioprint division of ReGen; they'd offered him the position, but his vegan sensibilities were averse even to manufactured meat. As resource constraints have made it impossible to sustain enough animals to satisfy human demand for their flesh, engineered meat has become the dish du jour. Despite my affection for Meiji, I welcomed the prospect of an escape from his fishy smell – and of greater responsibility. I got the job and rediscovered what it feels like to look forward to something.

Of course I had the impulse to share my news with Adele, but I didn't think she, also a longtime vegan, would get it, and wasn't sure she'd care. Then one blustery Saturday, she showed up at my door.

"I'm here to save you the trouble of telling me how stupid and selfish I've been," she announced, dark crescent moons under her eyes, her face pale and fraught, her hair a frowzy mess.

"Ok, I'll cross that off my to-do list, but why the courtesy call?" I said, sounding frostier than I meant to.

"I miss finding Liam's hair in the sink, lowering the toilet seat, tripping over his slippers."

Ah, the humanoid's inhuman perfection. She was giving me a chance to be my better self. I tried to take it. "My body used to ache at the sight of a wailing toddler punching and kicking a parent."

"That's different. You wanted Asha back. I have a new-and-improved Liam. I can't think of one good reason I should mind that he's never preoccupied with work, never the slightest bit forgetful, never needs time to himself. But he's driving me out of my mind."

"Adele, you loved a human being," I said as gently as I could.

As if exhausted by strenuous resistance to the encroachment of this self-evident fact on her *folie à deux* with a humanoid because it represented a repudiation of Liam's labor of love and the only Liam she had left, she breathed a sigh of bittersweet surrender. I could see her fighting back tears, which brought to mind the same sight in eighth grade after her father died. But adolescent self-consciousness couldn't explain why she held herself in check now. Maybe, mindful that she had kept my grief at arm's length, she thought it would be unfair to ask me to shoulder hers.

"I even miss the sour smell of his sweat," she mumbled, as if this were shameful, tears streaming down her cheeks.

"I used to bury my face in Asha's stuffed bunny for a breath of her."

We looked at each other for a long beat, and I saw her absorbing my words, the raw tenderness of her grief enabling her at last to open her heart to mine.

"Remember when I was a lousy excuse for a friend?" she asked with a weak smile.

"Remember when you thought age had made me so dimwitted that I would fall for that ploy and lose the point?"

"Would you rather play this old game than accept my apology?"

I thought this a cowardly way to apologize. Then I thought I was being ungracious, again. "Didn't you start the game? And didn't you once tell me we were beyond remorse?"

"Why didn't you ask what I could possibly have meant?"

"Didn't you mean that all was forgiven in advance?"

"But isn't that what your mom would have called poppycock?"

Yes was the answer, but that would cost me the point, according to Stoppard's rules, and undercut my oblique offer of forgiveness. "Is there a pony in here somewhere?"

"Remember when you equated my admittedly inept attempt to apologize with a big pile of manure?"

"Remember when you weaponized my allusion to a beloved old joke?"

"Pony or no, how do I dig myself out of this stinking pile?"

"May I ask why you're seized by regret right now?"

"Can't a girl look back on life and see it anew through her best friend's eyes?"

I doubted she could, but was thankful she had tried. "Are you asking for absolution?"

"Is it available?"

Without thinking I said, "Yes," apparently wanting a rapprochement more than I had admitted to myself.

"Am I hallucinating or did you just give me the game and mercy in one sweet syllable?"

"You might be hallucinating. Sleep deprivation can do that, you know."

We grinned at each other like the schoolgirls we once were, our laugh lines since etched in our faces.

"Is someone hankering for a Slurpee?"

"I was thinking more along the lines of Singapore Noodles."

We ordered from Happy Lotus, eager for our new fortunes.

"'A gem is not polished without labor, nor a man perfected without trials,'" I read, squinting to decipher the small print. After a pause for effect, I asked, "Am I glowing?"

"Are you a gem?"

"According to Hans, I am. Antique ebony, if you must know."

"Hans himself is a gem. Maybe tiger's eye. Okay, what's mine?"

Passing her the cookie halves, I read the oracular words: "'Quiet thoughts will mend the body.'"

"Boring."

"Boredom is a failure of imagination."

"You see, it's my mind that needs mending, not my body," she said. "Who are you quoting now? Let me guess: Victor Hugo."

"Bingo. You've been paying attention after all."

"V, thanks to you, I have words for experiences I would otherwise have thought ineffable. Just since Liam died, I've been having what I can only call 'hot flashes of ontological alertness.'"

This was gratifying, even if the words were Anatole Broyard's, not mine.

She elaborated, "It's this blazing awareness that I'm alive – how astounding that is – and how one day soon, just like Liam, I won't be." She looked at me. "I know you know what I mean." I nodded, sensing she had more to say. "I'm so accustomed to sharing my feelings with the old Liam that I talked to the new one about it, but that only made me feel more alone, because however apt his words, I couldn't escape the fact that they were empty of understanding."

"I'm sorry," I said, swallowing hard with the sobering recognition that this was my first moment of genuine sympathy for her loss. Lousy excuses for friends flock together. It dawned on me that with Izzy grown and Liam gone, she was alone, or rather, without human company, for the first time ever.

Slumped cross-legged on the floor, she held her head in her hands. I knelt behind her and began taming her windblown tresses. She sat up and sighed contentedly as I fashioned a French braid, bringing to mind the last time I'd styled someone's hair: at Adele's beach house, the day before the tsunami, I'd perched Asha on a tall kitchen stool, Pudding in her lap; impatient for me to finish, Asha announced that Pudding had to pee, and she didn't want bunny pee on her. She didn't give a hoot about her hair, and her utter unselfconsciousness taught me to love my afro. Recalling the last time I played with Adele's hair took me all the way back to middle school; I found it hard to fathom how much had changed since then, yet I loved her just the same.

"Now I'm sheveled," Adele declared.

"And I'm gusted," I replied, flush with joy and relief. "Might I interest you in a cruelty-free, mouthwatering burger from ReGen's fastest growing division led by yours truly?" I was the bioprint designer of the moment, the aesthetic flair I never knew I had flourishing in my signature recipes.

"Congratulations! – but forgive me if I pass," she said. "Sorry, V.

Don't have much appetite lately."

"No worries. You know the old Vernie would call my current job ridiculous."

"She's behind the times. Tell her you've gone from saving people to saving animals," she suggested generously.

"But I'm not actually saving animals, I'm just not slaughtering them," I pointed out. "I confess, though, I am finding it oddly fulfilling." That was an understatement. I take pride in the work. The basic tissue engineering technology predates the Collapse, but my refinements make all the difference. Anyone can boil pasta, but not all spaghetti is created equal. Likewise for the difference between bland bioprints and my customized creations. My burgers are succulent, my bacon as crispy and flavorful as my mother's.

"Your Renewal, " Adele ventured.

"About time. I took even longer than *the* Renewal," I said.

One person I'd love to feed who's kicking back with my mother in heaven if there's any posthumous justice: the man who saved me from starvation during the Collapse. Looking for Asha, I wandered through the catastrophic silence of astounded souls all night – sidestepping corpses amid the rubble of their aborted lives, a boy spooning a golden retriever, one arm draped over a furry torso caked with blood; an unidentifiable body and walker mangled into a gruesome aggregate; a young woman in a sundress, covered in grey ash, hair matted to her head, arms outstretched as if reaching for a child, face frozen in anguish. My knees buckled and my bottom landed in a splatter of mud, jolting me to awareness that I ached all over and my mouth felt like sandpaper. Ready to curl up like a weary dog and welcome eternal rest, I closed my eyes, only to open them at the startling sound of footsteps. A scruffy old man with white hair and wise eyes bent toward me proffering a hatful of wild greens. His kindness brought my first tears since Asha had slipped away, but what made the difference between life and lethal dehydration were the mushrooms. We foraged in a swampy area where they proliferated amid a phantasmagoric profusion of flowering milkweed, iridescent butterflies, and glistening wheels of spider lace. Our hunt kept us close to the ground, and I thought I might faint from the pungent smell. Neither he nor I knew which fungi might be poisonous, but we knew we would perish without them. As reassurance, he mentioned that in Baltic folklore mushrooms were the fingers of the god of the dead bursting through the ground to feed the poor. Laughing as if we were out for a lark, he said he never expected to need mycology more than mythology.

It wasn't until we were about to part ways – he told me I wouldn't find Asha; I should return to Izzy and everyone still alive (I wept again, knowing he was right) – that he extended his hand with mock formality, and said, "Bill, enchanted to make your acquaintance." Only later was I struck by his resemblance to Adele's eccentric Uncle Billy, who gave away his share of

the family fortune and urged us to join him at peace and justice marches when we were absorbed in our word games. “Make that cleverness mean something, girls!” he exhorted. I owe him a huge apology for misjudging him in my youth as a quixotic crank. My guardian angel would have taken it all in jaunty stride. If you have the wherewithal to crack jokes when the world is falling to pieces, adolescent attitude would waft past you like so much dandelion fluff. I can picture him savoring one of my burgers, suggesting I add mushrooms to the menu, which I shall do in his honor, whoever he was.

I wouldn’t have had that encounter, or any since, were it not for Izzy, who saved my life when I would have let it go. I’m grateful to him now – when I hear Marvin Gaye, I’m glad I’m still here to remember Asha babbling along, as I sway to the music of time. How sweet it is. My hot flash of ontological alertness, you might say, though it feels nothing like a hot flash, more like an invigorating shower of light, shining through the quotidian veneer onto my tender, naked soul.

“How’s Izzy managing without Liam?” I asked.

“Better than I am. He’s engrossed at the lab, stepping into Liam’s shoes.”

“Speaking of work, we can always use more help at ReGen. You might enjoy having something to do,” I said.

She scrunched up her face, still puffy from crying, in childlike distaste, as if I’d offered her a hunk of moldy bread.

“May I remind you that you wouldn’t have Izzy without your last job? Who knows what might come of the next one?” After Barnard when I was at Columbia Law School and she was bored eating bonbons, I suggested she volunteer as a literacy tutor at the community center that connected her to Izzy when he was a poor orphaned boy in foster care whose primary role model was his condemned brother. Most of his peers would end up in the criminal justice system or dead on the street, but he’ll go down in history as a pioneer in humanoid development, second only to Liam.

“I’m too old to evolve beyond duncedom in the kitchen.” she replied. “I wish Izzy would give me a grandchild.”

“We have a children’s garden. You could help teach the kids about history and what we’ve learned from it.”

“What have we learned?” she asked plaintively.

“To count what is left?” I proposed.

“Are we back in the Kingdom of Wisdom at last?” she quipped, her eyes twinkling.

“I wish. Have you heard the rumors of radioactive life emerging in the Dead Zone? There’s talk of building a massive wall around us, just in case.”

“Ugh, no,” she moaned. “I’ve been hiding behind my own wall, as you know. So much for wisdom, I guess.”

“Cioran said we grow wise when we should be depressed.”

"Is that supposed to be helpful?"

"It's supposed to suggest that wisdom may be overrated," I explained.

"And *that*'s supposed to be helpful?"

"When did I say I had all the answers?"

"Are we playing now?" she said, formally opening the game.

"Come to think of it, haven't we always preferred questions?" I asked.

"Remember when people thought the Collapse would be the end of civilization?"

"Have you forgotten that non sequiturs are not permitted?"

"How can you fail to see the connection to possible invasion from the Dead Zone?"

"How many times have we thought our lives were about to end?"

"How many more times can we be wrong?" she said, sounding wiser than she knew.

Our predicament brings to mind an Arab proverb in which a traveler comes upon a sparrow in the desert, lying on the sand with claws outstretched toward the sky. The man asks what the bird is doing, and the bird explains that he has heard the sky is about to fall, and he wants to be ready to hold it up. "You foolish creature," says the man, laughing. To which the bird replies, "One does what one can."

The man has a point, but my heart is with the sparrow.

María DeGuzmán *is a scholar, conceptual photographer, creative writer, and music composer / sound designer. She is especially interested in various forms of synesthesia and in photographing or otherwise conveying that which lies on the periphery or at the limits of our sense perceptions.*

Sophia and the Lifeboat:

Fragments in Photographs from a Much Longer Story

María DeGuzmán

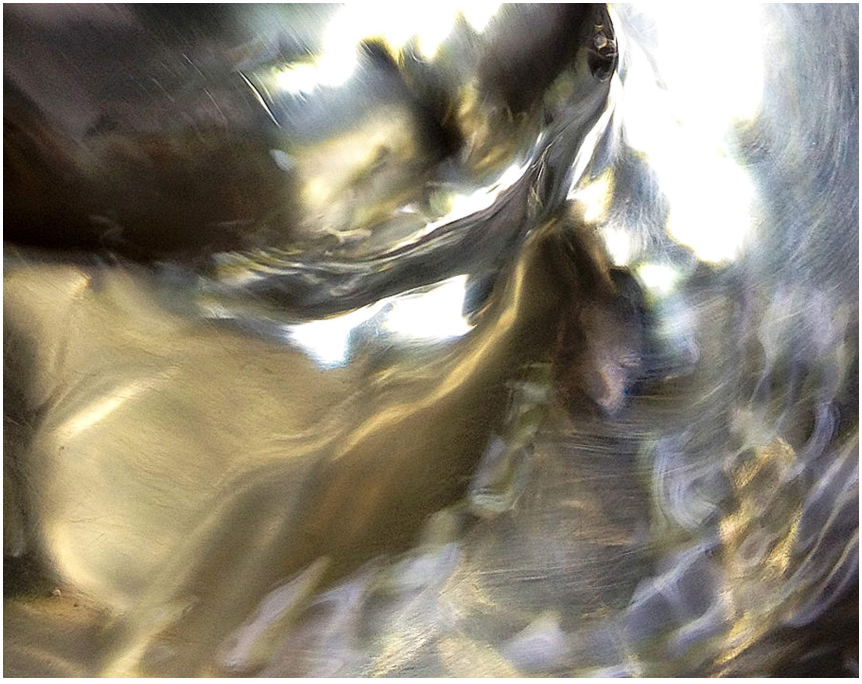
The morning begins before dawn, with the stirring of a spoon in a cup of water. A good start.

Fluid Spoon & Sculptured Water

Sometimes the flash of spoon light is a gate break toward an unseen finish line.

The Runners

Under last night's moon and rising seas, was it a dream of joy?

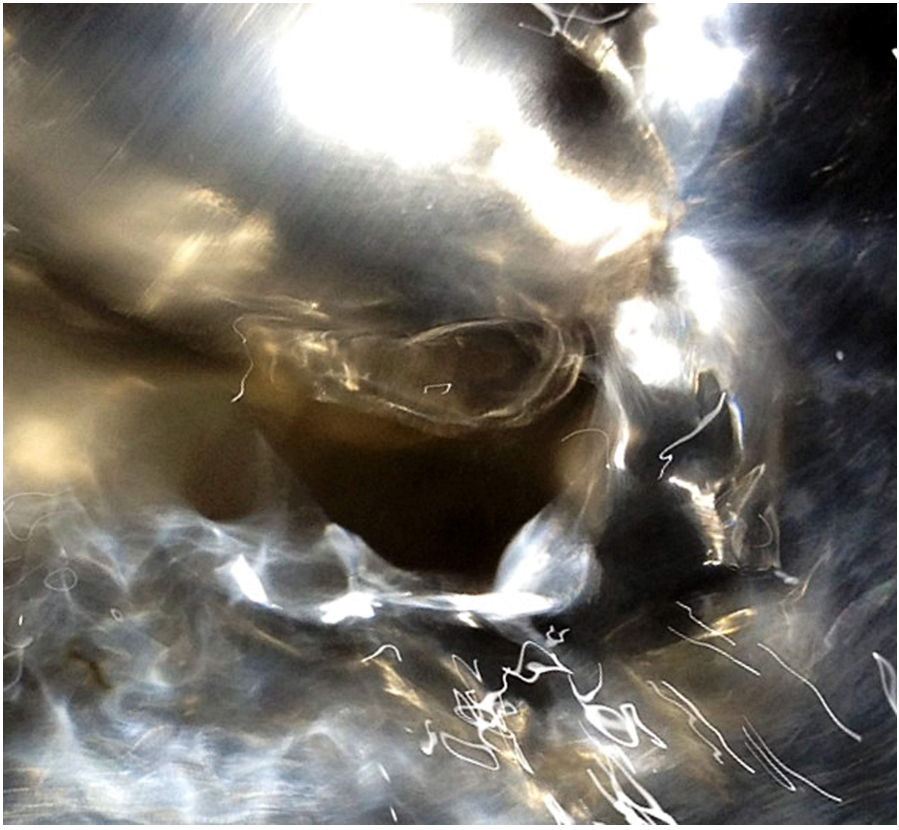


Feeding the Albatross

Dripping from the spoon, homecoming or strange squalls rushing shoreward?

Honey Water

Better than a breakfast of champions, an awareness in the midst of a raging storm.



Sophia and the Lifeboat

These photographic images were obtained by "silversmithing" water – that is, stirring water around in a small silver bowl with a small silver spoon and photographing the interaction between sunlight, fluorescent and incandescent light, and the moving water. These photographic images are primarily abstract with uncannily evocative figurative elements. The images are not manipulated. They result from the camera's freezing of patterns in the water swirling too quickly for the naked eye to capture.

Suzanne Farrell Smith *is a writer, editor, and teacher. Her work explores memory, trauma, education, parenthood, and the writing life, and appears in numerous literary and scholarly journals. She is the author of The Memory Sessions, a memoir forthcoming from Bucknell University Press, and The Writing Shop, an education book forthcoming from Brill | Sense. Suzanne lives in Wilton, Connecticut, with her husband and three sons.*

Winter Skin

Suzanne Farrell Smith

I am relieved my mother will die amid all this ice.
The sight of her body so much the sight outside.
Icicle drips fill glacial-cracked callouses.
Flakes of infinite variation scatter, float,
coat bedrails and housecoattails.
Crisp winds whip sastrugi on the cold sheets.
Without soft gold-tipped grass or blooms
that beckon begin something new
she hallucinates, slips on white
wedding gloves and goes
to an old love.
I leave by slick streets where no one sees me shiver.

