

metafore



Winter 2018

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David Xiang

fiction

IN WAR, GOOD GRACES

AUSTIN BENSON

Silently, we looked out on the field from the depth of our trench, bodies leaning against the bunker, glazed eyes peering through peepholes in mortar and folds in sandbags, mouths exhaling hot stale breath that misted in our faces in the cold morning air. We were a stack of sardines pressed against the interminable, cemented walls and heavy, sand-filled burlap sacks comprising the barricade, green steel helmets and bayonet-tipped rifles flitting the air. All of us, hundreds were collect, ready in our courage, and unspeakably horrified we might not be coming back.

In our uniformity drew we a last grave, coppery breath in the dreadful calm, awaiting the storm. The barracks were emptied, mess-hall and officer rooms in candlelit shadow, all quarters deadly quiet, lonely haunts for the departed, and us all waiting, waiting, waiting. I'd watched dense rolls of fog fall over the cemetery beyond, sift, plume spectral about the beaten soil like a consolidating congregation of lost souls, sheeted ghosts.

That's when the whistle blew.

Sharp and shrill, the senior officer going into battle harped long and loud on the metallic device. Simple as that, we stormed rickety wooden ladders over the top, rushing the battlefield headlong in swells of sound and fury. Unto the fray we charged, through smoke, dust and ash, hopping over explosives in the minefield of barbed wire, pikes and stakes. Each stride farther took us closer to the very crosshairs heart of that chthonic hinterland, where amidst chaos the eruptions and artillery sounds of battle grew presently louder, reverberated thunderously, were felt ever stronger until they'd seemed to become all there was left in our man-made reality.

Going along, deep, past the last glean of fog-lights into the dark, most of the men in a vanguard were shot down by unseen bullets flying the air. In addition, some few others met their grisly fates in grotesqueries of blood and flesh, unwittingly passing by thrown grenades or walking o'er those *sneakers* which rolled delicately nearby, and on planted landmines their foots stepping. In the twilight that was still pitch-black all felt far from the dawn; all one saw were clouds of debris, dust and smoke through gunfire and *heard* most prominently the screams.

At the front of the enlivened and death-defying surge, I'd come to find myself. Ever our formation moved forward, despite the suffered causalities now splayed in the pits in mosaics of bloody death. As we went on, all rage, fear and mortality, few allies still dotted the map ahead. I hoped to dear life none would soon join them others in the ditches. A bit of shrapnel took one of our men in the leg, not far in the lead of me. He buckled down onto the ground, an entourage of medics and *luckies* kneeling by his side lending aid. Two others were diverted in the misty rain and hurricane winds of the mayhem, entering into *must survive* combat with enemy fighters waiting in stealth. Through the fog, a lone Dutch soldier went well beyond our ranks, dozen feet in front of me to the left. He ended in the blast of a grenade launched from a German Schiessbecher; and then, after I was past them all, I ran deeper, grinding teeth and squeezing fists with malice whilst charging into thine consumptive hell, back ducked, head bowed and eyes closed, *mortified*, until I was taken in a gust of light and power.

...dense white tendrils of smoke and soot blotted components of the theatre, hovered up phantomic in the amalgamated matters of disembarked spirits...

Later I revived in the ditches, ailing a concussion from the brunt of the blast. I'd been taken by surprise, presumably a grenade which landed in the middle of our charge. I wondered how many lives of men took it with it. Disoriented, in a

sea of mud I clawed my nails, grunted and attempted rolling over. In this great effort such proved debilitating, the ground become like a tar-pit for humans similar to the sticky strips hung out on the porch to catch and subdue buzzing insects. Eventually, I managed to roll over, nudged myself along and sat up with elbows, in a slow process, then tenting both hands in the Earth and digging in with the fingertips to raise up. Clearing before my vision the mists sifted away, trailing into greater fogs. Dust in the air was dense, and in fact *always* remained, taking quite a while to settle after all fell silent. In the distance, once I started clearly seeing, dense white tendrils of smoke and soot blotted components of the theatre, hovered up phantomic in the amalgamated matters of disembarked spirits gone on the wind, floating ethereal masses. A gale scoured the field, brisk and forlorn in its sharp moan, pinning me down on my back, clearing out much of the fogs swarming nearby. Out of its flight, I spotted a neighbouring German soldier nearby in the muck, jarred in the same as myself, trying to brace himself upward ... thankfully I'd seen *him* first.

I tore off the buckling leather sheath of the holster, wrenched out my revolver and pointed it immediate at the Nazi, who sat faced the opposite direction ... he turned, noticed me, helplessly, *just* in time. I gripped index finger on the trigger, then determined and squeezed. No shot transpired; I jangled it, beat adamantly at the stock and forestock, though nothing changed. I stared across the scape, direct into his bloodshot eyes, whilst immediately the youthful Nazi began patting down the ground, finding his own pistol and when he did, taking aim, with still a shocked countenance, *fired*. But no bullet emerged through the barrel. The cartridges in both guns were murked from the filth.

Our gazes, met and lasted, lingering confusedly, then fell away, and I laid back into the mud, *gasped* out a sigh. Today were the closest I'd ever been to dying, twice, post-breakfast in the morning and after napping in the afternoon. Briefly I rested there, looked at patches of sky twixt the veiled ether; I could see faint yet sweeping blue, and furrowed puffs of white.

After the close call, and creeping docility, my mind screeched back into alertness – I jostled up where I lay. *What the hell was I doing? I needed get back soon*. Not far off, upon an embankment around shallow ditches, dirt-carved, trodden smooth by the champ of soldiers' boots, sat the German soldier, in repose which seemed peaceful as mine had been. With a calm composure he turned his head, looked over at me once sensing I'd resurfaced.

'So, we cannot kill each other,' he called to me. 'Maybe we can help each other get back. Can you help find my jacket for me?'

I wondered if he was delirious.

'Find your own *damned* jacket,' I replied, grimacing.

'I can't,' he quickly shouted back. '*Look*.' He shuffled wide about on his bottom, moving very slowly. As he came to, I realized he was applying pressure with both hands on the thigh of his right leg. It seemed he'd been injured quite badly. The German boy, who was not a man, looked to me innocently, a painted expression which qualified he'd understood the graveness of his situation.

He meant no threat, nor carried ulterior intention, and this I believed clear. *He just wanted life*. I got up slow, walked over hunchbacked, to where he sat in the field, smoke-screened by the dust, ash and smoke of no man's land sky. As I drew closer, I could he tell he was even younger than seemed from afar.

'Please help me,' spake the boy. 'I think I need a doctor.'

‘Alright,’ I told him. ‘If we find a way out of here.’

‘Don’t you know the way to your trench?’

‘No. Do you?’

‘No,’ he admitted. ‘What happened to you?’

‘A grenade from one of your Schiessbechers,’ I told him. ‘You?’

‘The same, I think,’ he said. ‘We must’ve been close.’

‘Probably.’

‘What’s your name?’

‘Sephrenus,’ I told him. ‘Cassleman.’

‘I’m Wilhelm, Brecht,’ the boy replied. ‘I recognize the surname Cassleman – *Kassel*?’

‘My grandparents were immigrants, and changed the spelling for the region when they arrived.’

‘So you’re German.’

‘I’m Canadian. German grandparents, like I said ... *but* from a different nation, a past Germany they’d say.’

He listened politely, until I’d finished my rationalization, then looked at his leg, squeezing it and grimacing – I could tell his attention had been there the whole time. I got the feeling we trusted each other adequately, went a bit closer and kneeled at his side in the muck. The wound looked bad, torn down the quadricep muscle, bright red and spreading the interior of the thigh. I reckoned he’d need immediate medical service if he were to live.

‘You can take me prisoner,’ Wilhelm said. It seemed childish, in war a barter of sorts between kids. ‘Just get me somewhere with medicine.’

‘Alright.’ I mustered professional confidence. ‘You’d said you needed your coat ... is it around here?’

‘I don’t know,’ he said, labouring over his leg, and he spoke English well, although with thick Deutsch accent. ‘It blew off me in the explosion.’

‘Do you really need it?’

‘Well, it’ll get cold. And there’re pills, for pain.’

‘Alright. I’ll give a look.’

‘Thank you, Sephrenus.’

‘Call me *Seph*. It’ll be easier.’

I scanned the vicinity of the embankment and in the confines of the ditches. They were incredibly shallow, so I searched rather fast. A few metres of embankment to the near right, large mounds of tossed Earth thrown from somewhere else covered the ground. Inside, I found a tattered Nazi corduroy coat moistened in the dirt.

‘It’s all torn,’ I said, crouching down near him. ‘Sorry.’

‘The pills,’ he said, ‘check the pocket in the chest.’

I put two fingers into the breast pocket, then checked the hand pockets for good measure. There wasn’t anything in any of them.

‘Nothing. Sorry.’

He fell back a little aghast, seeming more put out there weren’t any pills than in concern for the severity of physical condition.

