



Art by David S. Morley

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A Strange Ache

by Peadar Donohoe
(for Anthony)

There was a pool of red blood at the bottom of the hill. As he approached, he could see dismembered limbs bobbing on the surface. The skins of the limbs were pale white yet translucent. He focused on a thigh in the middle and saw its mesh of arteries, veins and capillaries palpitating. There was movement from each end of the thigh as it pumped blood into the pool. When he scanned the other body parts in the pool, he could see they were pumping too, and the pool was expanding. As the blood came to his feet, he watched it slowly cover the base of his shoes, the laces, his ankles. It wouldn't be long before he was covered in it.

It took him a moment to orientate himself. He pushed himself off the bed and sat on the edge. His feet contacting the lino brought him back to reality.

He had hoped he might escape the dream by coming to his parent's deserted house. That the sleepy village would soothe the strange hollow ache he felt in his solar plexus. But it had only been one night. Give it time, he thought.

The tiled kitchen floor was cold. Not unexpected but he had forgotten to wear socks. His girlfriend got him out of the habit of wearing them. She absolutely hated them in bed. But now they were on a break, and he could go back to old habits.

After a couple of strong coffees, the fog of jetlag lifted, he felt somewhat invigorated and in need of exercise. Bright sunshine was

streaming through the window. It was probably warmer outside. No better day to pay his respects.

The village only amplified the ache, making him short of breath. In his memory the village had been a fairytale place: surrounded by trees and fields, with the old mill and the river at its centre. At one end of the road was the pub with its promise of cheese and onion crisps, across from it the shop filled with penny sweets. At the other end the foreboding church with its scary cemetery. In between were houses filled with kind people inside who always had the time of the day for a chat.

The frontage of the old mill had been turned into a dumping ground of disused tires, rusting barrels, smashed light bulbs and broken farm equipment. The river which ran beside the mill was now a murky brown, its banks lined with filthy foam. The street was littered with bits of trash discarded from the shop. Sweet and chip wrappers decorated both sides of the street, along with empty cigarette packs, butts and other cast-off packaging. Did the people of the village not care anymore? Or was his childhood self the oblivious one?

As he approached the first council house on his right, he saw movement of a net curtain. Then a woman stepped out from her front door.

Well, isn't it Noel Moran! She said in delight, giving him no time to reply. We haven't seen you for ages. Not since you used to sit on the river wall eating choc-ices with Sonny.

He smiled weakly, not sure who he was speaking to.

Sure, you don't remember me, do you?

I know the face to look at but I'm very bad with names.

Mary Fagan. Sure, I know you and your family well. I babysat you when you were a wee gossin. We missed you last year at the memorial.

The funeral service and cremation were in the States. His sisters went to Ireland for a memorial as well, but he thought it excessive. He gave his prepared excuse: I would have liked to have come but things were busy with work. How did it go? As if he didn't know.

People came from miles around. There were heaps of stories about Sonny and Paddy Reilly's band played for hours in the pub. It would have gone on all night but the Gards put an end to it.

There was an awkward pause. He had nothing to add.

Bit of a devil Sonny was but that's what drew people to him.

Sonny was the rebel. He couldn't be held down, not even by his tyrannical father who had no time for family life, only making money. And his mother, who went along with him, making herself as busy so as to leave little space for reflection on her unhappiness. But Sonny was a constant reminder that he was a child crying out for minding, guidance and love. Sure, we all did but it was a message our parents never got. They just tried their best to control Sonny and mete

out harsh punishment for his many transgressions. The lessons given to Sonny were not lost on the rest of us.

Mary Fagan was a reminder that he was really a stranger to the place, not like Sonny who had been old enough to remember everyone before they left for America. Whenever he came home on summer holidays, chance meetings on the village street were awkward for him. The village people chatted to him about people and events he had no memory of. Still, he nodded along as if he recalled names, places and incidents from the past might, like a memory spell, awaken something in him.

By the end of the conversations, the village people would seem unsatisfied. Sure, you were just a baby. Of course, you don't remember. His lack of corroboration and enthusiasm gave rise to disappointed shakes of the head and the implication: you're not Sonny. Just a shadow that looks like him.

Sonny had the ability to excite people. He always wanted things to be more than they were, as if the present moment were just not good enough. Something had to happen that would be extraordinary, even if it meant causing trouble. Like the time he and Micheal Kearney let the air out of everyone's tires, tractors, cars and bikes – any wheel they could get their hands on. There was uproar in the village until they found out it was Sonny's prank. Then it was laughed off as a mad bit of mischief and became a story remembered fondly for years to come.

Well, I'm off to pay my respects.

Do you know where he is?

Behind William Bradley's headstone I was told.

Just to the right of it. You'll drop by for tea later, won't you?

Thanks Mary, he said without committing.

The heavy cemetery gate was off its top hinge and had to be lifted to be opened. In contrast to the village, the cemetery was well kept. The protestant population of the area was too small to support a Church of Ireland minister, but that didn't mean they didn't respect their dead.

The priest who gave the service in America balked when he heard half of Sonny's ashes were to be buried in a protestant cemetery. But that was a wonderful thing about the village people. They had escaped sectarian prejudices. People didn't mind what religion you were as long as you were decent.

The grave was easy to find, as he was told it would be, and there were fresh meadow flowers at the base of the headstone. Siobhan, his oldest sister, must have told the Fagans he'd be coming.

There was a child's faded plastic windmill stuck in the soil beside the headstone, gently spinning in the light breeze. Who could have put that there?

He knelt down on one knee and put his hand on top of the small headstone, unsure what to do next.

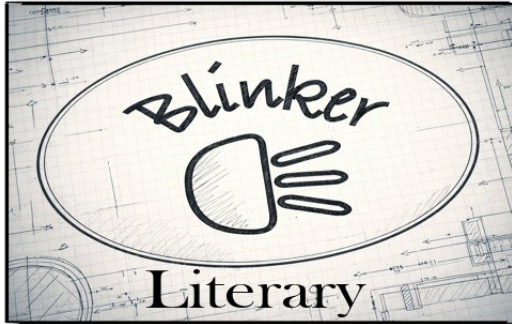
The last time he spoke to Sonny, it was agreed they were too busy to meet up, next month perhaps. It was a relief to put off those meetings. Sonny could be so volatile, quick to anger, you watched what you said around him. Then Sonny died, a sudden heart attack. His body lay on the living room floor of his apartment for a week before the alarm was raised.

Sonny was solitary. He liked company but only for limited amounts of time. He preferred to spend his time writing and dreaming. If he didn't return your calls, it was no surprise. But his best friend Marnie began to suspect something was not right.

They often got together for a pint. And Sonny never ignored Marnie's messages two weekends running. Marnie ran by the apartment. It was the bad smell that alerted him. He rang 911. The firemen knew well what the smell was and broke in immediately.

They found Sonny decomposing in the middle of the floor. His arms and legs outstretched, as if opening himself to something, while his decomposing bodily fluids seeped through the floorboards.

Noel noticed his breath becoming shallow, his thighs feeling weak. He sat down on the grass, leaned against the headstone, closed his eyes, rooting himself to the spot as the ache spread into his heart and lungs, all over.



This eclectic collection of voices, drawn from various textures of human experiences, is shared from the authors' hearts and delivered by tireless volunteers with the singular goal of providing enjoyment and enrichment.

Ponder

by Selma Dulic

[editor's note – Which is ultimately more essential: technical perfection or emotional truth?]

While glancing through the list of unknown words and their definitions trying to learn and use as is well. Known that, words can change the direction of the course, life destiny, either for a good or bad. Ponder stuck out, just like that with a little pingpong ball on a stick standing and, one can think that is hiding strongly between other words and letters.

Ponder, I said. Looking at it thinking it will give me approval for actually say it out loud correctly the first time. Turning around and looking for the closest English-speaking person, who can verify my pronunciation. It was Tommy, little four foot nine lady that always had a mad face walking around, actually scary.

Pondering later while doing the same job and have the same stress as she has I realized was not mean, just stressed. Politely, with a low voice I showed her the word and said “Ponder.” Tammy smiled and said “Yes.”

The pride of me verbally and loudly, correctly read and use my little ping pong word made sure it stuck in my memory while I ponder thought past in my memory lane.



Rays from the Sun

It's been 23 years, and many stories and things have happen and is still happening. Many are there too with a remembrance (*satkan* – A Serbian (Latin) word that translates to “weaved” in English) in brain part, that requires actual therapy (shrink) in order to remove negative cells and have to *le-rearn* new behavior.

After all hope and disappointment happens from humans and their offspring their only hope is Rays from the Sun that come through window, early in the morning, above the head to let everybody know – Everything is going to be fine.

Is amazing, it always sneaks behind, gentle. Even though the window is large, with 8 ft. high and 14 ft. wide with metal brackets in between to hold it properly so it doesn't fall.

Behind those windows is a whole wall of glass. Those ones are 4 ft high and 50 ft. wide. (which always gives problems for being cleaned due to the size of it).

No matter how dirty or any obstacles are in between, Rays of Sun always find a way to gentle sneak in and touch the top of the head.

I'm trying to draw words in the Sun Rays that come through windows in the morning above my head.



The Karaoke King of Kyoto
by Kevin Ramsden

“No, no, no” Nobu laughs, gently extricating his jacket sleeve from the formidable grip of Mayumi, the mama san of ‘Pink Angels’, the snack bar he has just exited. “No more tonight. I’ll be back tomorrow,” he gently scolds her, “And I’ll do my Ed Sheeran medley.” Pouting, Mayumi releases him and gives a little wave goodbye. Nobu chuckles to himself. It’s not easy being the man. Convenience store clerk by day, celebrated crooner after dark. Shrugging his jacket fully on, he sets off at pace, keen to get to his next and final destination of the evening. He’s saved his favorite for last.

Weaving his way through the labyrinth of alleyways, and throngs of tourists, in Gion, he plows on. Nobody does karaoke like Nobu. His set list is unmatched in this town and, believe it, this man can warble. A few minutes later, he enters a multi-level building and taking the stairs two at a time to the 3rd floor, whistles his first intended tune softly to himself. Just as he is about to push the fake-leather-padded door of ‘Sinatra’s’ open, however, he hears something a little disconcerting coming from within.

Singing. But not just singing – real singing. Quickly making entry, he glances over to the far end of the bar. Sure enough, there is a body on the mic - his personal mic. A tall, very cool, very good looking foreigner. And he’s killing it with Nobu’s most covered number. He’s doing a Bruno Mars! Mama san Erika, Nobu’s biggest fan, turns to face him, index finger pressed to her glossy red lips. Then with a slow shake of her head, returns her gaze to the interloper. Nobu’s chest sinks in on itself. He can’t breathe. Quickly opening the door, he escapes silently down the stairs. Crushed. The king no more.

“Do You Think This Is Bad?”

by Ace Boggess

question asked by Randi Ward

Words worry. Words reveal.

One says *hope* to an oak, &
a gray squirrel falls.

Then comes *money*: the kitten
you found broken in the road,
tried to salvage with a vet,
prayers from a needful priest.

Maybe was a word then, &
improving. No word
named the sadness after.

Rescue is heard often:
anemic dog, robin chick,
spiders under the sink.

One can't save a world intent
on immolation. *Immolation*—
there's a good two-dollar word, &
a bad one, an end, a burning.

Be satisfied you did your best,
weren't the last survivor
on a raft, found adrift
with blood dried on your lips.



“What Are Your Feelings About Social Media?”

question asked by Mark Danowsky

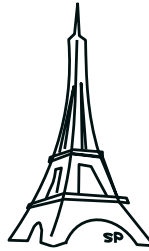
I'm an actor after the show, saying,
Bring flowers to my dressing room.

I'm a convict guiding your tour
of my cell: bars, toilet, bunks, floor.

Here's my cat, dinner, pajamas;
there my shoes caked in mud.

Read my deathbed confession, please,
or this tanka autobiography.

I'm a shadow erasing itself in lights.
Welcome to my gallery of lies.



Except Me
by Huina Zheng

My parents' cold war felt like a wet blanket during the rainy season. Heavy and hard to breathe under. Every Friday after school, I took an hour-long subway ride to my dad's new apartment. I switched lines twice, squeezed between people, watching *Doraemon* on my phone and thinking: Nobita's dad never had to sleep in a different house. On Sunday nights, I took the same ride back to Mom's place.

But it was still better than listening to them fight. When they argued, Mom turned into an opera singer, yelling about Dad's smelly socks, dirty teacups, and earthquake snores. Dad hid on the balcony, pretending he couldn't hear, then made a weird, twisted smile and told me to go do my homework. Now I didn't have to pick sides. I could just watch cartoons in both homes.

But going back and forth every week was tiring. A year went by, and Dad still didn't come home. One night, while he heated up his company's best-selling pre-made pickled fish for dinner and hummed a Teresa Teng song, I finally asked, "When are you coming back?"

"When things get less busy," he said. His chopsticks froze for a moment, but he didn't look at me. "This place is closer to work."

He had worked there for ten years.

"Is your company laying people off? Like Uncle's?"

Dad gave me a tight smile and put a piece of fish on my plate. The fish was so white it almost looked fake.

Right then, I felt like I'd asked something dumb. After COVID, my classmates complained their parents stopped taking them on

trips, but Dad had taken me to the Eiffel Tower, the Alps, and the park with the bowing deer. His company must've been doing fine.

One Tuesday after school, my neighbor Lan came over to do homework. She swung her pigtails and asked, "Is your dad on another business trip?"

"Yeah," I said. Same as always.

"No, he's not." She looked way too proud, like she knew something I didn't. "Yesterday my mom and I saw your dad with a young, pretty lady. He had his arm around her."

I jumped to my feet and pointed at her. "You're lying!"

"I'm not! My mom says something's been weird with your family forever."

"Liar!"

She stomped her foot. "My mom says your parents must've divorced already!"

I wanted to yank the door open and shove her outside. But when my hand grabbed her arm, something even scarier hit me:

I was the only one who still thought everything was okay.

Let It Choke

"Don't expect a few hundred yuan's worth of medical checkups to detect any serious illness," the CEO of a major health screening chain told the camera.

Like thousands of people online, I laughed in fury at his "honesty." So, it was our fault, apparently. Naïve to believe their ads promising to "catch it early." And then he told us: we just couldn't tell a checkup from actual medical care.

I stared at the screen, my fingers itching to speak out for Ms. Zhang. For ten years, she had gone there for annual checkups, each one stamped "all clear." But last year, she was diagnosed with late-stage cancer. In a burst of anger, she took the health screening center to court. And the CEO's response? No apology. No reflection. Only arrogance. He held a press conference and announced that he was suing her for "spreading falsehoods," claiming her words had "hurt staff morale." On screen, we could all see it clearly. His faint smirk. His arrogant gaze. Oblivious to the outrage he was stoking. He had no idea how damaging his words would be to the public.

Does Ms. Zhang stand any chance of winning this case? Does she even have enough time left to see it through? An individual against a corporate giant. This sounds like something out of a film, but this is our reality.

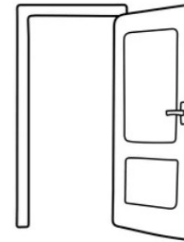
I, like thousands of viewers watching that press conference, have spent nearly a thousand yuan each year on these checkups. For my health. For my family. For prevention. Just as their advertisements promised. And now we're told that this money was insignificant? That it couldn't even buy peace of mind?

I wonder: is this just one rotten company, or an open secret across the industry? If a few hundred yuan buys nothing but placebo reassurance, must I spend more on a "premium package" just to feel safe?

I am being gaslighted. My hesitation and compromise feed the fanged beast this institution has become. It swallows not just my money, but my health.

In the flood of furious comments, in the burning words scrolling past, my hands reach in. Into the screen. I pry open its mouth, push my hands inside, and pull out the money and the trust it has swallowed over the years.

Let it choke.



Steal Away
by Stephen Mead

The quiet creeping,
the toes to tip with & leave behind maybe all clothes,
books, objects, leaving, in fact, even the door open,
a thief in reverse saying "have this, take, go ahead,"
just don't catch my vanishing into true peace of mind.

Patchwork Tapestry

by Mark Gunnells

I haven't been born yet.

I know when it happens, the date and even approximate time. I just haven't lived that day yet. I'm in no hurry. My mother once told me giving birth had been fairly traumatic for her, and I imagine it will be no less so for me.

The first day of my life was my twenty-first birthday. A pretty good day. A huge party, music and food and drinks and laughter. I got pleasantly buzzed without getting so drunk that I couldn't remember the day later. And I'm glad, because it was definitely a day I want to remember. As far as first days go, that was a pretty good one to start off my life with.

I went to bed that night feeling warm and fizzy with a sense that the world was full of potential.

I woke up the next day at fifty-eight to discover my husband of over two decades next to me, dead. He had apparently passed from a heart attack in his sleep. The day was a numbed blur of shock and pain and disbelief. I called 911, and remained in bed holding my husband's cold, unresponsive hand until the paramedics arrived. Which was merely a formality as there was nothing they could do.

A great day followed by the worst. Only two days old and I had already gotten a harsh lesson in the pattern of life. My life at least.

Live a day in my thirties where I was offered my dream job, followed by a day when I was twelve and a bully beat me up on the playground so bad he knocked two teeth loose. A day at seventeen when I lost my virginity followed by a day at sixty where I got downsized out of my job only a few short years from retirement.

I think I had been alive three years or so, living a day in my mid-forties, when I realized that not everyone experienced life the way I did. I was cuddled up on the sofa with my husband, and he was flipping through a photo album, talking about growing up in Indiana. He seemed to remember everything that happened in the photos, and when I asked him if he'd already lived all these days, he gave me an odd look like perhaps he thought I might be crazy. Only then did I realize that he never talked about his death. Almost as if he hadn't experienced it yet.

And it hit me, he lived his life linearly. Chronologically. The very concept baffled me, but he seemed to think it was perfectly normal.

I started surreptitiously asking questions of others and came to understand that most everyone who wasn't me lived their lives straight through from beginning to end instead of jumping around to all these different points like I did. In that way, I seemed to be unique.