Ghost Mother

Suzanne Farrell Smith

My son, weighted skin
slack and still on the monitor
screen shimmering
shades of silver, tin, nickel,
sleeps like a post-mortem photograph.

I named him
for his three-greats grandfather who
with his wife had nineteen children.
Louisa sat seven masquerade settings.
Draped in robes
covered by cloth
posing a dead baby from behind
a shroud, as if she were the one
who died so each child,
painted eyes on closed lids,
could live.

Am I a ghost mother?
Clothed in soured silk
covered by quilts
curled around the monitor
thumb stroking
smooth plastic cheek

Whitney Lee *is Maternal Fetal Medicine physician, an Assistant Professor of Obstetrics and Gynecology at Northwestern University, former OpEd Public Voices fellow, and veteran. She received her MFA from Vermont College of Fine Arts. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in Ninth Letter, Booth, Lunch Ticket, The Rumpus, Crack the Spine, Gravel, Numéro Cinq, Huffington Post, and Women's eNews. She lives in Chicago with her husband and four children. Currently, she is working on a collection of themed essays about a physician's experience with death.*

A Warrior's Death

Whitney Lee

I traveled this highway with my parents every summer. But now, thirty years later, I am alone speeding past familiar farms, silver silos rising high above empty February fields, the gray skeletons of abandoned barns, browns, reds, and oranges swirling deep into miles of sandstone – hoping to arrive in my grandmother's small western Kentucky town before she is dead.

She has been ill for a year. The warrior of a woman I admired and cherished growing up – the one who grew up laboring in tobacco fields, collected rain water to bathe, wielded a broomstick to beat apart my uncle's teenaged-testosterone–laden fights, sang hymns in the house, cooked a flawless roast, stacked a perfect dishwasher, worked as a school bus driver, drove a red Volkswagen beetle, and spoiled me for two weeks every summer – had lost the ability to care for herself then languished.

But this morning, my uncle called me at my home in Chicago and explained my grandmother was admitted to the hospital to die. An x-ray demonstrated fluid in her lungs. I am a physician thus I know the x-ray means the tiny myocytes, the cells that stack and swirl together to form the walls and cambers of her heart, are tired. The muscle can no longer squeeze blood through her body. Consequently, fluid floods the small sacs in her chest intended to collect oxygen and carbon dioxide. She is drowning.

My medical degree has bestowed upon me the responsibility of interpreting clinical data and offering recommendations to my family and friends. This role feels uncomfortable. I am an obstetrician and as a doctor who cares for young pregnant women, I am a poor consultant to an old dying one. Yet for the last year, my family wanted me to weigh in on my grandmother's prognosis, decide if we should continue the treatment, and speculate on how long she'd live.

I did not know how to answer their questions. But I knew – all I needed to know – was my grandmother suffered from old age and a failing,

tired, elderly body. These conditions require no diagnosis or cure, nor should they. Age and death are universal, normal, and natural – growing old and dying are not aberrant or pathologic. Just as living does not require confirmation, neither does dying at age eighty-eight. Some facts only require acceptance. I believe it is time to accept her life is ending and for my family to surrender. Today, we must accept it is time to let her go.

#

As a child, the summers I spent with my grandparents were magical. I had no siblings, but I had seven cousins who lived in my grandparents' town of Lone Oak, Kentucky. During my stay, some combination of cousins spent the days at my grandparents' house. They mocked my northern accent and colloquialisms. But soon their southern drawl – the one that peppered my mother's diction in anger – the one that laid thick on my grandmother's words – crept into my vernacular.

Those summer days lingered long, hot, and damp. My cousins and I waded in the creek that flanked my grandparents' property, chased one another through their small two-story white house, swung on their rusted peeling backyard swing, and fought over who loved my grandmother most. Once, four of us gathered around her on a yellow and brown linoleum kitchen floor, each of us trying to solely own her. "She is my Meemaw," I insisted pulling on her thin fingers – skin like parchment paper – hands covered in brown spots and protruding veins. Another cousin would argue, "No. She is mine." The others waged the same argument. She explained she belonged to all of her grandchildren – no one more than the other.

Though she was fully ours, though she spoiled us and called each of us "Sug" (short for "Sugar"), we physically did not resemble her. She had wavy red hair and soft blue eyes. The rest of us – my mother, her three brothers, and all of the grandchildren – did not share her exotic coloring. My grandmother's unique appearance reflected the qualities that I drew me to her – lovely, exceptional, celestial, striking, strong.

#

I have reached the bridge that spans the Ohio River – where Illinois meets Kentucky. Today, the structure appears especially cold and ominous. The scaffolding forms consecutive arcs that undulate over the water like a dragon's spine. As a little girl, this was my favorite part of the trip. Anticipation and excitement filled my chest as the bridge appeared in the distance. The enormous structure signaled the last leg – the final twenty minutes – of our journey to my grandparents' home. But now the bridge stretches long, lonely, barren. Now is the last time I will traverse this massive structure while my grandmother waits on the other side for me. In youth, the bridge was a welcomed landmark. Today, it is the final one.

#

Decades earlier, after my cousins and I muddied our knees and

sneakers in the creek – when sweat streamed down our temples – my grandmother split a watermelon and called us in from the backyard. While I ate the huge pyramid-shaped slices which tasted crisp, cold, sweet – pink juice dripped down the curve of my chin and onto my clothes. The other kids spit the seeds into the grass but I did not care for spitting. So, I swallowed dozens of the black ellipses. My grandmother told me a watermelon would soon grow from my stomach.

While we indulged in the melon, my grandfather placed oak planks into a heavy claw-foot table where my cousins, uncles, aunts, and grandparents would sit and eat together. Though my grandmother prepared the meal, cleaned the house, and laid out plates, silverware, severing spoons, and carving knives, table-expansion was grandfather's only contribution to the meal.

My grandmother spent hours a day in the kitchen cooking and baking. I remember roasts, mashed potatoes, gravy, cheese-filled casseroles, ambrosia salad, coconut cakes, and pecan pies. I remember heavy tan plates with a single brown filigree in the middle. I remember when she ate sweet corn off the cob, she made a high-pitched sound – like a chipmunk – as she curled her tongue under her top lip and tried to suck away the yellow pulp wedged between her teeth. But I also remember she rarely sat. When dinner was over, while the adults lingered at the table to talk and the kids ran off to play, she cleaned. My grandfather had old-fashioned expectations of a woman's role in the home and he merely watched her labor. But my grandmother never complained. Everything she did for her family was done as prayer – intentional, thoughtful, selfless, flawless. She worked with grace and diligence to ensure each of us had everything we wanted. She sliced my meat into pieces and ensured I had enough orange or grape Fanta soda. When I asked her for something she did not roll her eyes, sigh, order me to get the drink myself. She said, "What ya need, Sug?"

Her choices and actions were efficient and purposeful. She wasted nothing. I loved to be near her whenever I could – especially in the evenings. The dinner clean-up served as a prelude to the time she would sit and I could curl up next to her while she watched TV – when the house had fallen still, quiet, and neat. That hour was also a time she let me eat her sticky candy orange wedges, Andes candies, and red striped peppermints. Once, while I loitered in the kitchen as she cleaned, I found a ball of tin foil. I asked her why she kept it. She told me if you lived through the Depression, you learned to keep and re-use everything.

#

Little has changed about Lone Oak over the last thirty years. Driving into town, I pass the K-mart where I used to ride the pretend horse – where my grandmother slipped coins into a box and then I sat on the metallic creature while it lulled back and forth for two minutes. I drive past the Gore's

grocery store where she bought dried onion soup, gummy candy shaped like orange wedges, potatoes, coffee, bacon, steak, onions, cheese puffs, grapes, pimento cheese, and ICEE popsicles.

I park next to my grandmother's house – a home she bought after my grandfather died. Night is seeping into the sky and her windows glow from the lamps inside her living room. I step out of the car and walk up the short driveway, past her neatly cut lawn, edged flower beds, climb three steps to her small porch, and knock on her door. My mother answers and hugs me.

I am carrying only a small bag – I cannot stay for more than a night and my grandmother is not expected to survive the next twenty-four hours. Walking through my grandmother's living room, dozens of pictures of my cousins, aunts, uncles, and grandfather are propped on her shelves. The claw-foot oak table sits in the dining room. She has displayed countless knick-knacks and draped blankets over the back of her couch. Soon her children will disassemble her home then give away, throw away, or distribute all of her belongings – figurines, paintings, picture frames, couch, beds, jewelry, clothes, afghans, pot holders, thick-soled shoes, reading glasses, toiletries, car, laundry detergent, socks, dressers, quilts, vacuum cleaner, photo albums, letters, chairs, claw-foot table, Christmas ornaments, prayer cards, television. She spent eighty-eight years accumulating these possessions only for them to be divided, discarded, or donated over the course of days.

"Meemaw is too tired for visitors at the hospital tonight," my mother says.

"I hope she is alive in the morning," I reply.

#

Every summer morning at my grandparents' house, I woke to the scent of bacon, eggs, toast, and coffee wafting from the kitchen. Today, those scents remind me of their scratchy brown and orange shag carpet and my grandfather reading the Bible in blue coveralls at the breakfast table.

I loved the taste of bacon salt intermingled with strawberry jam. I also cherished my grandmother's white toast. My mother only allowed wheat bread at home so the white toast felt special. But my love for the grandmother's toast was more than the indulgence of processed flour. I loved her bread, in her toaster, with her butter and grape jam which tasted sweet, savory, simple, and perfect.

When I was ten, my grandparents attended a meeting at a church on a Wednesday afternoon leaving me alone. In their absence, I toasted piece after piece of bread and smeared butter across the surface using a knife that had a scalloped pattern on the handle like a fish. I had never seen anything like such a pattern and still haven't. My grandmother owned other patterns of silverware, but I liked that one best. I used her fish-scale spoons to scoop and eat ice cream. I used the forks to devour her tangy backed beans. And that day, I used her knife to cover slice after slice of bread with butter. After I

buttered each piece, I sprinkled sugar over the top. Then I piled the warm sugared toast onto a plate. When my grandfather returned home he graciously ate the entire loaf I had toasted and praised my cooking skills. He said one day I would be a wonderful cook like my grandmother – an indirect and rare compliment to her.

#

I slept poorly last night but I woke with a purpose. My mother suggests we take turns showering in my grandmother's guest bath. I don't know why showering in my grandmother's bathroom feels like an invasion of privacy – a space where I am not invited – but her spaces are still hers.
The phone rings as I brush mascara on my eyelashes. I can decipher enough to know one of my uncles is calling to inform to my mother that my grandmother is declining. My mother peeks her head around the bathroom doorway and tells me now my grandmother is fighting to breathe and she wants to die – for the pain to end.

I abandon my make-up routine and hurry into the kitchen where my mother is pouring coffee into travel mugs. I open the pantry door where every box, can, and bag are neatly organized. I find a cereal box and fill a Styrofoam cup with granola and milk. Pulling open my grandmother's silverware drawer trying to gain the composure to choose between a handful of spoons, one lone spoon with a scalloped pattern on the handle – like a fish – catches my attention. But I worry I might forget to bring the utensil back to my grandmother. Though she will never return home I think, *I cannot take this spoon*. *She may want it back*.

My mother and I arrive at the hospital and step onto the elevator. We distract ourselves talking about coffee and what to have for lunch. Exiting to the corridor of the inpatient ward and then peering down the hallway that leads to my grandmother's room, I am scared. I cannot fathom my grandmother suffering. Over the last decade, while training to be a physician and then practicing as one, I've spent more hours in a hospital than in my own home. Yet this time, confronting the death of my grandmother, the space feels vast, foreign, and frightening. I have always been in control in a clinical space. But now I exist as a spectator.

Everyone and everything in the hallway radiates a jaundiced glow under fluorescent lights. The scent of Salisbury steak and hand sanitizer lingers stagnant in the air. The twenty feet to get to my grandmother's room feels disproportionately long. I knock on her door and crack it open a few inches but my uncle opens it the rest of the way. I see my grandmother and she is suffering.

The head of her bed is raised so she can breathe. She gasps and as she exhales she moans, "Ouch." She begs for us to prop her body vertical, yet her weak back crumples when she tries to sit straight. A healthier person would tripod in this circumstance – lean forward with her hands on her thighs – but

my grandmother lacks the strength to support her own body.

Dozens of blood draws have interrupted the rivers of veins coursing through her arms, staining her complexion with large plum and moss-colored plumes. Her feet balloon and crack – a consequence of heart failure.

#

Twenty years earlier, my grandfather languished in his bed dying from liver falure – a consequence of an occupational chemical exposure. Six weeks separated his diagnosis and his death. For most of those days, he savored the time he had with his children and grandchildren. We drove from Ohio, Indiana, and Alabama every weekend to spend that time with him. I observed my grandmother cook whatever he wanted to eat. She cleaned every inch of him, even using a Q-tip to clean the crease between his nose and cheek. Yet she managed to take care of us too. She continued to cook, keep fresh linens on the bed, and the candy jars full of the gummy orange slices covered with sugar, Andes Candies, and peppermints.

Before he died, my grandfather reviewed the finances with my grandmother and explained the intricacies of the house. He initiated the changing of the guard. He was patient with her and she acquired the skills with ease. Yet his final week of life, he retired to delirium.

The last hour, he woke with clarity and demanded everyone leave the room. He told my grandmother to climb into bed with him. She did and with her by his side, he died. She comforted him in his decline, cared for his every need, then held him until his last breath.

#

Now my grandmother is meeting her own death tortured with pain and starving for oxygen. My mother moves from the doorway to her bedside, picks up a cup, and places the plastic straw between her cracked lips – her mouth dry from gasping. But she lacks the strength to wrap her mouth around the hollow tube or the lung capacity to suck the water from the bottom of the cup, up into the straw, around the accordion bend, to her mouth. She attempts to drink several times but fails. Consequently, my mother drips water from the straw into my grandmother's mouth like a bird feeding her chick.

The effort my grandmother has expended to breathe has weakened her chest muscles. Exhausted, she desires to lie flat. My uncle lowers the head of her bed but her heart and lungs protest. Her condition presents a compromise of misery.

The woman who harvested tobacco leaves as a child, cooked thousands of meals for innumerable house guests – the woman who split watermelon for me on hot mosquito-infested southern afternoons, saved aluminum foil, and called me "Sug" – my Meemaw – now lacks the endurance to drink, sit, or breathe.

My mother's two older brothers grow agitated at the bedside. They are tall men – over six feet – and nearly two hundred pounds. They hunt,

watch football, build things, drive trucks, vote Republican – men's men. But now, watching my grandmother suffer, they squirm in their chairs. They lean forward, put their hands on their knees, then sit back. They stand, pace, and cry. I rub my grandmother's back, her hands, her feet. Then I kneel at her side.

A nurse enters the room and I ask how the doctor plans to relieve her pain.

"I just gave her Dilaudid and will soon hang a morphine drip," the nurse says.

A morphine drip is a standard palliative care therapy when someone is dying. The medication along with the Dilaudid will dampen my grandmother's respiratory drive and allow her to relax. One of my uncles keeps a notebook where he logs every medication the nurse had given my grandmother. Reviewing the notebook, I see the dose of Dilaudid the doctor had ordered was too small. Furthermore, the nurse administered the drug early in the morning. The effect had worn off before I arrived.

The young physician walks into the room. He does not introduce himself. He does not ask about my relationship to my grandmother. He has reached the foot of the bed. I wave my hand over my grandmother who continues to gasp and moan.

"How do you plan to deal with this?" I ask.

He explains he has ordered a morphine drip. He is uncertain why the pharmacy is slow to send the narcotic to the floor.

After an hour my grandmother continues to suffer. Holding her hand, I tell her I will fix her pain. My uncles and mother pace the room and wander into the hallway searching for doctors and nurses. My grandmother slumps further forward and my mother tries to hold her straight but the effort inflicts too much pain.

Why isn't the nurse in the room attending to my grandmother's thirst? Why isn't she moving her up in the bed? Why isn't she rating her pain? Why isn't the doctor in the room evaluating the effect of his treatment, relaying a plan, changing medication doses?

From my own experience, when a physician has no cure, nothing to heal or fix, he retreats. At that point, the doctor loses meaning in his job. He is unable to shift his perspective – his goal – from the care of a patient to the care of a person and abandons his job.

My grandmother's gasps grow deeper, louder, persistent. Her heart monitor chirps at a quicker cadence, signaling her pain is escalating and fluid continues to fill her lungs. Her death has become slow and indolent.

Now I have watched my grandmother's comfort continue to wane for hours and her suffering escalate. Angry, I rise from the chair and march through the yellow lighted hall to the nurses' station. I demand to speak with the physician. He emerges from behind a small corridor, defensive.

"Three nurses are working to care for your family," he says. "I have

changed her medications eight times."

"She is suffering in there," I yell standing in the hallway, my left arm stretches out, my index finger points toward my grandmother's room.

"There is nothing I can do," he says. His white coat swallows him as if the garment is his father's but gray sprinkles his hair.

"You will write for morphine to be at her bedside. Then you will order an assessment of my grandmother every five minutes. If she is still suffering you will give her two milligrams. And you will do that until she is comfortable." My words leave my mouth before I know they are there.

"I cannot do that," he says. "The pharmacy will not allow it."

"Write the order."

"We could kill her if we give her too much morphine," he says.

"God bless her, I hope you do," I say. "No one should die this way. You and I both know that."