‘C’mon,’ I said gently. ‘We oughta be moving on.’

‘I can’t walk at all.’

‘I’ll help you.’

I moved closer, for the first contact; Wilhelm appeared slightly uncertain of it. I looked at the wound, then at him.

‘It’ll get infected. I need to clean it.’

From a tin canteen, I poured out some water, then used cloths from a sanitary pack to rub it clean. Next I tore the seams of the coat’s sleeves, ripped apart their fabric then lashed and tied them tight over the gash. Lastly, I looped the corduroy base of the jacket, secured it loosely over the threads for an additive protective layer. ‘Let’s go,’ I said.

Wilhelm, wincing, propped up an arm, I clasped him around the forearm, then lifted. He rose slow, hobbling with his weight on the good leg. Once he’d steadied we went fast from there, only ever inching along, always doubled over. We headed due north along the plain, and going this way so that we wouldn’t wander too closely to either lines, before configuring our plan.

We were much slowed toward dusk. The needle in my compass was erratic, had started being affected by the magnetic fields of the battlefield. And so we just wandered. Our progress in entirety had been tedious; Wilhelm couldn’t do more than limp, careful not to put too much weight on the bad leg, so mostly dragged it behind like someone with awful gout or a clubfoot. The arduousness of it all threatened to drive me mad, amplified trepidation whilst worsening the stakes, depriving us more every passing second of successful potentiality.

Somewhere we realized we'd heard noises, excited whispers, which weren't delusions, as we scaled high mounds, traversing throughout the deepest foxholes near centre of the field. From then we paced only increments, always beneath the sides of embankments, or in below the jutting lips of ditches with their Earth blasted apart by detonations. Going for some time now, I'd been helping Wilhelm along, lending support man-carrying with our arms over each other's shoulders, and his top-weight pressing down the crest of my spine.

Gruff voices suddenly grew louder, their accents Scottish and British. Soon words became discernible.

'*Listen*,' one of them said, 'over there, down below. D'you hear it?'

'Yeah, think do ... What s'ppose?'

'Dunno. Let's check 'er.'

The two of them sounded a pair of burly, rougher men, and sometimes particulars of that sort tended not to be so kind to prisoners, nor especially favourable to the aspect of *taking* them. I chose to remain silent, although think Wilhelm expected me to call out, and waited to see if it were us they'd heard ... since dusk we'd been going at a slow rate in fairly steep ditches, and I'd believed we'd been quite quiet.

After waiting a long moment the sound of their movement trailed away. Next few, nothing showed up, so we both figured it were probably safer to clear out sooner than later. Hunched, we kept along the side, and I eventually helped Wilhelm shimmy up the inverted slope.

We paused, for all that was good in the world, before climbing over the ridge. In the dim, grey light, we noted the shadows of two military figures creeping a hilltop barely yonder. They'd moved in a way summoning to mind the feral scurrying of rats, went farther in that rodent manner down the base of a ditch, stopped, calculated, watched a soldier who cowered deeper in the cleft of an old abandoned pillbox. Through the side of the pillbox was a rugged patch of mossy dirt, partially collapsed in with multitudinous bullet-holes; he mustn't have noticed this vulnerability.

Wilhelm hadn't yet caught up, where I exhibited this unfolding debacle. Patiently, I awaited, eagerly, hoping to death that the poorly concealed fool wasn't a Nazi.

The Britons snuck up to the pillbox, suddenly dragged the hider out by his feet, fell upon him ... I heard the shouts, implores for mercy; the soldier definitely was German.

'Don't look,' I said to Wilhelm, once he'd made it up beside me.

Wilhelm peaked down over the ridge, and he looked anyway. Quickly his face grew chalk-full of grief and disgust. It weren't an easy thing to look at, nor could such ever be. Wilhelm turned away, when the time came he couldn't watch any longer. I did too, couldn't bear it. The cold, shrill gale beat o'er the deserts of no man's land, called out desperately, sombrely, unto something, and for us all to hear it, amidst the horrific and sorrowful desolation of ours making.

It was cold at night in the wet mud and autumn weather. The Nazi's carcass lay below us, stiff, still. There were red fingerprints around his throat; they'd beaten and throttled him. We'd seen most of it, hence due for this felt that we deserved to be shot in cowardice. It should've been a war-crime under the Geneva Convention merely to witness such atrocity.

'Check his pockets,' Wilhelm told me.

Kneeling, I reached into the man's breast, pulled out a small tin that rattled with what couldn't have been more than a couple mint-sized objects. Wilhelm, though perceivably not satisfied by this, especially given the context, nodded and held his hand out for me to pass him the aluminum drugbox.

Softly Wilhelm shut the man's eyes, then untangled a sterling-silver crucifix hung on the corpse's neck, removed it, tucked it into his palm, closed the fingers around. Here we couldn't stay long. Kindly, I deflected the youth's attention, beckoned him on, we had to go.

We'd come upon another corpse that night in the dark. It were husked of a Lieutenant Frederic, whose life's charge had been mine unit; he must've died in the morning assault. His face had gnarls which were heat boils, and half the flesh melted and torn off. His dog-tags and boots were gone. For Wilhelm, I gently sidled the lieutenant out of his coat.

The stars were out, bright and aplenty, moon high and pale-violet far away near red Mars. There wasn't anything that could make the night and night's sky unbeautiful.

Also, Frederic's helm had tumbled from his head in death, rolled into a puddle of soggy mud; I reached in, procured it, handed it to Wilhelm with the officer's garb.

'You may want these.'

'Danke.'

The two of us walked few metres away, and down we laid in a shallow ditch concealed from both opposing sides.

‘There is to be an offensive tonight,’ Wilhelm said, offering me one of two miniscule pills from the tin. ‘Take it. It’ll make you feel better. This will all become just business.’

The stars were out, bright and aplenty, moon high and pale-violet far away near red Mars. There wasn’t anything that could make the night and night’s sky unbeautiful. The way of such things, their marvel, was perpetual, not affected like the other things humans could destroy.

I knew Wilhelm had been correct, when the drug kicked in. Raw emotion became immaterial, not of the essence. Everything was more vivid, sharp and clarified. Focus intensified to a frenzied degree. We rested there, afraid to fall asleep, but there wasn’t a chance of that anymore. In our distinctive lull, in poignant clarity of it, we gazed the stars, the sky, and listened to the sounds of the night.

‘In Flanders fields the poppies blow, Between the crosses, row on row, That mark our place; and in the sky The larks, still bravely singing, fly Scarce heard amid the guns below ...’

‘What is that?’ Wilhelm asked.

‘A poem Canadian named John McCrae wrote.’

‘Did he die?’

‘Yeah. In the Great War. He wrote it about Ypres.’

‘It was good verse.’

‘It is.’

‘How old are you?’

‘Nineteen, you?’

‘Seventeen.’

‘You look younger.’

‘Oh.’

Pause.

‘Do you have a girlfriend?’

‘Yeah. Back home. You?’

‘No. Too young.’

I looked at him, he were smiling. I smiled back, we laughed softly.

‘Yeah ... I guess so, Willy.’

All night, we watched the orchestra of explosions, the gunfire, listened to the typical symphony choruses calling in the night that we'd been numbed to for so long now. The Nazis bombarded heavily throughout the whole dark; their barrage of lightning-blitzkrieg a gunmetal blue-and-yellow lightshow of flash, vibrance, akin the Northern Lights both brightness and beauty. Phantom detonations, artillery and firefighting glared through the dusty smoke, resonance booming like the storm's thunder, always closely followed by the next electrification of lightning.

We watched, transfixed, until the lightning struck us.

The fighting resumed at dawn and continued late into the afternoon. In the night a shell had fallen nearby where we laid, shot us into an exploded crater ten feet deep. Wilhelm had not much strength left; I think his leg was rotting on him already. He had bad fever, as well. Most of the day, I'd spent trying to wake him, recurringly fearful he'd died, except for a weak pulse continually convincing me otherwise.

I stood in the crater, spread my arms to their full length, measured the gap. There was about a half foot one side I couldn't reach; towards the top the opening became narrower. My hair was filthy, matted, face stained with mud and blood ... the vile sloshed up the ankles, cold, wet, disturbingly uncomfortable.

I clutched my young German companion by the collars of Frederic's jacket, shook him and brushed him lightly across the face a few times. He came to, eyes lolling, focus weak, but doing his best to heed me there. 'We've got to get out of here,' I said. 'It'll be hard, but if we're brave I think we'll have the strength to do it.'

'Okay,' he said.

I rushed him onto his feet under the arms. He wobbled, took a minute to steady, but got a grip. He anchored himself up on his good leg, the other crooked, and hanged onto a protruding root with each hand.

'What do we do?'

'Back to back,' I said. 'Do you have a strong core?'

'Yeah,' he said. 'But my leg. There's no way I can do it.'

'You can,' I told him, defiantly. 'We're at least going to try.'