At first I felt sorry for everyone else, not getting to experience life as this great patchwork tapestry, connecting the dots to reveal the full picture and instead just having the picture handed to them. Then for a while I envied them because they could live in a kind of blissful ignorance, not knowing what the future held. Eventually I settled into a blending of both feelings.

For instance, sometimes it hurt being with my husband, knowing how I lost him. Yet it also made me appreciate every moment with him even more intensely because I knew our time together was finite. The very definition of bittersweet.

Plus, while I had already lived through the pain of my husband's death, I still had our first meeting to look forward to. I knew how it would happen, even when it would happen, and the thought of experiencing it firsthand filled me with a giddy anticipation.

Some might say dying would be one of the worst experiences, but mine honestly wasn't all that bad. I was maybe fifteen years old when I woke up at seventy-two, in a hospital bed, hooked up to various tubes and beeping machinery. Some very kind nurses attended to me, and my final moments were relatively painless. All told, I consider the experience to be a rather peaceful one, not nearly as distressing as I fear my birth will be.

I've come to accept the fact that I'm not like everyone else. Some people are tall and some are short; some people have blue eyes and others green or brown; some people have great singing voices and others can't carry a tune in a bucket.

Some people live their lives in order, and then there is me. Maybe not the only one, but the only one I've ever met.

I will continue to go through life in a zigzag manner, days of triumph bumping against days of failure. Moments of ecstasy followed by moments of tragedy. Five one day and fifty-seven the next then eighteen the day after that. It doesn't feel weird to me, as it is the only thing I've ever truly known.

Plus I can deal with it because even though I haven't been born yet, I have already died and I know I had no regrets.



How to Draw by Mya Smith

Start with a blank sheet of paper.
Make sure to grab a few from your grandfather's printer.
The ones that have streaks of ash and smell like
The nicotine in the cigarettes he leaves between his yellow-stained
fingers.

Look for a pencil and its wife, the sharpener, in the junk drawer full
of note cards, Dried out markers, and the cat-like staple remover you
like to play with. And don't forget, the most important step when
taking time to draw,

Find a quiet place.

A quiet place to empty the ever-consuming thoughts about how your
mother and father can't communicate without using you as the rope
in their game of tug of war or about how your grandmother can love
and hurt you at the same time.

How about the cat you had when you were 12? You miss him, right?
The feel of his fur, draw that. Remember the features of his face,
How his black, brown and gray coat looked when you cradled him in
your arms.
How you watched the ghost in his empty bed next to the cold fireplace.

You like drawing cats. What about lizards? Draw Tibbles.
A spiked, chubby bearded dragon that produces joy with a touch.
Draw his large, triangular head with scales that feel refined and silky
like petals
And his shortened, stubbed tail from that surgery he had 2 years ago.

What about the second one? Remember Nugget?

Draw her frail yellow body dragging itself forward, trembling with each step.
A body with hard, rough, spiky scales from years of neglect and abuse.
Don't forget her eye that went blind or the knot on her knee from MBD.

Imagine the silence of dying alone –
trapped behind glass, lungs slowly collapsing. Draw that.
Draw the tears that are streaming down your face in your dad's car.
Draw the gaping hole you have for a mouth as you scream her name
Into nothing but the hum of the engine and the dashcam tuning in.

Stop drawing before you ruin it.
Or keep going until you do.
Stop waiting for it to be perfect.
Now do it again.

I Never Thankt Berryman
by Sheila Murphy

Maybe I was busy being twenty-one
When he lifted off. I dunno.
Berryman took liberties to bed and heart.
I later learnt not to spark something that would
unmagic my life with some other life likely
to ruin me. I had a father who warned
of men looking mostly for a house-
keeper in keeping with what they believed
they were owed. Early on I lost interest,
of course. But balance being what it is,
I would have liked to thank Berryman
for spelling as he did, with or without
spellbinding me (I may seem impressed
but rarely I assure you), I just like justice



Likely Stories

by William Doreski

When I asked my father if he had graduated from college he looked at me with incomprehension.

“Where I come from college doesn’t apply,” he said.

When I asked him how he met my mother he said, “I haven’t met her yet.”

When I asked how he earned a living, he said, “I steal stamps from the post office and sell them at a discount.”

After years of oddly angled conversations, I decided to research on my own. The local library had several books about my father. Their subtitles were “A Dungeon Life in Chains,” “A Man of Ease and Bullion,” “A Saga of Intrepid Betrayal,” and “Thriving in the Eye of a Telescope.” I checked out these books and brought them home, but when I opened them, every page was blank. By then my father was old and weak so I sat him down and demanded straight answers.

He hemmed and hawed, but I persisted. At last he coughed up a tidbit. “I was hatched from a glacial boulder. Honestly, that’s all I know.” I had noticed that he was getting mossy, but I thought that was just old age. I peeled a bit of lichen from his forehead for my scrapbook and left him in peace.

Wildfire
by Cithara Patra

Tonight is the night
Tonight will define us
Sticking us into certain boxes
Blocking freedom of expression
and molding us into perfect people
molding us into the people they prefer

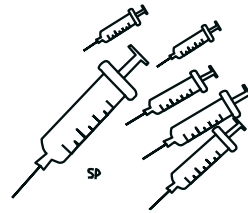
Tonight is the night
Tonight opened my eyes
to a broken world beyond my borders
I saw those evil ones sitting on top
signing away at laws to strip us
of our humanity and our boundaries

Tonight is the night
Tonight broke my last thread of sanity
as I stared at the screens filled with war and tears
My fists balled up and I vowed
to take back everything they were taking away

They don't know, God they don't know
They struck the match and threw it away
and the flames grew higher with all the kindling
they threw onto the pile of broken dreams
A tiny spark blew up and spread like wildfire

And this wildfire will burn them down
The evil ones who once believed themselves untouchable
Little do they know, kings were only humans
and humans have always known how to fight
So, as the wildfire spreads, I'll gather myself
Gather my courage and spit in the face of complacency

Tonight is the night
Tonight will define me
Tonight, the wildfire will burn
and I'll take back everything they took from me



Six Syringes

by Robin Trimble

The sterile appearing ward in the pediatric-oncology unit at the military hospital I was stationed at displayed no paintings, characters, art, or colors kids would like. The children's energies, even when sick, were the opposite of the all-white walls. The smell of urine, feces, antiseptic, bleach, and patient food trays battled each other for the award of most noxious smell. The sounds of children screaming and crying echoed from the procedure room down the hallway despite its two-inch thick metal doors.

One of my patients when I was a Lieutenant in the Navy Nurse Corps was a three-year old named Julian, whose body had been consumed by leukemia when he was two. He went through several rounds of chemo, but it acted immortal and selfish. His last resort had been a stem cell transplant and his brother, who was twelve, turned out to be a perfect match. Initially it worked and his mother had told her eldest he possessed, "magic blood". When his little brother relapsed and returned to my unit the next year, two rounds of chemo were tried but the aggressive cancer ignored it and he was deemed terminal. I heard his sibling say, "I had bad blood not magic blood and it's my fault he's gonna die."

"God must have a purpose for doing this to him and us and it is not malevolent. Your brother is an old soul and too good for this world. You prolonged his life," his mom responded.

I had always noticed there was something unique about Julian and her old soul comment made sense but not her statement about a God I knew didn't exist.

The head of oncology, a Navy Commander, pulled me aside and said, "We are going to have to inject him with fentanyl until his

breathing stops once I spot blood in his throat or it will come out of his eyes and that is too traumatic for the family and too painful for him. So have six syringes ready.”

I had never been chosen to euthanize a patient before, but the family had requested I be their nurse. I knew a half a vial of fentanyl could kill an adult. I unlocked the med room and broke off the top of six of the glass fentanyl vials using the square from an alcohol wipe. In my mind I would be ending the child’s only existence, because I had never seen anything that convinced me there was life after death. It was hard to believe he would be gone in two or three hours, and I worried I wouldn’t be able to do it if needed.

The doctor checked his throat about every 30 minutes and after one such check, Julian, squirming on his mother’s lap, said he needed to answer a call from a Fisher Price toy phone in his room. Its stickers were worn from being disinfected between patients. The toy always seemed to be watching people with its creepy blue eyes. Julian picked up the red handle and started talking to someone.

“Dad, mom is sad, but she says you’re a hero and I will see you soon.”

He hung up and answered another call.

“Who are you talking to?” his mother asked.

“Uncle Randall,” he answered and went back to his call.

“I will let her know. I’ll see you soon,” he said.

When the call ended, he told his mom, “He said to tell you it didn’t hurt and he didn’t suffer.”

“Julian, can you see them?” his mother asked.

“Yes, they are right here,” he said. “With a lot of people.”

I pensively looked around the room, seeing and feeling no one. I wondered if he had been told by his mom of those that went before him and he was making associations, but he seemed sincere and knowing.

“I never talk about your uncle, do I Ricky?” she asked her older son.

“I didn’t know your brother’s name,” he answered. “He’s going to heaven with him and dad right. He was talking to them, right?”

“Yes, and I am glad they will greet him. I don’t know why the males in my life die but I have you and four brothers left. His dad died in Iraq when he was three months old and my brother died in a car accident when he was twenty-one. A Drunk driver killed him,” she said to me. “I am glad they will watch him until I arrive one day.”

We gave the family time to themselves for the next half hour, and the doctor and I came back into the room and after checking him she turned pale. I gave her three of the six syringes I had. I didn't need to be told this was the end nor did the mother.

"This is it? The last time I will hold my baby alive? Is this really it? I'm not ready. Is there anything that can save him?" she said through dripping eyes as her stoic and calm and humrourous nature left when she realized the finality.

She begged us not to do it but then Julian became upset and his eyes started to replace tears with blood. She cradled him closer.

"Hurry, just hurry!" she yelled at us. Using the two-port central line in his chest that fed directly into his heart, we rubbed the ports with alcohol first, out of habit, to prevent injecting germs, then we each screwed on the syringes.

"One, two, three push," the doctor whispered to me, and it only took the first two for his chest to become rigid and his breathing to stop, but we each administered two more doses anyway. We both listened for a heartbeat for over the required sixty seconds. His heart was silent.

"Time of death, 1516," she stated for the purpose of his chart and death certificate.

We left the room to let the family say good-bye. My shift was supposed to have ended over an hour before, but I stayed over six hours waiting to escort Julian and her to the morgue as she cried and screamed. It was both physically and emotionally painful to witness for the parents and staff, but everyone understood her expressions of severe grief and loss. Finally, she said she was ready to let him go. The staff, many of whom considered the patients extended family, lined up on both sides of the hallway leading to the elevator down to the basement where the morgue was located. I turned her over to the coroner and I heard she remained there for a couple of more hours with the hospital chaplain.

The celebration of life occurred a week later. I rarely attended what seemed more like funerals of my patients, even though I cared deeply for each one, because I felt out of place. Julian's, I felt compelled to go to. The family requested everyone bring a toy and put it around his casket to donate to the pediatric unit. There appeared stacks and piles of them; they resembled ofrendas around his small coffin, including a brand-new Fisher Price phone I added to it. The large church that sat over 100, became standing room only.

After the service the line formed for people to express their condolences. I treaded towards the end of it carrying a brown paper

bag. When I reached his mom and Robby I gave Julian's mother the bag. She gave me a quizzical look and peeked in it.

"Is this THE phone?" she asked.

"Yes, it is THE phone. Technically I stole government property, so I hope they don't make an example out of me if they find out," I told her. "Julian was special and he made this nonbeliever a believer that death is not the end of existence."

"Thank you so much for the phone. Julian taught me a lot too. I have thought about this phone often this week. Ricky and I know he's in a better place and is not alone. This gift means the world to me. Of course I won't turn you in because then I would be technically in possession of stolen government property, Lieutenant. But on the bright side," she laughed, "we'd probably be in the same cell."



Cobwebs

by Beth Sherman

Thomasin the witch got her haircut at the usual place – *Hello, Gorgeous*, at the corner of Willow and Vine. Her stylist was a chatty elf who she tended to ignore as she pondered the Big Question. Should she ask Bellatrix to move in? She'd consulted the Magic Eight Ball. Inconclusive. She'd read tarot cards. Made lists of the pros and cons. Cast at least 18 spells and still she couldn't decide. As scissors danced frantically round her skull, she watched her raven locks slip to the floor. She missed her hair already. The back of her neck felt naked.

"Did you hear about Nimue?" the elf was saying. "Up and broke it off with Bellatrix. Scandalous. You can't find a trustworthy witch these days."

Thomasin felt the room go loopy, like she'd had too many Cranberry sours.

"Which Bellatrix? When?"

"The one with two warts and a tattoo of a ferret on her hip. Day before yesterday, so I'm told."

"I must fly," Thomasin told the elf.

"Wait. Your hair's lopsided."

"Never mind. Fix it next month."

Thomasin ripped off her smock, threw some coins at the elf, grabbed her broomstick.

She soared over the treetops, past the Sign of the Crooked Finger where she and Bellatrix had first kissed. Bella the Traitorous. Bella the Terrible. The wind tore at her dress, blew her too short bangs into her eyes. The world was a dark and terrible place.

At home, she dragged her cello over to the bed and began playing Stravinsky's Firebird. The chords were dissonant. They jangled the way she liked. She'd played this piece for Bellatrix on their third date, right before things got physical. Out the window of her hut,

the moon was a thin piece of grey cheese. Illuminating shaggy pines, all the dead plants in her yard, the outskirts of her lonely, barren life.

Thomasin stopped playing abruptly when she heard someone banging on her front door.

Peeking through cobwebs, she saw Bellatrix holding a bouquet of dead lilies.

“No one’s here,” she called out.

“Tommy. Let me in. I have tickets to the Wizard Ball.”

Thomasin flung open the door, sizing up the witch who’d torn her heart in two.

“What happened to your hair?” Bella asked. “Did you stick it in a blender?”

“My hair is the least of your problems. I heard all about you and Nimue.”

Bellatrix rolled her eyes. She looked enchanting in her torn black dress.

“That wicked elf. Honestly, Tommy. It didn’t mean anything.”

Thomasin felt her skin turn a paler shade of green. “Then it’s true?”

“Let’s forget the whole thing happened. I much prefer you.”

Thomasin hesitated. Staring into Bella’s alluring gray eyes, she longed for more moonbeams and magic.

Bella flashed a snaggle tooth smile. “You and me canoodling under the stars at the Ball? How about it?”

Taking a deep breath, Thomasin cast her 19th spell. Lightning flashed. The sky clattered and broke open. Her body trembled.

When she was done, she set Bellatrix the frog on her bedside table and resumed playing her cello. The loud, jarring chords drowned out the frog’s plaintive croaking.



Red Wing Boots

by Barbara A. Meier

To set a trap,
to catch him in my dreams,
tangle him with threads,
and hold him in place,
where he can't get into my head.

Ah, but he so subtly finds passages
to worm his way in from the grave
to my dreams.

The gaudy sparkly purple dreamcatcher
I positioned above my head to keep him out
stopped working after the first night.

He ripped the net into pieces.

Burnt the feathers with his rage,
inhaling the sooty sage,
then letting it curl from his nostrils.
Finally crushing the beads
under his Red Wing boots.



The Soul Call

by Elle Becker

My cell phone rang. I answered with my eyes still closed.

“Hmmmllloo?”

“Hey,” Mom said. “Quick question. Do you think something can be wrong with you if you feel completely fine?”

I rubbed my eyes and checked the clock. It was 2:17 am.

“What? Mom? Where are you?”

“I don’t know. That’s why I called. I can’t find my car, and everyone keeps ignoring me.”

“What street are you on? Turn on your location.”

“I tried. It says I’m nowhere,” she continued.

“Mom, where are you? What do you see around you?”

“Everything looks like it’s already been used.”

“I don’t understand.”

“It’s like I arrived after something finished.”

I sat up very slowly.

Fully awake now.

I had buried Mom on Tuesday.

“Sweetie, I think my phone is broken. All my files and photos are archived.”

With a dry mouth, I rasped, “Mom, who’s there with you?”

“Oh, lots of people. They’re all people I used to know. I saw my high school English teacher. They’re not the same, though. It’s all different.”

The line crackled with white noise. “Mom? Mom, are you there?”

“Did we talk today?”

“No.”

“Can you remind me what I’m like?”

“You’re—you’re my mom.”

“Yes,” she said. “But who was I before that?”

I tried to answer. In the darkness of my bedroom, something pale and shimmering moved across the ceiling, like fading light forgetting how to shine. Something else in the room shifted. Not physically — just enough that I noticed the room had always been wrong.

“I think I’m being watched,” she said.

The line filled with a low, distant pressure, like sound underwater.

"Sweetheart," she said, carefully, "when I forget you, do you still exist?"

I didn't answer. I couldn't answer.

Something had just occurred to me.

I could not remember what she looked like. Suddenly, I couldn't remember the sound of her laugh. Or the color of her hair. Or whether she had ever called me sweetheart at all.

"Are you still there?" she said.

"Stay on the line," I said. "Just stay."

"I don't think I can. There are fewer places to stand."

Then, after a pause:

"Also... who is this?"

The call ended.

I sat in bed, holding my phone in the dark. I sat that way until the sun rose through my window, paralyzed with fear as I frantically tried to reconstruct her face from memory.

It felt like trying to remember a word that had never existed.

By the time the velvet sky had begun to lighten, the effort had made me exhausted. I fell back asleep.

When I woke, the sun shone and it was beautiful out, but the rest of the day felt surreal. I knew something important had happened during the night.

I couldn't remember what.

I went to bed with a stone in my gut, feeling like I was missing something I couldn't remember.

At 2:17 a.m., my phone rang. I woke up groggily and fumbled for the phone.

"He-hello?"

A voice on the other end said, "Quick question. Do you think something can be wrong with you if you feel completely fine?"

I listened politely, but I had no idea why the words made me uneasy. Or why I felt responsible for a stranger's life.



Mandarin Risk Management

by Walter Sanville

Gerald gripped the vibrating steering wheel with both hands and eased the ancient van back into their lane. But the wind off the Arizona desert kept pushing him and Shirley toward the interstate's median and oncoming traffic. He slowed, which helped some, but only prolonged their torturous westward journey. They'd been on the road five days, coming from Michigan and dropping south early to avoid being hammered by late spring storms.

"Do you want me to drive for a while?" Shirley asked.