We stand together still in the hallway as a heavy silence settles between us. I have caused a scene. Nurses surround me. Family members gawk from doorways.

"Yes ma'am," the young doctor says. "I will do better."

But now my mother sobs outside my grandmother's room.

I hurry toward her.

"Oh god, Mom," I say. "I'm sorry."

She wraps her arms around my neck and says, "Thank you."

I retreat to my grandmother's room embarrassed by the scene I caused yet I am empowered because I can take care of her. After eighty-eight years of caring for everyone but herself, after meeting my needs without complaint or annoyance, after meticulously caring for my grandfather in his decline, after holding and comforting him as died, I can now take care of her.

"Whitney took care of the situation," my mother says.

I pull a chair to the end of my grandmother's bed and perch as if I am watching guard. I cross my arms, tap my foot, and let out long deliberate sighs. I lean forward and touched my grandmother's foot and say, "Meemaw, I know you don't believe me, but I promise it will get better." Then I straighten my back and continue to hold vigil over her pain – ready to go back to battle over her suffering.

But the nurse enters the room with haste. She turns to me, holds up a syringe, and says, "Ten milligrams of morphine. I will give her two milligrams every five minutes until she is comfortable."

I lean forward and touch her foot. "It will get better soon, Meemaw," I say.

The nurse swabs my grandmother's IV with alcohol and hooks the syringe to the port. I know my grandmother will soon be comfortable and sleep. I know she will be able to lay back and rest. But I also know once the nurse pushes the medication into her veins, she will never respond to us again.

The loss feels acute and precise. I want to explain to my mother, uncles, aunts, and cousins, "This is it. Right now. This is the very second where she will leave us forever." Yet I don't want them to see this final rest as tragic. Like the moment my grandfather died in her arms, her last sleep should be a sweet, restful, peaceful, comfortable, and free of the stain that can accompany acute loss.

Now, after the single dose of morphine my grandmother's body relaxes and my mother lays her back. The nurse gestures to me with the syringe.

"More?" she asks.

"Yes," I say.

And yes and yes and yes again until the nurse pushes a total of twenty milligrams of morphine and increases the drip from one to four milligrams an hour. I'd avoided assuming the responsibility of my grandmother's doctor throughout her decline. I'd redirected my family back to her specialists unwilling to give insight or feedback. Medicine was not my role in her life and she was not my patient. But now, in her last moments, my family, the nurse, even her doctor have relinquished control to me and I have harnessed it.

My grandmother's breaths grow long but no longer labored. Her tension releases and so does ours. Over the next two hours, visitors come and whisper in my grandmother's ear. We cry and kiss her forehead. We surround her bed and talk to each other about our children, our memories, how much we miss one another. As the room fills and the afternoon approaches, my departure looms. I can add nothing to the situation and I need to drive seven hours back to Chicago to take care of my own family. I bend over and kiss my grandmother's forehead over and over again. I keep my face close to hers and between each kiss I whisper, "I love you so much."

When I used to put any one of my four children to bed – when their bodies had grown agitated with exhaustion – I first paced our hallways with them in my arms, rocked them, held them, or rubbed their backs. When I felt all of their little muscles release, and their breaths settle into a rhythm, I would lie them down, kiss them, and tell them I loved them. These last moments with my grandmother echo of those evenings.

I hug all of my relatives in the room, walk down the jaundiced hallway, ride the elevator to the parking garage entrance, then move through the unseasonably warm but dim February afternoon to my car feeling sad, yet relieved.

Two hours into my drive home my mother is calling. I answer. "She is gone. She stopped breathing in peace."

Three days later, my mother calls and inquires if I want any of my grandmother's belongings.

"I want a spoon," I say. "It is in her silverware drawer. The handle has

a scalloped pattern, like a fish."

"That is all you want?" my mother asks.

"That is all I want."

D.A. Xiaolin Spires *steps into portals, rematerializing in Hawai'i, NY, Asia and elsewhere. Her work appears in Clarkesworld, Analog, Uncanny, Strange Horizons, Nature, Terraform, Fireside, Galaxy's Edge, Andromeda Spaceways (Year's Best), Diabolical Plots, Factor Four and various anthologies. Select stories are translated into German, Vietnamese, Estonian, Spanish and French. daxiaolinspires.wordpress.com Twitter: @spireswriter.*

mossy cypress

D.A. Xiaolin Spires

mossy cypress,
raveled roots,
birds' nests
dotted branches
on my scalp--
i need a defrizzer
and a trunk-long comb

whoosh
through my split ends
and feathers fall

half-chewed

D.A. Xiaolin Spires

half-chewed
the tabloid spit at me
tangled conspiracies laced in webs of intrigue
as i disentangled myself
from its stringy 3-D ink

triumph by absorption

D.A. Xiaolin Spires

armed with strong magic –
the baking soda defeats
the dragon's breath

the sun

D.A. Xiaolin Spires

the sun
flicks off
i feel around
in the dark
and find the
circuit breaker

Cezarija Abartis *has published a collection, Nice Girls and Other Stories (New Rivers Press) and stories in Bennington Review, FRiGG, matchbook, Waccamaw, and New York Tyrant, among others. Recently she completed a crime novel. She lives and writes in Minnesota.*

Sleeping Beauty – Three Stories

Cezarija Abartis

Sleeping Beauty Gets Her Wish

She used to have small feet. She was a princess, after all. Rosamond, daughter of the King and Queen of Bavaria, young wife of Guillaume, and two months ago, new mother, with her baby son on the pillow beside her. She blinked. Now even her toes seemed big, motherly.

She swung her legs off the bed. A beetle scurried across the marble floor and into the corner. She had once pressed her kid-leather slipper on a beetle, moved the toe in a circle, and when she lifted it up, saw only a smear, centered with a tiny human face. She had once stolen an apple from her grandfather's forbidden orchard, bitten into it to find each seed a homunculus. She had once peered into a gold chest and spied a mirror in a silvery frame with someone staring back at her.

A half-familiar guilt twisted around her windpipe, but she could still breathe. She swallowed hot sobs and bleated into the empty room. Outside the casement, holly hung in pointy green lace. It fluttered and clanged in the wind, accusing her.

Was it because of the beetle and the apple? The gold chest? Or the spinning wheel and spindle? She had been rude to the old lady. Taken her spindle.

There was something she had wanted so much and for so long. The good fairies had promised it. It shimmered in the shadows, invited her to touch it, and jolted her. She had slept for a hundred years and dreamed. In the dream she had the small feet of a princess and danced with her prince in a hall lit with a thousand perfumed candles. Music enveloped them. The thorn forest of a hundred years had dissolved. And he was beside her! Kissing her with soft lips.

Now she walked away from the bed to the window, the floor cold beneath her swollen feet. In the distance, the forest was growing prickly again.

Her head ached. Her parents had wanted her too, loved her, or learned to love her, despite her willfulness. At the window, the sill felt warm, alluring.

She sat on the edge. She searched her memory for where she left the baby, stared toward the dark center of the forest, and leaned out. She heard the thorns scraping. She twisted away from the window.

There he wriggled on the pillow, a pale, wrinkled thing, the tiny feet dancing in the air. When Rosamond was a baby, she must've looked like that to her parents. Rosamond coughed. Now her hands, once delicate, porcelain-skinned, had turned into puffy claws.

Her guilt climbed out of her throat and perched above her head. She stared at her feet, which seemed small and light. The baby gurgled and grew still.

The maid came back into the room. She held a plate piled with fine white bread. She glanced toward the bed and the quiet baby. The maid's face was tight, frightened. "Are you all right?"

Sleeping Beauty Plans a Funeral

Unexpectedly her father-in-law, the king, died. His heart. And so he never got to see the West Country before he went into the dark. She embraced her husband, while their two children chased each other around the room, giggling. Inside her arms she felt Guillaume tremble.

"I don't know what I'm supposed to feel," he said. "I'm sad, tired, flat." He stretched out a shaking hand in wonder.

She stroked his back as if he were a baby about to cry.

He released himself from her embrace. "We'd planned to visit the West Country. To see their agriculture, their dams and dikes."

"I know," she said. "I know." She pushed the children to sit on the floor for a minute.

"Autumn is the perfect time to smell the dirt." He stared at the bright open window. Birds chirped. They had not heard about the death in the family.

"I can come with you," she said. "Afterwards, I mean."

"My father was a good man." He took in a deep breath. "But my uncle still lives and he's a bad man. I'm only safe because I'm far away, here in a poor province. He wanted to flood the land where the peasants were rebelling."

"Your father was a good man."

"Will I be like my father? Will I die young? I'm ashamed to be thinking that now."

"I won't let you die. I'll hold your hand and pull you back from the dark." Her smile stretched to her dimples.

The children rose from the floor and ran to them. The four-year-old said, "I'm not sad, Mommy."

"Not sad, Mommy," the three-year-old said.

The children hugged her legs.

"Now we have a funeral to plan," she said.

Sleeping Beauty Imagines Her Husband

Dowager Queen Rosamond had always been vain about her hair. Long and wavy, it felt cloudy and soft. She gave it a hundred brush strokes every night. Guillaume had said to her, "You cut it when we traveled to negotiate with the king of Sweden. You didn't want to have to take care of it. You were practical as well as beautiful. I loved your hair."

He really had loved her. He remembered after all those years.

Her hand went to the top of her gray head, and then to ends of her chin-length hair. "I'm sorry," she said. "I'm sorry."

"No. I loved your face too." He kissed her forehead. "I loved your body." He kissed her throat. "I should probably stop. They'll be jealous." He gestured toward the old couple shuffling by with their canes, and then the teenagers holding hands and giggling. "Not right here in the park. A scandal. They don't like to see old people making out on a park bench. Or anywhere."

"They?"

"The powers that be. Admin. The Government."

"Are you doing conspiracy theory again? We were the government. We were the king and queen. Until our son inherited the throne."

He waved his hand dismissively. "It's nothing. Fantasy. I don't mean it. I'm not here. I'm a mere figment."

She gasped. Just her imagination again. Lately she had not been sleeping well. Ever since Guillaume died four months ago. She continued to talk to him, usually silently, but sometimes overtly, so that people stared at her and turned away in embarrassment. She was embarrassed too.

She had not expected to become this ditzy, sputtering old lady, wearing a brown cardigan with large buttons she could manipulate. She was vain and beautiful and indulged in her youth. Why not in old age?

She looked around the park bench. Maples burning blood-red for the past week, or yellow, then leaves gone, gone, gone. Oak leaves soon to lose their copper color and become gnarled black branches against the watery light.

"But there are evergreens in winter," he whispered.

"Lonely pine trees. That's not enough recompense. The only green things to poke out of the snow, foolish and hopeful."

"I was foolish and hopeful once. You were too."

"And now I can't be hopeful anymore. Only foolish." She stretched her hand to caress his transparent cheek, but it went through as if he were a cone of light. "See? I can't even touch you."

"But I can give you imaginary kisses."

She wrapped her arms around herself and closed her eyes. “I remember. We were hot as rabbits when we were young.” She opened her eyes and buttoned her sweater against the wind. “Not now. I loved the way my hand felt in your dry, smooth hand. We were partners and safe and could accomplish anything.”

“We did.” He cleared his throat. “Do you wish you were queen again?”

She thought about this, as if it were a real possibility. A red leaf drifted down in front of her and fell on the still-green boulevard. “I would want something new, not all the meetings, worries, ailments of the children, our own ailments, funerals to attend. I would have to be someone else.” She picked up the red leaf and twirled it by the stem. The stem felt firm. The leaf could be a tiny fan to wave back and forth or a scoop for fairy grass or the first leaf to be woven into a coronet. “I think I want a garland more than a crown.” She patted the top of her head. The wind blew a leaf into her lap. She needed just a few more.

Will Cordeiro *has work appearing or forthcoming in Best New Poets, Copper Nickel, Crab Orchard Review, DIAGRAM, Fourteen Hills, Nashville Review, Poetry Northwest, Salamander, Sycamore Review, The Threepenny Review, Zone 3, and elsewhere. His two chapbooks are "Never-never" (White Knuckle, 2017) and "Reveries and Opinions of Mr. Figure" (RDP, 2016). He also co-edits the chapbook press Eggtooth Editions. He is grateful for a grant from the Arizona Commission on the Arts, a scholarship from Sewanee Writers' Conference, and a Truman Capote Writer's Fellowship, as well as residencies from ART 342, Blue Mountain Center, Ora Lerman Trust, Petrified Forest National Park, and Risley Residential College. He received his MFA and Ph.D. from Cornell University. He lives in Flagstaff, where he teaches in the Honors College at Northern Arizona University.*

A Peach in the Brandy

Will Cordeiro

My mother filled in as the village midwife.
She knew the spells of birth and afterbirth,
grimoire and stirrups, ruptures, pills, and relics.

She knew which fiber of the bulbous midriff
responded to which root – but would assert
if spells worked every time, they would be physics.

She kept her potions and her poisons corked
and locked up all the books and secret figures.
Lopsided samples lined our topmost shelf,
each fetus pickled in a puckered jam.

One day my father stomping home from work
already drunk had seized on one to swig.
He gulped it down and belched. Within myself,
small bubbles gurgled through the bowels I am.

Haiku for Monsoon Season

Will Cordeiro

Chalk dust floats
from a board erased.
Summer rains are shining.

*

The last raspberries
darken on the bush.
Dusk comes sooner now.

*

The aspen gossip
of decaying leaves.
Puddles daydream passing clouds.

*

Raindrop off the ponderosa.
Among brown needles,
a spider-web.

*

Moving boxes stacked in hallways.
A slow wasp trapped
between windowpanes.

*

Sunlight inches out a crack.
A dry-wash spills
thick rabbitbrush.

*

Dog asleep on pillowcases.
Quick shadows slant
from overcast.

Storey Clayton *is a current MFA candidate in Creative Writing at West Virginia University. He's worked as a youth counselor, debate coach, strategic analyst, development director, rideshare driver, and poker player. His work is forthcoming in The Bookends Review, Barely South Review, and Blood & Bourbon and recently appeared in Riggwelter, Pilcrow & Dagger, Spitfire, Eunoia Review, and Montana Mouthful. You can learn more about Storey at his personal website, The Blue Pyramid (bluepyramid.org).*

To See a Rabbit

Storey Clayton

The year is not yet three days old and I am trudging up an arduous English hill. The tabloid on the train warned of a "double duvet night," portending a cold snap that prompted me to don my overstuffed down-alternative parka at the Basingstoke railway station, two miles plus a bus ride behind me. It's a glorified sleeping bag with sleeves. I pant through my exertion, sticking my tongue out to aid my breathing. I am exuding pure salt-water, threatening to sweat through the parka's thermal reflective waterproof breathable critically seam sealed OmniHeat lining. I am suffering from a bad cold. I pause on the high shoulder of the country road, boots sinking into high-grassed mud, and wonder how long it would take for someone to find my body.

I am lost.

There is nothing that cuts you down to size like coming to some strange and marvelous place where no one even stops to notice that you stare about you.

I have been planning this trip in earnest for two weeks, but more accurately I have been planning this trip my whole life. I am on a quest, a literary pilgrimage to visit Watership Down, the real-life rise of grassy hillside where fictional (albeit allegorical) rabbits finally found home. Base-camp for the journey has been my best friend's handsome three-story Greenwich abode, where I've just spent the holidays living out an approximate fantasy of a Dickensian Christmas at the twilight of 2018. Neither he nor I are British, but he had the good fortune to marry into the nation via one of its foremost immigration experts. Their daughter, Beatrice, is about to turn two.

The night before, just after her bedtime, I pored over the scant websites devoted to other admirers of the definitive leporine novel. Having completed a "country walk" on Boxing Day, I'd learned of Britain's relative distaste for absolute property rights, the sanctity of public access to the "right of way" against fences on the edge of outlying farms. The maps on the fan-

sites looked straightforward: a two-mile walk due south of the sleepy Hampshire village of Kingsclere (population 3,164), then west into the downlands toward a plaque honoring the late Richard Adams (1920-2016). I'd scrawled the basic sequence of steps, including train transfers and bus times, on a folded sheet of legal paper. I'd elected not to print a map.

Heaving with fatigue on the side of the country road, I pull my aging low-quality smartphone from my parka pocket, turn it on, and wait for it to connect with a lonely cell tower and drain my precious quotient of international data. I flinch as a car whizzes by at 40 mph (er, 65 kmph), kicking leaves into my shivering legs. A sheep lows mournfully in the distance, well on the other side of a rickety barbed wire fence. The proliferation of barbed wire – which I rigidly associate with my homeland of the American west – in southern England, jars me. My phone is finally ready. Zooming into GoogleMaps' walking directions offers little help. My quarry, the plaque, stands in a wide expanse of green with no visible paths or trails from this road. The phone blinks 9% at me. I consider the need to text my wife and friends, back in Greenwich, if I get stranded. I turn it off.

The sun dips behind the heavy clouds, closer to the horizon than its peak, mocking my late start.

Have I really come all this way, spent thirty-five pounds on transportation, bundled up with a cold on the coldest day of my visit, only to fall a mile short of my destination? I examine the surrounding hillsides, wonder if one of them is the fabled Watership Down, if saying I saw it from a distance might be enough. When will I next be in Britain? Why am I such an idiot? Would it really have killed me to print out a couple detailed maps? Why do I always do this?

The phrase *hare-brained schemes* bubbles into my consciousness and I have to laugh. All I want is to see a rabbit.

My mother tells me stories of my early obsession with the cartoon film of *Watership Down*. I would beg her to let me watch it again, tugging on the bottom of her untucked shirttail in a way I remember from later years. She would sigh reluctantly and pad toward the television, me trundling fervently in her wake, and confront the small collection of giant white plastic VideoDiscs: *Dumbo*, *Mary Poppins*, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *Robin Hood*…

"I want to see a rabbit," I would tell her.