We locked in arms and shoulders, then pressed our backs hard up against each other. Wilhelm exerted a lesser force, but I felt the will in his resolve.

‘One foot at a time, then let the other person go,’ I said. ‘Slow and steady, we’ll be able to do this, Will.’

‘Alright, Seph,’ Wilhelm said, weak, exhausted. ‘Let’s go. I’ll only have the push for this once.’

Given the crater was fresh, the Earth in the walls seemed relatively dry, dense with rocky material, much to our benefit. We removed large placements of rock, then smoothed out pebbles and dirt, carved footholds we’d be able to use the first dozen or so steps. Once each of us had completed the stepping stones, high as possible, we began the climb without a word. The beginning went easy, but slow with the hesitancy it took Wilhelm to plant the foot of his bad leg, when he’d needed. A few times he caused us to wobble, though there didn’t seem a great threat of teetering over. Each time, he’d managed secure it, and in the speed, persistency of motion, I never was unconfident that his strength would subsist.

Near the top where there weren’t any footholds, it became loads harder. We were pressed closer together, awkwardly bunched, and had to excise greater effort. Wilhelm wobbled, teetered, shook consistently. A metre from the top, we utilized our inverse force to adrenalize us up. I felt Wilhelm’s determination, refusal to give up, he pushed on hard, heartily, a final step, on mine, I knew then that he couldn’t take another, I launched us sideways so our shoulders clipped the edge of the crater’s precipice, but then we were slipping, about to fall back in. We each dug our heels at the edge, clenched tight, pushed with all the force we could muster to roll a fraction onto the surface. On our final reserve, nothing left but fumes, we tumbled to roll as far as gravity would take us, then separated, energies and wills imploding on the ragged soils.

With any alternative out of our hands, we took rest on the ground. Afterward, recollecting ourselves in the groggy delirium of sleepless drug-induced trauma, when finding ourselves able to claw back onto our feet, we inspected the smoke, dust and soot that clouded the theatre, and the silhouettes of apparent passersby seeming deformed if they were mirages; we’d no idea how far, how close, nor who they were, moving as they did, forms of aberrant monsters ... passing unison, one next after last, demented craniums skulls extended Ancient Nazcas, others in Pickelhaube helms of the Kaiser's Imperial Army.

‘Demons,’ I said, delirious.

‘No,’ Wilhelm interjected, solemn, deprived. ‘Soldiers.’

We stood, loitered afoot, watching the grotesquerie menagerie. Soon thereof, as if we in the grips of an overwhelming hallucination woke up, one lone monstrosity came at us aggressively fast, prevailing out of the fog.

His bayonet pierced my shoulder, pinning me unto the Earth with fierce might; I looked up under his enraged face, beastly contorted and snarling.

‘No!’ I’d painstakingly thought I heard Wilhelm shout.

Something black and sizable knocked the soldier clear off me; I jolted up weakly, the blade now clear of my flesh, making to stand. As I twisted up, the penetration of a second blade drove through my heel, cold and sharp.

I writhed, flipped onto my gut, twisted and saw the small hatchet lodged above my foot. Wilhelm protested again, pushed the older soldier a length away from the spot where I suffered, miserably on the ruinous ground. It was all I could do to pay attention, listen and watch the means that would decide my impending fate.

‘Get back to the base now, traitor boy,’ the Nazi man commanded of Wilhelm. ‘Take the scum with you. You will report to the authority of your station immediately. There is a special placed reserved in detention for mutinous cowards.’

Surprisingly, the soldier turned, ran off into battle. My friend looked down at me.

‘He pointed *that* way,’ I said to him. ‘Go.’

‘I won’t leave you.’

‘You will, *now*. You have to.’

Wilhelm’s eyes were large, still hard and glossed from the effects of the pill. He crouched down front of me, reached his forearm out to clasp mine; I reciprocated frailly, and afterward we shook hands and nodded at each other firmly, makeshift brothers in arms.

‘Get going, and I’ll to try to make it back on my own. *Go*.’

‘Thank you, Seph. I will search you one day, when all this is done. Please, you *must* survive.’

Into the fray, he disappeared, sprinting off until the mists of dust, soot and smoke and fog consumed his grey-fledged silhouette. When he’d gone, I did my best to regain both feet; I couldn’t, but could crawl along decently well, one leg poised up. I was bleeding quite a lot. Deep beyond the distant opaque clouds, I heard a shot ring out ... understood it hadn’t been *worth* it.

Providentially, I knew then that Wilhelm had been shot, recipient of the gun blast. *Possibly* mistaken for an ally raiding the enemy trench. *Or* killed by a stray of ours.

My journey wasn't yet over. I had to be going. It was the only thing then to do. I fled from there fast as I could, back into the madness and delusions of dying men.

BIO: Austin Benson is an aspiring filmmaker and writer, an outdoors-man and world traveler, recently graduated from Queen's University in Kingston, an hour from his hometown of Brockville, Ontario. Literature and film have been his loves since early childhood, but no passion burns so bright within as writing. His greatest desire is to one day become published as an author. In 2016 and 2019 he had a short film selected and screened at Canada's largest film festival dedicated solely to Canadians and their work.



Image by featured artist, Lennen Sanchez

STAINED GLASS WINGS

JILLIAN BORUKHOVICH

If you decided to take a stroll through the forest on a cool spring morning, and if you happened to take a left down that forked path deep in the trees, you would come across a quaint cottage with the most remarkable garden. Flowers of all colors, shapes, and scents; where golden sunlight floated through the tree branches and fell to rest among the petals. The keeper of this garden was a little old woman who had lived alone in this cottage for as long as its stones could remember. What was even more remarkable than the garden, though, was the quiet wind of thousands of wings.

Butterflies of all colors, shapes, and sizes mingled throughout the flowers, making the garden look like a moving painting. The butterflies came every day to the woman's garden, trickling in at the same time each morning until it was impossible to distinguish insect from flower. The woman had built this garden just for them, and at this time each morning, she woke to watch them arrive with the sunrise.

The woman knew each of the butterflies by name. Monarch. Swallowtail. Painted lady. Silver-studded blue. And she knew which flowers each of them liked the most. She put all her love into her garden, and in return, the butterflies whispered messages in her ear.

The woman sometimes collected the tiny caterpillars that had been born in her garden, keeping them in a tiny glass box to help them grow. The woman kept the caterpillars safe and gave them her love, just as she had done for her children years before. Once the caterpillars had sprouted their wings, she released them back into the garden and watched as they learned to fly.

The woman's first child had arrived with autumn, a small baby girl, with golden curls and cinnamon eyes like her father's. Only months after she arrived, the baby grew sick. She cried for days, unable to tell her mother what was wrong. Each day she seemed to shrink. The woman put all she had into her daughter, praying for her to get better.

Until one day, the butterflies came.

As if from all corners of the world, they flew in thousands to answer the woman's prayers. One of the butterflies, massive with stained glass wings, landed on the baby girl's

forehead. It kissed her quietly, then took off to the skies followed by its sisters. And just like that, they were gone as soon as they had appeared. Within days, the baby stopped crying and her laugh shone through the home, brilliant and bold.

The woman's second child, she named after her brother. A happy baby boy whose face mirrored her own, he loved life as much as she loved him. The boy grew into a strong young man, but as he grew his love of life faded. He became angry, anxious. With the passing of spring, the woman entered her son's room one morning to find him limp and barely breathing. An empty prescription on the nightstand next to a note.

The woman cried by the boy's bed for days, once again praying for the life of her child. She couldn't let her son go, for namesake to become curse. But as if on cue, in the middle of the night, the butterflies came back. They swirled iridescent through the room, and once again the largest one landed on the boy's forehead, its shining wings brushing his curls. They were all gone with a kiss, and the next morning the boy woke, and he smiled.

The children followed their dreams across the world, leaving the woman alone for the first time in many years. She knew it was time for them to fly, but the cottage was too quiet without them. So she decided to build a garden. A garden that would attract what always came back—the butterflies. One by one, different butterflies came to the garden, according to what flower the woman planted that day. Soon, she had collected every flower in the world for every butterfly.

After the butterflies left at sunset each day, the woman spent her evenings painting. With her paints and brushes laid out in front of her, she breathed color into the canvas.

After the butterflies left at sunset each day, the woman spent her evenings painting. With her paints and brushes laid out in front of her, she breathed color into the canvas. She kept an illustrated journal of every flower in the garden and every butterfly who would visit. Her paintings were so realistic that she imagined the flowers swaying in the wind and the butterflies'

wings fanning open and closed. She covered every inch of her walls with her art, bringing her garden inside with her.

The only painting that wasn't her own was made by her brother. At the center from which the painted garden grew, a square canvas illustrated a smiling woman with a monarch butterfly in her hands. Her brother had painted it right after he got sick, many years ago, when the woman

was just a girl. He gave it to her, telling her this was how he pictured her grown up, since he wouldn't be able to see it.