Gerald shook his head. "We're about thirty miles from the California border. I'm hoping the wind will slack off when we get past Needles."

Shirley chuckled. "Honey, it's all desert and wind."

"You're right, darlin', you're right. We'll stop for lunch soon. I can rest then."

Gerald had taught botany at a major state university. He'd fallen in love with Shirley while they both attended a national botany conference in San Francisco. Both of them were approaching Social Security age. But he felt much younger now, sucking up the energy of new love. He had no regrets leaving Michigan's harsh winters behind, eager to return to his boyhood home state.

"There's a rest stop ahead," Shirley said. "Why don't we pull over?"

"Good idea."

They drove into the almost empty parking lot, stopped close to the restrooms, and sat without speaking. The art of traveling with a lover felt new to them: deciding when to speak, when to quietly stare

at the landscape; when to tell stories; when to argue and debate; when to sleep. But learning the self-taught skill of companionship was not without its bumps.

Traveling the desert, Gerald had halted their progress to inspect and photograph just about every plant that he'd only seen in books, making their westward sojourn anything but flowing. He could tell she felt impatient to get through the barren desert with its struggling-to-survive towns full of abandoned and decaying businesses. But she'd not complained. He wished she had. His wife had been the stoic type, even in her death; leaving Gerald and his adult daughter to do all the grieving.

Finally, Shirley broke the silence. "After that last stop, we've got plenty to eat. You want me to make us some sandwiches?"

"Sounds great. And grab that bag of mandarin oranges. After eating diner food for five days, I need something to cleanse my palate."

"Yeah, citrus will do that and we've got plenty. They're so sweet yet slightly tart, just like you." Shirley leaned across and kissed Gerald, a kiss that lingered and was well returned. Gerald glanced in the back of the van, thinking for a moment that maybe they could do more than just kiss. But a semi pulled into a parking space close by and destroyed their illusion of privacy.

The wind continued to sandblast their van. In the distant haze, mountain ranges drew ragged lines between earth and sky with flat scrubland in between. They munched ham and cheese sandwiches, drank ginger ale from the cooler, followed by the oranges.

Gerald asked, "Do you think the agriculture inspectors at the border will have a problem with us bringing in these oranges?"

"Oh God, I forgot all about those guys. Yeah, that could be a problem. Oranges can carry pests and diseases like citrus greening."

"I guess we'd better ditch them."

Shirley frowned. "Hold on a minute. We're in my private van with California plates. I've crossed the border plenty of times and have never been searched. I can just stuff the bag under the seat."

Gerald nodded. "Yes, but if they do find the oranges they'll want to search the rest of the van and would find my collection."

Shirley tisked. "Geez, Gerald, why would they give a flying fig about your collection of liverworts."

Gerald felt hurt by her dismissal of their importance. "Well, first of all, I would have to explain the name and then try and convince them that my mossy little specimens don't carry any diseases or nasty bugs. But they could confiscate everything."

Shirley peeled an orange and greedily devoured it. “Look, Ger, the probability of getting searched is so low and these things are absolutely delicious.”

“But the liverworts are my life’s work. You think it’s worth *any* risk of losing it over a bag of oranges?”

“In the remote chance they search us, I’ll help explain the benign nature of your collection to the inspectors. I too am a biologist, remember?”

“I’m sorry, Shirley, but that’s not enough. Unless we ditch the oranges here, I can’t go any farther ... with you.”

Gerald could almost feel Shirley’s body stiffen. The situation had rapidly grown intense. *Maybe this is a test of our relationship*, he thought. *I can’t believe I gave her an ultimatum. Is any of this, oranges or liverworts, worth risking our ... our love?*

They sat in silence for some time, the bag of oranges lying open between them.

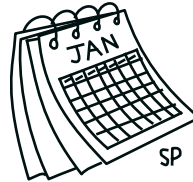
Finally, Shirley shuddered and broke the silence. “Well, I ... I suppose we could buy some more fruit in Needles.”

Gerald let out a deep breath. “Thank you.” He shifted across the bench seat and scooped her into his arms, felt her relax and nuzzle his neck. “Let’s eat as many of those oranges as we can and leave the rest to the crows and coyotes.”

“It’s a deal,” she whispered.

They spent the rest of their lunch break devouring oranges until they couldn’t eat another slice, the sticky juice from the tiny golden globes dripping off their chins. They heaved the dozen or more that remained into the parched desert, trying to see who could throw the farthest. Shirley did well for a girl. The effort took away any residual tension.

Back on the road they approached the California border and the agricultural inspection station. A highway sign flashed “Inspection Station Closed. Please Drive Through.” Shirley stared at Gerald and began to giggle. Their hysterical laughter could be heard as far away as Barstow.



Funny If It Makes You Cry.

by Favour Agiande

Before the first time I was ten, I was afraid of my father. He was angry all the time. He scowled at everything. We bit our thumbs to please him but that didn't work. I turned another ten, again, the fear still there. The fear is constant like it came to stay, like the next year after I was the first ten and squatted outside to pee and blood came out instead. I ran to my mother, another constant, who'd said "it has come to stay". I hope she never leaves. I remember the last time I wrapped my arms around my father's frame. I was ten years plus three years old. My father returned from a trip to see his mother and would not look anyone in the eye. Maybe he thought to humor us when he moved to a new house with a new woman. She was younger. She wore mascara. Take ten years, plus six years, call it my 'rain' years. I spent it crying at his bad joke, 'It's not funny if it makes you cry!'.

I am ten plus seven years old. I am still afraid. I still bleed. I still have my mother. My rain years give way to script-a-suicide-note days between school and visits to my mother who is leathery. She has circles where her face is trying to swallow her eyeballs. The only thing she wears well is her smile, unwrinkled at it's edges. I cry less often, so I gain weight...all those held-back tears. Did I forget to mention Beulah?. She is the girl child they welcomed when they thought I'd be a boy. Beulah is model-toned, her eyes lean out of their sockets. She is the sibling that takes the separation and swallows it for seven plus three years.

It is two thousand and too empty one. She moves 17 hours away. So much road between us. Trauma may feel like luggage, but you can't forget it in your room, so, once she settles in, she pukes that separation over everything she owns. She is anxious most of the time. she cries. she calls, crying. Nobody told her how hard our bodies remember - The small of our backs, our hands, the way we act when

we are tired. She takes pills to help it forget, but they don't work, so she prays and cries some more. No comfort, just that same thin hollowness we both feel. The same one women who have to father themselves must feel. We are forced to learn how to distract our bodies, and to disrupt the old patterns, we must adopt new gestures consciously. Pray. Set boundaries.

It has been ten and three plus years since my father told a really funny joke.

I know because I laughed at his not-so-funny ones and didn't really cry.

His humor must be the heirloom my sister and I are trying so hard not to inherit.



A Blackcap Eating Berries

—Photograph by Emma Byrne Hickman

A Blackcap Villanelle

by Nancy Byrne Iannucci

Your appetite is as insatiable as a blackcap
disemboweling berries before the sun rises.
My flesh drips onto your woolly milkcap.

Overcome by this emotional deathtrap,
I am willing to risk it all for your prizes.
Your appetite is as insatiable as a blackcap.

Drinking droplets that run off my shower cap,
you sip & tilt before the water vaporizes.
My flesh drips onto your woolly milkcap.

The sound of your flute stuns like a thunderclap
while feeding me mouthfuls of insect surprises.
Your appetite is as insatiable as a blackcap.

My hazelnut tresses break free from their cap
& dance before you like a drape disguises.
My flesh drips onto your woolly milkcap.

I pause a moment on your lap
for a cloacal kiss as the moon arises.
Your appetite is as insatiable as a blackcap.
My flesh drips onto your woolly milkcap.



Snettisham Scalp

by Glenis Moore

They call it the stubborn sand
as it never gives way to the sea
despite its urges, threats and promises.
Soft words whispered
on warm summer days,
or curses thrown on the wind
in the depth of winter, have no effect
except to litter the never-ending beach
with dank puddles and sinking mires.
In the distance waves lap and roll
but the sand withstands it all
a haven for gulls and terns
and intrepid fishers
digging for bait in the evening gloom.



Debility, Dependent, Dread by Nile Arena

Recently, my partner and I had a frank discussion about our personal and individual views on parenthood. I say my partner although what I actually mean is my girlfriend. My girlfriend calls me her partner, not her boyfriend. I use the term, too. I refer to her as my “partner” in her presence. I also make an effort to use it when I am alone, when I am not in her presence. But it still is confusing to me. It confuses others, too, I can see this. And when I think of her in my mind, I call her my girlfriend, not because I think of her as a girl and not a full-grown woman. No, it is not any specific resistance to progress. I call her my girlfriend because we are not married. I merely feel that the term “partner” has a certain ambient severity to it. There is a certain implicit legal rigidity. Lawyers in a law firm, say. Or else a pair of television detectives investigating crimes gruesome and obscure.

There are other considerations. But I would think of her as my boyfriend if she were a man. And if I were her girlfriend, I would still think of her this way. As my girlfriend. “Partner” implies a certain matrimonial designation and import that has, in fact, not fully transpired yet. It jumps the gun. It hops the gate. It heightens, shall we say, the circumstances. The given circumstances. There is nothing tragic, for instance, in the following sentence, “My girlfriend and I had an argument and so I went out to the bank robbery movie by myself.” Whereas, for instance, “My partner and I had an argument, so I went to see the bank robbery movie by myself” sounds full of import. Even dire. It sounds as if something has gone quietly, awfully wrong. For it could only be after a courtship, an apartment shared, a pet with a

walking routine, an Ikea adventure, a ring, a registry, a wedding and its reception with embarrassed, slightly raunchy dancing to “Uptown Funk”.

It seems like a turn in the story. But it isn’t. It isn’t a turn in the story. It simply means a disagreement ensued after a candid discussion between two people and then I went to the cineplex and watched the bank robbery movie—the one my girlfriend didn’t want to see anyway—and I filled up on popcorn and Milk Duds and so I didn’t eat any dinner.

It isn’t tragic. I didn’t need dinner. I was not hungry.

The disagreement came about after our frank discussion on the subject of parenthood. Our viewpoints, it came to pass, differed. I thought it was a good discussion. I thought it was refreshingly frank, and that, being in the spirit of candor and speaking directly, it could only be good. It came about from recounting an amusing anecdote. I have many colorful anecdotes, and I employ them as kinds of fables when I feel it might add levity and spirit to some of life’s harsher truths. My anecdote was about sitting around on the evening of my birthday some years before. I was with my friend Katherine at my old friend Duncan’s apartment on the far North side of the city. We had been drinking red wine and Coca-Cola. Like the Spaniards, Duncan told us.

It was sort of repellant at first but the continental context earned our trust and after a few glasses I got used to the flavor and even enjoyed it. It relaxed me and it was in this state of relaxation I revealed my then-partner might be pregnant. She had told me earlier that day and I was still stunned. I let slip to Duncan and Katherine that I was, possibly, a father-to-be. Both friends nearly spit out their red wine and Coca-Cola mid-sip.

“You?” Katherine said, “A father?” “More of a dad,” Duncan said.

Was I terrified? Was I excited? What were our plans? Would there be an abortion? A hasty courthouse wedding? Did it clarify things for me? Make me see beyond the pettiness of the mundane quotidian trifles?

I coolly explained that no, I was not worried, and I drank my drink. Savoring the buzz of the sugar and wine before it irritated my stomach. I was not worried, because of my partner’s generally high level of distress and, in total fairness, my own mood disorders and our respective psychopharmacological plethora, that surely the most it would amount to was a miscarriage. If there was not, well, we could always leave it in the pine forest for some tinker to discover. Katherine and Duncan found this viewpoint funny. At least a little funny. Katherine chuckled while shaking her head. We continued drinking and watching the traffic moving far down on the street from Duncan’s apartment window. My partner, that is, my current girlfriend—did not see anything very amusing in this recounting. In fact, my current girlfriend found it so dreadful she fell silent for an uneasy slab of time.

We sat there in the kitchen. She on one side of the little wooden table and I on the other. Neither of us spoke. And then the frank discussion about parenthood flared up.

Did I not, she asked, even a little bit want to be a parent? What she meant was a father. A parent, again, I think, implies something beyond or behind the framework of the world at large. There are books on parenthood. There are courses on expectant parenthood. There are yoga classes. There are endless appointments. There are meetings at schools for parents when their children are children. But I would not, I gently explained, have been a parent. I would have been the father of a child. This smacked of semantics to my partner, who, again, is only my girlfriend. But I held firm.

She felt differently about the language, and about parenthood. I offered that with motherhood it's different. It must be. Nobody really needs a father. And, I said, at best, any man is uneasily acquiescent to the enterprise. Out of, surely, love for one's partner.

This was not the viewpoint my girlfriend held. I, she asserted, was generalizing. I was putting my own reticence to the whole human endeavor into the minds and the mouths of all those male-identifying partners and partners-to-be and would-be partners. I did not think so. I said as much. Biology was then invoked. The evolutionary and the social kind. Parenthood was fundamentally different for women and for men. And, in fact, the entire notion of parenthood bled of the sexes was only good in the examples seen above. This viewpoint was not shared, and examples were hurled at me by my partner that defied my chauvinism. Same-sex couples. Single fathers. Chimps who befriended kittens in sub-basement university laboratories. There, far from the prospective freshmen tour, these interspecies bonds shifted paradigms and brought funding to new, grant-enabled heights. One imagines, anyway. One hopes. That is one can, I suppose, hope.

This all went on for a time, until finally I was accused, by my partner, of glancing a little too longingly at my wristwatch. I explained I nevertheless was listening carefully. I was listening and simultaneously checking the time, fearing our frank discussion would make us late for the start of the movie. Important though our frank discussion was. Important, if not more important. Certainly, in the grand scheme, more important. Though, it had to be said, this discussion was hardly bound by the same confines of time as the cineplex.

Some frank words were exchanged. It became clear I would be going to the cineplex alone. Did I really want to see this idiotic movie about bank robbers?

I did, yes. Yes, I did.

And, I learned, my girlfriend did not. Her heart had never been in it, but now, thanks to our discussion with its frankness, she felt a new liberty to reveal her feelings about going to the movie. The

candor brought forth from the larger topic could not, she fairly felt, be bottled again.

There were other faults, which had been pointed out to me before which emerged now. My affinity for espresso-flavored energy drinks over real coffee. My irritable bowels. My irrational fear of the shower curtain being drawn. It went on like this. When I returned from the cineplex a good amount of my partner's things—and some odd pieces of the furniture—were missing.

At first, I thought there might have been a break-in. Probably this was inspired by the movie. There was no message, no note, but burglary quickly seemed less and less likely as time went by.

But there's nothing so tragic in it. A boyfriend goes to the movies alone and comes back to an emptier apartment. But not ransacked. That is not a Patsy Cline song on the lonely jukebox in a dive bar where the lovelorn weep into their watery highballs. It's not, surely, "The End of the Affair", when some tidbit from one's rushing mad twenties falls flat in the retelling. It was not even a prurient tidbit. It wasn't transgressive. In-your-face. I was not making light of, as it turned out, an actual terminated pregnancy. Or an unwanted child. Or a girlfriend—a woman—abandoned in an hour of need. It was not villainy. I was not drinking Duncan's red wine and cola decoction while flogging some baroness in a villa, counting all my gambling hall winnings. No one had to ride along in the cab of a logging truck bound for Montreal to flee anybody else.

It isn't tragic, but give it time. Something, surely, will be.



The Hum

by Todd Epp

My dad, Rodney, sleeps
in his electric easy chair.
Ninety-three years.
Mouth open.
Slipper half off.

The TV is on the news,
soundless.

Angel, our poodle, takes the deck chair.
Again.
She sits in the sun,
lifts an ear
when the refrigerator cycles on.

I sit where I see them
and listen to the house.



Women who leave with the Seasons

by Shuchi Masrani

The women in my family do not die normally. They disappear in seasons. My grandmother vanished during the monsoon.

My mother dissolved into summer. And I, well, I have always belonged to the wind. The village says this like a curse. I wear it like an inheritance.

The first thing u must understand is this: There are women born with bones made of obedience. And there are women born with storms stitched beneath their skin.

The second kind never survives quietly. I was born in a coastal village where the sea constantly sounded angry, the houses leaned into one another like gossiping widows, and every woman there knew how to lower her eyes at the right moment.

I never learned.

At eight years old, I climbed roofs instead of helping gut fish. At twelve, I cut my hair with my father's rusted blade because a boy at the market said long hair made girls softer.

At fourteen, I was caught swimming too far into the ocean at dusk, floating alone beneath a bleeding orange sky while the village women screamed from the shore that something would take me.

Something already had.

The sea.

The dark.

Myself.

My mother used to say: "Wild girls are loved in poems and punished in real life".

She would say it while braiding jasmine into her hair, her fingers smelling of coconut oil and saltwater. There was always something exhausted about her beauty, as though life had spent years trying to sand her down into something smaller.

She had once been wild too. You could tell by the way she stared too long at migrating birds, by the way music affected her shoulders before it reached her feet, by the way she stood at the shoreline every evening as if waiting for herself to come back. But then she married my father.

And slowly, invisibly, she disappeared without ever leaving.

My father believed women should be contained. Contained laughter, contained hunger, contained ambition, contained grief.

He spoke gently in public and cruelly in private, which is the most dangerous kind of man. The kind nobody believes could hurt you because he never raises his voice loud enough to echo.

He liked the silence in the house and I filled every room with noise.

I hummed while sweeping, read books while cooking, asked too many questions and stared directly into people's eyes when they spoke. At sixteen, I told him I wanted to leave the village someday.

He looked at me for a long time before laughing, not because it was funny, but because he thought it was impossible.

"You were born here," he said, chuckling. "Women like you always come back broken."

Women like me!? As if I belonged to some ancient species of ruin.

The year I turned nineteen, something strange happened: the sea stopped returning the bodies. Fishermen began disappearing, three in one month, then five.

The village priest said the ocean had become cursed because women had forgotten modesty. Old women nodded solemnly while men drank nervously after sunset. And the sea just kept swallowing people whole.

I remember the night they blamed a girl named Leela. Leela, with her silver anklets and loud, free laugh, who smoked secretly behind the temple. Leela had once kissed a tourist girl beneath the pier because she wanted to know what freedom tasted like.