And she would select the thin white disc case, adorned with a giant shadow of a black rabbit on the cover, slide it into the player, and instruct me to sit further back from the TV. I could hardly contain my glee as the faint red glow of the stylized sun peaked out from the black screen, opening the animated film with its strangely religious origin story of rabbits.

The sun-god, Frith, makes all the animals: they are all the same and

they all eat grass. But the rabbits multiply too quickly and leave too little grass for their neighbors. The other beasts complain to Frith, who gives each a gift of sharp claws, vicious teeth, or piercing talons which they can use to hunt and eat the rabbits. El-ahrairah, the prince of rabbits, is frightened as his children die, but Frith blesses him too with powerful legs, long high ears, and a shiny white tail to evade his foes.

All the world will be your enemy, Prince with a Thousand Enemies. And whenever they catch you, they will kill you. But first, they must catch you. Digger, listener, runner, prince with the swift warning. Be cunning, and full of tricks, and your people will never be destroyed.

Watching the film now, it's shockingly violent and scary. The plot of *Watership Down* is laden with blood-soaked rabbit fights, harrowing encounters with predators, symbolic warnings of destruction, men gassing an entire warren, and the looming presence of the Black Rabbit of Inlé, who greets rabbits upon death and shepherds them to the afterlife. When I first asked to read my mother's cherished hardback copy at age seven, I couldn't get through the opening chapter. It was too terrifying.

Three years later, I tried again and was captivated. There was something so gripping, so profound, so powerful about this tale of adventuresome rabbits and their quest for freedom and safety. The allegory to human behavior was stark and cutting, but the detailed life of rabbits was also realistic and true to their nature. To date, I have never loved a book more.

Part of the fascination I went on to cultivate with the book, which I've re-read seven times more than any other tome, was that it felt familiar and deeply rooted in my consciousness, even before I read it. It took me an embarrassing number of years to realize that this was no miracle, nor anything particularly innate to the quality of the book itself. It was because I had imbibed its themes and plot before I was forming lasting memories, hour after hour, in front of that television.

I decide that my best bet is to keep ascending. Watership Down is a hill, after all, so the chances are good that I must gain elevation before reaching it. Maybe there will be a sign up ahead or some kind of indicator – I can't be the only person making this pilgrimage today. And while others surely brought their cars, the usefulness of vehicles is about to run out. My next turn should be away from the road, straight into the pastoral landscape of the English countryside.

A mile prior, I'd almost entered an open farm gate, presuming I could use its paths to find the Down. The entryway displayed a friendly sign dubbing it Field Barn Farm and a collection of scruffy sheep who approached the fence to meet me. But smaller signs promising prosecution for solicitors gave me pause. If I was just passing through, was I really a trespasser? Would it be better to risk angering the farmer than missing out on my destination?

Could I pretend to have missed the signs? Feign ignorance of English, perhaps? Instead, I'd chosen the safer path and turned around, heading up the thin damp shoulder of roadway.

You know how you let yourself think that everything will be all right if you can only get to a certain place or do a certain thing? But when you get there you find it's not that simple.

There are no sidewalks on this road, nor any other pedestrians. Like many rural English byways, the width of its two bidirectional lanes is miserly and dangerous, requiring cars to hug the left side of the meandering asphalt to avoid a collision. The thin berm of mud offered me sometimes rises two or three feet above the road, offering a small buffer from the traffic, but also risking an imbalanced topple into its path. The going is slow and careful under the thickening clouds.

After a half hour of painful progress in which I traverse less than a mile, the road widens ahead of me into a small "car park" on the right side. About a third of the spaces are occupied with squat practical British cars which give way to a wood-framed sign posted at a slight angle. The sign, covered with a thin layer of clear plastic, is obscured by hundreds of last summer's bugs who crawled underneath the plastic to die, belly-up, legs akimbo in creepy repose. I squint past their carapaces to make out a faded illustration of a rabbit above two lengthy paragraphs about the animals' history on the downs. Richard Adams is mentioned, but most of the writing is about the impact of hunting and farming rabbits on the local medieval economy.

I look up to see a clear dirt path, wider than the entire roadway I've just sidled up, stretching west toward the last glimmers of sunlight. I've come to the right place.

I was nine when I got my first rabbits. We lived on an acre and a half of piney forest overlooking the Oregon coast. We already kept ducks and chickens and geese and a cat, but I wanted to do 4-H and rabbits could be handled and shown at county fairs in a way those other creatures resisted. My mother had owned rabbits when she lived in Los Angeles in the early '70s, including her beloved Putney, whose stomach exploded from eating too much lettuce in a tragedy whose retelling haunted my young imagination. Putney was still alive in 1974 when my mother purchased the first American edition of *Watership Down* at a local B. Dalton, drawn by the cover illustration bearing a compass and rabbit. I named my rabbits Eager and Milne, after two of my favorite children's authors. My father built them a hutch.

Milne proved to be a doe and Eager a buck and if they were siblings, the social mores of rabbits proved indifferent to this fact. Milne wanted nothing to do with the hairless worms that emerged from her early one evening, batting away these young and withholding her engorged nipples. My

mother had read something about rabbits who ate the offspring they rejected. We shuttled the seven blind, clawing newborns into a cardboard box, nestled it under a heatlamp, and rushed out to buy an eyedropper and some milk.

Infant bunnies defy our expectations of adorable babies. They resemble fetal pigs: swollen eyes sealed tight, short flappy ears above pale bodies that are almost slimy to the touch. Everything that makes a rabbit cute – their fur, long ears, frantic curious noses in subtle motion, bright inquisitive eyes, fluffy white tuft of tail – is missing. After an initial horror at their utter ugliness, I gave in to a previously untapped paternal instinct. My mother showed me how to hold them gently at an angle, pry their mouth open with the end of the eyedropper, squeeze a slight amount of milk out to not overwhelm their tiny throats. They lapped it up with gusto, squirming against my soft grip. I was in love.

I named them all.

It took them a little over two weeks to expire. The first strands of fur were coming in, offering distinctive markings: a stripe of white on a black head here, gray socks on white legs there, a black spot on a gray body in the corner. They huddled together under the heatlamp, took the eyedropper insatiably, opened their eyes, stretched their firmer ears. But then eyes closed again; the failure to thrive was evident. After school each day, desperately, I would ask my father if they'd all made it and he would tell me that Bright was gone or Skunk hadn't pulled through. I ran for the eyedropper and talked optimistically about how there were still five, four, three, two rabbits remaining and surely *they* would grow up.

Only when the last one stretched its fledgling legs and died did I truly cry.

My heart has joined the Thousand, for my friend stopped running today.

This was hardly the end of my devotion to raising rabbits. We went on to acquire Nepal, an impossibly gentle Himalayan doe, black and white with a long tubular body who became my go-to show rabbit. And Cadbury, a chocolate Dutch buck, gorgeous in his European-flag brown-and-white markings, but feisty and unruly as all hell. Milne's second pregnancy prompted my father to cram a large block of wood in her cage, restricting her from turning around or really moving, enabling five of her second litter to survive under their captive mother.

These nine rabbits were instrumental in our fledgling 4-H club, the Beach Bunnies, securing an upset win of the coveted Herdsmanship Trophy at the 1992 Clatsop County Fair. A year later, when we moved to New Mexico, my parents gave most of them away. But we released three remaining rabbits – two bucks and a doe – on a forested back road of Ecola State Park, half a mile north of Cannon Beach. I watched out the back windshield as the trio of sheltered hutch rabbits sniffed the damp air uncertainly, one rising on his back

legs to chew a leaf.

I had long lamented their fate, presuming a grisly end for the omega-prey worthy of a scene from the *Watership Down* cartoon. But last October, a friend from the area pointed me to a public broadcasting feature on Cannon Beach's burgeoning rabbit problem. "Many years ago, someone released their pet bunnies at Cannon Beach," the accompanying article stated. "Pets don't usually do well in the wild. They can't easily find food and aren't well prepared for predators. But for some reason, these rabbits survived to do what their species does best: Reproduce, again and again and again."

The town (population 1,728) is now split on what to do with the friendly creatures, who consume guarded gardens and proffered treats with equal enthusiasm. The Cannon Beach Bunnies are estimated to number at least a thousand, have a Facebook page with hundreds of followers, and draw tourists to the area just to see them hop amongst the hotels, restaurants, and shops that dot the dunes. They also routinely fall victim to cars, dogs, and apparent disappearances at the hands of fed-up locals.

I can't be sure that these thousand are, in whole or in part, descendants of our three, but I also can't find a documented reference to the Cannon Beach Bunnies that predates their release.

The path is long and easy, a mild uphill climb that allows me to catch my breath and finally appreciate the idyllic scenery. On either side of the rising down, farms unfold in uneven rectangles below, divided by hedges or rows of trees, punctuated with stone farmhouses and wide steel barns. I cannot catch sight of a single rabbit, musing that they may be hibernating beneath the January frost, but sheep are plentiful in the fields and birds careen overhead.

At one point, I eye a lone seagull and this pedestrian beast seems freighted with meaning as I recall the pivotal character Kehaar. In *Watership Down*, this inarticulate gull saves the rabbits from danger with both his reconnaissance and his beak while providing rare comic relief with his outrageous accent. For years, I would greet any wide expanse of blue surface, from the Pacific Ocean to Lake Tahoe to the Mississippi River, with Kehaar's trademark description of his ocean home: "peeg vater!"

"Later on ees vinter, plenty cold, plenty storm on Peeg Vater. Plenty bird come in. Den I come back, see you vere you live."

Every human I meet is heading back the way I'm coming, half-smiling at me in the reserved British manner, deterring me from engaging them in conversation about the book or its characters. I am sure there is only one thing that would bring us all to this hillside in this weather, though I am the only one traveling alone. Horseshoe prints stain the packed mud before me, but I can see no equines. The path curves gently left, softly right, eventually revealing my destination: a thin bare beech sapling encased in a

short wood fence, featuring two engraved metal plaques.

The tree was planted in 2013 and adorned with the primary plaque, which reads *In recognition of Richard Adams / 'a lover of Watership Down and its inhabitants' / May 2013.* He lived another three and a half years, dying on Christmas Eve 2016 in Oxford at the age of 96. I'd been thinking of the tree as a memorial, but now I wonder if he was here for the dedication, a doddering nonagenarian making his last trek up the hillside that made him famous. I am torn between surprise that the plaque predated his death and shock that, had I been here just six years prior, nothing would denote this place as notable in the literary canon.

A few crusty brown leaves, desiccated and enfolding, cling to the thinnest strands of the sapling fluttering in the hilltop winds. Below, the top board of the fence is littered with poorly etched names of the novel's beloved characters: FIVER, BIGWIG, HAZEL, BLACKBERRY, HYZENTHLAY. Fiver's is the newest and most visible, but all were done with the mix of care and haste that denotes heartfelt graffiti. Rather than seeming to desecrate this humble monument, these etchings sanctify it with the passion of readers who've come before me. I hardly consider adding to the list (I can't bring myself to mark up the margins of books) and besides, Fiver is here already.

Fiver is, perhaps, the hero of *Watership Down*. Much has been written about Hazel's model leadership, Bigwig's courageous strength, Blackberry's intuitive cunning. But Fiver, a runty soothsayer prone to flu-like seizures, saves everyone's life repeatedly. It is his initial vision that inspires the rabbits to leave their ultimately doomed warren, his continual prophecies that lead them to safety, his premonitions that help him find his brother Hazel as he's dying of a gunshot wound in a ditch. As a scrawny kid, always the shortest in the class and frequently bullied, I related to Fiver like no one else. No human in literature has ever spoken to me so consistently.

It probably didn't hurt that I was prone to distressing dreams. I remember vividly my first nightmare: I was five and dreamt that a spider had wound me into a web and was about to consume me whole. I awoke with a twin-dotted red welt on a finger of my left hand. This opened an era of powerfully realistic dreams of horror from which I still suffer, visions of carnage and bloodshed, doom and destruction, danger and betrayal. For a number of years, I routinely died in my dreams, falling from great heights to feel the concussive smash on the ground below or keeling over from a series of shots, crumpling to conscious paralysis and knowing I'd been killed.

"I don't know what it is," answered Fiver wretchedly. "There isn't any danger here, at this moment. But it's coming – it's coming. Oh, Hazel, look! The field! It's covered with blood!"

Fiver's experiences offered hope that there was some meaning, some purpose to these dreams beyond self-torture from an unforgiving

subconscious. When I was seven, I briefly convinced my father that I'd foreseen an impending nuclear war in relating a recurring dream of rockets launching all over the world. To our great relief, the Cold War started to crumble just two years later.

My dreams did not relent so easily, escalating in intensity with adolescence. Early in high school, fed up with the pre-sleep anxiety of anticipating these ubiquitous nightmares (which surely only made them worse), I gave up on their possible prophetic value and resolved to sleep less. I rarely surpassed four hours a night for the next four years and got some of the best rest of my life.

It distresses me that I've never before considered whether my obsessive viewing of the Watership Down movie helped spark my nightly nightmares. The film's ominous soundtrack, pervasive sense of danger, and mournful scenes of loss have frequently been described as haunting. Every year, the British Film Board receives several complaints from angry parents at the film's **U** rating (the equivalent of **G** in the United States). Throughout my life, I've turned to the characters and depictions of Watership Down for comfort. Did they unwittingly spark my need to be so comforted?

I hike a bit further up the hill from the Richard Adams tree, vowing to make the crest of Watership Down before I return to take pictures. My stomach is demanding the avocado, tomato, and cheese sandwich I purchased at a cute café in Kingsclere earlier in the day. I am already fighting a looming sense of disappointment, a December 26th kind of feeling that this is all there is to it, that most of this journey has been riding on an anticipation that's nearly spent. I realize that my curfew is sunset – I will be unable to walk these unlit paths in the dark. Just like a rabbit.

There are no rabbits on the summit of the Down, which stands 778 feet above sea level amid a field that looks like young yellow corn. A squat concrete obelisk marks the hill's zenith and I briefly consider whether I can scale it for an even higher, more accomplished view of the surrounding environment. After a couple feeble attempts, I content myself to picnic in its shadow and survey the terrain: green and brown fields, gatherings of barren winter trees, distant huddles of villages, a large series of towering power pylons cutting a straight swath through the scene.

"Come and look! You can see the whole world."

When I return to the sapling, my path is blocked by a trio of mounted horses being coaxed over a short metal gate. It's clear that the first rider is an instructor and the second is somewhat seasoned – their horses clear the obstacle in one and two attempts, respectively. But the third rider is a novice, perhaps in her teens, and her horse stops short on each pass, bucking and threatening to fling her from its back. Frustrated, she waves me on down the path past the sapling, which is just feet from the gate. I politely decline her

offer without explaining that I'm here to photograph this sad little tree and its enclosure, that I'd be in her way as she tries to get her animal over the fence and down the bridleway. She smiles gratefully as I stand to the side and wait while her instructor barks increasingly curt advice.

After six more attempts, the instructor beckons me over to ask if I would be so kind as to open the gate. Sheepishly, the young rider trots her horse through and I seal the gate once more. I take a moment to clear my mind of this mundane encounter so I can properly revisit the monument before me.

I take tens of photographs, placing myself in several of them, capturing both the prominent Richard Adams plaque and the smaller one bearing Frith's commandment to El-ahrairah. I pose in front of the etching of FIVER with both a smile and a somber expression. I try to think what I'll regret not doing, regret forgetting to photograph, tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow. Impulsively, just before leaving, I reach over and grab a dead leaf from the sapling, considering how my mother presses leaves and flowers from her garden. I pocket the crunchy brown memento and turn back up the hill.

Just before the sapling is out of sight around a curve in the path, I greet three hikers heading downhill. After they pass, I feel a vicarious thrill as I turn to watch them approach the sapling. I cannot wait to see them reach the destination of their own pilgrimage, the surge of accomplishment they'll feel at reaching the site where, in the book, the rabbits of Watership Down made their home. I want to connect with them, this moment, though they barely returned my "hello," to see if this book means as much to them as it does to me.

They walk right past the sapling without a glance.

I've spent a lifetime trying to spread the gospel of *Watership Down*. With, as with all missions, mixed results.

I loaned my mother's beloved first edition to my best friend in eighth grade. He carried it in his backpack for weeks and returned it, much loved but tattered and worn. My mother was heartbroken. I've given a new edition of the book to every serious girlfriend in my life, the act of its bestowal a token of my investment in the relationship. In a playwriting class in high school, I considered adapting the novel for the stage, a feat that's since been attempted twice by more serious playwrights. When the Modern Library opened a popular poll of the 100 best novels of the twentieth century to match their editors' list in late 1998, I voted for *Watership Down* till my finger ached and took personal responsibility for it making the list. On the AP English test, I wrote my primary essay about *Watership Down*, a book I'd never encountered in an academic context, filling three blue books with time-honed insights into its allegory, symbolism, and deep-seated messages. I received a 5.

It is simply the story about rabbits made up and told in the car.

When I got married two years ago, my vows compared my life to the struggle of the intrepid rabbits who'd set out to look for home. My voice broke as I declared to my wife: "You're my Watership Down."

That night, as the waitstaff were helping us collect the leftover food and decorations we wanted to keep, one of the waiters pulled me aside. "Hey, what was that book you mentioned in the ceremony? It sounded really interesting and I want to read it."

A broad smile cracked my face, my mind clearing from the logistics of the moment. I stood up straight in my dark teal wedding suit and raspberry tie and held forth about the book for nearly ten minutes.

I return down the steep edge of Watership Down, taking a precipitous southbound path that meets up with a small road I mistake for a walking path before a car surges up it and I have to scuttle to safety. The walk ahead is nearly four miles and takes me the better part of two hours as I shift from muddy uneven shoulder to muddy uneven shoulder across the wending roads, keeping an ear out for autos and pausing periodically to turn around and photograph the Down from distance. It is majestic. It looks exactly like the book cover of the edition I gave my wife in our first year of dating.