The night he died, she held his hand as she watched him go. The cracking ache in her chest rivaled anything she had ever felt before, and she prayed she would never have to feel this way again. As she went to bed that night, a stained glass butterfly landed on her windowsill. Amazed, she opened the window to let it in. It fluttered through her curtains, circling her head before landing on her nose. She felt a soft kiss, and the slightest whisper of a promise.

BIO: Jillian Borukhovich is an undergraduate senior studying Creative Writing at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. She is currently on the editorial team for the web-edition of *Ninth Letter* and is an editorial intern for the *American Literary History* journal. Her work has recently been published in *Sonder Midwest*.

WHEN A GIRL DREAMS, YOU LISTEN

LUCAS J. BURFORD

The soapy film makes a thin, ripple-free membrane floating on top of the water. She stretches underneath. Her toes can't reach the end of the bathtub, which is plain and ordinary, and her hair floats on the surface like golden algae, softly sweeping across her shoulders and freckled chest. She's gotten into a habit of taking baths in winter, the hot water hugging her bones and easing her muscles. The company of water helps her relax when all alone. It has been several weeks since the incident and she still doesn't know how to help herself out of it all, her mind is soft and letting the small moments slowly burn her insides with the flame of loss and misunderstanding.

The absolute being of herself weakens her physical state. A moment of clarity is often perceived, but that clarity is the surface of a bottomless sea, the shadowed moments of herself dying, then, floating to the surface of a twisted observation of recognition. The control of courage wouldn't offer the variable of instances beyond her grasp, she is the

A moment of clarity is often perceived, but that clarity is the surface of a bottomless sea, the shadowed moments of herself dying...

martyr of her own existence, accepting every moment with the sin of past mistakes, resulting in the future consequences. Her struggling meek mind is aggressively eating away at itself, while the past becomes present with no conclusion of remorse or awakening; the purgatory of her thoughts could bury her existence if not ratified with a conclusive effort of appropriate professional reflection. Her own strengths in physical form are a weakness to herself, beauty a burden.

The heat of the water is raising her temperature, discomforting her body which discomforts her mind. She extends her toes against the front wall of the bath which is stained an off-white from the city water, and with her toes she pushes her body up, letting her shoulders

breath above the water. The air cools her shoulders, red with heat, and she sweeps her hair to one side in a heavy tangled clump. Her long fingers straighten and comb through her hair scratching at her scalp and tearing apart any tangles. Long hairs stick to her fingers and the back of her hand while she picks them off and wipes them on the rim of the bathtub. She places her hands back down into the water and under her knees, squeezing them and rotating her hand to the top while pushing them down. With her toes pointed straight she stretches the muscles in her legs and watches her toes spread apart before releasing. Closing her eyes, she takes a deep breath through her mouth and out of her nose until she can feel a separation in the back of her throat from the rest of her body. She hunches, stretching the skin, exposing the shallow outline of her ribs, one neatly stacked on top of the other and then tenses her entire body breathing all the breath out, holding nothing in her for several seconds before she can feel the black pulse behind her eyes. The swell of her pulse is pounding, and swirls of her imaginations lost in strands of color appear and she takes a long slow breath of air and opened her unfocused, unbalanced eyes which correct themselves while she blinks it away.

A perpetual blend of memories that have been buried under aging parts of her mind are sharpening in focus, while the current memories are trying to make sense of themselves, slowly laying down in the crevices of her mind that are so brutally torn and played with as a young child until now. She sinks into the water that is still hot, and these scattered memories of time appear racing her heart into a slow dissolve of anxiety and panic, it's as if she was remembering a bad dream with delayed hurt in perspective. She moves her ankles under the water slowing rolling them in circles while her fingers tap the top of the water making small popping noises every time a finger strikes, she thinks of her at this very moment and her fists ball and sink slowly down into the water while her jaw clenches, and her eyes begin to cry. The portion of memories that are surfacing of her as a child being touched, her being loved, her escaping her reality, love from her mother, weariness from her father, escaped love, escaped memories, and a reality of control of drugs and alcohol, anything to self-medicate an escape she thought necessary. She tucks her chin down in the water and begins to cry and her fingers tremble, a slaughter of these memories are self-inflicted, healing her while tearing at the wounds for recovery.

“Eventually it always catches up,” she thinks in a crying panic of self-doubt.

She stands up out of the bathtub and water is running down her thin legs and she reaches for a hazelnut colored towel that is thick and wraps her frail body with it. She is delicate to the

touch and to the gaze, a beautiful mess of escapism and self. She steps out of the bathtub while a stream of water, caught under her foot, follows it onto the shaded white bathroom mat, thin and now damp. The freckles on her chest are covered in tiny raised goosebumps that make their way down her arms and legs, each like a memory trying to open from the pores in her fair skin.

An intense amount of mental poison is releasing into her body, this makes her unsteady and tired and is breaking her down. She focuses on the good in her life, the moon she loves when full and white in the sky and memories of friends. This helps her dry off and becomes warm enough to step slowly and make it into her bed undressed, in the next room. The towel drops around her chest, down her waist, and to the floor. She kicks it away. She leaves for her bed and with her long fingers she grabs at her comforter and pulls at the corner while falling into it, and wrapping it around her while tucking her knees close to her body, curled up and exhausted. The pillow on her head is damp from her wet hair and the warm wet heat gets trapped inside while she covers her head with the comforter. A dull lamp sits near the corner of her bed, illuminating the comforter, and she opens her eyes, seeing dim golden light and the tag from her pillow poking out. Nearly every light is on in her apartment and the draining water from the ordinary bathtub is swirling down the drain making an even sucking noise. The sound quietly lasts while she falls asleep, alone and in peace, knowing she can only hurt herself and no one else.

BIO: Lucas Burford writes books: At the heart of each of his stories is the undeniable imagination of someone who should probably be institutionalized. Not only do his stories trek across paths we hide from, but they also entertain. <https://www.lucasjburford.com/>

ANTHEM

TOTI O'BRIEN

Now they let him go out for walks, the man who woke up after surgery speaking Sanskrit. By the window I see him sit on a bench—the same always. I am not sure he walks much. Maybe he goes to the bench and sits, that's all. Then he lies on his side, knees against his chest, so still he could be sleeping. But I am too far to tell, and too busy.

I only notice him because he's so regular. He shows up every day in the late afternoon. And I know who he is because of the incident—they say he chanted in a language unknown after he came to. A nurse said it; then his feat made the news among staff, patients, visitors. Not for long, as there wasn't much to comment about. Who cared if he moaned a strange-sounding litany, then suddenly stopped, dozed off, then didn't recall a thing? Not uncommon after G.A.

Wait a moment, said the nurse who performed catheter procedure. Something was unusual about it—how lucid he looked, aware, eyes wide open... And his voice without a trace of slur, loud and clear, arresting. As she inserted the thing, she asked: "In which language were you speaking?" in order to distract him, of course. He had no clue. She didn't believe him.

Careful not to look as if she was ridiculing him, she recited the line that had poked a hole in her head (did she like the sounds or was it his tone—deep, metallic—when he spat that particular string of syllables, aba, saba and so forth)? What does that mean? He stared at her vacuously, either stupefied or indifferent, cramped around the sharp sting of his screaming urethra. He stared at her wearily, as if she was insane.

How did the nurse know it was Sanskrit? Easy to figure out. She looked up the words, that night (they played on, stuck inside her ears like a silly nursery rhyme). She typed them just as she recalled them, without spelling concerns, and they immediately popped on the screen. Sanskrit stuff, all right.

How did she know he didn't speak it? She didn't for sure. But as she repeatedly asked, in the following days (she for one was curious) he never provided an answer. He kept looking at her with bewildered eyes.

They have dug out a tumor from his left hemisphere, not big, the size of a walnut. They had found it early enough. Damage was contained and mostly reversible. Re-education will be lengthy, though. They will move him from this to another, then another department, as recovery will slowly progress. From this to another building, still in the same hospital structure. Same gardens. He will visit the bench under the sycamore for a while, I guess.

Not that I care for it, but somehow he has become familiar, a landmark.

The first image he saw... Wrong, it must be the last. The last image he saw before he came to was the woman with the long scar. Beautiful. The scar. And the woman, but he only saw her head, neck and shoulders. Just one shoulder, then both, the other shoulder, then both from the back while she slowly turned, as if on a rotating platform. Certainly on a rotating platform because she was stock-still, like a statue—yet a living one and quite so, her skin almost vibrating, translucent. He could see the pores breathe in and out.

But she didn't move on her own. Something caused her ineluctable orbit—a machine, a contraption of sorts. Not an orbit, no. She revolved around herself. It's called a revolution.

The astral association was caused by her stone-still tranquility, steady pace, luminosity. Also by the impeccably regular shape of her head—smooth, rounded skull, contoured by a crop of short curls the color of amber.

Her eyes somehow eluded him. He did not, could not meet them, mesmerized by the diagonal scar emblazoning one side of her face...