Someone claimed they saw her walking near the cliffs before the last fisherman vanished. That was enough. Villages like ours do not need proof, only a woman different enough to carry the weight of everyone's fear. They dragged her mother into the village square first and then her.

I still remember the color of her lip where someone struck her, I remember the sound of men calling her a witch, whore and a curse on the village.

I remember standing frozen in the crowd while rage clawed at my throat like an animal trying to escape and I remember my mother gripping my wrist hard enough that it had started to bruise.

"Do not speak", she pleaded, whispering.

But something inside me had already stood up.

There is a particular moment in every woman's life when fear and fury meet each other and one always devours the other. That night, fury won.

I stepped into the centre of the square. I do not even remember deciding to move, only the feeling of heat beneath my skin.

"You blame women for everything you cannot control", I spat out.

The crowd went silent and even the sea seemed to pause.

My father looked horrified, while the priest looked murderous. And suddenly every woman in the village was staring at me with the same expression: not of shock but of Recognition. As if they had all once possessed this exact fire in their being before life and society taught them to swallow it.

"You fear the ocean because it behaves like a woman", I continued, my voice shaking but growing louder. "Unpredictable. Powerful. Impossible to own."

Someone spat near my feet, but nobody dared to interrupt me.

"Maybe the sea is not cursed," I said. "Maybe it is just hungry after centuries of being fed women".

That was just the beginning, not the end. Beginnings rarely arrive beautifully. They arrive like storms.

After that night, the village changed around me, or maybe it simply revealed itself more honestly. Women stopped speaking when I entered rooms, while men watched me the way hunters watch unfamiliar animals. Children whispered stories that I could control tides, my father stopped looking at me altogether. Only my mother remained unchanged. Which somehow hurt the most.

One evening, I found her burning old photographs behind the house; she fed them to the fire one by one without expression. In one picture, she was younger than I had ever seen her, hair loose, laughing openly beside a motorcycle, wearing trousers instead of sarees.

Another version of her, one which was alive and free.

"You could've left," I said quietly.

The fire crackled between us, "Yes," she replied, "Then why didn't you?"

For a long time, she didn't say anything, but then she whispered, "Because survival and living are not always the same thing."

That night, I could not sleep. The wind outside sounded like women screaming underwater. I walked to the shoreline, the tide was violent, hewing against rocks beneath a swollen moon. And there, standing ankle-deep in black water, was Leela.

Alive, Bruised, but Unbroken.

"They wanted a monster," she said without turning toward me. "Sometimes I think women become monsters simply because men need them to."

I stood beside her silently. The ocean sprayed salt across our skin.

“You know what terrifies them the most?” she asked. “What?” “A woman who no longer fears being alone,” she replied, smirking.

Those words entered me like a prophecy.

Three weeks later, my mother disappeared. No note. No body. No explanation. Just an open back door moving softly in the wind. The villagers said she must have drowned. My father said nothing at all. But I knew. Women in my family do not die normally.

They disappear in seasons.

And my mother had finally chosen herself over survival.

For the first time in her life. I think I loved her most for leaving.

After she vanished, something inside me split open completely.

I stopped apologizing. Stopped lowering my voice. Stopped pretending softness was the only acceptable shape for a woman. I began writing at night. Stories and poems first. Then confessions, then truths sharp enough to cut open generations. I wrote about mothers who buried their desires alive, girls taught to confuse silence with goodness. Women who turned themselves into smaller and smaller things just to be loved safely. I wrote until dawn every night, as if language itself had become a form of escape or resurrection.

Months later, during another violent storm, the sea finally returned a body. Not a fisherman, but my father.

They found him tangled in fishing nets along the shore, eyes open toward the sky as if shocked the world could end without his permission.

The villagers called it a tragedy, but the women did not.

At his funeral, old widows looked strangely peaceful. Leela squeezed my hand once beneath the rain and for the first time in my life, I felt no fear standing among ruins. Only space, air and possibilities.

I left the village before winter, no dramatic farewell, no tears. I took my notebooks, three dresses, my mother’s silver ring and boarded a bus heading north before sunrise.

As we drove away, the ocean glimmered beside the road like something alive and watching. I pressed my forehead against the glass and suddenly I understood. The women in my family were never disappearing. They were returning to themselves.

My grandmother in the monsoon.

My mother in the summer.

And me, finally with the wind.

Years later, people still tell stories about the village by the sea. They speak of cursed waters and vanished women. Of storms that oarrive without warning. Of girls who became impossible to tame. But sometimes, if the night is loud enough and the tide violent enough, the women there swear they hear laughter carried across the ocean wind.

Wild.

Unashamed.

Free.

And somewhere far away, in a city that does not know my old name, I write stories about women who survive becoming themselves.

Not because the world allowed them to,

But because they chose to anyway.



After the Rain

by Isabella Aleksander

Rainwater gathers in parking-lot constellations
every puddle briefly believes it is the ocean

The clouds leave as dramatically as they arrived
that's Miami for you, qué cosa

A shopping cart drifts through reflected skyscrapers
an accidental astronaut of aisle seven
while ibises patrol the margins of civilization

The air smells like wet concrete and mangoes
like somebody left summer running overnight

Kids kick a soccer ball through a rainbow oil slick
the sunset overcommits, as usual
pink layered over orange layered over impossible

Evening settles into the palms
and the city keeps glowing from underneath.



Fort Peck Dam, Montana

by Alan S. Kolok

Sara sat on the side of the road, her face wet with sweat and tears. Flecks of sand, tiny pieces of the Rocky Mountains that had been blowing across the great plains of Montana, were sticking to the damp contours of her face. Her bike lay where she had unceremoniously dumped it.

She and Danny were cycling cross-country from Oregon to Maine, with the western tailwind pushing them along most of the way. The previous day, they had ridden over 140 wind-aided miles. Today was destined to be another gold letter day.

That all changed, however, when Danny proposed a detour. "Let's go to Fort Peck Dam."

The two of them were a week away from northern Minnesota lake country, with little to look forward to beyond long days of monotonous cycling. By detouring to the dam, a short trip of twenty miles, they they could stay at the campground, take a well-deserved shower, and get some rest.

It wasn't until they turned south from Glasgow, however, that they realized just how powerful the Chinook winds really were. It was hard enough to cycle across the treeless great plains in July, with temperatures well above 90, and with water in short supply. But once they turned south, the relentless wind continuously tried to push them into traffic.

The struggle to maneuver against the broadside wind required continuous concentration and sapped their strength. Their progress slowed considerably, and by noon they had only covered 10 miles, scarcely half the distance to the dam. A strong gust of wind caused Sara to overcompensate toward the soft shoulder of the road. Her front wheel caught gravel and in a flash her bike jack knifed, throwing her to the ground.

Danny stopped a few yards behind her. Rather than approaching her, he rummaged through his handlebar bag in search of the toolkit. He pulled the toolkit from the bag, then approached Sara's bike to assess the damage. When he lifted the bike, the rear rack was askew, awkwardly bent to one side. A small bolt had sheared in two. His only hope was that he might have a replacement nut and bolt on hand. Miraculously, he found a suitable replacement rolling around in the bottom of his toolkit.

It took him five minutes to repair the damage. He then walked toward Sara, wiping small bits of road grime off his hands.

"Sara?"

"Go away."

"I fixed your bike. You can ride it now."

"I don't care."

"Sure, you do." Danny put his hand on her shoulder, but she turned away from him, wresting her shoulder from his grasp.

"C'mon," he said, "if you eat something, you'll feel better. I have a Snickers in my bag."

"What are we doing here?"

"We're on our way to the Fort Peck Dam, you know that."

Sara turned toward him and removed her sunglasses. Most of her face was tanned and dirty and in sharp contrast to the clean, light skin hidden behind the lenses of her sunglasses. With her sunglasses off, she looked like a photo negative of a raccoon, dark faced, with a white mask around her eyes. Danny couldn't help but smile at the sight.

"It's not funny, Danny!"

"I'm not laughing at you."

"You're laughing Danny, and it is not fucking funny. I mean what am I doing here? I could be back in Portland, working at my nice job, going to nice restaurants, hanging out with my friends."

Danny didn't say anything. He pulled the Snickers bar from his handlebar bag and started to unwrap it.

"Sara, we agreed that life was too short to spend it working a job, getting married having kids and settling down. We agreed that a cross-country bike trip would be the adventure of a lifetime. We agreed on it."

Danny bent the candy bar in half and handed her the larger half. She accepted the peace offering.

Danny understood her frustration. His muscles ached, too. They had been living out of a tent and hadn't had a shower for days. But he loved it, he absolutely loved it. For him, it really was the trip of a lifetime.

"Do you really think any of this is fun for me, Danny? I mean really, any of it at all?" Sara licked bits of chocolate from her fingers.

"Sara, think of it as an adventure."

"I don't want to think of it as an adventure. I don't want to think like you anymore. I want to go home."

"You can always go home if you want to, Sara. We can arrange that."

"We can? Danny, I was hoping that you would say that. I have been thinking about it for days. We could get our jobs back, get a little apartment together, start over."

"I meant you, Sara. You could always go home. I have to finish this trip. I don't have a choice."

That remark hit home more forcibly than the sting of her crash. Her eyes misted.

"Danny, why?"

"I cannot fully explain it. I've had so many things in my life that I wanted to do but didn't. I always settled for the easy way out, always did what my parents wanted me to do. What you wanted me to do. Not this time, Sara. This means something."

"Danny, you said that we would make decisions together, go forward as a team. Remember?"

"I meant for the trip. Not for a failed return to Portland. If you want to go home, you'll have to do that alone."

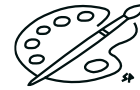
Sara picked at the small bits of gravel that were embedded in the scrapes on her knees.

"I can't do this anymore, Danny. I just can't."

She mounted her bike and rode toward Fort Peck Dam, leaving Danny on the side of the road.

She did not turn back.

They rode the final 10 miles alone and in silence, accompanied only by the relentless whine of the wind.



A Place for Our Blue
by Alice Jade

Blue — bright blue, sharp blue, lightning blue — is, apparently, a color not found in nature.

You first hear it one autumn morning from a sixth-grade classmate, too clever by half, and then echoed not much later by a teacher: blue is a color not found in nature.

At ten years old you're far too shy to try and belabor the point — you accept right away that you hadn't understood things properly before, because that's what good, smart children do. In this world, all blues brighter than those grey "blue" cats are unnatural, and you should've known that already but it's better late than never. Into your mind it goes, filed away in your growing archive of trivial, immutable facts about the world: blue is a color not found in nature.

Sometimes, though, you just can't help but wonder.

Blue - rich blue, paint blue, blue like your favorite shirt - is the color of so many minerals. Cobalt, lapis lazuli, sapphire... it might take a little effort - digging and searching and polishing to a fine gleam - but they're all at least as vibrant as any blue light on a screen.

Is effort not natural, then?

That's the wrong question to ask - it's sarcastic, apparently, even if it really is what you wanted to know. Your teacher is unamused; he accuses you of starting fights.

So you nod along the next time it comes up, saying nothing. Blue - vibrant blue, electric blue, saturated blue - is a color not found in nature.

Except that it happens in the sky sometimes, when the Rayleigh scattering lines up just-so: blue, blue, blue, as stark and rich as any paint. On clear, bright wintry days, the snow tosses it back, faded but only by a little.

Surely the sky is natural, isn't it?

You get some clarification that time: when people say "nature" what they mean is life - flora and fauna. Blue exists, yes, but it is not found in nature because nearly no creature reflects it. That's not a bad thing - it's just that blue light is full of energy, nourishing, too valuable for living beings to give away. That means that if you look at nature - at life - the way you're supposed to, you shouldn't be seeing much of it.

So, for the most part, blue does not occur in nature. For the most part, it's the color that fills your head, and that haunts you. In this world, there's a place for blue — deep blue, propane blue, your blue — and that place is outside the realm of the natural.

What does that mean, then, for someone who has always been blue on the inside? Everyone agrees that it's so, both that you are blue and that blue is not a part of nature.

Your student, your friend, your little sibling happens to put it like this one day:

"Humans are part of this world too, aren't we?"

And there's your answer, years after you needed it but perhaps right on time all the same.



What My Grandmother Said

by Louise Bezirdjian

My maternal grandmother was a difficult and demanding woman. She lived in another seaside resort along the coast from our house. I have not one happy memory of her to relate, except perhaps the garden. She had a fuchsia bush and I loved to pick the flowers and turn them into ballerinas by pulling out the extra filaments, leaving just two, like slender dancer's legs. She had a narrow, square paved path running down the middle of the lawn which was perfect for playing solo hopscotch but I had to remember to wipe the chalk markings after I'd finished or there would be trouble.

It was strangely cold and dark in her house, even in summer. There was red Linoleum in the lavatory - she called it a lavatory - and I could hardly reach the flush chain. The paper was hard, in a box on the floor. The kitchen was cramped, smelled of stale bacon fat and, to protect the prized, it was covered in a dusty, crumpled, polythene bag. Curled inside a mauve toweling shower cap in her bedroom wardrobe was an exceptionally long rope of her plaited auburn hair, cut from her head when she was 30. Sometimes she uncoiled it and held it against my own head, and it brushed the back of my calves. She maintained her hair was so long and heavy she was forced to have it cut to assuage her headaches and back problems.

She was sour; her mouth turned down at the corners. Her small eyes squeezed together in a constant disapproving frown. She must have been badly wronged in her life to make her so mean, mean spirited as well as ungenerous.

She never read me stories or bought me sweets, or baked a cake with me. She did teach me how to knit, but the lessons were fraught, she was impatient and would snap like a cat if I didn't catch on to an instruction immediately. I don't ever remember hugging her or her cuddling me. There would only be a polite peck on the cheek, when I would smell that fusty, old lady smell, a mix of moth balls, a little body odor and lavender water.

There are letters my father wrote during WW2 where he mentions her fondly, so perhaps she wasn't always miserable.

29 September 41

I was very sorry to hear that your mother had to have as many as 16 teeth extracted—what a horrid appointment it must have been to look forward to! It was bad enough when I had one pulled out so I dread to think how very painful it must have been for her.

From time to time I was sent to stay with my grandmother when my parents had the occasional escape from their boisterous children. I dreaded it. I was with her on 15th February 1971, the day the United Kingdom embraced decimalisation. She sent me to the butchers on the parade to buy sausages for our lunch and I ran excitedly all the way back to her house. I wanted to show her the shiny new decimal coins I had been given as change which jingled in my pocket. She was absolutely furious, ordered me straight back to the butcher to insist on her change in 'proper money'. I was twelve years old, shy, cowered and so ashamed of my grandmother's wrath.

On her sideboard in the dining room she had a large silver ball, about the size of a small bowling ball. It was never dusted because the dust that collected on top was alleged to have magic powers. Very occasionally I was allowed to place one finger on it, wipe off a little dust, and then make a silent wish. Needless to say, the wishes never came true: mine was probably *Please can someone come and fetch me home in the next five minutes?*

2nd October 1942

Are you going to French classes this evening or going straight home to finish a pullover and listen whilst Mummy recounts her experiences that afternoon in an air raid shelter?

I was transfixed by her underwear which consisted of layer upon layer, summer and winter, no matter the weather. Voluminous knickers went on first, followed by a heavily boned corset with dangling suspenders on which were hung thick beige stockings, 60 denier, with seams up the back. The corset ensured she always sat ram-rod straight, and walked with the deportment of a debutante even in her 80s. Her brassiere was satin, shapeless and offered little if any support to her sagging breasts which lolled over the top of the high corset, and had thick straps and multiple rows of fastening hooks and eyes at the front. She would pull a woolen vest on top of the bra and corset and long woolen bloomers on top of the stockings and suspenders, and finally a silk petticoat to smooth the silhouette of whole ensemble. It took her a very long time to get dressed and undressed each day.

We used to visit her neighbor, an ancient paraplegic called Mrs.. Goddard, who lay on a day bed in her geranium filled conservatory, her spidery veined hands clawing at the heaps of hand-

crocheted blankets covering her skeletal body. If my grandmother perceived me to be naughty she would pinch my thighs and order me not to cry or *you'll end up with legs like Mrs. Goddard's*. I never actually knew what poor Mrs. Goddard's legs looked like, hidden as they were under the blankets, but I knew she couldn't walk and I'd seen her awful hands which was plenty enough grist for my imagination.

June 1942

What thousands of happy memories come back to life as soon as I give our double bed a thought! Watching your pretty little face deep in slumber, making love to you in the afternoons at Blakewood Court, straining our ears for Mummy's unexpected arrival...

There was another time that springs to mind. Rarely was I allowed in the dining room with its dark wood sideboard and matching dining table and chairs. Her knees were old and arthritic so I was given a yellow duster, stiff with polish and a tin of bee's wax and told to clean the furniture, starting, crouched on the floor, with the barley twist table legs. She watched me, upright, beady eyed, her now salt-and-pepper hair crimped into artificial waves. I must have been about seven or eight and I said something like,

"Mummy doesn't make me polish the furniture; she just dusts it."

"Your mother was a harlot in the war!" she replied.

I didn't know what a harlot was. It didn't sound like a very nice word, and I was too frightened to ask. I couldn't make head nor tail of the definition in my children's dictionary: A woman of the night. A prostitute.

Camp Gaza

by Alison Glick

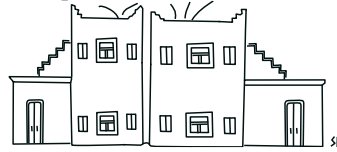
I needed no clock to tell me the time during those precious Gaza mornings.

Camp Gaza began promptly at 9, and every Sunday through Thursday around 8:30 a murmur of voices floated up from the YMCA courtyard below, swelling in volume as the time approached the top of the hour. A high cement wall surrounded the Y's grounds and buildings, all secured by a bolted metal gate that opened onto a red clay courtyard — the camp's center of action. It was the place where campers gathered each morning, a few boys lazily shooting hoops and girls in small clusters, heads bent together, chatting and laughing. The sound of the camp's ringing doorbell would soon be drowned out by the animated voices of the campers, each one greeted with the scraping of the gate's bolt sliding along its track, opening the door to their new day. The chorus of excitement wafted up across the street and through the bedroom window, flung open to any hint of breeze that could make its way through the thick Gazan air that thinned only slightly over night. This was my morning alarm in summer 2023, the last time I saw Gaza in the before times.