The temperature is dropping precipitously with the sun and I try to balance a quickening pace against my desire to linger in this moment I've longed for for so long. When will I next be on Watership Down? This is the kind of pilgrimage one makes once in a lifetime, maybe revisits once with grown children or other aficionados. I will never meet Richard Adams. I will never again hear Art Garfunkel, who provided the angelic voice to the eerie "Bright Eyes," a meditation on death written for the film, live in concert. I feel a deep creeping sorrow at how long it's been since I've reread the book, try to recite its scenes in approximate order from memory. I zip my parka back up, tighten my scarf around my face.

Many human beings say that they enjoy the winter, but what they really enjoy is feeling proof against it. For them there is no winter food problem. They have fires and warm clothes. The winter cannot hurt them and therefore increases their sense of cleverness and security. For birds and animals, as for poor men, winter is another matter. Rabbits, like most wild animals, suffer hardship.

By the time I reach Kingsclere, each country inn and closing shop is aglow with exterior lighting. I traverse Swan Street toward the bus stop near the town's center where I will begin my journey eastward back to London. Before leaving, I duck into St. Mary's, an ancient stone church that stands as the most prominent edifice in the village. A plaque outside says there has been a church on this site for over 1,000 years. The door is unlocked, but the church is empty.

On the back pew are a handful of handmade pillows, each

embroidered with the image of a rabbit. They are the first rabbits I've seen all day.

Laura E. Davis *is the author of Braiding the Storm (Finishing Line, 2012). Her poems have appeared in Tinderbox, Pedestal Magazine, Muzzle, and Corium, among others, and anthologized in Bared and The Doll Collection. Laura is a freelance writer in San Francisco, where she lives with her partner and son.*

Because the Universe Is Expanding

Laura E. Davis

Pick a word: *Go* or *salmon*.
Or maybe more than one. Try
a phrase: *go like the salmon,*
upstream with the vigor of a mighty tongue.
Or what about *burn*? Then again, what hasn't
everyone already said about burning? If you go
with *phalanges* or *sarcophagus* you risk
that rabbit's hole of word salad: all image, no meat.
Meat, maybe that's it. Raw and wet – sliceable.
ready to be grilled, but then you're back to heat
again, and that's too close to *burn*. You can't admit
that sometimes you want *cavern* or *pantomime.*
But you figure everyone wants it that way sometimes.
You could mask it in metaphor: *a smiling finch*
or *a quilt made of sitcoms,* but you'd sooner
pick *naked.* How about a homophone
such as [*hav*]? As in, "She'll have the rare
porterhouse with a baked potato," or "She'll halve
the rare porterhouse with a serrated steak knife."
Safe behind layers. Because who can
choose just one word from hundreds
of thousands? And anyway, aren't you just
stalling, so that by the time you reach
the end everyone will forget
how you just wanted to burn?

Tara Isabel Zambrano *works as a semiconductor chip designer. Her work has been published in Tin House Online, The Southampton Review, Slice, Triquarterly, Yemassee, Passages North and others. She is Assistant Flash Fiction Editor at Newfound.org. Tara moved from India to the United States two decades ago and holds an instrument rating for single engine aircraft. She lives in Texas.*

Scooped-Out Chest

Tara Isabel Zambrano

When I slice a knife down my chest, my heart crawls out. It looks healthy, full. Cherry red inside out. I watch it drag itself on the floor, onto my desk overlooking the yard and the trees. Blood drips from its sides. Outside, the moon floats on the cloudy horizon, fuzzy on the perimeter.

In front of the mirror, my heart mouths words. It complains I haven't been an optimistic person, I don't drink enough water, I always wear black. When I read a joke circulated on WhatsApp, my heart laughs, it has teeth, sharp fat deposits. We talk about the boys I liked, the towns I lived in and hated, the men I slept with and said I love you to with different levels of uncertainty. I offer bourbon and the heart gulps down in one go, the knots of blood growing darker.

My heart and I go grocery shopping and fill our cart with chocolate ice cream and potato chips. At home, the TV gleams in the background: arguing couples on Fixer Upper, pretending to be excited. In its gentle cautious voice, my heart whispers my secrets into the night, a large chip stuck to its side like a tongue. Shh.., I say, and one by one, the indiscretions rise like smoke, hover as if holding us hostage and then merge into the white of the ceiling. The heart puffs up like a wind sock with all the space released inside it. I watch it earnestly: if this is the way it's supposed to be but almost never is.

In the middle of the night, the heart curls up next to me like a lover, confesses that it's impossible for it to go back in my body and beat endlessly, needlessly. I watch its surface: smoothed and rounded by time and ache, a muscle flexing, stroking, concentrating on a thought.

What should I do with this? I point to my scooped-out chest: a fleshless hole, a peculiar sickness settling in my gut. The heart brushes itself on my cheek, its salty smell goes up my nose.

Oh shit, I murmur, feeling cold as a coin, shivering. I'm sorry to let you down, I say. My throat stings, I drank too much whiskey.

It's okay, it whispers and places its mouth between my legs. I see a

bridge of capillaries, the atria and ventricles soaked in milky blood drinking my fire. Then it jumps down the bed and tows itself away, a thin trail of ice cream behind it. I wonder if I'll die in a moment, an hour or never, if my heart ever belonged to me.

We have always found our way back to each other, I shout. A door opens and closes. I put my ear to the ground, hear the thumping growing weaker, and imagine all my blood and sins leaving its sliver of a stomach.

Rebecca Irene *holds an MFA in Writing from Vermont College of Fine Arts. Her work is published in Burningword Literary Journal, *82 Review, Amaryllis, Dime Show Review, and elsewhere. She received a 2018 fellowship from the Norton Island Artist Residency Program, and a 2019 residency from the Sundress Academy for the Arts. A Poetry Reader for Hunger Mountain, and The Maine Review, she lives in Portland, Maine, where she supports her word-addiction by waitressing.*

Stay

Rebecca Irene

As a dog returneth to his vomit, so a fool
returneth to his folly. – Proverbs 26:11 KJV

When I taught the Bible, I was in love
with Solomon – Poet. Ruler. Lover.
Until I discovered that he enjoyed
watching dogs scavenge the dead.
Caress
of carcass in the teeth of want.
*
I was well suited for conversion,
developed the face of a martyred
saint. I asked women to church
on street corners, buses, & subways.
Pleaded in cafes, pools, & bars.
Whenever I taught Solomon,

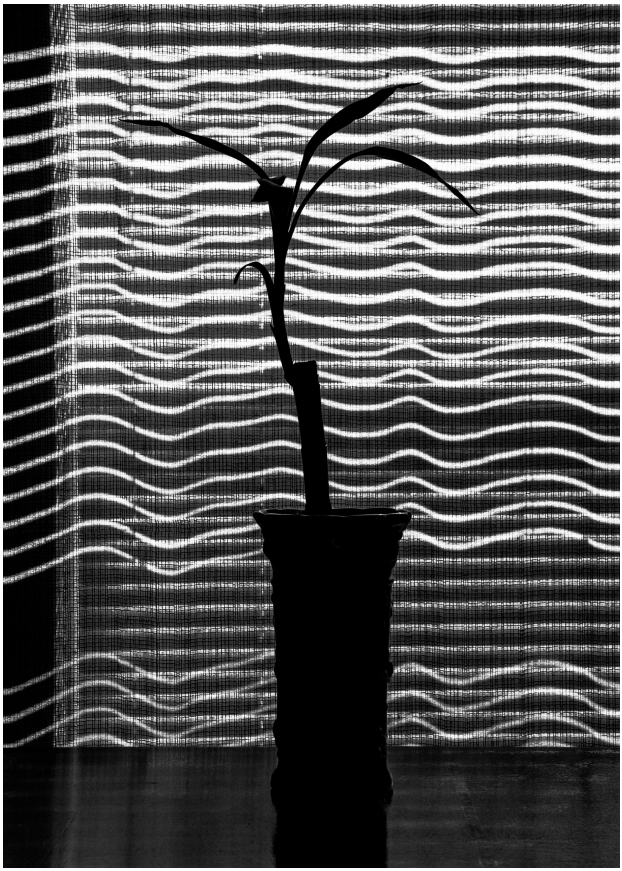
I disremembered his 700 wives,
& 300 concubines. I kept my doubts
to myself, shared Solomon's verse
in strident tones. Taught with symbols:
fool as woman, folly as sin. *As a dog*
returneth to her vomit, so a woman

returneth to her sin. I imagined Solomon,
freed from lusts, at long last, at the right
hand of our Lord & Savior, approved.
The thrill of saving souls was like no other.
Chosen. Redeemer of the lost. I forgave
each confessor, offered her repentance,

offered the sacred scriptures of Solomon
as solace, baptized with song, & gazed
into her eyes. As Solomon must have
after each new battle. Bathed, sated,
resplendent in royal righteousness,
with new flesh by his side. Some of those

I studied the Bible with remain faithful.
Zealous. They still call me their *spiritual*
mother, & pray for my lost soul. Sometimes,
I wish I could return to them, find faith's
certainty again, but that was so long ago –
I was unable to stay.

Jon Beight *lives and works in South Carolina where the temperatures are much more cordial that at his former digs in Western New York. His fiction and photographs have been published in Foliate Oak, The Bitchin' Kitsch, Fabula Argentea, Boston Accent Lit, and other fine publications.*



Plant in Window

I was passing by the front bedroom and saw the morning light coming through the blinds. I thought the waves of the slits of light made for an interesting image.

Untitled

I love film noir photography. I saw this shadow from an end table lamp and thought, with the somewhat skewed angle of the shadow and the light through a venetian blind as a back drop, that it captured a sense of noir.

Mahesh Raman *is a writer and scientist who is interested in the fragility and malleability of memory (chiefly because he often finds his keys in the fridge after looking for them everywhere).*

Never Forget Me

Mahesh Raman

Somewhere in the world, perhaps in San Francisco or Lisbon or Seoul, in a city with cobbled streets and unexpected hills and pastel houses, there is a girl sitting on a front step, watching it drizzle.

The world is filled with fog and rain, warmth inside and a blustering wind outside, lights that flicker through passing wisps of cloud. There is a call to prayer in the morning at five, a muezzin followed by the thousand names of Vishnu, and then a cock crows in this place that does not exist anywhere.

A jet plane roars overhead. Peach blossoms fall out of the sky. A cat chases a dog through the gutters.

"I don't like this," she says. Wait a bit, replies a voice inside her head. It'll stabilize.

"I don't like it. I want to leave," she says.

The world shimmers, then disappears. She blinks at the man in the white lab coat. He frowns at her. He has kind, brown eyes and a scraggly brown beard.

"You have to stay inside," he says.

"Okay," she says, through cotton-numb lips.

She closes her eyes again, and when she reopens them, she's sitting on the step watching it rain. A car goes by, its lights blinding her momentarily.

She sits there for what seems like eons, suspended like a tiny speck of mud in a vast ocean of time, hundreds of fathoms below her and above her and in every direction.

#

After a while she forgets.

It stops raining. The sky is clear and blue. Inertia leaves her and she stands up, turns around, and without knowing why, knocks on the door. She knocks quietly at first, and then she's thumping the door, insistently.

#

A man opens the door. He has black hair that greys around the arms of his glasses. His eyes, enlarged already by thick lenses, expand when they see her. His mouth opens and she stares curiously at the one silver filling at the back.

He envelops her in a bear hug. She does not know what to do so she

stands with her arms to her side, letting herself be hugged. She can feel him crying. She looks into the house through the open door, which leads to a corridor with stairs leading downstairs and a smaller set of three steps leading upstairs.

After a while, he pulls back and looks at her. His eyes are red and his cheeks streaked with tears.

"Welcome back, Radha," he says, and Radha looks curiously at this man she has never met before in her life.

Inside, she sits on the couch, feeling immensely sleepy and tired. The doorbell rings and a man in a white coat with a brown beard walks in. She hears the two men converse in hushed tones. She shuts her eyes for just a little while and curls up her feet on the couch. She feels a hand on her temple and then again on her wrist. She has a vague sensation of being carried upstairs and being placed gently on a soft bed. It starts to rain once more, and she falls asleep to the sound of raindrops on the windowpane.

#

The house is spacious and uncluttered. She loves the pastel blue of the walls and the light grain of the wooden floor. In the days the man is gone to work and she walks through the rooms, examining photos of the two of them in various exotic locales. In the photos she is beaming happily, showing the little gap between her front teeth, her face tilted a little bit to the right as if she thinks that is her best side. She looks happy in the photos, but who can really tell.

The walls of the living room are lined with neatly arranged bookshelves. She pulls out books at random and finds her name scribbled on the front page of each. A piece of paper drops out of one of the books; it has a cartoonish drawing of a boy and a girl standing in front of what seems to be the Eiffel Tower: "Radha and Maurice in Paris," it says in what is probably her handwriting, with a heart drawn next to the words.

In the evenings, Maurice brings home take-out, either Chinese or Thai or Indian in rotation. They eat quietly at the round dining table, which feels solid and expensive and a little too large for just the two of them. Maurice is calm and solicitous. He primarily asks her questions: "How are you feeling?" "Better today?" "Do you need more water?" She responds in yeses and nos, with slight nods and shakes of her head, with the kind of smile we use for friendly strangers, lips slightly pursed. Afterwards, she goes to the guest room on the second floor where he tucked her in that first night. In the night when she tiptoes through the corridor to the bathroom to pee, she can see the door to the main bedroom is always ajar, and she can hear him snoring inside.

The guest room is small and cozy. It's painted in a light shade of pink. It has a large, full-length mirror on one wall. The single window faces a brick wall, with just a few feet of empty space in between. Twenty feet below is an alley; sometimes if she peers down she can see a large tabby walking up and

down with his tail pointed straight up.

She is not stupid or crazy. She realizes something happened to her that made lose her memory and now she is back in her home. But the reality is that this house and the man who lives in it are both strange to her, and she does not know how much she can count on their kindness. There is a photo in a pretty frame sitting on the mantel above the fireplace in the living room. They are in a convertible with 'just married' written in confetti ribbons on the boot. The photo is taken from one of those old digital cameras that nobody uses anymore; there is a date on the top right corner from twelve years ago. They look so young in the photo, barely out of college.

The doctor who examined her on the night of her return comes back for a check-up. He shines a flashlight at her as she sits on the couch. His hands press and prod her body mechanically; under her chin, on her neck, below her eyes. She realizes with a start, mid-way through the examination, that she is wet. A little thrill runs through her. After the inspection he smiles at her with warm brown eyes the color of caramel.

"Don't worry. There won't be another episode," the doctor says to Maurice before he leaves.

That night she lies in bed, listening to sounds in the dark. The rain patters on the windowpane. She keeps one hand tucked into her underwear for warmth. The house creaks and sighs in the dark, expanding and contracting. She thinks of the doctor's hands, calloused and veined, sun-browned against her pale, smooth skin. She mingles her small, inchoate noises with the whispers of the house.

In the morning she remembers the baby. She is half-awake when it happens, lying in bed, a tiny wedge of sunlight from the window bisecting her body. She sits up straight, her heart pounding. There was a baby in this room. Her name was Anita. She is gone now.

She scours the house. She finds what she is looking for in the back of a closet in the main bedroom. It's a large duffel bag full of baby paraphernalia: small pink clothes, a baby monitor, a rattle. She starts to cry.

#

She finds the address on a post-it note stuck to the fridge. It's only three blocks away. She takes an umbrella with her since it's drizzling. The doctor opens the door when she knocks.

"May I come in?" she says.

He lets her in and closes the door behind her. "How are you?" he asks, his eyes searching her face.

"I remembered," she says.

"I'm sorry," he says, pulling her to himself. She buries her face in his body. The tears soak his shirt. He kisses her forehead. "I'm sorry," he repeats.

They make love on the floor of his small apartment. Their bodies are illuminated by a faint, watery light through the bay windows. The raindrops

on the windowpanes cast shadows that slither across their skin. Afterwards they lie on the floor, listening to the breathing of the house.

"I want to try again," she says. Her head is resting on his chest and she can feel his even, calm heartbeat. She can't see his face; she is afraid to look.

"Are you sure?" he says, finally.

"Yes. I am sorry. I need to forget."

They get dressed. He wears the white lab coat by force of habit and takes out a syringe from an attaché case, filling it with a solution from a small unmarked bottle. When she is ready, he injects her in the arm with the solution.

"I'll see you again soon," he says, holding her hand and stroking it gently. "I love you."

She closes her eyes. When she opens them, she's in a far-away city, sitting on a front step, watching it rain.

Jonathan Travelstead *served in the Air Force National Guard for six years as a firefighter and currently works as a full-time firefighter for the city of Murphysboro, and as co-editor for Cobalt Review. Having finished his MFA at Southern Illinois University of Carbondale, he also turns a lathe, crafting pens under the name Scorched Ink Penturning. His first collection "How We Bury Our Dead" (Cobalt Press) was released in March, 2015, and "Conflict Tours" (Cobalt Press) was released in 2017.*

God[damn] Particle II

Jonathan Travelstead

Some nights it's less the threads of blood pinking my urine
than the way the garage's shingles bruise wet with moon that calls me
to the deck. Pissing spent rocket fuel between the spindles,

I read what's scrawled on night's slate. *Astronomy Tomorrow* says
current methods of seeking absentee gods are obsolete.
That our lenses' current prescriptions can't reveal bacteria

on Mars or Apollo 11 at rest. Cue ALMA, Chiles' radio telescope
whose name translates roughly to *soul.* Cue also the array of
gray dishes in the desert Southwest, mitts spread quadratically-wide

that a message might come for us. Lower back whinging,
I crane my head towards footprints in the moon's regolith which
astronauts say smells of black powder, strawberries.