Her eyes somehow eluded him. He did not, could not meet them, mesmerized by the diagonal scar emblazoning one side of her face—a triangular shape, elongated, vertex above the ear, then down like a crescent, base following the lower edge of her mandible. A fine texture covered that slice of skin, darker than the rest, infused with a coppery hue.

First, it seemed just an intricate cobweb, but as he couldn't divert his gaze he started deciphering characters. Minuscule, yet the most he looked the most they came into focus. Exquisitely traced, they enlarged slightly as the triangle flared across the woman's cheek.

The alphabet was unknown to him, yet he felt an urge to pronounce what his eyes greedily sucked in. He improvised, attributing arbitrary vowels and consonants to the small, pretty marks. And the most he spoke, the most his recitation felt natural.

Once his daughter came by. Oh no, he didn't expect her visit. Like his son, she lived in a distant town. But she had traveled for the occasion. Maybe a spur of remorse, sudden reminiscence of duty? She had always been more lenient than her brother, or just weaker.

She looked preoccupied. So fragile and worn, he felt she might have come to seek help. But she didn't and she didn't speak of herself, if not in the vaguest terms. He had never been able to ask. He noticed that she had cropped her hair very short and her head looked childish, denuded, sparrow-like, immensely frail.

Her visit was quick, shy, perfunctory. She left something unfinished in the air—the halo of sadness lining all things family, all things past. Unavoidable, was it? They both said they'd remain in touch.

He needed nothing. All clean. No malignancy. Long stay, covered by his medical insurance. Worry not. Then back home. Fine as always. In touch. She left something unfinished and then she was gone.

He still sits on the bench, the man who chanted in Sanskrit when they scooped him out of the stretcher and tucked him in bed—minty green in his scrub, head wrapped in bandages. Well, I didn't see him. I am extrapolating, I know.

He had long hair when he was admitted—said the nurse who clearly had taken an interest in him from moment one, though there is nothing noticeable in his looks. At least presently, all shaven, regrowth only a shadow.

Very long hair when he came in—she said—darkish though spotted white, long beard, woolen beret. Quite untidy and eccentric, ridiculous yet eye-catching. Right away, they cleared a spot for biopsy, but for surgery they de-brushed the entire skull. Those long locks, dropping sadly into the wastebasket, could have filled a small pillow. I haven't seen them. I am extrapolating.

The scar will be invisible as soon as his hair grows back. Low, right above the occiput—a delicate spot. At least out of sight. Not a large cut. Thing the side of a walnut. Talk about luck. The scar will be unnoticeable. No one will know as long as he has hair. How old is he? Freshly retired, I guess.

How can the nurse be sure he didn't know Sanskrit before? Any retired bloke can study anything when he's left with a load of time on his arms. Too much time isn't friendly, and it makes you sick. And what did she say the rhyme (those words that he sang out loud) meant, already? Either she didn't say or I forgot. Curiosity tickles me all of a sudden. I will ask her when I come back from vacation, a week from today.

I watch him by the restroom window as I clean. Actually, I am taking a micro break and some air. The smell of disinfectant after five makes me feel light-headed, probably because I have overdosed it all day.

The last restroom. In a minute I'll take off my gloves, wash my hands before changing into my clothes, before I even touch them. I glance at myself in the mirror. Tomorrow, tomorrow I'll get my hair done.

"Eli, eli," said the man who never spoke Sanskrit, 'lama sabachthani'. The words—Hebrew, Aramaic... he wouldn't have known—were engraved on a cross hanging from the wall right in front of him. To be exact, they inscribed a brass plate attached at the base of the crucifix. Old style hospital and forgotten décor. The cross was hung high and the inscription was small. But he saw it quite clearly, or maybe he did not—his brain only remembered remote catechisms. His brain, freshly shattered, threw that bit of flotsam on sand then washed it away.

BIO: Toti O'Brien is the Italian Accordionist with the Irish Last Name. She was born in Rome then moved to Los Angeles, where she makes a living as a self-employed artist, performing musician, and professional dancer. Her work has most recently appeared in *Peacock Journal*, *Gyroscope*, *The Birds We Piled Loosely*, and *Pacific Review*.

nonfiction

TO BE WITHOUT

KATE ALDRIDGE

Autumn leaves greet the day—shaking hands with the breeze.

“Hello there,” the leaves sing to the wind.

They dance with gravity—each one waltzing its way to the ground. Some linger and hold onto the life of a branch. The metamorphosis from green to yellow, green to red or green to brown has already occurred. One by one they shift and turn, unable to keep the grasp of the life they once knew.

My eyes fixate on one that’s gripped to a branch, unwilling to let go. This leaf, with colors of dry soil, and streaks of leftover green, attached to the only home it’s known. My legs glide me closer to the base of the tree. My right hand slides against gravity. Fingers outstretched, my palm plants itself against the bark, and each finger follows. I swallow the air—allowing the breeze to move through my cells, my nerves, and my organs.

“Be free,” I whisper through the exhale.

The grass pulls my hair back towards it. Lifting my gaze to the sky, the leaf jumps towards me. Right hand remaining pressed against the trunk, my left limb twists higher to meet its new friend.

I focus on the projection of the leaf—desiring its warmth against my flesh. Ice continues to run through my veins, echoed with disappointment as I watch the leaf swivel away from me. Spinning, and enraptured with its calling to meet the Earth, the leaf maneuvers its way to the ground. I study the vegetation, contemplating why the leaf chose the sod over me. My first friend who wasn’t much of a friend. The yearning echoes louder at the base of my throat—an emptiness that welcomes me like the grass embracing the leaves.

"Oh, to be held," I chanted under my breath.

To be touched.

To be caressed.

To swim with another in the remembrance of all that could be, of all that should be.

Yet, somehow I continue to mingle with the unknown, with nothing. I attempt to meld with the lives of Earth, only to be left alone again. The agony of loneliness boils through my bloodstream. My arms sway, and I bend my head back to look towards the sky. Each shoulder lifts along with the deep breath that moves through my body, and I attempt to shrug off the weight.

“When will it end?” I hiss to the leaf.

The green extensions from the soil tickle their way around the leaf—creating a platform for it to body surf away from me. Another question goes unanswered. But it can’t, and I won’t let it. I bend my knees to the ground, preparing the caps for impact. My left hand anchors my upper body weight, while my right hand lunges to touch it. The frailty of such a creature stimulates the nerves at the tips of my fingers. Bookmarked with the leaf, my palms meet. I stay here for a moment—the passage of time continuing to move forward without me, while I bring the leaf towards my heart. Desperate for another life to meet my own.

My chest expands with the depth of autumn air filling my lungs. There is something about the crispness of the breeze, and the way it enters into me—chilling every particle, every blood vessel, and every nerve. Freezing me from the inside out. As if the wind and the Earth meet somewhere in the middle and negotiate the

There is something about the crispness of the breeze, and the way it enters into me—chilling every particle, every blood vessel, and every nerve.

temperature, the sounds, and the colors to create such a stillness, such a sobering experience.

Each of my irises look down into my hands and catch the intricate details of the leaf—stiff edges, a strong core, and a color palette of various greens. Brown veins are sketched throughout, creating the life map of this piece of nature.

“I can only imagine all that you’ve seen,” I whisper.

I fluctuate my weight from left to right—feeling the wet sod against my pants. My elbows anchor against my knees, while my lower half shifts into a pretzel. Letting my gaze remain fixed on the leaf, I acknowledge that this moment is the most connection I’ve experienced with another in quite some time.

“We could be so happy,” I say with a sigh of relief.

Yet, the acceptance of that is stirred with a spoon of negativity, and my neck stiffens. To welcome such a thought requires the admittance that I have been alone, and maybe I like it that

way. I take the initiative and crumple the leaf in my hand because even this leaf will otherwise one day leave me. The life crunches in my fist. I spread my fingers open, and observe the remnants dancing with the breeze. Each particle drifts into oblivion.

BIO: Kate Aldridge is a writer, creator, and feeler with an education in social work, experience in working with groups and individuals, and a passion for assisting others in understanding the way they view and interact with the world. Kate strives to view situations, art, and the complexities of life by asking big questions and approaching such obstacles from a feeling perspective.



Image by featured artist, Lennen Sanchez

THE FIRST TIME I HEARD YOU

AIMÉE AMANDA

To appreciate the story, you'd have to appreciate me. I'm not sure how to make you do that. I realize that my soul is rather unique and remarkable, but my life has been a sequence of mediocre misery. If you met me as a young teen, you'd be impressed, so I'll start there. I was strange. Not strange in the wears-black-and-wants-to-die way. Not strange in the yikes-don't-talk-to-her-way. Strange in the she's-cool-but-she's-weird way. Strange and exceptional. I knew everyone, but no one knew me. I suppose my mystique gave me silent power.