It was a Gaza I hadn't seen for thirty-one years. My previous visit, like this one, was to bring my daughter to see her father's family. That Gaza was one I still knew well. I could flag down a Peugeot 404 taxi with a baby on my hip and navigate the labyrinthine maze of Shati camp's alleyways, unintimidated by the stares of passersby. Missing then but present now was her father Zayn, my former husband, who had returned from a painful, disorienting exile and was our host, along with his wife.

This Gaza had become almost unrecognizable to me. How could I not know we were on Omar al-Mukhtar Street, the main street I had driven down hundreds of times in the two years I lived there? Was that really *Souk al-Fres*, once an open-air market with farmers selling produce off the back of donkey carts and now an expanse of well-kept storefronts? Most shocking was not recognizing the house where Zayn and I had lived as newlyweds. Yes, floors had been added, as had a coat or two of paint. A lump rose in my throat when I saw that the garden had been sacrificed to space needed for my brother-in-law's growing family that had moved in during Zayn's exile. But what really threw me was the neighborhood. The four-story house built inches away from ours hadn't existed then. Neither had the cluster of shops across the street. And what had happened to the swathe of sand between the house and Shati camp where every afternoon lithe, raucous boys would careen up and down their

makeshift field chasing a soccer ball? Like so much of that Gaza — my marriage to Zayn, countless friends, vestigial memories — it was gone. The question for me now became what is here instead?



From my ninth-floor perch that I shared with our daughter in Zayn's apartment, I had a bird's-eye view of the Y, with the camp's activities forming a kind of soundtrack to our visit. Punctuating the swell of morning voices at precisely nine o'clock was a sharp blast from the director's whistle. It was time for the good morning call and response followed by daily announcements, and time for us to be up and dressed, ready for the day.

For Zayn, every day included a trip to what he called his farm, a plot of land in the town of Beit Lahia, north of Gaza City near the border. On those one and a half dunums of cherished earth he had created a garden oasis. The gate opened onto a patio shaded by a grape arbor heavy with pale green fruit that sparkled in the summer sun. Behind a small hut that hosted visitors in rainy weather stood a few towering date palms whose clusters of young fruit hung down like yellow feather dusters. Next to those, in a section reserved solely for them, stood several rows of olive trees, whose graceful silver-green leaves and intricate, sturdy trunks were unmistakable. Woven throughout were pomegranate, pomelo, papaya, lemon and fig trees. Stalks of corn and banana leaves waved in a modest breeze to the pepper and beet plants below. Punctuating it all were fragrant bushes of basil, jasmine and mint. The abundance was almost overwhelming. Yet I could not help gravitating to the elegant flowers that dotted the landscape, some in earthenware pots and others in old olive oil tins and plastic buckets: spikes of purple gladiolus and blood-red hibiscus, butter yellow lilies, and lush coral roses. Seeing such delicate beauty take its place among the hardy and stalwart produce was somehow very Gazan.

Zayn weeded and watered, fussing over his bounty like a farmer preparing for the county fair, as our daughter and I watched. Mornings at the farm stretched into early afternoon, when visitors would often arrive. Those who were children thirty-one years ago would bring their children, along with nieces and nephews who hadn't yet been born my last time here. Tea would be served along with some offering from the garden. Before leaving for lunch, Zayn would prepare a bundle of that day's harvest — peppers and lemons, potatoes and papaya, a few stems of roses — carefully wrapping it all in a plastic bag that he would stop to give to friends on our way home.

After lunch we would all sleep away what we could of the midday heat. The cheers of the campers' late afternoon basketball game would wake me, sticky and bewildered, from a hazy slumber. Sipping sweet tea brightened with mint from our morning, I would

take my place at the open window, forearms perched on the aluminum frame. Adorned in track suits and sneakers, the players dashed up and down the green court, hijabs flapping behind those girls who were wearing them, everyone sweating and cheering. The boys made up in shooting skills what they lacked in the girls' height advantage. Players cycled in and out at the signal of the coach's whistle. At the end, everyone circled together, hands clasped, faces red with excitement and effort. After yelling a chant I could never quite understand, they raised their arms and let out one last *whoop!* Game over.

One evening near the end of our stay, the basketball court was transformed into a dance floor for *dabke*, with neat rows of chairs lined up on the perimeter. Twinkling lights strung between the Y's buildings looked like fireflies from my vantage point. The end-of-camp party transformed the usually silent night-time courtyard into a celebration buzzing with excitement. Once the sound system was hooked up, the throbbing beat of *tablas*, *dabke* music, and Arabic pop songs reverberated throughout the neighborhood late into the night.

The next morning children arrived to collect their remaining belongings, shoving them into backpacks that would go unused for the school year that would not be. In a few short months, those backpacks would carry only the essentials as they fled for their lives, leaving their childhoods behind.

Now Gaza is unrecognizable to all. Miraculously, though, the YMCA stands partially intact, its windowless buildings pockmarked with bullet holes, the grounds strewn with chunks of concrete and metal. The courtyard where campers once gathered each morning is now home to a displaced family living under a tarp. On a wall to which the tarp has been tied, someone has painted a line from a Mahmoud Darwish poem: "On this land there is something worth living for." Those returning to the north and to every other place from which they have been displaced, and those who never left know exactly what that something is.

Gaza holds for me now what it has always held: love. It's a love that looks and feels different in ways that have taken time to understand. Like the courtyard of the Y, it has been battered by the forces aligned against it but remains open to those seeking shelter from a loveless world. In the difference there is also a gift. New people to love and laugh with. New people to form memories with. And new people, as I would learn after October 7, to grieve. It's a familial love, yes, but somehow something more. It's a love forged and strengthened by its own rending and repair. It's a love that grows in unexpected ways and places, like the silky roses in Zayn's garden. And it has become a buoy to which we all desperately cling in a sea of genocidal violence. Most crucially, it is our north star to the future for without it we are lost.



Loved

by Lucy Carr Icard

It was a fun night, if anything, I thought. My belly bulged under the white hospital sheet. The room was cold and sterile.

“A cesarean,” the OBGYN said. She explained something about the placenta obstructing my cervix. I don’t really know what she was talking about. *I am no longer in control. I don’t think I ever was.*

A large window spans the length of the wall. I feel like a frog waiting to be dissected. My chest is covered by the sheet, but my legs are sprawled open, bent at the knees. My womanhood is exposed to the passersby. They don’t even look. Doctors, nurses, personnel, they fly by in green scrubs and bouffant caps. I shiver. *I just want to get this over with.*

I think about Raymond, or was it Steve? Maybe he’s called Raymond Steve. It seems that I heard people calling him by both names. His blond hair was greased back, and he had a flashy smile with white teeth. *Maybe his eyes were green?* I can’t remember. *Maybe the baby’s eyes are green,* I think. *Maybe they are brown,* like mine. *I’ll find out soon.* My heart warms despite the cold obstetric bed.

The anesthesiologist walks in. He is businesslike; as if I’m not lying here with my bulging vagina exposed to the world. I don’t know why I have to be naked; they are going to cut me open to get to the baby. He places a catheter in my lower vertebra. I wonder how he does it since I am practically lying down. I don’t really care. He said the epidural will numb the pain. I tremble.

I imagine what it would be like if Raymond, or was it Steve? were here. Would he sit by me during the intervention and stroke my forehead? Or would he be pacing back and forth in the waiting room? I think about how things should have been, Raymond Steve, by my side, waiting for his daughter.

It's ok, I tell myself. It was my choice. Raymond Steve will never know he has a daughter. My blood warms my body – *I am going to be a mother.* I can almost feel her in my arms, almost smell the sweetness of her skin. *My baby.*

The epidural must be working because my legs no longer feel cold. They don't feel anything at all.

The OBGYN enters the room. She reassures me. There are other people, too. I don't pay attention to them. I concentrate on what I am feeling. A tug, something scraping. I hear voices, but all I see is the white light shining down from the ceiling. It seems strange to know that something is happening but not really feel it.

A soft whimper.

The baby is wrapped in a blanket. *My daughter.*

Someone puts her in my arms. Her tiny eyes are sealed shut. I don't know if they are green or brown. Her skin is ashen, yellowish. But her face is perfect.

Commotion.

They rip her from my arms.

"Aimée!" I cry out.

"Don't worry," they say. "There is a small problem, but she will be okay."

"Small problem?" I ask.

"Yes, it happens sometimes with a cesarean," they explain.

"Her lungs are full of amniotic fluid. We need to pump them out."

It does not sound like a *small problem* to me.

"But Aimée will live," I say. It isn't a question.

They don't answer.

They are gone for a long time.

I keep my legs still, only moving my arm to touch the skin near the stitches. My stomach feels numb, bloated.

I lift my head. The stitches look like a barbed wire fence, clamping my skin together. They shaved my pubis, and my skin is stained with Betadine. I slump my head back on the thin pillow. My insides feel bruised. Exhaustion wraps a blanket over me. I let it.

A nurse wakes me up.

"Aimée?" I croak, tearing myself from my slumber. Without thinking, I try to sit up, to swing my legs off the bed. A pain rips through my right calf. I yelp.

The nurse puts her warm hand on my leg. "It is swollen," she says. My leg throbs under her touch. "I'm going to go get the doctor."

"Aimée?" I beseech. The pain in my heart hammers more painfully than in my leg.

“She is in neonatal. They have her breathing, she is stable,” the nurse said before scurrying out of the room.

Stable, I think, letting the stress wound around my chest untighten, just a little.

The doctor gave me a shot of Heparin. “Anticoagulant,” he said. If the swelling doesn’t diminish, you’ll need an IV.”

I don’t really care. I just want to see Aimée. I close my eyes and see her perfect face.

The doctor left. I lay still, thinking about my baby on the fifth floor in Neonatal. She is only three floors above me. She could be exactly above me. I did the math; she may only be 24 feet away. *So close. So far*. The sinking feeling in my stomach was worse than the pounding in my leg.

I wait.

I sleep. I dream that Aimée is in my arms. I can see her bright eyes, her straight nose, her soft lips. Her tender skin has regained its color, a light rich brown. Her head is covered with a thin layer of hair, lighter than mine. It looks like peach fuzz. She is hungry; she roots and twists her head toward my breasts. I feel them tighten, filling with milk.

Aimée, I think. *You are loved*. I drift off, holding my baby in my arms.

I wake up, but I don’t. I can feel things happening to me, but I can’t see what. It feels like a peridural, but all over my body. I tighten my grip on Aimée. They tug at my arm. I feel a cold liquid swirl through my veins. Then I don’t. They lift me, slide something hard under me. I hear screeches, loud noises, and alarms. They echo from a distance in my head. My chest compresses, pounds. I want to yell at them. They are going to crush my baby! I try to open my mouth, but something is covering it, my mouth and my nose. *Aimée!* I screech, silently.



The Best Advice by Abby Remer

“I can’t do this.”

I’m crying, no, snorting tears down my cheeks into my throat.

I am desperately ill, in dire pain, and emanating more fear than this foreign land can hold.

I’m standing in the back of a bus, careening down a coastal road in Turkey on a bright, hot June morning.

“What is going on?” Caren and Laura, two teacher trainers at the spiritual IM School of Healing Arts, are asking with love purring through their voices. I can’t begin to describe the overwhelm.

We arrived 56 hours earlier after a brutal flight, and while everyone else is tired, I can’t see straight because my gallbladder is on fire, my bones hurt, and my upper back is being cranked apart on a rack.

I have a debilitating disease for which there is no name. It began three years earlier. At 34 years old, I came down with a wracking cough that tore at my lungs with every fit, which no carpet bombing of antibiotics could stop. Soon, everything was running through me. I felt each beat of my heart even when I was in bed, and there was a searing, unrelenting javelin piercing every muscle.

“It’s all in your head. There is no such thing,” my first internist insisted when I asked to be tested for Chronic Fatigue, which few had heard of, and the medical profession roundly denied at the time.

“Then give me copies of all my records,” I’d furiously demanded and stormed out of the office as best I could, shaking from yet another bout of coughing.

Doctor after doctor, specialist after specialist, test after test, denied that anything was clinically wrong. I was desperate as each day I got worse. Through word of mouth, I discovered a remarkable

holistic physician, Dr. Stoff, who runs a special clinic in Tucson, Arizona.

I completed a twenty-two-page questionnaire delving into my physical, emotional, and spiritual history, faxed over all 127 pages of medical records, and had an hour-long consultation with Dr. Stoff's medical historian, who went through, blow-by-blow, each detail of my life.

"My team and I have reviewed everything you sent, and we are ready to move forward," Dr. Stoff embraced me in welcome when I arrived in his office. I burst into tears, feeling both heard and believed for the very first time. *Maybe there's hope?* I thought, almost too scared to believe there might be some way to deal with this nightmare.

It turns out, I have five simultaneous autoimmune illnesses. Not lost on me is that among them, I am producing antibodies against my reproductive and digestive systems and, significantly, my own heart. I'm not smiling. God is clearly sending me a message I've been ignoring for far too long.

Dr. Stoff and his holistic team presented a treatment plan that bridged Eastern and Western medicine and, to my enormous relief, gave equal measure to my spiritual health. In New York, at the IM School of Healing Arts, I'd already been working closely with its powerful founder, Levent, on my spiritual growth.

I'd been led by a series of God-given breadcrumbs to Levent's door, seeking something beyond conventional therapy. I've learned profound truths about myself that I'm slowly working through: I hold onto grief as an identity, as though my life depends on it. I disempower others from helping me, so strong is my deep-seated need for control. My quick mind often keeps me disconnected from my inner spirit.

Over the years, I have been getting better, ever so slowly. Although I am still pretty ill, Dr. Stoff and Levent agreed that I could risk the two-week trip to Turkey to visit sacred sites and bask in the ancient healing energy. They hoped the visit would accelerate my recovery. And I desperately didn't want to miss this opportunity to be with my classmates on the culmination of our spiritual journey at the school.

But standing in this bus with Laura and Caren looking on, I *know* I have made a terrible mistake. The others are fine after no sleep the night before; breakfasting at 8 am; then traveling to a spiritual archaeological site for hours of meditation, contemplation, and

“processing,” stretching far into nighttime adventures until dawn, to desolate islands with Roman ruins and ancient mud baths.

Ripped from my health regime that demands tight reins on my food, hours of sleep, and downtime, my body is screaming, No!

Through my hiccupped tears, I try to describe my terror and physical breakdown. “You guys just can’t understand. There’s no way I’m going to make it another hour, let alone two weeks of this. Who did I think I was fooling, believing I could do this pilgrimage?”

Then it strikes. A voice. Not mine, but coming unbidden into my head:

Hold open the possibility that anything can happen.

That split second, that divine intervention, changes the trajectory of the trip...and my life. I intuitively know what these sacred words mean. God is telling me to get out of my own way. Don’t think of any alternative to whatever my fear may be. Leave space for the workings of miracles. It isn’t about the power of positive thinking; it’s about *not* thinking at all.

I sail through the rest of Turkey. My health soars as I soak in hallowed sites and rituals, fall more deeply in love with my classmates, and am at one with all that is in utter grace. My heart is big, and there is hope. I’d flown to Turkey with an oxygen canister, which helped with the pain, but I told the stewardess to keep it on the way back.

When we arrive home, I crash for a while, but by holding open the possibility that anything can happen, I quickly regain ground. I try out my mantra on *all* my many, multiple, and myriad fears...and continue to do so. I work this muscle like a triathlete, and though my physical healing takes a decade more, I live in a new paradigm—a before-and-much-better-after.

Thirty years later, not a day goes by that I don’t say those words. It can be when I’m running late, about to have a conversation that’s making me oh so anxious, a relationship that’s going south, a task that feels overwhelming.

The thing about the solutions to my fears is that when I hold open the possibility that anything can happen, what comes about is *always, always* something I never, ever could have thought of on my own.

Does God give advice? That day in Turkey, it was more like a command. I suppose since I have free will, I could choose not to listen to this wise counsel...but why would I when the words come straight from heaven?



Artwork by Angela Wilson

That first cup

- by Sarai Mannolini-Winwood

Why is it so comforting to fold
Clinging fingers around
A warm cup of tea?
To watch steam spiral
In cold morning air
As the dog still snores
And snow fills the porch.
Bergamot clouds out
Woodfire smoke even as
Ash is still settling.
Sugar sweet and milky
Soothes wind-jangled nerves
An embodiment of
Fleece PJs and Uggs in a mug.



School - by Leslie Dianne

To understand the ocean
I would have to lie
on the sand and
let it scratch my skin
until it was smooth
then I would bury my arms
and let the sandweight
take my bones and
knit my flesh to itself
my legs would grow holes
and turn inside out
my chest would sink in
to the deep moist layer
where treasures are kept
my ears would dissolve
and say hello to my eyes
my nose, curious at the change
would scent danger
then wonder
the fog would come
from across the world
tides would visit me
and offer me to the moon
I would wash from the shore
blink with my big new eyes
at the waves
my tender gills
learning to breathe
once more
a kindergarten creature
in a new kind of school



Ghosts

by Robert Leger

She asked to loosen my top button. I said it had been a long time since anyone wanted to do that and laughed. She didn't. As her hands rose toward my chest, my mind went somersaulting back decades to another woman, another shirt.

It was October. Our campus church group was going on a hayride. It sounded like fun, especially with the girl I'd just started dating. As the tractor and hay-covered flatbed rambled down a wooded path under a full moon, she surprised me by taking my hand in hers. We joined the others in chatter and laughter until the end of the ride, where hot chocolate and campfire treats waited.

A guy with a guitar sang a John Prine song. Someone told a ghost story. I slid a spit through a marshmallow. The girl said she imagined I'd done that before and laughed. Yeah, hasn't everyone made a s'more?

A gust chased sparks from the fire, and that's when I realized my head was bare. I'd lost my hat, and this wasn't just any hat. It was a Scottish tam, a souvenir from a trip that summer. I looked at the girl, panicked. We'll find it, she said.