Feels like mortar mix. Drained to the gravity of my back yard,
I'm a vessel awaiting our future engines, just waiting for coordinates
so I can shuttle off this treated deck, & freefall in space

until a mass greater than my own tethers me to its orbit.

An Astronaut Makes a Break For It

Jonathan Travelstead

Goodbye, blue jaw-breaker.
From up/down here
your heartaches look beautiful.
Your incorporate, mirrored buildings
ache towards heaven.
War looks like a lover's quarrel,
two opposing bodies
twittering nonsense
across the ocean
while the sun like a fat clown
hides behind Mercury.
From this distance
I imagine Beatitudes
scrawled in the mountaintops:
Own nothing. Leave only footprints.
Now fugitive to that petty world,
why would I return?
I found a whale & she's deaf
but she's teaching me to locate by feel.

Goodbye, sea monkeys
floundering in your blue sandwich bag.
Goodbye, smartphones, & fear
of abandonment.
Goodbye, anger issues.
Degauss your computer screens.
There is no economy here
& it's so quiet
I'm getting to know myself better.
Wish you were here.

Pamela Krueger *is a writer, emerging expressive arts therapist, wife, mother of two boys, and regularly involved in community service that empowers youth. Having left her law career of nearly twenty years behind after her oldest son was diagnosed with cancer and survived, she earned her Master of Fine Arts from Oregon State University in 2018. Simultaneously, she is halfway through a Master of Counseling Psychology program and a budding social entrepreneur, relying on her creativity to help form an organization that will expand the meaning of healing and wellbeing. When writing about the three and one-half year period of her son's treatment for leukemia, she makes observations relevant to the lives of thousands of families confronting tragedies that arrive suddenly.*

The Relativity of Grief

Pamela Krueger

> *Everything is energy and that's all there is to it. Match the frequency of the reality you want and you cannot help but get that reality. It can be no other way. This is not philosophy. This is physics.*
> --- Albert Einstein

When I was a little girl, my maternal grandmother used to tickle my palms and sing me to sleep at night. There was an exquisite generosity to her love that I only understood later when I learned that I came into existence on the night her youngest son died, buried in an avalanche. He may have been seventeen. Six months later my father's brother died in a motorcycle accident, on the edge of seventeen. Each of my parents, just one year older, became parents while they mourned the loss of siblings, yet no adult in any part of my growing up ever spoke of these losses.

I was well into adulthood when I understood these losses had occurred and their timing. Somehow, though, grief was transmitted by silence. I knew great sadness within every fiber of my being just by being close to and loved ferociously by my mother and her parents. In me, this silence lived as a lifelong well of sadness, its frequency embedded deep within me. Not having the source of the silence named, I couldn't identify it in tangible terms. At its depth, the silent love that was there, too, felt as though it was of another world, the deep space of my reality.

While this muted ancestral past may have contributed to my sense of joy in life as foreboding – my belief that if something good was happening, something bad was probably just around the corner – it also gave me the pleasures of solitude. Sitting with myself, I could go deep within and try to

find what was hidden there in the silence, something so magnificent that no one who loved me could speak of it. Maybe the silent suffering held the secret of life.

#

When my oldest son, Ethan, was seventeen, he was diagnosed with a rare form of childhood leukemia. His diagnosis reawakened my latent, inherited sadness. His larger-than life intellect, athletic prowess, and acute social awareness, by then in a six-feet-three frame, with olive-skin and a carefully manicured bearded face, all seized, all at once. Until then, his deftness at playing basketball was incredible to watch and sometimes seemed to be all that he lived for. I remember watching his natural athletic ability play out on the basketball court like some sort of complex symphony of movement I could appreciate, but not emulate. He knew exactly where his body was in physical space and he was attuned to where other players were going even before they did. His freedom of movement instilled a sort of belief in some intangible force of nature we longed to feel. Then the disease signaled itself in abiding exhaustion over several weeks, but was not detected until he suddenly couldn't walk due to painful lumps in his legs. When he lost the use of his legs, he lost himself.

I was so connected to my children that I felt his diagnosis reverberate within me. Like when he was little and I would go off to work and feel a strong physical separation, like a phantom limb sensation. While I could never claim that I endured Ethan's excruciating treatments myself, or experienced his younger brother Oliver's long weeks of being left behind at home while we lived for months at the hospital in the ensuing year, my empathic bond was so tight that I believed I could feel what they each felt. Modern science gives this feeling a name: microchimerism. It is the intermingling of mother and child DNA within the womb, where each receives a part of the other. I feel their essence residing within my womb's memory, as if they each left behind a double wallop of their DNA, now embedded in my heart's glove. I don't know if every mother feels this; I only know it vibrates through me like hundreds of sparrows chirping in a cherry tree when it blossoms.

#

Oliver is four years younger than Ethan, looks more like me (pale skin, blue eyes) than Ethan, and was beginning to form strong bonds with his peers when his brother disappeared from his daily life. On the eve of Oliver's Bar Mitzvah, Ethan's leg pain and lumps began. We all had our attention turned towards Oliver's completion of his Hebrew schooling, standing in front of his entire congregation to deliver a D'var Torah, his own interpretation of a section of the Torah. That day, in his white tux and purple shirt and cummerbund, he was his own effable combination of humor and capability. During his D'var, he spoke about the way that community supports life. I couldn't remember that by the time I wrote this; I had to search through pages

of memories to find it because everything had been blotted out by the whiteout of our family tragedy.

During the three and one-half years of Ethan's treatment, during 1,197 days of chemotherapy, Oliver would become brother-friend and brother-helper in ways that closed the four-year gap in their ages. He would forego time with his friends to be transported to our transient home near the hospital on weekends, so we could spend days together as a family. He slept on the sofa in the living room there, his feet dangling over its edge. Whatever Ethan needed from him, he responded, even when Ethan wasn't nice, even when his brother looked haggard and old with suffering. At thirteen, he came to fear the imminent death of his brother. But he tried not to show it.

In my ripped-down-the-middle life, I felt a tug towards each of my children. I wanted to absorb their pain, be two places at once, be there for Oliver's middle school woes and Ethan's treatment, simultaneously. Be two mothers-in-one. It was a kind of magical thinking, a way of imagining that I could give them what they each needed.

When we were at the hospital, people would ask me, "Would you like to go out and go for a walk and take a break?" This question made me confront whether I could leave Ethan there just to alleviate whatever I was feeling. I felt anger rise in me at the idea I could leave and he could not. It didn't make any sense to me.

Of course, I did have to get up and go for a walk or run sometimes. Every time I did, I felt this great force of gravity attaching me to him so that all I could do was think about what might happen while I was gone. Every step I took in the rain-filled wind, or smelling the scent of cherry blossoms as spring came, passing other runners, reminded me of what he couldn't do. Sometimes he could barely walk the few feet to his hospital bathroom, wincing in pain.

Every time I left Oliver at home those nine months we lived apart (because our home was too far from the hospital for it to be safe to stay there), departing after a night's visit, dropping him off at school, I watched as his head bobbed away from me, in a sea of other kids, until I couldn't detect which one he was. Sometimes, I just sat in my car after all the kids were inside in their classes, unable to turn my car on and drive away. I felt a twinge and pull of gravity, splitting me in two.

I didn't know how to save Ethan. I didn't know how to give Oliver what he needed. I relied on my survival instinct to make a series of decisions, from the impossible to the obvious, each cascading across the terrain of our new unfamiliar landscapes. Embark on a course of chemotherapy untested for someone with Ethan's rare form of leukemia? Uneasily, yes. Let E eat lettuce from a salad bar and risk bacteria that he couldn't fight attack him? No. Ask him if he wanted to meet Chris Pratt or Chris Evans or any number of Seahawks visiting the "sick" kids? No way (well, that one took me awhile to

learn the right answer to, based on his vehement reactions). Let Ol finish middle school in one place? Uncertainty reigned but decisions were required.

Our circle of chosen family was a cocoon for me. One day a friend would bring me a stack of magazines. Another day a friend would bake five-dozen cookies for Ethan (though he couldn't eat even one but wanted to) and bring them to the hospital. My husband Scott, my partner for a quarter of a century by then, was horrified of hospitals from the start, and would be the one able to leave the grounds when Ethan wanted something.

Still, I felt like I was alone. Like I was the only one who could keep Ethan alive. I saw myself as his supplemental life force. Because of his age, doctors would barrage him with questions he was often in too thick of a haze – of pain or pain medications – to comprehend. I'd help translate in both directions. When it became too hard for him to move from his bed even though it was vital for him to walk the hallways, I'd gently encourage him though, sometimes had to more vehemently *cajole* him to get up, to move, to see moving as life-giving.

After the first nine months of his "active" treatment, active because most of it was spent in-patient or in the infusion clinic, returning to the world of casual living was hard. I felt tender, sensitive, and unable to answer questions about what was happening; any explanation felt hollow, pointless. Often, people would share their tragic stories with me and I'd search deep within myself for the strength to listen to what happened to them, all the while in unrelenting agony living in a kind of a shell, barely existing out of fear of losing my son.

Not wanting to claim more real estate for my grief than I was owed, I wondered about the relativity of grief.

#

Before Ethan became sick, I had been a lawyer for almost two decades. Wandering the forests of Washington with biologists looking for rare bird habitat, collaborating with governmental agencies, nongovernmental organizations and tribes to negotiate the use of scarce natural resources, my practice was all about the science of taking care of natural places.

Most people recognize the name Hanford in connection with nuclear power plants and *Silkwood,* which tells the story of the disaster caused by the toxic byproducts of power production. In other words, Hanford is often associated with the disasters that flow from too-soon use of little-understood technology. But the site also hosted a device called the Laser Interferometer Gravitational Wave Observatory (LIGO). LIGO was made of mile long "arms" of thousands of tiny mirrors, designed to measure events in deep space that could prove Einstein's theory.

As part of the burgeoning industry in renewable energy sources, a new windfarm was proposed close enough to LIGO for the vibrations from the wind turbines to disturb LIGO's delicate instruments. As a lawyer for

Caltech, my job was to help a local governmental planning body understand why the windfarm would disrupt the quiet ambient conditions necessary for the operation of LIGO's mirrors, in the process making defunct a $500 billion investment by the National Science Foundation on land owned by the Department of Defense.

The silence on the Hanford site felt like a vacuum of sound, enhancing even the tiniest movement; even one's breathing made an echo. This silence makes it one of two of the quietest ambient conditions on the North American continent. Eerie silence. Silence deeper than my own ancestral well. While we convinced the local planning commission not to allow the windfarm and its vibrational noise, what I remember most fondly is a heckler in the audience, who, while I was asking Caltech's rocket scientist carefully poised questions, shouted, "Cows don't fly! Why the hell are we worried about wind turbines and cows?!!!" I felt like I was in a live comedy, asking an astrophysicist pointed questions about deep space while being heckled about flying cows. It was both comical and serious – astrophysical science meeting land-based practicality, but missing each other entirely.

Almost ten years later, deep into Ethan's treatment, a former law colleague sent me an article indicating that LIGO had finally proven Einstein's theory of relativity. It came at a time when I was grappling with the grief of my family's losses. Perhaps as a means of coping, I immersed myself in reading the articles about the sounds being recorded from deep space. I reminisced, hitting the keys of my laptop at Ethan's bedside, searching for a new understanding of what I had helped make possible, laughing to myself about that crazy case.

As I dug into articles about what it all meant for humankind, I found that Einstein not only had a lot to say about relativity but also about grief. His quest for scientific understanding accepted the premise of the mysteries of life. His pursuit of objective science allowed for acceptance of the concept that not everything is quantifiable. In his historical letters to friends and colleagues, he offered his views on grieving the loss of a loved one, which became some of the most quoted philosophical writings on death and relationships. This set me on a quest to understand his theory of the universe, as if only someone who understood both the vastness of space and the vastness of grief could offer me understanding. Somehow, my deep well of grief felt connected to Einstein's wisdom. I became obsessed with unearthing it.

My first insight came when I read that Einstein posited that time does not pass at the same rate for everyone. Even time is relative. So why would the pace of grief, sitting within its relative time, be the same for anyone?

#

It was hard to apply a rate of the accumulation of grief to Ethan's years in chemo. Time had ceased to have meaning, enveloping my family in

its freeze frame, while around us others continued on as they were. We were moving through time at a different pace. For us, grief was a constant backdrop. Its contours kept changing: lost time, lost seasons, lost basketball pickup games and high school parties, lost childhood, lost college dreams and daydreams, friends moving on to college without him, lost togetherness, lost familiarity, lost life trajectory, lost health, lost freedom from pain, chronic pain, ever-present pain.

Time moved at a plodding pace.

And yet people kept forgetting we were still in this death spiral of the unknown. "What's going on with you all these days? Is Ethan in college?" These questions hit me like an explosive punch to the gut coming out of nowhere that I had to silently endure, as if my life depended on it, to maintain social niceties that plagued me. It reminded me of a time when I was a little girl and another girl would frequently hide around a corner and hit me in the stomach as I walked by, knocking the wind out of me and making me afraid of corners. Once, I was invited to her house for her birthday and my mother made me attend, no matter how much I protested. After eating her cake, it felt like all of the times she'd hit me were gathered in my gut, and I vomited all over her shag green carpet. But Ethan's death spiral left me with nothing left to cough up.

#

In the dominant American culture, few are taught how to grieve, how to be with one who grieves. Instead, there is often a black hole of advice or awkward silence. Although I'd noticed before how tragic news, once voiced, often shuts down conversation, it wasn't until my own tragic news was the subject that I understood the gap that silence represented. Culturally, we are led to focus so much on the "bright side" that most of us don't know how to act when we are down or in trouble. It is as if there is a thin slice of shame built into any casual sharing that's not upbeat, like somehow the parts of us that suffer, every day, need to be hidden, shut off from view, not mentioned. Perhaps this creates a black hole inside each of us, a place where spaces inside us collapse in upon themselves and can't achieve something like the escape velocity needed to escape a black hole in space.

#

Ethan's mortality rolled through in a seemingly endless series of life-threatening events. I could no longer afford the luxury of hiding my grief; it was simply too immense. I turned back to Einstein. Einstein's theory of relativity relied on a concept of "gravitational lensing," where the light behind a black hole can illuminate the black hole, like a lens.

Ah ha! I could see into my own internal black hole with some other source of light. I thought about where I could find a light source. I found it in remembering people's attempts to give uplifting advice, even if that included comparing their grief to mine. I imagined the advice as a light source

approaching the black hole. That is: not a black hole of advice, but advice illuminating a black hole. Feeling others' advice as a light source allowed me to see the colors, tones, and dimensions of my own grief by hearing from others what it was not. Well-meaning advice served as a sort of gravitational lens, illuminating my own grief, allowing me to see it, roll it around, and begin to work through it.

#

As the mindfulness axiom goes, where we focus our attention is where our energy goes. If we spend all of our time mourning what isn't, we devote energy towards a life that doesn't exist. But the subtle trick here is that we cannot bypass the grieving process to transform loss into living with loss. I had to let myself feel what I lost, fully, in order to live in the world with this loss. Events pushed me.

One night in the ICU, I feared Ethan had died. He had been wheeled off by an overtired radiology doctor for a procedure to dissolve a massive blood clot in his jugular vein. Juxtaposed against the dangers lurking in the hospital, the hallways were filled with painted murals in vibrant colors, depicting each major area of the hospital with scenes of the landscapes and critters of the forest, mountain, ocean, and river. I had been wandering through the changing scenery of these hallways for about three hours, lulled by their enchanting colors, when I heard my name paged over the intercom. I picked up one of the phones at a nearby nurses' station and the woman at the other end of the phone yelled at me to get to the ICU, "NOW." In that instant, I believed the attempt to dissolve the clot had failed. I ran at a sprint that felt like I had no air. The painted wall murals blurred as I ran, stopping at several points for redirection because my mad dash had disoriented me. It felt like the long hallways grew longer, more sinister, until I arrived at the ICU. The surgeon began telling me how things went and I quickly realized Ethan had survived after all. I crumpled to the floor, catching my breath, tears of relief flowing down my cheeks. Scott, who had been trailing behind me, helped me up, held me.

Even though he did survive the procedure, Ethan contracted an infection during the procedure due to bacteria getting into his bloodstream. With his immune function nearly nonexistent, the combination of the blood clot dissolving, and medicine coursing through his veins alongside this newly introduced bacteria was ominous. Lying on the sage-green hospital couch a few feet from his bed that early morning, where he lay, still as a mostly-silent lump, shivering under layers of blankets, I focused all of my imaginary powers to will the potential for his death away with all of my being. Silent tears rolled down my face. I imagined the void of a life without him, like falling into gravityless space.

Only after I accepted that my own child was mortal did the weight of my grief decrease. When his fever broke and he lived, I began to allow myself

to live again, to allow myself – without fear – to imagine his full recovery.

#

Einstein said, "mass and energy are different manifestations of the same thing." What we know about the people we love comes to us through their energy, embodied in their form. In Einstein's terms, the way that we know a person is through their physical body (mass) and all of its uniqueness. Yet how we experience another being is through the resonance of how we feel them to be (energy) as we encounter and move through space and time with them. Einstein is attributed with saying, "Energy cannot be created or destroyed; it can only be changed from one form to another." Just as I knew that the living, breathing flesh of my children was my everything, I also knew that they lived within me, every moment, whether physically present or not. I realized I knew them through their energy, their ways of being, not only their physical bodies. This energy was permanently present within me. The combination of their matter (their DNA left behind, within me) and their energy (residing in all of my memories of time spent within them) was my own personal law of physics.

#

Grief is not meant to be held alone: there is a community well that can hold grief. Not knowing this was what I would learn, I signed up to attend a group retreat about transformation through change, which took place at a cancer retreat center called Harmony Hill. What I would learn about change showed up first in the form of the labyrinth, in its winding pathways.