I lived in a small rural town. Very small. Population-twelve-hundred-small. Graduating-class-of-forty-two-small. Everyone got along with everyone else, and if they didn't like each other, they just didn't interact. There were no clashes or rumbles, just a glob of cowboys, a smattering of Indians, a slew of Spanish-speakers, a sprinkle of surfers, a cohort of wannabe-urbanites, and a few hardcorians. I was training in ballet and studying the theatre. I played guitar but didn't like country music. I wore Dickies and Docs and Chucks and was always on stage at night and on weekends. Friends, family, and strangers couldn't let me forget that I was the palest human they'd ever seen among the beautiful sun-kissed people of Southern California. I just stood out. I wasn't like anyone else.

So maybe now you can appreciate me as the oddity and novelty that I am. I went off to college, had run-ins with all of the wrong types of men, developed momentum in my performance career, and then was struck down by injury. It wasn't just any injury, either. It was complex, involved, life-ending, multiple-surgery-requiring, laid-up-for-years injury. It was the he-left-and-no-one-else-will-ever-be-interested-in-you-again injury. And then my dad, my best pal, died. Between the isolation of my medical drama and the loss of my only soul connection, I found little reason to care about anything. My strangeness simply got stranger, and I gave up hope of ever feeling like a native earthling. I grew accustomed to my place as an outsider, an

observer, an alien, a ghost. I lived alone, I worked alone, I was sure I would die alone. There was no sorrow in this existence. I'm a realist, and I appreciated that it is what it is.

But then, I heard you. The circumstances are hazy, but I'll never forget how it felt. It was April, 2018. My thirty-something body felt closer to ninety-something after a long day stuck at my ergonomically incorrect desk. I'd been fighting the pain and losing all evening, growing more resentful of the three dogs blissfully snoring in my bed with every passing moment. I flicked on the Roku, not bothering to put on my glasses. The room became illuminated with the blurred myopic, astigmatic glow from the little tv on my antique banquet turned dresser. The nerve pain was searing through my spine and down both legs. I couldn't take another minute of the torture but had no escape.

I hate light. I hate overhead lights, lamp light, light bulbs, recessed lights, and any light that doesn't come straight from the sun. So I didn't turn one on. I refused to strain my eyes in the dark to manipulate the buttons on the little black remote, so I let fate direct me to whatever distraction I needed through clumsy fingertips. I was in that sort of mood, too painful and too despondent to act like a rational human being. I was overwhelmed by misery and blind as a newborn rat. I fiddled with the remote and something loaded up. Though I couldn't make out the shapes, I recognized the sound. It was a comedian with a very distinctive voice, so I set down the remote and closed my eyes to see if he'd make me laugh. He didn't. Instead, he introduced you. Your name seemed vaguely familiar, but I couldn't place you. Then you started to play. From the first note, my life changed.

If I'd seen a white light, I would have known I was dead; however, it was abundantly clear I was alive, though I had exited earth.

I'm not sure how you looked that night, but you sounded like my heartbeat. The fuzz from your guitar immediately snapped me out of my misery, and I seemed to leave my battered body before the drums began to play. If I'd seen a white light, I would have known I was dead; however, it was abundantly clear I was alive, though I had exited earth. Then I heard your voice, and I knew I was home. There, in the dark, I was floating on another plane while your music injected my blue veins. For the first time, I connected with something. My heart pulsed with your percussive voice and my soul melted into your words. You, good sir, gave this monster life, your music the lightning bolt that awakened every fiber and titanium part of my scarred and lifeless body.

That was just the first time I heard you. I discovered that you were nothing new and that everyone who had not spent the twenty-aughts isolated in hospitals and working four jobs to pay medical bills already knew you well. I had decades of your music to catch up on. And I'm doing it, though at a snail's resolute pace. Every day I spin a record, play a podcast, shuffle a playlist, or otherwise commune with your voice. Every day, the sound ignites my humanity and reminds me that life is not pure torture. My soul transcends and dances barefoot with yours in a foreign land where bodies are shed, and hearts connect.

I fear the day when I don't have something new from you to save me from a prolonged desolate death. You see, every time I hear you for the first time, I'm electrified again. I don't know you and perhaps I never will, but I hope your soul can feel mine. You're a strange one, and I deeply appreciate you. Strange in the most beautiful way.

BIO: Aimée Amanda, MFA, is a writer, assistant professor of English, and a lifelong appreciator of the arts. Her monologues and one-acts have been produced by Brand New Theatre Company, and her books on writing have been published by Bridgepoint Education (Constellation). Works are often developed through her online workspace at aimeeamanda.com. She lives, works, and volunteers in Southern California.

SUBTITLES 8

MATTHEW JAMES BABCOCK

Screen shuts you down. Sentence makes a paper airplane of your impulse and sails it out the window and unpainted shutters of your wonder into upturned hands, a surprise someone unfolds. Screen slumps you in darkness. Sentence jumpstarts a spark and bathes you in luminescent moods. Screen tortures your body into the bony pose of a circus contortionist, the yogi of yesterday's throw pillows. One stretch from the sentence—zing!—your skeleton's realigned. Screen stuffs you with static. Sentence snags the silver strand that unravels your soul. Screen sings. Sentence sings. Screen: evil hypnotist. Sentence: sentimental sidekick. You say *screen*, I say *succubus*. You say *sentence*, and I sway to the susurrus of Sufis on surfboards sounding out *succulent*. The screens, the way they pin you in place, they remind me of the summer before my freshman year when I pierced butterflies and ladybugs and stuck them to beds of Styrofoam for Mr. Jordan's biology project, the stringent stink of cotton balls steeped in rubbing alcohol, the dull shells of bees and beetles, their papery husks mounted and impaled, brittle wings and antennae flaking to dust, the shiny steel shafts drilling them to the day of death. Those sentences, they were with me after I got married young, in college, when my wife still had a long time before she could graduate, and I spent the whole luscious year lollygagging at the library, working and strolling past the nineteenth-century mansions on Center Street to the rodeo grounds, reading fat paperbacks on leafy park benches and lingering at the bald eagle cage at the zoo, wondering how they could mend its broken wing so it could hurl its hammering heart against the sky. Shrouded in power outages, screen sits. Unfettered and footloose, chancy sentence stands and with grandiose abandon fences its handsome bandoliered betters with lances of lightning. Screens mandate mental mastectomies. Sentences fling away pink polka-dotted bikini tops and, bouncing, flounce down the beach. Screen drones, like a senile man babbling war stories on a rotting porch—it doesn't need you to continue. Sentence won't summon you unless you press your lips—a dewy, fervent, life-giving kiss—to the sizzle of the first syllable. The fizzling screen

Screen slumps you in darkness. Sentence jumpstarts a spark and bathes you in luminescent moods.

splutters and, muttering, nudges you closer to the edge. The salivating sentence smacks buttercream lips and jabs a swizzle stick into a juicy lemon wedge. Swindler screen serves you the same stew of rehashed plots, airplane glue, and used pinball machine parts as something new. Swami sentence smiles into the sunrise and sips the golden broth, the soup of ancient cures, and savoring it, eyes narrowed, pronounces it still true. Screen is to sentence as coma is to aroma. Screen is coffin, mothball, the Victorian undertaker doffing his black top hat outside Lord Catatonic's cobwebby manor. Sentence is spaceship, lollipop, the superhero slamming an uppercut to the jaw of Archie Nemesis and sending him spiraling into next summer's sequel. The screen, the maniac, smearing an electric matrix of madness. The sentence, the painter, the patient palette. God save your Puritan husband, Goodman Screen, no dancing, the Sunday sermon, the constant slap of the butter churn and your duty to produce thirteen obedient children. Thank God for the Florida sorority of nymphomaniacs who never cheat, Alpha Chi Sentence. You can stop watching, and screen will keep walking. If sentence sees you nod off, it will wait and whisper you awake when you're ready to wander. Screen bleeds speed. Sentence craves space. Futuristic screen wants you shrinkwrapped and shriveled, atrophied and apathetic, mumbling in numb slumber. But grease the wheels, muscle oxcart sentence to market, and you'll bulge like Atlas. Behold the effete earl, Screen the Seventeenth, his revolting storehouses of stolen wealth from taxing groveling landowners into poverty, nailing his likeness to every tree, his shaggy shanks as he drops his baggy knickerbockers in his bedchamber before a trembling cobbler's daughter for another round of *prima jus noctis*. Enter ye olde raucous candlelit tavern of Sam Sentence, warrior democrat, crack shot with the breech-loading musket and friend to woodland creatures, smuggling bread and medicinal herbs to orphans on horseback, never ceasing until all citizens are free to see what they want to see, his watchcry "*Semper Fidelis!*" Screen flubs the filibuster. Sentence makes the French maid drop her feather duster. Sneering, senseless, sniveling screen. Sauntering, suave, sincere, suntanned sentence. Worship monotheist screen in monotone. Jam to sentence's polyglot one-woman street band on squeezebox, jaw harp, and sousaphone. Screen screams and screeches. Sentence beams and reaches. Screen yawns. Sentence dawns. Screen smells the current of contemporary air and sells you on the idea that it should tell you what to think. Sentence thinks you have something to tell.