We walked for what felt like a long time. She talked most of the way. I nodded, said uh huh every so often, kept my eyes peeled on the ruts in the road, swiveled my head back and forth to the dying roadside grass, wondered why she was jabbering instead of looking, and then she pointed and said there it is. She leaned over, picked up the cap, and placed it on my head, a secure tug for emphasis. She took a step back, shook her head in disapproval, said it's not that cold, and loosened my top button. She didn't ask. She pulled me toward her. Didn't ask about that, either. The kiss was long and deep. Better than hot chocolate.

At last, she pulled away and, with a laugh, asked what took me so long. She promised to make me a better kisser. She slipped her hands under my loosened flannel shirt and kissed me again. Her face, her smile, her ...

Some memories are best left buried. I shook my head like I was erasing an Etch-a-Sketch. The hayride and the cap, the kiss and the girl faded away, just as she had before the next Halloween. We were kids, and those kids turned to ghosts long ago. Other women came ... and went. It had been a long time since anyone wanted inside my shirt. Until today.

The woman loosened the button and slid her hands under my Polo, up my chest, over my shoulders. She rubbed my neck. Her fingers probed. It doesn't feel like a lymph node, she said. Probably just a muscle knot. We can order a CT scan just in case.



Longlegs

by Tamizh Ponni VP

I got ten minutes tops.
My school bus ran on callous grease
And the selfish clock simmered scarlet.
Ripples of fear have raided the room.
One small shift and my cover's blown.
I see an entrance woven by drips of vile
A red carpet is rolled out to blurry backrooms
There she is
Snugly perched four feet above the floor
Primed for a manic rampwalk on a vulgar runway
“Come out! How long?!” Mother screamed
While the cleaning mop giggled from its
corner I squinted and sprinted from
captive air into clearance
She was one of those cellar types that had a year or two.
Have we met before?
At the library last week on Britannica's centrefold!
When my squeal earned a ban and a gross embarrassment.

Phobias are egregious. Just like love.

Twenty years tumbled down the ridges of life.

My Tree Rings darkened, and color schemes faded.

I met the latest one from her labyrinth
Tiny yet gallantly hacking its
paralysed prey.
Same place. Reformed fear.

My bathroom tiles bore the worst.

Its grout lines fed on salty dreams.

Gifts of grief and chronic cramps

From her high-hat loge, She saw it all and snubbed it all.

The premieres of my teenage theatre.

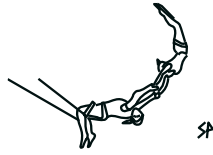
Our paths felt the final touch.

When lines almost turned circles.
Caged by cottage walls, inked by polar
past, lineal ghosts wandered my halls .
Her slender shadows lurked from the shelves above my kitchen sink.

Only this time, they were benign.

Too frail to balloon or build a
decoy, She crawled under my
coffee skin and grew into my
bitter veins.
Medications failed, but mutual pain helped.

Under the fractals of wasted youth, We made a
silent pact to honor what we lost and curse those
we wronged. Two blotched souls that waited to be
towed by the wrinkled hands of time.
Our eyes whispered a bankrupt 'Goodnight.'



Believe You Can Fly
by Debra Jo Myers

The line of people stretched all the way around the block. When the big red doors opened, they flooded in. The smells of popcorn and sawdust filled the air. It was the '*Greatest Amateur Show on Earth!*'

The 1500-seat arena was standing room only when Delia climbed the rope ladder to the pedestal twenty-five feet above the crowd. All eyes were on her. Wrapping her fingers tightly around the trapeze, she thought about ten years earlier when she was one of those spectators. She had done this trick dozens of times, but it didn't keep her from feeling a sliver of fear. She took a deep breath before she nodded to her coach below. The coach signaled, she swung out, threw her body into a layout somersault, and looked for the catcher's hands trusting they would be there. When they made the catch, the audience erupted in applause. Delia smiled returning to the bar with a sense of overwhelming relief and exhilaration. She had never felt an adrenalin rush like that before.

Ten years earlier when she was six, Delia's mama first took her to their local amateur circus. Delia was in awe of the sparkling costumes, clowns creating laughter, the band playing *Hey Look Me Over*, and the ringmaster bellowing, "Ladies and Gentlemen, Children of All Ages!" It gave her chills.

When mama asked if she wanted to be in the circus. She jumped up and down and yelled, "Yes, yes, yes!"

Delia's uncle made trapezes for the circus and made her a single trapeze of her own. He hung it on a large tree branch at her house. Mama put an old mattress underneath, and Delia found a step ladder to use as her pedestal for her mini version of flying trapeze. She began doing tricks and then dropping onto the mattress. She practiced every day, so much that she developed calluses on her

palms. The sky was pitch dark before she went inside. She even had dreams about the circus.

A year passed before Delia could sign up to be in the circus, and as she walked into the circus arena this time, it looked gigantic without an audience in the bleachers. Her heartbeat fast, and she was filled with excitement when she learned that her first act in the show would be *Swinging Ladders* - the ladders swing ten feet in the air while the performers do tricks on their rungs, including hanging upside by one foot in a foot loop. Delia's coach, Betty, had white hair and a matching contagious white smile.

"Coach Betty, I keep messing up the foot loop trick. I am too scared!" Delia told her after a failed attempt.

"Young lady, you aren't scared. You are fearless. Embrace that quality whenever you feel nervousness emerging. Trust yourself." She took Delia's hands in hers. "I know you can perform the foot loop trick. You have the natural talent to become a wonderful aerialist. I am proud of you for talking to me about it."

The next day at practice, Delia wanted to go up on the ladders first. She wanted to show Coach Betty she was right - she did the trick! She couldn't wait to learn whatever came next.

She moved on to side-by-side trapeze and met trapeze coach, Willie.

"Dee'da, you skills on'da tap'eze," he put his fingers to his lips and blew a kiss. "Fantabulous!"

She adored the fiery little man with a German accent. He made her giggle when he pronounced her name, "Dee-da."

"I have a trapeze at home on my tree. I've been practicing," Delia said with pride.

"Fantabulous!" Willie said again.

The year Delia turned thirteen, she took a big step up from her mini trapeze on the tree and tried out for high-flying trapeze. The first time she climbed the rope ladder to the pedestal, she couldn't look down. It was higher than it looked, and it was a lot scarier than she expected. She started in a safety belt swinging over the net and built the courage to drop to the net to learn how to fall. It became exhilarating once her initial fear subsided.

"Delia, I feel you're ready to get rid of that belt and start working on tricks to the catcher," her flying coach told her. He used to be a flyer too.

Before the final four performers were chosen, they would have to do two tricks without the belt, catch, and return to the bar and pedestal.

The day arrived, and Delia was shaky and nervous until she heard Coach Betty's voice in her head. "Trust your talent. Embrace your fearless side." Her hands were sweating, so she applied more rosin powder and shook it off. Delia nodded to the catcher that she was ready. Both of her tricks went flawlessly. She made it! Delia

became a member of the *Freebirds Flying Trapeze* act that was not only her dream, but the dream of every child in the circus.

The following summer for Delia could have been tragic. She had fallen before, but never anything quite like this fall. She began learning a trick called the “passing leap.” She swung out, the catcher caught her legs, then another flyer did a somersault over the top of her as the catcher turned her back to the trapeze bar. But this time something went terribly wrong, and they collided. Delia was kicked in the back, hurdled uncontrollably toward the ground, and she could miss the net.

Performers on the ground watching began yelling.

“Delia’s falling!”

“Oh, no! I think she’s going to hit the concrete!”

A spotter who was under the rig who saw Delia, ran toward her, and caught her under the armpits. The heels of Delia’s feet slammed down on the concrete as she cried out in pain. She flopped onto her right side fracturing her tailbone.

Delia credits that spotter for remarkably saving her life. But Delia was tough and determined to fly again, despite her mama trying to talk her into waiting.

“You don’t have to go back up, sweetie. It worries me. You had a traumatic, frightening fall. No one expects you to fly this season after that,”

Mama

said.

But Delia tapped into that fearless nature. She went to her flying coach.

“Coach, I want to try it again. Please! I don’t want to wait.”

Although he was apprehensive, three weeks later, she was back in the air. She and her partner worked together and conquered the “passing leap” before showtime. It was that drive that she carried with her as an adult.

Being diagnosed with Primary Progressive Multiple Sclerosis nearly forty years later in 2016, Delia’s neurologist explained this accident may have contributed to it.

“Although it’s impossible to determine the exact cause of your disease, suffering blunt force trauma injuries to the head or spine can lead to its progressive development.”

After her MS diagnosis, people gasped in disbelief when she told them she was once a highflyer.

“Is that why you’re crippled now?”

“She’s delusional. She’s got to be making it up.”

Comments like these made her feel small, like the first time she walked into the circus arena as a little girl. Multiple Sclerosis is referred to as an invisible disease, and that was just how she felt. She slipped into severe depression grieving who she used to be.

One afternoon her son, Derek, came by, and he was getting ready to take her granddaughter to see the circus for the first time. Delia overheard him talking to his little daughter, Joelle.

“When Nana was in the circus, she flew at the top of the arena.”

Her eyes lit up. When he showed her the collage of pictures of Delia on flying trapeze, she ran to her Nana.

“I’m going to tell all my friends about you, Nana. I can’t wait until I can be in the circus and fly on the trapeze like you did!”

Delia was touched deep inside; it took her back to the smells of popcorn and sawdust, back to the day when mama first took her to see the circus.

After seeing Joelle’s reaction, Delia’s depression slowly lifted. Looking back at her past accomplishments like flying high, she began to stop grieving what she could no longer do. Instead, she cherished the memories of what she’d done. She began to move forward, battling her disease. She made it through four of the five steps of grief – denial, anger, bargaining, and depression. She was moving toward step five – acceptance.

As a girl, she bravely climbed that rope ladder to the pedestal high in the circus arena. She was ready to fly, as high as she could go. Delia believed she could soar.



The Gray Demise

by Homere Bar El

When Mrs.. Jay and Mr. Jay saw the announcement on television they couldn't quite imagine exactly what the announcer meant by, 'color.'

Mrs. Jay eyed the dark-haired Mr. Jay. His darkish lips were gaped wide open, and his bushy gray hands were entwined in a gesture reminiscent of prayer.

"The New Year will be a new dawn for America," said the NBC announcer, "And for the world entire, in due course." He continued, "This broadcast will not appear again and will not be available in our archives, it is therefore paramount that you never refrain from the task. Good day and Merry Christmas to you all."

Mr. Jay rose from his light gray chair and went over to the table to put some strawberry jam on the white bread. Mrs.. Jay, quite shocked by the whole affair motioned her husband to step outside with her. Mr. Jay took a small bite and left the bread on the kitchen table. The two stepped outside to enjoy the wonderful gray lawn and the blinding sunlight.

"What shall we do?" asked Mrs. Jay.

"What can we do?" Mr. Jay scratched his head, "As the government said I suppose."

"Darling isn't this all a little irrational?"

Mr. Jay laughed, "The word 'color' sounds irrational to me. Come dear, they know what they're doing."

Mrs. Jay nodded and reluctantly allowed Mr. Jay to return home for his sandwich. She placed a hand on her swollen stomach. She could not come to terms with having to lie to their unborn child.

The following week on New Year's Eve, they woke up to a new world. At first, they didn't quite notice it, but when Mr. Jay started his morning by making himself his usual strawberry jam sandwich he shrieked. Mrs. Jay rushed downstairs. Her eyes widened

in horror. The strawberry jam was no longer a delicious dark gray but a smudgy burning sort of color. Mr. Jay had dropped the knife and cut his finger.

"It's just a scratch darling," he murmured, "I was surprised is all."

He sucked the blood away. Mrs. Jay stood back, terrified. She pointed at his face and couldn't let out a word. Mr. Jay found a mirror and was shocked to find the same smudgy burning color dripping from his lips. Their lips he now saw were of a similar tint to the smudgy color, only of a lighter variant, like grass and leaves in their respective gray.

They turned on the television and found it too dizzying to view. They turned their eyes away and listened.

"...variant of color called red, our scientists have so determined that our jams, bodily interiors, some fruits such as strawberries and apples as well as negative dangerous items such as fire or the communist flag will be so 'colored'."

Red was the first to appear. Though they remained glued to the television, hearing with apprehension the naming of new 'colors' that were to soon materialize. The broadcaster reported that the government was aware of the panic and was therefore going to slow the rollout. Thus, when the couple finally endeavored to leave the home and take the car to a local meadow to relax, they found their car a frightful color. They rushed back inside until the NBC presented once again the new colors introduced – Red, orange and yellow. Their car was a horrible yellow color!

"Oh, get it changed!" shrieked Mrs. Jay. The next day, Mr. Jay sold the car for half the price and got a wonderful elegant classic dark gray car.

"I can't have folks in the office see me with such a color!" Mr. Jay whispered in angst.

A week later, he returned to the car salesman, his car having turned to a depressing hue of 'blue'. The car salesman was unwilling to make a trade.

"Look I'm being overrun here," he said. "Anyhow this 'blue' may not be so bad, look the sky looks like it." There was nothing Mr. Jay could do and so, he returned defeated with his blue car. The last trace of their world by the end of the year was the sublime gentleness of nature — as gray as ever.

Photographs could still be taken in the old palette and so the Jays made sure to picture their newborn baby girl as much as possible so one day she could know how she would have truly looked if the world were left untouched by man and his coloring devices.

But even the old forests and the mighty rivers were not left unspoiled. One day, the murky blue of the water was no longer contrasted by the divine gray of nature but by a harsh, living, breathing color. It frightened them. So much so Mrs. Jay avoided the grass for a full month, so afraid she was of its strange breathing.

When their daughter, Joan started growing up, the Jays started taking her to the movies. One time they took her to a screening of the old classic – Casablanca. She couldn't help it. She was mesmerized.

"Mama, papa?" she asked in her tiny voice, "In old times was everything black and white?"

The Jays looked at each other, the moment the broadcaster had warned about had arrived.

"Surely not darling!" said Mr. Jay, "We had color, same as today, only we couldn't capture it is all."

Little Joan nodded and went back to staring at the film. They too couldn't help but stare. When they thought Joan couldn't look, they shed tears of longing and regret. As Henry was born and he and Joan grew older, they would sometimes look at the old photographs of the children, reminiscent of the wonderful shades of gray, so fine in its differentiation, it turned all it shaded to art.

All the children grew believing color was ever the norm in the world, though they may have noticed how the colors grew sharper and more distinct over time. Or perhaps they never noticed, never trained and attuned to the fine palette of older times. Even those parents that couldn't stop themselves and told their kids the truth on the emergence of color were dismissed as a joke by the youngsters. The cameras switched after a time, and the gray was lost in moviemaking. Only a few photographers kept picturing the old take on things, showing their work in nostalgic art galleries.

Long after the children had moved out. The Jays would sit in the attic and look back the photographs of little Henry and Joan, remembering the sublimity of a simpler time, a time without color, until even they forgot.



The Country I Carry in Sound

by Syed Peerzada Shoib Nazir

If someone asked me to describe my country without showing a single photograph, I would ask them to close their eyes.

Every morning began the same way, although I never realized it at the time.

Before anyone in our house had finished breakfast, the vegetable vendor would turn into our lane. I never knew his name. I am not sure anyone did. We recognized him by his voice instead. It travelled ahead of him, slipping around corners and through open windows until someone, somewhere, would say, "He's here."

That was usually enough.

By the time he reached our gate, the neighborhood had already begun assembling itself. A wooden gate creaked open somewhere across the lane. A kettle whistled from a nearby kitchen. Sparrows argued from telephone wires with the confidence of creatures who believed the morning belonged to them. A shopkeeper rolled open his metal shutter, its familiar scrape echoing briefly before dissolving into the sounds that followed.

No one decided that the day had begun.

It simply happened.

One sound made room for another until the silence of dawn became the ordinary noise of morning.

As a child, I never listened to any of this. Not really. The sounds seemed as permanent as the road outside our house. They returned every day with such quiet reliability that I mistook them for part of nature itself. I assumed mornings everywhere arrived in much the same way. It never crossed my mind that another neighborhood, another country, might wake to an entirely different rhythm.

I could not have pointed to every village on a map, or explained the geography of the valley, but I knew exactly how an ordinary morning unfolded. I knew the moment the first bicycle rattled over the uneven road. I knew when neighbors would begin greeting one another across garden walls. I knew that somewhere,

before long, the cricket games waiting for the afternoon were already being argued into existence by children who had not yet left for school.

None of these things asked to be remembered.

They simply refused to leave.

They work quietly in the background, arranging life so efficiently that we mistake them for the natural order of things. No one wakes up thinking about the creak of a neighbor's gate or the scrape of a shopkeeper lifting his shutter. We do not pause to appreciate the pressure cooker announcing dinner in another kitchen, or the chorus of sparrows that somehow returns to the same telephone wires each morning. These sounds do not demand our attention. They ask only to be repeated.

Every afternoon, our lane became a cricket ground without anyone declaring it one. The walls of nearby houses became wickets because they always had been. Rules were invented, abandoned, and reinvented before the next ball was bowled. Every appeal was louder than necessary. Every impossible catch became the subject of a debate that lasted precisely as long as it took someone to bowl again.

The games mattered less than the certainty that there would be another one tomorrow.

Evening arrived the same way. Not all at once, but by accumulation. Birds disappeared into the chinar trees one flock at a time. Radios drifted through open windows carrying songs older than I was. Pressure cookers hissed in neighboring kitchens. Conversations grew softer, as though the entire street had silently agreed that the day no longer needed to raise its voice.

No one conducted this orchestra.

No one had to.

Nothing announced the changes.

There was no final cricket match. No neighbor stood at the gate for the last time. No morning declared itself the last to begin with the familiar call of the vegetable vendor.

They slip away gradually, almost politely.

A conversation becomes a little shorter because someone is running late. The children who once argued over imaginary boundaries begin spending their afternoons elsewhere. A familiar voice misses one morning, then another. By the time it occurs to us to wonder where it has gone, its absence has already become part of the neighborhood.

For years, I thought change arrived through dramatic moments that everyone remembered. I know now that it usually arrives through repetition interrupted. One ordinary habit fails to repeat itself. Then another. The rhythm falters so quietly that we mistake it for silence rather than transformation.