There are three labyrinths on this property that towers above Hood Canal, the clear blue water glistening below in the distance. Ancient forms of healing meditation, each labyrinth's path leads to a center, then back out again. One labyrinth was formed by mown grass and it was often hard to find its shape. One weaves through a garden, with a midway stopping point where you can sit on a bench and be hidden from view by an old cherry tree with many arms. One offers its tight pathways with a myriad of sea-shells and has an ancient cedar tree at its center, holding hearts and folded paper messages and amulets left behind by those who have followed its meandering path. I walked its pathway many times, searching for something. Once, I paused and quietly inserted a carved heart-shaped rock within its trunk. It felt like a secret between me and the tree, where I whispered my love for my two boys.

While perusing the library of a massive wooden cabin with exposed beams made from ancient trees, I came across Francis Weller's *The Wild Edge of Sorrow: Rituals of Renewal and the Sacred Work of Grief*, and found myself reading hungry to read about the ways that ritual can serve grief. When I picked up the book, I randomly opened it to a passage that struck a strong resonant chord in me:

> *When we gather on weekends to work with grief, we often begin by saying that we are entering into a sudden village. These rituals frequently bring together people from great distances, and yet slowly, over the time we share, the feeling of being in a village takes on a shape that is more than a longing; it becomes something tangible. These gatherings offer some of the constituent elements of a living community. The space is created for deep listening, respectful attention, and a container strong enough to receive our most painful and sorrowful revelations. In a very real way, we are able to generate a vessel capable of holding our joined hearts suffering. This space enables all of us to risk sharing the wild edge of sorrow. (Page 13).*

Near the end of our retreat, I asked if others in the group might be interested in carrying out a grief ritual. At first I felt I was pressing my own desires on others, but as we progressed, I understood that everyone there was hungry to express their grief.

We decided we wanted to create a space for future wanderers to sit with their grief. We found an alder meadow at the top of the property with sunshine casting rays through the trees. We carried heavy boulder-sized rocks that I acquired from a local rock quarry up a hill trail that had been designed to support those walking with their grief. We moved in silence, feeling our journey to be sacred. We each placed a rock in a depression in the meadow, finding a spot for these sitting stones that was not random in relation to one another, but wasn't a circle either. The sun glistened. We sat on our stones.

In the center of the meadow, we had placed an altar with a copper bowl and a stack of small pebbles from the beach. Each of us, in turn, walked to the altar. As we approached, we each spoke our grief out loud starting with the phrase, "The grief I carry is..." each expressing the weight of sorrow and plinking a pebble in the water to release it. When my turn came, I said, "The grief I carry is the weight of seeing my sons suffering and not being able to do more than comfort them." We continued for over an hour, each of the seventeen of us taking turns while everyone not speaking sat and listened deeply. Because of the silence sitting amongst the alders, each person's words resonated around us, melted into each of us.

As we carried out this ritual, I felt my grief meld into my family's grief meld into my ancestral grief meld into humanity's grief. I felt this grief being plunged into my community, between the people present and permeating into and through the roots of trees and in the mycelium of the forest underbrush. Afterward, two of our members carried the small pebbles we'd dropped into the water-filled pot to the shore below to be rejoined with the pebbles there. The world took in our grief, eroded it, turned it into something else, something different.

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The Me Paradox

Gina Hanson

The day I fell in love with myself, I was wearing my least favorite pair of jeans. Everyone has a pair of these jeans – they aren't necessarily uncomfortable or unflattering, but for some reason they're just always the last pair of clean pants on laundry day. The shirt I was wearing that day was a two-sizes-too-big Duran Duran T-shirt that I had bought at their 1988 *Big Thing* concert, the concert where I lost my virginity to a slobbering drunk guy with one side of his head shaved and the other side shellacked so high with hairspray and egg whites that he had a six-inch-high hairy monument to 1980s fashion extremes. He also smelled like toast. I came out as a lesbian some four years later, but I don't think I can blame that on the toast guy.

I wasn't expecting to meet myself let alone fall in love with me. I was just sitting on my couch, in that five-year-old T-shirt and those nondescript jeans, reading the Sunday paper, minding my own business, when all of a sudden, I walked through the door. I didn't knock; I just walked right in, stood there, and stared at me.

At first, I didn't recognize this new me. I was considerably older and my hair was shorter and a shade or two darker. Exactly what are you supposed to say to yourself when you walk through your own door and stand right in front of yourself, looking vaguely like you but not at all like you at the same time? I didn't know, so I just said, "Can I help you?"

"Don't freak out, Cameron," the new me said. "I know this might seem strange, but I can explain."

"Okay."

"It's going to sound crazy, but what I'm about to tell you is the honest-to-god's truth. I'm from the future."

Seemed as reasonable an explanation as any. I should have had a million questions, but I didn't. All I could think of to say was, "Can I offer you something to drink?"

"No, I'm fine." The new me came and sat on the other end of the couch. "Geez. I thought you'd totally freak out when you saw me."

"I'm not really the freaking out kind," I said, which was true, and I felt the future me should have known that.

The older me gave me a strange look, a look I was sure I had never made before. It was kind of cute – that look. So I tried to copy it, but the future me was staring and that made me self-conscious, so I quit trying.

"Why are you here?" I asked the future me.

"I'm taking part in a new kind of therapy. There's this company that offers its clients the ability to go back in time and tell their younger selves something they need to know. Something that will make their life easier in the present ... or in your case, the future."

I folded the newspaper and slid it onto the table. "Sure you don't want a drink?"

"Maybe I do. You got any wine?" the future me asked.

"I got a Pinot Grigio in the fridge," I said.

"Omigod, I love Pinot Grigio," the future me said.

"Me too." We smiled at each other with identical smiles and then chuckled in unison. "This is kinda cool," I said.

I walked into the kitchen and poured the future me a glass of wine. "You look good, by the way," I yelled from the kitchen. "For an older lady, you look really good."

The future me joined me in the kitchen. "An *older* lady? I'm only 38."

"We look so different, though." I handed her the glass of wine. "Still, I'm not afraid to say that I look pretty hot at thirty-eight."

The future me smiled as she took the glass from my hand. "And I'm not afraid to say that I forgot how cute I was at twenty-three."

"Seriously? You think I'm cute? In this shirt and these jeans?"

"I still have that shirt." The future me sipped her wine. "I still hate it, too."

"But it was a good concert, though, right?" I winked. I had recently picked up the habit of winking when I flirted. I thought it added to my charm. She didn't seem to notice.

"I hope you're joking. I try to pretend that night never happened. Honestly, I prefer to consider my first time to be the first night I spent with Cheryl."

"Cheryl?"

"Cheryl." The future me's voice lowered slightly, her head following suit. "You'll meet her a few months from now. You'll fall instantly in love. You'll settle down with her, buy a house, adopt some cats, and then one day you'll walk in on her in bed with another woman." The future me bit her trembling lower lip.

Despite the early hour, I poured myself a glass of wine as well. To clarify, I poured me – the present-day me – a glass of wine. "That's heavy." I put the bottle back into the fridge. "I was sort of hoping to play the field some before settling down. I only just came out a few months ago."

"You'll play the field for a little while, but it gets old fast. Cheryl

changes everything." The future me gulped her wine. She rubbed her temples and then shook her head, perhaps to dislodge the memory of her recent heartbreak. "That's why I'm here. I'm hoping that you won't go to that charity auction in August. That you'll never meet Cheryl, never fall in love with her." The future me finished the last of her wine in a gulp so big, it had to hurt as it slid down her esophagus.

"Fine. No problem," I said. "Give me the date and I'll make other plans that night." I took the bottle of wine back out of the fridge. "More wine?"

"Please." I poured me – the future me – some more wine. "Thank you," I said – I mean, the future me said. The future me took an even bigger gulp than the last. Just how big was her esophagus anyway? "God this is good" she said. "I've been sober for six years now. I've forgotten how good this stuff is."

"I have a stressful job. I started to drink a little more than I should. I'm not an alcoholic, but I stopped drinking to avoid the possibility."

I topped off my glass of wine and slurped a little from the edge. "Smart."

"So, you won't go to that charity event?" the future me asked.

"Not if you say I shouldn't. I don't want to get hurt. Who would ever knowingly get their heart broken?" I sipped more wine.

"I feel bad about depriving you of such a passionate relationship, but ... the ending ... this awful ending ... it isn't worth the beginning or the middle." The future me finished her wine in one swallow. She set her glass on the counter, wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, and looked at me with an apologetic face. I marveled at just how sorry that face really looked.

"I've got another bottle," I said to the future me. "I can open it and we can order a pizza."

"Sounds perfect," the future me said with a half grin. It was a look that seemed vaguely familiar, but I never saw myself make it before.

#

The future me loved onions on her pizza. "I don't know," she said. "About five years ago I just started ordering it this way. It's so much better with onion."

"I hate onions," I said.

"You won't for long."

"Can I ask you a question?" I wondered if the future me still hated being asked if it was okay to be asked a question.

"Why do people do that? Why do they ask if they can ask a question before they ask the question?" the future me said.

"I know, right? I hate that. Don't know why I just did it."

"Forget about it. Go ahead. Ask your question."

"It seems to me that you're a little more ... butchy ... than I am.

Butchier than I ever thought I'd be," I said, quickly adding, "Not that you look bad because you don't. Not at all. In fact, you're totally my type." I wondered if the future me could feel herself blush. "But I was just wondering how this look of yours came about."

"It was an evolution," the future me explained. "It started with just wanting to dress comfortably, and then it evolved into this style." She tugged at the grey form-fitting T-shirt she was wearing. "I started working out a lot, and I wanted to wear clothing that showed off my hard work. And I …we ... don't exactly have a real feminine body, so ..."

I bit into my slice of pizza and then spoke with a full mouth. "No, you look great. I'm happy that I don't have to look like this forever." I motioned to my own body.

The future me drank some more wine. "Being back here now, I can see why Cheryl was so attracted to you ... to me ... to us. I know you don't realize it now, but you are such a beautiful girl." The future me reached over and rubbed a piece of melted cheese off my chin with her thumb. "Really. So pretty."

I set my pizza down and wiped my hands on a napkin. "And the future me? Does the future me ever realize how hot she is?" I went for it and looked me straight in the eyes.

The future me looked away. "Did you know that there's time travel technology now, right here in 1993? No one will use it though because some sci-fi writer has scared the bejesus out of people with this idea of a grandfather paradox. But, a Russian astrophysicist in the eighties all but proved you can't erase yourself." The future me licked a smudge of pizza sauce off her finger. "Besides, the agency that sent me here can only control the time-space continuum of a client's particular life, so I can't even travel back to before I ... *we* ... were born." The future me finished the last of her wine, which unfortunately was also the last of my last bottle. "Wow," she said as she set down her empty glass. "I should probably slow down on the drinking."

"You don't have to drive anywhere, right?" I walked back into the kitchen and grabbed a bottle of vodka from the cupboard along with a carton of orange juice from the refrigerator. I returned to the living room. "How 'bout some Screwdrivers?"

"Maybe one." The future me held out her wine glass. "I'll have to drive when I return to the clinic. I have no idea if time travel sobers you up or not."

I added vodka to the orange juice that I had already poured into her wine glass. "How long will you be staying?"

"I don't know. My therapist said I'd stay until I said whatever it was I needed to say, but I've said what I wanted to say, and I'm still here." The future me sipped her Screwdriver. "God, this is good. I love these."

"They're my favorite, too." I sipped from mine. All this alcohol was making me light-headed. "What if you're stuck here? What if something went wrong, and you can't ever go back?"

"Can't happen. I guess there's a safety mechanism, an escape clause of sorts. Some predetermined amount of time that the agency has set into its programming that brings me back whether or not I am successful in what I came here to do."

"I wish I knew how long you were going to be here," I said. "I don't even know if we have enough time to watch a movie."

"Really, Cameron?" the future me said. "A future version of you comes along, and you want to watch movies with her?"

I stared at the future me straight in the eye once again before I spoke. "A very attractive woman suddenly appears in my living room, she only vaguely resembles me, and then she gets me to drink way too much alcohol after a very long dry spell – in more ways than one – and she tells me that she's recently single." I paused to finish my Screwdriver in one giant swallow. "The movie would just be background noise for what I'd *really* like to do with this future version of myself."

As soon as I had uttered the words, I regretted them. I mean, it shouldn't be all that weird to tell yourself you'd shag yourself given half a chance, but in this particular situation, it added an awkward air about us. We sat in silence, finishing the pizza, and continuing to drink the vodka. The future me was the one who eventually broke the silence.

"I guess I can't see any real reason why we couldn't. Couldn't do what you ... you know ... you want to do." The future me added, with an utterly irresistible smile, "It's not like it's illegal or anything."

"I don't know," I said. "It'd be weird. I mean, you know what I like, but I have no idea what you like ... I mean, what I will like at your age."

The future me moved closer. "Not much changes. Cheryl introduces us to a few things that are kind of nice." She put her hand on my leg. "Since you won't be meeting Cheryl now, maybe it's only fair that I introduce you to those things myself."

I looked deep into the future me's eyes. "Well," I said, putting my hand on top of hers. "That does seem like a pretty fair exchange, if you really think about it."

#

And so that's exactly how it happened. Right there on my living room couch, I had sex with myself. And it was great. No wait, mind-blowing. The best sex of my life. I marveled at how solid her body had become, and she marveled at how soft and youthful my body was. It was a perfect fit. I'm not ashamed to admit it, I fell in love with me that night. And afterwards we talked. All night we talked. I learned so much about myself, who I truly was, what I was to become. We talked and talked, right up until she vanished from

my shower in the morning. Poof! Just like that. One minute I was washing her back, next minute, gone, nothing there. Now, fifteen years later, I'm sitting here in the time travel therapist's office – the one who will send me back to a twenty-three-year-old me – and I'm as nervous as all hell. I never did meet Cheryl after the future me warned me about her. I never really met anyone after my encounter with myself. Once you've experienced that kind of love at such a young age, it sort of ruins you.

So, as I was saying, I'm sitting here preparing myself to go back and tell the past me to stay away from me. To go out, meet someone. To live life and not waste it pining away for someone she can never have.

My therapist is explaining the procedure to me, but I'm only half listening. There's no funky time machine, which I knew because the future me explained how I would lie back on the couch and they would send me back rather uneventfully. My therapist says that my body will remain in his office as I travel, but an exact replica of me will arrive in 1993. I'll inhabit that replica. I won't notice any difference. It's not a hallucination, I'll be there, but the transfer is more energetic than physical – as if that makes any sense.

I lie back on the couch, close my eyes. My therapist counts back from ten, and when I open my eyes again, I'm standing in my old living room. The past me is sitting on the couch reading the paper exactly the way I did all those years ago. I'm even wearing my least favorite jeans and that old Duran Duran T-shirt.

"What are you doing here?" the past me asks, completely unaffected by my presence.

"I'm you, from the future, here to deliver a message," I say. It's not quite how I had practiced it, but it's not terrible.

"Okay," the past me says, folding the paper. "What's the message?"

I didn't anticipate the past me being so unmoved. I can't just come right out and tell her not to fall in love with me. We haven't even worked our relationship up to that point yet, so I say, "Maybe we could order a pizza or something, Get to know one another."

"Pizza? Really? No offense, but do you really think you should be eating pizza?" Her eyes scan my mid-section.

"What are you talking about?"

"You ... I mean, *me* ... I guess. Apparently, I gain quite a bit of weight in the future?"

"I'm not that big," I say to the past me. "I don't work out like I should because I don't have anybody to impress, but I'd hardly say I'm fat."

The past me takes off her Duran Duran shirt. "Here," she says, tossing it to me. "Put it on. I bet it fits you perfectly."

I hold the shirt in my hand. I don't need to try it on. I still have this shirt. I never wear it anymore because it's just a little too snug. I'm wholly unprepared for how to proceed.

I toss the shirt back to her. “Put some clothes on,” I say bitterly. “You’ve got a visitor. You always strip down when you get visitors?”

The past me wrinkles her brow. “Seriously? You’re going to barge in here and start lecturing me like my mother or something?”

“*Our* mother or something,” I say. “What happened to make you so mean? I don’t remember ever being this mean to strangers.”

The past me stands to put her shirt back on. “You’re not a stranger. You’re me. And if that’s true then I apparently need to start practicing some tough love with myself.” She plops back down on the sofa. “So what’s this dreadfully important message you came all this way to give me?”

The speech I had worked out for this moment seems remarkably unnecessary now. I wanted to encourage the past me to meet someone nice, someone who will take care of her, love her. Now, after coming face-to-face with this little shit, I decide to change my message entirely. “I’ve come back to tell you that you’re going to get invited to a charity auction in August. Go to it. No excuses. You’re going to meet the love of your life there. Her name’s Cheryl.”

“Okay. Anything else?”

“No, that’s it.”

“Fine.” The past me turns back to her folded newspaper and re-opens it. She reads for a moment before looking up at me. “How long you staying?” the past me asks.

“I don’t know.”

“Well, you’re welcome to stay,” the past me says. “But, this is a lot for me to process right now.” The past me looks me up and down. “I really had dreams of being hot when I got to be old.”

“Old? I’m only thirty-eight.”

“Wow. I would have pegged you for at least forty-five.”

“Who talks to themselves like this?” I’m almost shouting, so I take deep breaths to calm myself down, and put my hands on my hip. “Look, I’ve said what I want to say. I don’t know how long I’m going to be here, but can you at least try to be a bit more humane?”

The past me shrugs one shoulder and returns to her paper. “Sure. Whatever.”

I stand in the past me’s living room, looking at the past me – who, I might add, isn’t nearly as cute as I remembered me to be – and wonder what to do next. I stand there in total silence. I put my hands on top of my head. How long am I going to be stuck here like this? I don’t know if I can even leave the apartment – I can’t remember what my therapist said about that, so I just stand here, being completely ignored by an obnoxious previous me.