Screen vs. Sentence

BIO: Matthew James Babcock. Idahoan. Writer. Failed breakdancer. Books: *Points of Reference* (Folded Word); *Strange Terrain* (Mad Hat); *Heterodoxologies* (Educe Press); *Future Perfect* (forthcoming, Ferry Street Books, 2018); *Four Tales of Troubled Love* (forthcoming, Harvard Square Editions).



Image by featured artist, Lennen Sanchez

THE CEREMONY

SUSAN BLOCH

Blood simmers in an aluminum pot over a log fire. Urgent flames lick and dance.

Sparks fly, logs crackle, resin oozes out of twigs, and a goat's head sizzles in the ashes. Eucalyptus fragrance mingles with the metallic-smelling liquid. Two men squat on the ground near the incandescent coals. Each wears a red-and-blue-checked *shuka*, the traditional Maasai blanket. The fabric draped over their shoulders falls between their knees. One, a holy man, has orange stripes down his cheek. He takes a bunch of dried neem leaves—recognizable by an unpleasant sulfurous odor—from a pouch around his neck and throws them into the dark red liquid. Between his palms, he whirls a wooden spoon as swiftly as an electric whisk.

I'm on a hiking and camping vacation in Tanzania's Maasai Mara National Reserve, when my guide, Medukenya, and I stumble upon this ceremony while tracking a pride of lions. Medukenya, who is also Maasai, greets our hosts in Maa—the local language. The holy man looks at me, lifts his hand in greeting, and gestures us to join them.

"The medicine man says you can take photos if you wish. We are very lucky they let us watch. This is my first time," he says.

"It's my privilege. *Asante*, thank you."

Minutes later, the holy man pushes his beaded headband higher on his perspiring forehead, dips a plastic cup into the frothy liquid, sips, sighs long and deep, and passes it to the other man hunkering in his circle. He wipes his blood-stained lips, turns to glance at me, and my mouth suddenly feels dry. His broad eyes are welcoming yet distant, filling me with a sense of being home and out of place at the same time. Medukenya crouches close to them, gesturing to me to sit on a rock a few yards away.

"It's only to make *men* strong." He drains the cup and smiles; my clenched jaw relaxes.

The holy man pours the remaining congealing liquid from the pot into a plastic bottle. The other man stands up, places the goat's roasted head in an impala-skin bag, picks up the goat's hairy headless body which he nestles into the crook of his elbow, and kicks sand over the

On this silent midday, as lions doze, baboons nap, cuckoos rest, and the fire dies, my breathing and swallowing sound noisy—even intrusive. Dust from the ashes creates a sense of godliness.

fire with his rubber sandals. On this silent midday, as lions doze, baboons nap, cuckoos rest, and the fire dies, my breathing and swallowing sound noisy—even intrusive. Dust from the ashes creates a sense of godliness. I’m in a sacred place that isn’t mine and yet, somehow, I feel imbued with a longing to believe in something.

My host rises, throws his shuka over his shoulders, and nods. He strides downhill, the grass whooshing around his long, sinewy legs, and tucks a traditional wooden staff under his elbow. I’m left with a sense of wanting more. More acceptance and intimacy. More reverence in my atheistic world.

Our next stop is the local Maasai market where I’m the only foreigner. Draped in different colored *shukas*, men and women wearing beaded necklaces, bangles, and headbands sell cakes of soap, rubber sandals made from car tires, matches, plastic jerry cans, goats, donkeys, and importantly, piles of *shukas*. Medukenya chooses one, drapes it over my shoulders, and closes his eyes.

“It is a blessing for you,” he whispers, “so you keep healthy and have many children and grandchildren.”

The blanket is scratchy yet comforting, heavy and protective. In the evenings around our own campfire, I drape my new *shuka* over my shoulders. That week the new moon is a thin crescent. The milky way dominates the black sky with enough light for owls to hunt, hyenas to sound their strange staccato cackle, and for me to sleep long and deep in my pup tent.

Back in my Seattle home, that red-and-blue-checked *shuka* covers my bed. When I wrap it around me before dozing off, I feel the holy man looking at me with those bloodstained lips. I float back to those silent moments when glowing coals turned to dust. I can hear his sigh. A sigh that calms my own spirit.

BIO: Susan Bloch is a freelance writer living in Seattle. Her essay “The Mumbai Massacre” (*Blue Lyra Review*) received notable mention in *Best American Essays 2017*. Her writing has also appeared in *The Citron Review*, *Entropy*, *Huffington Post*, *The Bella Literary Review*, *STORGY*, and *Tikkun*. You can find more of her work at susanblochwriter.com

THE AUDACITY OF HOPE, INDEED

VIRGINIA BOUDREAU

“Seriously, you aren’t going to be worrying about him the whole time we’re away, are you?” My husband was referring to our upcoming stay in Florida. As usual, I was fretting after another disheartening newscast and wondered aloud if two months was too long to be away from home. He stood there, shaking his head, a resigned little smile ghosting over his face. I glared at him. He didn’t get it; he never got it. I tried to ignore the lump of frustration anchored deep. That blob is my safety valve, a weighted cap keeping emotion contained. Part of me fears it’s a geyser that will never stop spouting if it lets go.

My tendency to feel everything too much is usually offset by my spouse’s ability to maintain a healthy detachment from the ups and downs of daily life. Think passionate as opposed to dispassionate. In some weird way, our system of balance and counterbalance keeps us ticking, despite frequent differences of opinion and approach. But that being said, my overly empathic nature has been the butt of a few jokes over the years,

I actually have an “Underdog” cape tucked away in my closet. It was a gift from the kids. I still remember their delighted giggles when I unwrapped it. “It’s perfect for you,” they’d announced as their dad, smiling broadly, nodded his agreement. I laughed with them, but honestly? It did nothing to dispel my secret inclination to view myself as a teensy bit superior. I took personal pride in my heightened “sensitivity.” It’s difficult to admit, but I’ve also been somewhat dismissive of my partner’s capacity for emotional distance. After all, who would choose to be so disconnected? His propensity for pragmatism has been handy at times, but I’m generally quite smug about my so-called heightened awareness, and have persistently maintained that given a choice, I’d take my hyper-vigilance over his indifference any day. Now, keeping this context in mind, allow me to tell you about a recent Saturday evening we shared.

It had been a tiring day, and my inner resources felt seriously depleted by the time I arrived home late that afternoon. The idea of tossing it in and going directly to bed after dinner was quite appealing. I had no desire to go out, be social, or even start a new novel. However, I was guilted into staying up, and Netflix was all I had the energy for. We were more than halfway

through an excellent series, but I needed a change of pace. The constant drama was spawning a nameless dread and the type of nebulous angst that surfaces when we're too muddled to know what it is we're actually disturbed about. I reluctantly agreed to watch something different. There truly wasn't much grace left in me that day.

My spouse passed the remote, and I searched through the offerings. "Here's one," I announced and pounced on a romantic comedy that wouldn't keep my head spinning all night. The movie was not bad enough to warrant switching off altogether, but we were bored to the point of passing Wordscapes puzzles back and forth on the iPad.

So, there we were, side by side on the couch, bookended by our snoring Yorkies. They had four sets of small paws stretched toward the ceiling in their favorite relaxation pose. No contest: we were getting more enjoyment from their antics than anything playing on the screen. In fact, I was all but comatose. The long day, the warm fire and mediocre movie combined to ensure I wasn't registering anything anymore. Truthfully, the only thing keeping me there was my reluctance to actually get up.

Hubby had commandeered the "flicker" by this time and just happened upon a still of David Letterman, who'd come to bear a bizarre resemblance to a studious Santa since I'd last seen him. For some reason, this caught my attention. When Barack Obama joined him on stage, I found myself suddenly awake and realized it wasn't only me. The iPad was ditched, the wine refilled, and the pillows plumped before we settled in. It looked like we were about to enjoy a re-run of the "My Next Guest Needs No Introduction" pilot. The dogs snored on, delighted their upheaval wasn't imminent.

I can't even tell you what we did except stay completely focused on that interview, heeding every word with a sense of wonder that was almost joyful in its intensity. I can only compare the feeling to that of seeing a dear friend after a lengthy absence. With that, came a forceful awareness of all that's been lost. It's not as though we're patriotically tied to the iconic figure who moved us so; we aren't even American citizens. A quiet fishing community on Nova Scotia's south-west coast has always been home to us. It seems a place far removed from globally contentious issues and shenanigans, but it's not; of course, it's not. That unfortunate ripple effect thing affects us all.

I can only compare the feeling to that of seeing a dear friend after a lengthy absence.

I don't recall even breathing; Obama was totally engaging; either self-effacingly funny or quietly contemplative. He shared snippets of private life we'd never been curious about but now lapped up like dogs at their water bowls. The words slipped off his tongue, his humanity and

humility gilded us in a warmth that was strangely reassuring. I looked over at my husband, you know, the dispassionate one I described just a short time ago? The tears were coursing unashamedly down his cheeks, one after another in an endless slide. “Oh, I’ve missed this man.” There was no need for him to say more.