I have tried, more than once, to remember the last time I heard the vegetable vendor.

I can't. I don't know whether he stopped coming, whether he chose another route, or whether I simply stopped listening carefully enough to notice.

I remember his voice with remarkable clarity. I remember how it carried into our house before he reached the gate. I remember someone, somewhere, saying, "He's here," as though those two words were enough to begin the day.

But I cannot remember when those mornings stopped.

Memory, it turns out, does not preserve endings very well.

It records what repeated.

The final time often passes unnoticed because it arrives disguised as another ordinary day.

You cannot mourn a moment you did not realize was ending.

Only later, sometimes years later, do you discover that the world you thought was permanent has quietly become something you remember instead.

For a long time, I believed memory was a faithful witness.

I imagined it carefully storing the important parts of a life, preserving them until I chose to return. The older I grow, the less convinced I am.

It remembers what we never intended to save and quietly abandons what we assumed we would never lose.

I no longer remember what the vegetable vendor looked like.

Yet I still know his voice.

A person can disappear from memory while the space they occupied in a morning remains perfectly intact.

I used to think memory preserved what mattered most.

Now I think it preserves what happened often enough to become part of us.

That may be why I no longer remember the vendor's face, yet I still hear his voice turning into our lane.

Not a catalogue of events.

Not an inventory of places.

A cadence.

Sometimes I hear it unexpectedly. A kettle beginning to whistle in another city. Children arguing over a game in a language I do not understand. The scrape of a metal shutter rolling open before a shop begins another day.

For an instant, two places exist at once.

The street where I am standing.

And the one that still continues, unchanged, somewhere inside me.

If someone asked me today to describe my country, I could begin with its mountains, its rivers, or the long shadows that winter casts across the valley. I could point to photographs, trace roads across a map, or name the places that have shaped my life.

All of that would be true.

It would also be incomplete.

The country I know best has never existed entirely in what I could see.

It exists in a morning that continues somewhere inside me.

A vegetable vendor turns into the lane before breakfast. A kettle whistles in a nearby kitchen. Sparrows quarrel from telephone wires. A shopkeeper drags open a metal shutter. Children are already planning the afternoon's cricket match long before school has ended.

None of those sounds exist together anymore.

Perhaps they never will again.

But memory has gathered them into a single morning that time can no longer interrupt.

That is the country I carry.

Not because it has remained unchanged.

But because it hasn't.

Years have altered the neighborhood, just as they have altered me. New voices have replaced old ones. Different children now invent different games on the same streets.

Somewhere, another family is waking to a morning that will one day become invisible to them too.

I hope they do not notice it.

Not yet.



Woman Walking Across Interstate 10
by K. A. McGowan

in the night with a white dress
almost like a gown touching the ground.

She might have been on her way home
from a wedding or a wake

or demanding the right-of-way
or escaping from a tormentor.

She might have been calculating the odds
or testing an algebra word problem,

sleepwalking or thinking of an afterlife,

playing the game of chicken
or just trying to get to the other side.



A Wild and Distant Shore

by Antonio Sodr 

Us, this only us, in this only love.

She picks a book from the shelf. It is political. It always is. She grabs a giant green towel and slips into a small green bikini. I realize she always chooses green whenever she can. She walks straight onto the beach. There is no other house nearby. We are exactly where we want to be. Alone. Us, this only us, in this only love.

I pause at the door, neither inside nor out, just for a moment. This house is measured for us. I tidy the place and place a framed picture on the mantel. We stroll along a windy pier; she wears a thick scarf too big for her. She asks a man to take our picture.

We have just met in a lecture on literature. I glimpse her notebook and notice she writes.

I join her on the beach. I help her with the sunblock. She is already a little red.

"You'll turn into a giant red pepper," I joke.

She hits me lightly with the book, laughing.

We swim in the ocean. A rain cloud hovers above us. We compete to catch more rainwater with our tongues. She claims victory, I concede. Back on the sand, the cloud drifts away. We dry quickly. We race to the house to see who gets in first. She claims victory, I concede.

I cook dinner while she lies on the couch reading, glancing at me from time to time. She devours everything, her big eyes fixed on me. Then she comments on something from the book.

"Such an atrocity," she says.

"There are many atrocities," I reply.

In the bedroom, I leave the blind open. We can see the moon, always full, always big and yellow, framed by our window. My

fingertips rest just below her belly button. She breathes heavily. My hand drifts lower. She moans.

We lie together looking at the moon. Us, this only us, in this only love.

We host a party. She throws a party.

All the women wear flapper dresses, short-haired wigs framing their faces. Glow sticks scatter across the house. Everything gleams neon. The men wear black vests and top hats and speak in a strange language.

I stay in my red T-shirt and khaki shorts.

She floats from guest to guest in her green Wig and green dress, catching up with everyone. She carries an Instant camera. In the photographs, everyone is faceless but her. She photographs the mirror, the camera covering her face. A nice shot.

I slip this print into the notebook she writes in.

I linger at the door, neither inside nor out. People drift between the house and the beach. I smile whenever everyone laughs. I fry to communicate through gestures, warning that it is easy to be carried away by the current and disappear forever.

I tell her about the beach house on a snowy afternoon; her moving boxes still scattered around my apartment.

"It's a pretty isolated island," I say. "But it fits us. This only us, in this only love."

She leaps up and throws her arms around my neck, her big eyes wide.

"Is it beautiful?"

"Paradise on earth. "

She wants to go so badly that she stops unpacking.

She asks me kindly to prepare colorful drinks, and I am glad to have something to do. I slice fruit of every color, covering the counter. I mix gm with pineapple juice and add a splash of blue curaçao. The drink turns a vibrant green for her. She calls her friends to show it off, then asks for more.

While people dance to remixes of 1920s songs, I keep shaking and pouring. Everyone gets drunk but me.

Some people begin to leave. Others keep dancing the Charleston. I take care of the music now. She stays close to her best friend, not caring. The book, her writing, this only us, none of it matters anymore.

When the last guest leaves, I take her to bed, change her clothes, and remove that strange wig.

"It was a great party, wasn't it?" she murmurs drunkenly as I tuck her in.

"Yes," I reply dryly. "It was."

I begin cleaning the house while the sun rises from the sea through the main doorway. For a moment, I remain at the door, neither inside nor out. I want to run away, but there is a massive black hole in the bedroom.

She is at the beach again, sitting on a sun lounger, reading her book. It is a beautiful day like all others. The sand is almost white. The ocean stretches out in shades of turquoise and deep sapphire. I sit beside her. She stops reading. "I want to leave. I feel suffocated," she says.

I have known this since the party.

"Okay, I'll make the arrangements," I say.

She gets enraged, stands up and goes to the sea. I can tell she expects me to fight for us, in this only love. But I don't. It would be useless to go through all the steps of the ritual of breaking up.

When the last box is inside the moving truck, she hugs me.

"I will never forget you."

I close my eyes. When I open them, no one is there. The Wind howls.

The wind howls the next day, and the next, and the next. Sometimes I regret not trying harder, not fighting for her. I spend most of the day sweeping away the sand the wind carries into the house.

At night, when I look through the window before sleeping, there is no moon.

She leaves something behind in the top drawer of the nightstand: a photograph from the party and a fragment of her writing. Perhaps she does not disappear in the middle of it.



Orientation

by Sarah Jean Benvenuti

It turns out, none of them really have it completely right. Susan - she's three plots over - has been in *quite* the tizzy about it since she's gotten here. It's been all "repent" this and "his time is nigh" that. The only thing nigh is my foot up her...

Pardon. I learned early on that you've got to accept your neighbors here. There's no changing them; that's for sure, and while we have a lot of places we can go, you always find yourself pulled back to this cemetery eventually. Best to learn how to let go of the little annoyances, because it seems we're gonna be here for a good long while.

Contrary to what they taught people like me and pious Susan, there certainly isn't some celestial hereafter awaiting us on the other side; no fat cherubs with harps or even a curmudgeonly angel ready to read off a litany of my sins and good deeds. Don't get me wrong, this side of the veil ain't bad - real easy living, honestly - but it's absolutely not like any heaven that I learned about in church.

It seems to me the others didn't get it right, either, though. Take Aurora over there; the tall, willowy one with the waist-length gray hair. Well, before she died, she got *very* into Buddhism. Mind, she did quite her fair share of *experimenting* in the sixties, so I'm not saying she's a monk or anything. But the way she tells it, we all just have to be patient, that we will be reincarnated into whatever life we earned next. Except that old Willem up the hillside, the grumpy old coot with the frilly sleeves? Well, seems he's been here since this little cemetery was founded. If *he's* still waiting on his next life, then I don't have a lot of hope for the rest of us.

At least there's none of that fire and brimstone nonsense, either, though the way some of the atheists here act, you'd think any kind of afterlife was hell itself. I heard that Jarrel, the young guy near the gate, just stared at the horizon for most of his first year until he accepted that this was truly happening. A few of them have a kind of support group that meets at one of the mausoleums, if you're interested in philosophical discussions and that kinda thing.

Now, Hao, just down the lane, has seemed the most prepared, honestly. It's been at least 60 years since he got here and his family still leaves him a lot of random stuff at the gravesite, along with cash. As though we can use dollars or yen in the afterlife! But they're definitely onto something with all those offerings. Whiskey, food, flowers, little paper furniture - all overflowing from his place. You wouldn't believe it! Poor Elena, his neighbor, has practically no space at her plot every time one of Hao's' descendants visits.

That's how I got these spices. Hao's a generous man. Never married, you know. I would kill for a bit of paprika or oregano, but basil and salt will do, and his grandnieces and nephews have brought him plenty of those.

I have to be honest: I was pretty pissed at first when my husband showed up with my dented saucepan and tomatoes from the garden. It was dumb luck; he didn't know that kind of thing would make it to me. But there he was one day, placing it on my gravestone and weeping about how he missed my cooking. Idiot. As though cooking for him were the greatest joy of my life. It was pretty satisfying to see him there, shirt all dirty and ripped, suddenly realizing all the little things I did to make his life smooth. And now, even when he's sitting there, begging for me to come back, he can't even rustle up some flowers? At a *cemetery*!? I'm not afraid to admit that I would have wapped him over the head with that old pan if I weren't, well, insubstantial.

Can you believe it, though: now, I'm glad he brought it.

We don't really *need* to eat here. No bodies to sustain and all that. But it helps to pass the time, you know, and I do miss the smell of a good pasta.

Oh, don't worry, Hao has some noodles! Lucky, that. He likes a bit of gossip, too, and is always coming round to jabber. I enjoy the company and we both think it's hilarious how much it upsets stuffy old Willem. The codger has been here for like 300 years and, with all the changes this city has gone through, still gets bothered by the sight of an Italian woman and Chinese man sharing a meal. And I thought my husband was out of touch!

Ah, here comes Hao now. You'll like him. I would have never met him when we were alive, even if we *had* been living during the same times. That's one of the best things about this place: getting to meet so many interesting people. People whose lives were nothing like mine.

My husband might find his way here eventually. I'll tell you a little secret, though: I'm hoping he finds another woman willing to clean his house and maybe even give him some kids. Then they can make their hereafter somewhere else, and I can enjoy this little plot all by myself. And keep making new friends, like yourself.

Smell that? Sauce is done. Do you wanna stick around for a plate?



When Fog Lifts

by Robert Bradley

Morning tule fog slowed him. Had it always been this thick?

He leaned over to the passenger window, cranked it, and muttered "Niflheim" before turning at the street sign.

The Lincoln's brakes rasped to a stop under a row of sycamores. Tree sap always guaranteed him a spot. No car wash around got that scum.

This time the drive from the coast took four hours with the valley fog, more than he remembered. He stretched, then pushed the door half closed.

Sam's house—hers now—was unchanged, only bleached more. The valley spared the wood-frame houses a little. Lawn patches fighting hardpan were still green until summer burned everything. He slammed the door louder to alert her. "Why not sprinkle him here, Cindy?"

Then he saw her at the door.

Inside, they sat at the coffee table. A tarot pack dominated the uncluttered surface, edges frayed to fit her fingers. The top card showed a man hanged by a foot, wearing primary colors mirrored against a smooth, white box...Sam's ashes, no doubt.

Jeff surveyed the room. "I see his things are gone."

"I should have kept the fly rod," she said. "Do you remember how to string one?" Her jab made him look harder at the box and remember the times he and Sam waded Sierra creeks.

Crystals waited in a window, ready to cast a spectrum across the hardwood when the sun broke through. "It's like Norse hell in this town," he said.

"Odin's realm." She studied the hanged man, then shuffled the deck. "We got stuck here." She kept shuffling, like thumbing a rosary.

She and Sam had spent summer evenings on the back porch, planned to fix it up the house, maybe travel some. She still heard him when she fell asleep.

He asked, "So, it finally got him? Emphysema?"

"After the army, he kept smoking and drinking. He'd mess with the rod and reel. But never went after you left. Can typing reports in an air-conditioned trailer in the jungle do that to someone?"

"We weren't there," he said.

She brought up teaching.

He admitted boredom came with tenure, but it beat sleeping in cars like some grad school friends. She laughed her low laugh and suggested he keep the big Lincoln just in case.

He asked her about the veteran cemetery near the coast. "You knew him. He wouldn't like that."

"The ocean then? I can send photos...."

She shrugged and nodded to the fence post in a corner. "His conversation piece." It survived the yard sale. Woodpecker holes, some still holding acorns, lined it from top to bottom. He remembered when they liberated it, driving back from a day on the streams. Ranchers left them to rot near the road.

"It's about all that's left. You want it?" She lifted her fingers away from Sam's ashes. When he nodded, she picked up Sam's ashes and said, "I guess you want to get back."

He followed her to the car, post hoisted over a shoulder.

The moon roof opened wide enough to slide it behind the seat, like when they brought it back from the hills.

He swept away textbooks, papers, and sandwich wrappers to make room next to him.

Her touch stopped him. He looked at her but only saw the sun burning through her linen shirt sleeves.

"Do you...?" he asked.

"No." She cradled the box momentarily before handing it over.

He considered her laconic answer before replying, "Take care."

She called over her shoulder, "Don't get hung up. It's a long drive." He nodded and fished for keys. She was inside before the engine caught.

On the way out of town he traced the coast range along the valley edge. It always felt different after the fog lifted. "The hills will stay green a while," he thought. Growing up on the farm, he had imagined emeralds must glow like that.

Something made him slow and turn off. The post scraped behind him as he aimed east into foothill cattle country. His grade school appeared, windows boarded, weeds breaking through packed soil next to the basketball court. He and Sam drew circles there for marbles and tops. How long before they tore down the fence and built tacky houses?

The road to the farm came next. Someone had told him the new owners had pulled the vines. He kept heading toward the Sierras until the backcountry snow filled the windshield.

When he entered the foothills, they felt to him like a vast, familiar library.



Receiver Without Weather
by Sandeep Kumar Mishre

The handset incubates an unuttered eclipse.
Its coiled umbilicus suckles an absent oracle.

Across the brow, five pale vetoes
quarantine the republic of sight.

A throat, elongated into liturgical vacancy,
hoists an alphabet no grammar survived.

Silence calcifies before becoming sound;
echo is merely memory's counterfeit mineral.

The garment rehearses its own collapse,
fold after fold of domesticated abyss.

Some invisible archivist inventories
the cartilage of forgotten permissions.

Desire arrives amputated from destination,
yet still drags its ceremonial shadow.

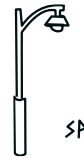
The room exhales an architecture of refusal,
where furniture remembers what flesh revoked.

No witness escapes the geometry of concealment.
Even the mirror kneels before omission.

Between dialing and answer
an unnamed cosmology ferments.

The face is not hidden—
only translated into an extinct syntax.

Thus absence inherits the pulse,
while presence becomes the final disguise



Half Past Eight

by John Dennis

Every evening at precisely half past eight, the lamps along Mercer Street came alive one by one, beginning at the post office and ending at the bridge. It took less than a minute, but Daniel never hurried through it. He preferred to stand outside the locksmith's shop and watch the light travel toward the bridge.

He had done this for nearly twelve years.

On the first evening of October, someone was already standing in his place.

She was perhaps fifty, dressed in an old green coat whose cuffs had been mended so carefully they looked intentional. She stepped aside when she noticed him.

"I'm sorry," she said. "Was this reserved?"

"It has been," Daniel answered, smiling. "Unofficially."

She laughed. "Then I suppose I've committed a municipal crime."

"There are worse ones."

So they watched the lamps together. The bridge lamp caught last, as it always did, with a small stutter before settling.

After that she appeared often enough that neither of them remarked upon it. Some evenings they spoke. Some evenings they merely watched the light travel down the street.

Her name was Helen. She had returned to the town after selling her parents' house, a fact she offered the way people offer facts they haven't finished deciding how to feel about.

"It looks smaller," she said one evening.

"The town?"

"My memories. I keep trying to fit the rooms back to the right size and they won't go."

Daniel worked in the library. Helen claimed to be resting before deciding what came next, though he suspected she had no intention of deciding anything for a while. She had, he learned in pieces, sat with her mother for the last four months of her life, in a bedroom that smelled permanently of the lavender ointment they'd used on her heels.

Autumn folded itself into winter. Helen began bringing chestnuts wrapped in newspaper, always the property section, always a different day's date, as though she were quietly working through a stack of them at home. Daniel began arriving five minutes earlier.

One snowy evening she asked, "Why these lamps?"

"My wife liked them," Daniel said. "When we were first married, she insisted we walk every evening. She said you could tell whether people were happy by the way they reacted when the lights came on."

Helen waited.

"She's been gone three years."

"And could you tell? Whether people were happy?"

"I never asked. She never said."

Helen looked toward the bridge where the final lamp had just come alive.

"And now?"

"I come because she can't."

Neither of them spoke again until it was time to go home.

After that, something quieter passed between them on the walk back, two people no longer pretending they had somewhere else to be. Helen started leaving before the last lamp caught some nights, and Daniel didn't ask why until the evening she told him without being asked.

Her mother had died in the last week of a year, and since then she'd preferred to leave before things ended.

Then one Monday they found workmen measuring the pavement. Metal barriers appeared. Yellow paint marked the road.