I tap my fingers on my head and then an idea pops into my mind. “Hey?” I say. “You got any wine?”

Alex Mouw's *poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in West Branch, Colorado Review, Southern Indiana Review, December Magazine, and elsewhere. He also writes nonfiction and was recently selected as runner-up in Ruminate Magazine's VanderMey Nonfiction Prize. He lives in Saint Louis.*

MY LORD IT WAS A COPPERHEAD WITH HER JAW

Alex Mouw

My Lord it was a copperhead with her jaw
unhinged, a hippo's watery pink gullet
made me think of you, how their hunger
swallowed things whole. A hundred penguins

scuttled after each other in colonies, bears
sunned outside their den, and three horses fenced
at the edge of the zoo stood still, eyeing
people as they left. Are you cool with all

those walls? The lion stretched like I do, in
yoga, palms planted and ass aimed heavenward.
A mother didn't stop her son's snow cone
flying through that fence. I tried to organize

a coup in the butterfly house but all they
wanted to do was drift from lilac to milkweed.

MY LORD WHEN YOU FOLD A SOUL TO YOURSELF

Alex Mouw

My Lord when you fold a soul to yourself,
do you make of it an origami crane?
Does it hurt to crease all those sharp angles
and lines? Did aunt Marsha believe she was

wrapped in another depression before she
looked full in your face, scarred as ancient
marble, bright as a house fire? What are
our first words to you? *Careful, Please, Not yet?*

Enough questions. I submit myself for
consideration, without much confidence,
for a seat at your table. Don't answer yet.
I'll keep half an eye angled on headlights

of oncoming trucks, the spider web on
my lintel. Let me know when you're ready.

Dave Gregory *used to live and work at sea but now writes in a bay-windowed, book-lined room. He is an Associate Editor with Exposition Review and a Fiction Reader for journals on both sides of the Atlantic. His publication credits include The Nashwaak Review, The Lindenwood Review and Sky Island Journal. Dave's story "Eighteen Dollar Shoes" was nominated for a Pushcart Prize by Bull & Cross in 2018.*

Last Jump Off the Lift Bridge

Dave Gregory

The lift bridge was the center of town, tallest thing on the busiest street. We started running the moment that mechanical arm came down, halting traffic. Ducking beneath it, we lined up along the north sidewalk, watching a distant cargo ship glide toward us. Twelve of us felt the lurch, our knees buckled as a hundred and fifty foot long section of road rose on counterweights and pulleys, between steel towers on opposite sides of the canal.

Last one to jump won the game.

The starting point was a dozen feet above water. Some dove right away but the thrill was watching the murky, blue-green waterway shrink beyond our toes as we climbed, then looking left and right to see who was still standing. In twenty seconds we were higher than the nearest rooftops. From that height, we didn't dive but cannonballed or leapt with windmilling arms.

It came down to me and a kid named Johnny Ridgeway. His family raised goats off West Side Road. I usually won but he tricked me. He was ready to leap, so I backed up, measuring my steps. Swinging both arms upward, he lifted one foot, so I started to run. Then he crouched, like he'd gone off, but he hadn't, he kneeled at the edge, too late for me to stop. Tumbling in mid-air, I caught a glimpse of Johnny laughing. That sneak. He stepped off barely a second later. Five stories up. I jumped from six once; I could've beat him.

I landed farther out but heard Johnny's splash and watched a tube of bubbles follow him down like a parachute, opening too late. A dark spot appeared in the center, probably his head, then a foot twisted below the bubbles as he pivoted toward the island. At least I could beat him there; I was the best underwater swimmer.

Passing him easily, I followed the current inland, beneath the train bridge lifting in tandem with ours. Coming up for air, I made sure the ship was still far off, then swam the last few strokes to where the waterway splits. One side carried fast moving water through the weir, which we knew to stay

away from, the other side led to Lock Eight, where the ship was headed. The island was between those two channels.

I got there first, I always did, no matter who jumped before me. Climbing the slope, I looked back for Johnny, still mad I'd been tricked.

"I don't see Ridgeway," I said after a few others caught up. We stared at the water, naming each head as we counted. Only Ridgeway was missing.

It got tense all of a sudden. Julie and I turned right, scanning the length of the weir. "He's not dumb enough to get caught in there," Julie said. "He's climbed out already. Bet he's back on Clarence Street, laughin' at us right now." Iron safety ladders hung every hundred yards, but they got too hot to climb on a sunny day. Rust would turn your wet hands orange.

"What if he got hurt and is floating near the bridge?" Monty asked.

"He'd still float this way," said a kid named Sonny, one grade behind me but three inches taller. He was already taller than his dad, who worked at the shoe factory.

"Ships look out for canal rats. If anyone on the freighter spots him, we'll hear the horn." Julie said that. A canal rat was what they called any kid who swam in the Welland Ship Canal.

Sonny piped up: "But I don't see him, floatin,' swimmin' or anywhere. Maybe we should tell someone."

#

Danger meant nothing to small town kids looking for fun. If my mother knew half the stuff we did, she would've grounded me till my wedding day.

The previous year, my best friend Julie – Jules Girard – took me out in his canoe. Julie's family was dirt poor – mom always sick, his dad bagged groceries at the A&P. Only thing Julie owned was that canoe, given to him by his gambling uncle. I remember the date: October 15, 1954. Hurricane Hazel should've lost strength and blown south of us. That's what the forecast said. Instead, it shifted and gained steam over Lake Erie.

It happened fast. One second it's sunny and calm, next we're riding waves, wondering if we'll make it, me bailing water with my bare hands, Julie paddling, aiming for the giant grain mills jutting out over the lake, barely visible through grey, heavy rain.

"It's hopeless," Julie shouted above the storm. "I'm steering for the islands. We can flip the canoe for shelter and wait it out."

They were more like rock piles, three little mounds near the breakwater, but we couldn't find them.

"The waves are rollin' over the islands." Julie was hollering. I could tell he was scared; something he never was in the canoe. "We should be right on top but they're just not here. We gotta head for shore."

Somehow Julie steered us to the canal. Waves rolled straight down the center and spilled over high concrete walls on each side. I thought we could

ride a wave onto the pier but Julie didn't want to try.

"If we miss by an inch, we'll tip and get dumped in the canal."

That's when he saw the fire engine. "Ronny, look!" Julie pointed to a big red truck backing to the edge. Waves were broadsiding it. Knowing where the wind would push us, the fire crew spun the ladder over the water. Two men were on it, each dangling a rope.

Next, we spotted Julie's mum in her yellow raincoat. She'd called the fire department, worried sick. Standing twenty feet from the engine, I couldn't tell if the firemen were holding her up or holding her back.

From the bow, I turned to Julie. "Hope your grip is good."

"I don't wanna lose the boat." Julie weighed his options. "Waves can't go inland forever. They gotta taper off sometime."

"I ain't stickin' round to find out."

The wave crested at the right moment. We grabbed the ropes and hung for dear life. Soon as we looked down, the boat was gone and we were ten feet in the air. A second later, another wave rose up, and we lifted our knees to escape it. Firemen grabbed our belts and we felt the engine lurch forward until we were over pavement.

A hundred yards farther down, another fireman with a long pole hooked the canoe and hauled it in when a wave brought it up. The paddles got away but we found them floating in Lock Eight with plenty other debris two days later.

You should've seen Julie's mum hug him when it was over. Crying, shouting, she thought he was a goner – but we were fine, wet as everyone else on the pier, but everything worked out. Always did.

That's exactly what I was thinking, waiting for Johnny Ridgeway to surface. We jumped off that bridge a hundred times and it was never anything but fun – no reason this time should be any different.

#

Another time we cheated death was ice fishing, two miles out in a hut made of old doors and corrugated tin. Dozens like it littered the ice. It belonged to someone's dad who worked afternoons at the nickel plant, who loaned us his gear. We sat around an eighteen inch hole, drilled through a foot of ice with an auger. We brought lunches and comic books and stayed there for hours, chipping away whatever ice re-formed, catching nothing, hoping to snare yellow perch for dinner.

Julie noticed a problem. "There's another layer of ice beneath us."

Peering through that tiny window into the murky underworld, it looked like a second sheet of ice moving in, two feet down. I shook my head, then realized what was happening. Julie read the panic in my eyes. "The ice is shifting," I told him and started reeling in my line.

Julie did the same but didn't understand.

I tried to explain, wishing I could show him from above. "Our sheet

of ice is rolling over a thinner one. They get thinner closer to the lake's center."

He still didn't get it.

"We're drifting on an iceberg!"

That time it registered. Julie opened the ramshackle door to find an endless landscape of snow covered ice, everything pure white. Thirty fishing huts surrounded us that morning, but each one was gone.

Julie and I looked at each other. "We've been abandoned," he said.

"Maybe we fell asleep. I can't believe no one warned us before going."

We grabbed our stuff and bolted.

Carrying everything, we ran for the grain mills at the entrance to the canal. They were the only visible objects on the horizon until Julie spotted more ice huts. "If they're still here, we must be okay."

But I told him: "There's a channel between us and them – we're on the wrong side of it."

In another quarter-mile we found a twenty foot gash of open water.

"What now?" Julie asked, dropping everything.

I looked both directions. "This ice didn't break off all at once. It tore open. One end must be narrower. We'll find that end – and jump for it."

"Which way?"

I pointed toward Buffalo. The lake narrowed in that direction. I guessed the ice broke at its widest point, which would've been Port Maitland way. Leaving our gear, we ran and just kept running.

Luckily, the gap grew narrower but it went on forever.

It was a long time before Julie panted: "I think I can jump from here."

"You better be right."

We ran another hundred feet, measured our steps backing up, then ran straight for open water. We leapt and stretched our arms, like diving for home plate. The shorn edge was thick enough to hold our weight. Only our feet and legs got wet when we landed. Our toes were freezing when we got home but no frostbite. We caught heck for losing the hut and equipment, which the ice floe never brought back.

#

When the steamship glided under the bridge, there was still no sign of Johnny Ridgeway. Eleven boys, wet and dripping, stood in a row, praying he'd come up and, at the same time, doubting he was down there. We thought maybe his brother came and got him, or he left for baseball practice.

Until then, no one ever got hurt – seemed like, anyway.

Then I remembered Sonny Dietz splitting his head open, three summers earlier, playing follow the leader, another game we played every day. The leader did crazier and crazier things while everyone tried keeping up. We'd sprint over thirty foot sand hills, near the train depot, and jump down

the side where a steam shovel dug part of the mound away, creating a fifteen foot cliff. Or we'd cross the train bridge, hanging from wooden railway ties.

When I was leading, I ran down the steps at Third Ferry. The last three were five feet wide, one was above water and two were below. I dove over the last two, into the canal. If anyone landed too soon, they'd scrape themselves on concrete.

Sonny Dietz was behind me. Tall kid, he should've had no problem but this was the most crowded place on the canal. Someone left a bar of soap on the step. Leaning in for the dive, Sonny's toes found it. He landed head first on the second last step, in water two inches deep, and skidded into the canal.

Everyone stopped dead behind him. I heard him scream and felt the bump when his skull hit concrete. I turned and saw an awful gash above his right eye, like a new mouth opening. Wailing in pain, the water turned red before we lifted him out. An ambulance eventually came.

He was all right in the end, stayed in hospital a night or two but was following the leader a week later. He went on to open a hardware store in Humberstone. I don't think he's still around but he made out okay, lived till at least seventy.

#

But Johnny Ridgeway was another story. Waiting on the island, in the middle of the city, we kept looking. Some ran to the bridge to see whether he climbed out, others walked the length of the weir, but I stayed put. The bridge started coming down as the massive steamer approached Lock Eight. Gliding past, we expected to see Johnny on deck, waving. Once it was gone, we thought his body might surface in the freighter's wake.

I was no longer sore Johnny tricked me; I even forgave the time he brought a baby goat to school, during show-and-tell. He knew I already had permission to bring my dog Scamper. Everyone had a dog, but no one ever saw a tiny goat. Scamper could've eaten that smelly thing for breakfast.

When the cops arrived, they didn't believe anything was wrong – everything looked so calm on that September Sunday. They asked a few questions, then radioed the dispatcher, who phoned Johnny's mother to make sure he wasn't at home. Told her not to panic but what mother wouldn't? Five minutes later she was running along the far wall of the canal. Two cops tried to settle her down. That's when we knew.

But we always knew. We knew the minute we counted eleven heads. Only one place he could've been. The police knew it, too: Johnny was in the weir, caught against the intake valve. I told the cops I'd dive down and get him but they laughed and said they'd have to pull two boys out instead of one.

"Maybe with ropes or something, you can hang on to me." I spoke to Frederick, my dad's friend on the police force.

He thought it was a dumb idea. "Unless we're wrong and he's playing

some lousy game, it's gonna take a professional diver from Toronto to get him, using compressed air, steel cables and a boat." Removing his cap and sweeping back his hair, Frederick's eyes followed Johnny's hysterical mother on the other side of the canal. "I should've chased you kids off that bridge long ago."

I'd have hated him for trying but guessed he'd never have to. Not now.

The next afternoon, a diver pulled Johnny from the exact spot we predicted. We were in school, behaving. None of us saw him.

Port Colborne was different after that. The mood changed, rules changed. Railings went up. Danger signs caught our attention for the first time, though they'd always been there. From then on, they reminded us of Johnny Ridgeway – and everything we lost.

David Galloway *is a writer and college professor of Russian. Born and raised in Maryland, for the past twenty-five years he has lived in upstate New York. His poetry and essays have most recently appeared in Watershed Review, Chiron Review, The Loch Raven Review, and The Remembered Arts Journal.*

The Last Milk

David Galloway

My youngest daughter is thirteen.
We still have four ounces of breast milk
for her in the freezer in a tiny plastic bottle.
This is no odd totemic hold-over,
like keeping a piece of her caul,
it is simple neglect, really.
It is first forgetting, then remembering,
then finding in the rush of things.

The bottle has outlasted two refrigerators
and still sits, semi-lost, on the bottom of the freezer.
But every time the appliance dies we try,
but fail, to do something with it.
There is no earthly reason for this.
It is no good to anyone. But it is, after all, a totem.
Despite not wanting to be one,
sometimes things become totems on their own.

It speaks to mid-morning feedings,
upset stomachs and burping over the shoulder,
the visual absurdity of a breast-pump,
but also to a perfect upturned face and
tiny nostrils as close as two humans can be.
We will never throw it out. I know that.
When we are gone, the children will find it
when they empty our freezer, and wonder why.

So read this.

January 30, 2012

David Galloway

For A. T.

You lived at the other end of Lavale,
a one-eighth mile dead end,
enough incline to coast down
on our bikes with just a pedal or two.

You owned a succession of liver-spotted
dogs named Winston with Roman numerals
after their names like medieval kings.
So many I can't remember the final incarnation.

We'd hike to the creek to catch salamanders,
pluck Japanese beetles from the rose bushes
and set them on wood-chip rafts in the rain barrel,
or try and fail at luring a robin under our box-trap.

In 4th grade we went on a coloring kick, filling
blank sheets with pages from our future
magnum opus, *Animals of the World*, but only
finishing *Volume One: Birds.*

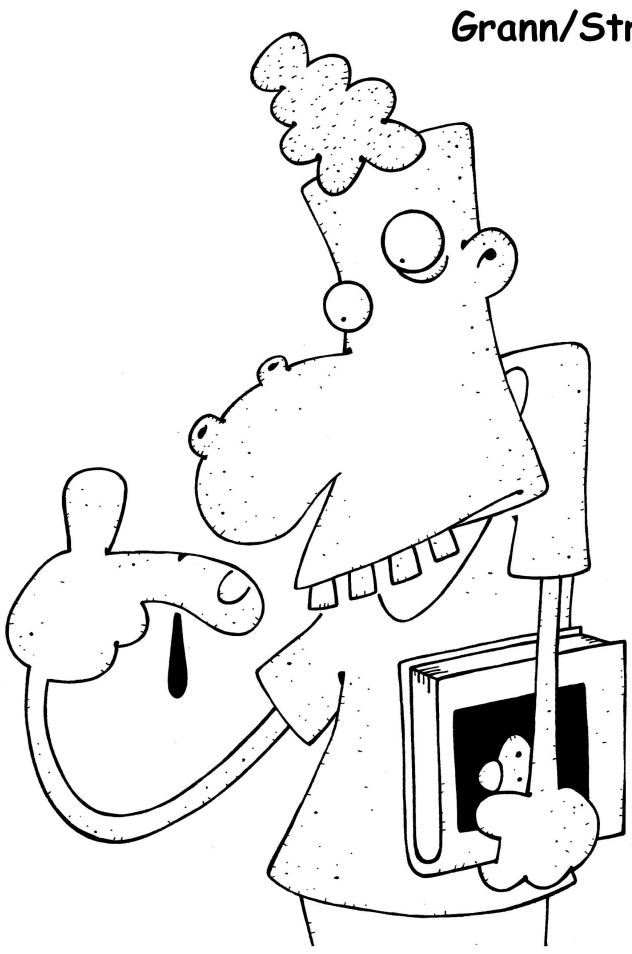
Your unpublished classic, "Ten Army Friends,"
I have in first edition mimeograph.
Our posse fought a mythical war while listening to
Top 40 hits of the late 1970's in our tanks.

In middle school a different crowd, cigarettes,
note to your girlfriend with sketches of marijuana plants
pulled us apart, we moved off like the silk of milkweed
pods we'd dissect and throw into the breeze.

But not a break, really, more a pause,
fifteen years later at that wedding we met
again for the last time, you took my cell
number to call when I was in town.

When the news of a man trapped
beneath the car he'd been working on
ripped through my mind, it felt like
every good memory was burning.

Neil Strahl *lives in Wichita, Kansas and is currently perfecting his parallel parking in parallel universes.*



I got a paper cut from a sci-fi book... my blood was green.

Be Careful What You Read