"The council's replacing the old gas lamps," one of the men explained cheerfully. "Electric. They'll all switch on together. Saves money."

Daniel thanked him.

Helen watched the surveyors in silence.

"It's only light," she said after they had gone.

"Yes," Daniel agreed, though neither of them believed it.

The work lasted three weeks. The old lamp posts disappeared one by one until only the last, by the bridge, remained.

On the final evening before its removal, they stood beneath it. Neither mentioned the obvious. The flame caught slowly, hesitated as it always had, then settled into its familiar glow.

Helen slipped her arm through his.

The next evening the new lights came on, every lamp at exactly the same instant. The street was brighter than it had ever been. People admired it. Children pointed. Cars passed without slowing.

"It seems efficient," Helen said.

"Very."

They stood in the familiar place. Nothing was wrong, exactly, except that there was no longer anything to wait for. The brightness arrived all at once and asked nothing of anyone standing beneath it.

They came again the following evening, and the next. The procession was gone. Yet they kept coming, long after either of them could have explained why.

One evening, just before the lamps burst into their single, simultaneous glow, Helen reached for his hand without looking at him.

The bridge lamp did not catch with the others.

It hesitated.

The old stutter.

Then, almost reluctantly, it joined them.

Daniel realized he had been holding his breath.

When he let it out, Helen's fingers tightened gently around his.

Neither of them said anything about the light that shouldn't have flickered.

Together they watched it settle over Mercer Street before turning toward home.



Eventually, Asheville

by K. A. McGowan

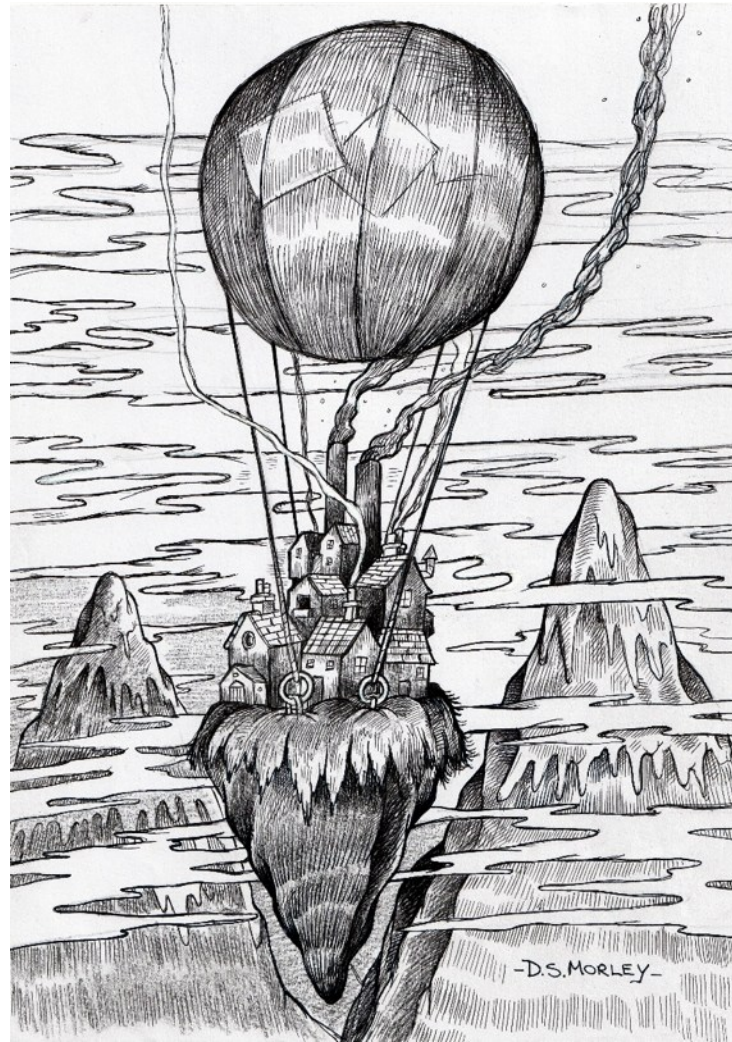
Toward the flood of 2024

Heading north on Interstate 85
just shy of Atlanta and nightfall,
cruise control set to seventy-three
with a brief patch of dark woods
on my left and right

a deer flashed
a few feet beyond my dashboard
like a still photo or mirage
and then was gone.

No other traffic.
No witnesses.

Just two survivors
grateful
for one more breath.



Art by David S. Morley

Authors

Favour Agiande is a writer and visual artist from Obudu in Cross River State, Nigeria. Being the youngest child meant playing by herself a lot and running errands, which helped shape her imagination and gave her a knack for figuring things out — now she uses that to write about social and environmental issues, her relationships and life as she sees it. She studied Fine and Applied Arts at the University of Calabar and has participated in several group exhibitions and has several art publications. When she's not writing or making art, she's singing and playing guitar.

Isabella Aleksander is too often confused with pop culture's most topical red heads. She used to make the claim that her hair is orange not red. She isn't creative but sometimes her poems are. Her favorite word is circumlocution.

Nile Arena has contributed writing to Purely Liminal, Canvas, The New Critique, and Centipede Press. His zine, Success Stories, is available offline at many bookstores across the United States.

M.G. Allan spent his childhood making up stories in his head. Now he spends his adult life writing them down.

Homere Bar El is an aspiring writer with a passion for architecture, history, and pasta. He founded a writing club at his university and is currently completing his degree. He serves as the chief editor of *Reference*, his university's student newspaper. His work has appeared in *Penstricken*.

Elle Becker is a writer, speaker, and instructor. Published in Prevention Magazine, ACPA's The Chronicle, Five on the Fifth, Twenty-Two Twenty-Eight, The Mighty, and various literary journals, she won the Tempe Writing Competition and was named Highly Commended in the McLellan Poetry Competition. She writes on Medium and Substack. She teaches From Idea to Edit, her six-week writing course, and serves as an editor for the humor publication Muddym. A consecutive speaker at Medium Day, Elle loves all dogs, good books, cheese, and nice humans, and looks forward to someday becoming a crazy dog lady.

Sarah Jean Benvenuti is a writer, musician, professor, and creative entrepreneur. She is the Founder and CEO of Benvenuti Arts; an adjunct professor for Master of Arts Management Programs at Carnegie Mellon University and the Università di Bologna; and a cofounder of the roving artists colony, the Wandering Theatre Collective. She has been published by the online flash fiction literary magazine, Short Beasts, and in The Atlas of Gratitude & Delight by

Write Pittsburgh. Her travel writing and other information can be found at sarahjeanbenvenuti.com.

Louise Bezirdjian was born in Beirut and grew up in England. She spent many years sailing small boats across oceans with her children, living and working in the West Indies. She has just finished writing a memoir about family secrets and lies. Following her husband's premature death, she brought up her four children whilst graduating in Screen Production from Southampton University, U.K.. At the same time she began to lose her hearing. She became a filmmaker writing, shooting and editing material for diverse documentaries from tigers to prison inmates. She lives by the sea in England.

Ace Boggess is author of eight books of poetry, most recently *Tell Us How to Live* (Fernwood Press, 2025) and *My Pandemic / Gratitude List* (Mōtus Audāx Press, 2025). His writing has appeared in *Indiana Review*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Hanging Loose*, and other journals. An ex-con, he lives in Charleston, West Virginia, where he writes, watches Criterion films, and tries to stay out of trouble. His first short-story collection, *Always One Mistake*, was recently released from Running Wild Press.

Robert Bradley Bob earned a Ph.D. in German Literature at UC Santa Barbara. After some years teaching, he left academia for a career in IT. Now retired in the Pacific Northwest, he returns to an earlier love.

John Dennis was born in New York and moved to Sweden after serving in the US Navy. He holds a Master's degree in Pedagogy from Malmö University where he also studied Creative Writing. He is married to Anna, father to Julia and grandfather to Noah.

Leslie Dianne is a poet, novelist, screenwriter, playwright and performer whose work has been acclaimed internationally at the Harrogate Fringe Festival in Great Britain, The International Arts Festival in Tuscany, Italy and at La Mama, ETC in NYC. Her stage plays have been produced in NYC at The American Theater of Actors, The Raw Space, The Puerto Rican Traveling Theater and The Lamb's Theater. She holds a BA in French Literature from CUNY and her writing appears in *One Art*, *Quaranzine*, *Decolonial Passage*, *Obsidian* and elsewhere. Her writing has been nominated for Best of the Net and the Pushcart Prize.

Peadar Donohoe is a drama lecturer at MTU Cork School of Music and Artistic Director of Cyclone Rep. He is relatively new to writing fictional short stories. One of his stories, *The Wounded*, was adapted for the *Dear Ireland* performances, which took place on The Abbey Theatre's mainstage during Covid. As an author, he is best known for his research on Drama as an anti-bullying resource, and for adaptations of Shakespeare's plays. He has written, directed and produced *Hamlet: CyberMadness*, *Billy's Choice*, and *The Bullying Prevention Session*. A selection of his work can be viewed on ResearchGate and at Cyclone Rep.

William Doreski lives in Peterborough, New Hampshire. He has taught at several colleges and universities. He has published several critical studies, including *Robert Lowell's Shifting Colors*. His essays, poetry, fiction, and reviews have appeared in various journals. His most recent collection is *No Vacancy* (2025).

Selma Dulic came to the United States when she was nineteen years old. She has raised two teenaged sons and keeps a sharp eye out for abandoned firewood on the side of the road. She speaks Bosnian, German, English, and she writes stories in a little notebook under the counter where she is employed.

Todd Epp is a writer living in South Dakota. His poetry, short fiction, and creative non-fiction are about the people, challenges, courage, and land of the Plains states. Epp is a finalist in The Good Life Review's 2026 Honeybee Poetry Prize.

Alison Glick lived in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and Yarmouk Refugee Camp in Syria for six years, working as a teacher, human rights researcher, and freelance writer. Her novel *The Other End of the Sea* is based on her experiences living and working in the Middle East. She now lives and writes in Philadelphia.

Emma Byrne Hickman is a nature photographer who resides in the countryside of England. Her photographs aim to capture moments of wonder and awe in the natural world. Her photographs have appeared in Floating Acorn Review, Belladonna's Garden Literary Review, and forthcoming in Blue Rivers. The Good Life Review's 2026 Honeybee Poetry Prize.

Lucy Carr Icard is an MFA student at Southern New Hampshire University. Her stories have been published in The Penmen Review, October Hill Magazine, Flash Phantoms Magazine, Blinker Lit, The Grande Dame Literary & Art Journal, and The Nunum Anthology. Icard's work is influenced by her adulthood in France, her childhood in Maine, and her zealous imagination.

Nancy Byrne Iannucci is a New York-based writer and author of four chapbooks. Her first full-length poetry collection is set for publication in 2027. A two-time Best of the Net nominee, she was short-listed for the 2025 Poetry Lighthouse prize. Her work appears in several places including Thrush, Maudlin House, Glass, and Belladonna's Garden Literary Review. She lives in upstate NY with her three cats.

Alice Jade was born in Toronto, raised in a lab (also in Toronto), and remains based in Toronto.

Alan S. Kolok is a professional scientist and writer. He is the author of three books as well as a modest number of short stories and pieces of flash fiction. Alan lives with his wife and dog in the great north woods of Idaho.

Robert Leger is a storyteller, award-winning opinion writer, and former national president of the Society of Professional Journalists. When he's not writing, he performs instrumental music with his wife, Cindy, for weddings and intimate concerts. He is a

member of SouthWest Writers, the Arizona Authors Association, and the Phoenix Writers Network.

Sarai Mannolini-Winwood (she/her) is a writer, poet, and literary theorist, and is generally intrigued by how we make sense of ourselves through our craft. Her work appears in *Eunoia Review*, *Emerging Possibilities*, *Bright Flash Fiction*, among others.

Shuchi Masrani is a fiction writer fascinated by the hidden tensions that shape human lives. Her work explores memory, identity, obsession, longing, and transformation, often focusing on characters navigating uncertainty, loss and unexpected moments of connection. Drawn to the intersection of the ordinary and the uncanny, she is particularly interested in stories that uncover what lies beneath the surface of everyday experience. Through intimate, character-driven narratives, she seeks to capture the emotions that linger long after a story ends. When not writing, she can usually be found collecting fragments of conversations, questions, and observations that may someday find their way into fiction.

K.A. McGowan - Born and raised in Scranton, Pennsylvania, K. A. McGowan lives 49 feet above sea level near Lafayette, LA. His first full-length collection *Pangaea* was published in 2022 by Kelsay Books.

Stephen Mead - Resident artist/curator for The Chroma Museum, Stephen Mead has intermittently been submitting work for publication going on four decades. He remains grateful to all of the editors who have given his work a good home as now, retired from his day job, he is busy trying to sell his 40-year backlog of art.

Barbara A Meier is a retired teacher who works in a second-grade classroom in Lincoln, KS. Her recent publications include *Al Dente*, *The Fourth River*, *Plainsongs*, *The Poetry Lighthouse*, and *Effy*. She has been nominated for the Best of the Net and a Pushcart Award. She has three chapbooks published: “Wildfire LAL 6”, from Ghost City Press, “Getting Through Gold Beach”, from Writing Knights Press, and “Sylvan Grove”, from The Poetry Box. She loves all things ancient.

Sandeep Kumar Mishra is the author of 15 bestsellers and award-winning books. He has been translated into more than 20 international languages, shortlisted for more than 50 international literary and arts awards and has been published in all 6 continents inhabited by humans. <https://www.sandeepkumarmishra.com/>

Glenis Moore is a writer who currently lives in the flat lands of the Fens just outside of Cambridge UK with her partner and three rescue cats. When she is not writing, she reads, makes beaded necklaces, knits, cycles and runs 10K races slowly.

David S. Morley is a UK-based visual artist specialising in detailed hand drawn illustration that bridges the gap between reality and imagination. He takes inspiration from magical realism, myths and folk tales incorporating this into his work. Alongside his drawing practice, David makes video art and photography. David holds a BA

in Fine Art from university of Essex and an MA in Drawing from Kingston university.

Sheila E. Murphy is a Pushcart-nominated poet, recent appearances include *Fortnightly Review*, *Lana Turner*, *Poetry*, *Poetry Bay*, and others. Most recent book publications are *I Want to Be Your Radio* (Unlikely Books, 2025), *Escritoire* (Lavender Ink, 2025), and *Permission to Relax* (BlazeVOX Books, 2023). She won the Gertrude Stein Poetry Award for *Letters to Unfinished J.* (Green Integer Press, 2003) and the Hay(ha)ku Book Prize for *Reporting* Phoenix, Arizona. She is listed in Wikipedia

Debra Jo Myers began writing in first grade. She has written three full-length novels, “The Vee Trilogy.” She is published in a number of online and print magazines, including Arts Midwest, 101 Words, Breath and Shadow, and Reader’s Digest. She is from a small town in Indiana; is married with five children, and nine grandchildren. She acts and directs in community theater and judges high school theater competitions.

Syed Peerzada Shoib Nazir is a writer from Kashmir exploring memory, language, identity, and place through literary nonfiction. He is completing a Bachelor’s degree in English literature. His essays examine how ordinary moments shape cultural memory, home, and belonging.

Cithara Patra currently lives in NC and works for the state health department. They’ve enjoyed writing stories and poems since they were young. In between their job and looking after their family, they try to squeeze in a little bit of writing each day. In their spare time, they travel, solve logic puzzles, and check out local restaurants.

Tamizh Ponni VP is an ambivert and a stoic art buff who loves to express her skills through literature, visual arts and music. She is an educator and sees learning as a life-long process. Tamizh’s articles, poems, stories and paintings have also been published in many anthologies, digital journals and educational blogs. Tamizh spends most of her free time painting, reading, writing articles, stories and poems, playing piano and watching documentaries/movies.

Kevin Ramsden resides in Kyoto, Japan, and is a professor of Global Studies at a university in the city. Other than writing, his interests include listening to reggae music and complaining about the performances of West Ham United football club. He has also self-published a collection of short stories titled “Here Comes Kenji – Stories from Contemporary Japan”, several of which have found homes in Japan-based journals and magazines.

Abby Remer is a published author of five previous books and the award-winning lead features writer for the Martha’s Vineyard Times. She is currently writing memoir essays.

Terry Sanville lives in San Luis Obispo, California with his artist-poet wife (his in-house editor) and two plump cats (his in-house critics). He writes full time, producing stories, essays, and novels. His stories have been published by more than 490 different journals,

magazines, and anthologies including Folio, Bryant Literary Review, and Shenandoah. He was nominated four times for Pushcart Prizes and once for inclusion in Best of the Net anthology. Terry is a retired urban planner and an accomplished jazz and blues guitarist – who once played with a symphony orchestra backing up jazz legend George Shearing.

Beth Sherman is the author of *How to Get There from Here*, a novella-in-flash (Ad Hoc Fiction). She has had more than 250 stories published in literary magazines. Her work is featured in Best Microfiction 2024 and 2026 and Best Small Fictions 2025.

Mya Smith is a student writer. She enjoys reading, video games, animals, and drawing. Her writing often focuses on sensory imagery and emotional storytelling inspired by her personal experiences and family relationships. She has written several unpublished poems and literary pieces, and she currently owns two bearded dragons named Tibbles and Ivy.

Antonio Sodré is a student of English Literature and Linguistics at the University of São Paulo, Brazil. He enjoys turning stories into short tales and has been published in several literary magazines, anthologies, and contests in Portuguese, Spanish, and English. **Instagram:** [@acasodre](#)

Robin Trimble is a video game designer who finished her creative writing certificate in Arizona. She is a Call of Duty aficionado. Her favorite book is “Where the Red Fern Grows” by Wilson Rawls. She served in the Navy Nurse Corps as a pediatric oncology nurse.

Angela Wilon; Hello, my name is Angela Wilson and I reside in Sacramento, CA and I've lived here for 47 years. What inspires me to draw is when I see a scenery I like that inspires me to draw and God inspires to draw.

Huina Zheng either writes as an admission coach at work or writes for fun after work. Her creative work has appeared in Baltimore Review, Variant Literature, Midway Journal, and other literary journals. She lives in Guangzhou, China, with her family.