You might be inclined to infer we’re CNN junkies with a voracious passion for all things political. Nothing could be further from the truth. We were barely aware. Now, I see we weren’t preoccupied because there was no need for us to be. We were complacent in our assumption that competent, morally responsible persons were at the helm, looking after affairs as best they could. I’d casually admired President Obama during his term, had commented on his intelligence, his vision, and what my grandmother would have referred to as plain “goodness.” But, it was inordinately powerful to be reminded of these gifts after such a difficult and lengthy absence.

An arm sheathed in navy wool crept along the back of the sofa, pulled me in close. We sighed together, said nothing at all for a long time. The coals on the hearth pulsed and glowed, bathing us in a warmth that went far beyond the Letterman interview. I’d been gifted with a startling glimpse into the sensibility of a person I dearly loved but had stubbornly pegged as dispassionate. I found something I hadn’t even known was lost.

I’ll be grateful for those unexpected moments on a rainy Saturday evening. Though I’m certain we’ll enjoy this program again, I’ll always be amazed by its singular impact on that particular fall day. One hour of skilled questioning and authentic repartee could turn insidious darkness toward a source of light, however distant. I’ll remember that next time I catch the news, and I’ll resolve here and now to not worry about “him” the whole time we’re away, enjoying warmer climes. I guess that’s what the “audacity of hope” is really all about.

*The book, “The Audacity of Hope” was written by former US president, Barack Obama in 2006, while he was still a senator.

BIO: Virginia Boudreau is a retired teacher living in Nova Scotia, Canada. Her poetry and prose have appeared in a wide variety of international literary magazines and anthologies, both in print and online.

ON THURSDAY

MIRANDA CAMPBELL

On Thursdays, Trenae, Jessica, and I talk about how long we spend in the grocery store picking out avocados. We complain about our university's steep student fees that are required every semester even though we're all on assistantship. We swap stories about the kids who teased us in grade school, the one that literally stabbed me in the back with a pencil, or the one that Jessica says was obsessed with butts. We talk about the news articles our supervisor just emailed us showing recent studies of Round Up found in certain brands of oats and oat cereal, and we forget for a minute about all the local archives and loose papers piling up underneath our fingertips.

On Thursdays, I download one of my favorite trashy reality TV shows that airs the previous night, curl up in my bed and eat semi-sweet chocolate chips, and watch as twenty-two singles who are bad at love live under one roof for ten weeks, drink too much alcohol, and try to find their soulmates.

I cover the crease of my eyelids in a golden brown eye-shadow, a color that makes my dull brown eyes pop and do something interesting for a change.

On Thursdays, I take my time in the morning.

On Thursdays, I want to try because much of the early week was spent tired and indifferent toward how I look. I cover the crease of my eyelids in a golden brown eye-shadow, a color that makes my dull brown eyes pop and do something interesting for a change. I swipe my

finger over dusty pink blush and pat it along the bridge of my nose, make it seem as though I'm freshly sun-kissed, despite the fact that it's 50 degrees outside and overcast.

On Thursdays, coworkers love to announce that *tomorrow is Friday!*

On Thursdays, my friends and I sit on the low-lit back deck at Metropolis, sipping on cold craft beer, but not before sampling their new taps, cringing at the ones that taste too sour, making a "not bad" face at the extra hops, and mmmm-ing at the wheat beer that's just right.

On Thursdays, I work out my legs, the legs I have hated my whole life because I've never had a thigh gap. I stack the weights, increasing little by little every few weeks and force my legs

to lift, to squat, to jump, to sweat so much that my clothes look darker when I leave than they did when I got to the gym an hour before. On Thursdays, I work out my legs until they wobble, until I have to hang onto the rail when I walk downstairs to leave.

On Thursdays, my coworker Holly usually brings in some kind of baked good or treat, notifies the whole library staff. Chocolate chip cookies the size of my face, a whole Key lime pie, pimento cheese, her own garden grown Zebra tomatoes. *Make sure to take some*, she says every time. On Thursdays, my stomach is a little extra full, a little extra happy.

On Thursdays, my friend Julia's NFL team sometimes plays. She wears her purple Minnesota Vikings jersey and hops around on her toes with a full smile. If I can, I wear something purple to show my support because even though I couldn't care less about NFL, I care about unity; I care about putting your faith in players whom you don't know, but sometimes feel you do because they represent youth and skill and command and even if you don't have a hand in who wins or loses it's all still just a little bit exciting, isn't it? From the yelling fans to the double high-fives shared when a play is in our favor, to the low-lighting of the bar where we sit and watch, even to the cadence of the announcer's voice, the speed in which they broadcast the action.

On Thursdays, I stay up late because I don't have to work at Special Collections the next morning. Sometimes I go out, sometimes I read or binge watch *Parks and Recreation* until the early hours of the morning because tomorrow feels far away, and my lack of sleep feels inconsequential, and even though I almost always regret it the next day, when my wrist can't hold up the weight of my head any longer nor can my eyelids stay open, that night is still Thursday night; it is not yet Friday.

OPERATION

MIRANDA CAMPBELL

You can almost always find a Band-Aid on at least one of my fingers. Not from a finger prick or a paper cut, but from my obsession with picking my cuticles. Obsession is an extreme word, and I use it for very few things. Perhaps my love of chocolate and the hit television series, *The Office*, but everything else feels like an exaggeration. I call this particular affliction an obsession because although it causes pain, I can't imagine not doing it. Stray cuticles and dead skin are an open invitation; they are asking to be picked. I started doing this long before the critically acclaimed movie, *Black Swan*, that appeared in 2010, but now when I pick, I conjure the infamous scene where Natalie Portman hallucinates herself picking a rather stubborn cuticle, dragging it so far she winds up peeling an entire layer of skin that starts at her nail bed and travels all the way down to her wrist. This is what could happen, I think, right as I begin to pick and tear at a particular spot. But every time, I pull the skin back anyway.

If I'm not wearing a Band-aid, a few of my fingers are most certainly a bright pink or red. Irritated from the peeling of a layer of skin, but not one deep enough to draw blood. If they're not red, they're scabbed over—the quintessential mark of a former picking. And once they're scabbed, they're in perfect condition for me to pick and start the cycle all over again. A vicious circle as these things are often referred to. If I feel like I've exhausted my fingers, I move onto the loose cuticles around my toenails. Pick and prod like a game of operation.

I'm almost always fidgeting with the skin of my fingers. It doesn't matter where I am. Sitting at my desk at work waiting for a scan to finish, in class during a lecture, at the gym resting between sets, in the middle of a conversation (even one that I'm engaged in), out to dinner with friends, walking home from campus, at church with my mother. She reacts the same way every time. Perhaps during the first or second reading, or the homily—a lull of some sort during mass—my fingers inadvertently feel for a straggle of skin out of place, and the picking begins. After some time, my mother notices my head bent in concentration, and she swats at my hand. She uses her angry whisper. *Stop doing that! You have such pretty hands, and besides, you could*

get an infection. I usually stop at that moment, just to please her, but if I can, I'll drop my hand to my side, lift my head to face the altar, and continue to pick.

I have a special habit of doing this when I don't have a Band-Aid on me. Sometimes, I pick in the car when I'm driving, assisting a researcher with the local archives. When there's no Band-Aid, I, of course, take the picking too far. When there's no Band-Aid, there's

I'm still shocked by how much blood can exude from a small finger wound even though I've done this to myself dozens of times.

almost always bleeding. I'm still shocked by how much blood can exude from a small finger wound even though I've done this to myself dozens of times. In those moments, I use the tip of another finger to tamp down the bleeding, a tissue if I have it, or sometimes even a scrap piece of paper as a temporary means of cauterization. I'm thinking of a line written by one of my favorite essayists: "Humans are pretty good at not learning from the mistakes that have already befallen us." He, of course, is referring to something catastrophic, the deadly Haiti tsunami of 2010 I believe, but it feels pertinent to my bad habit. When will I learn, if ever?

Rarely do I think about it anymore. My fingers habitually find my nail beds, and I have to force myself to stop. I find the process satisfying. From pinpointing an excess piece of skin near the nail bed to getting a good grip on it before I pull, to following it to its end for as long as I can tolerate, even to leaving my skin raw and tender. I have a pair of cuticle clippers and while I do use them for the terrible ones, the cuticles that at any moment might go *Black Swan* on me, I find I'd rather get to the root myself, the place where no cuticle remains flapped partway open. Only then can I let go.

BEFORE WE GO OUT

MIRANDA CAMPBELL

The first thing Morgan does when we get into her Ford Escape is plug her phone into the auxiliary jack and find a song to play. Usually something upbeat and with a fast tempo. All of our drives require music, but the one to the liquor store is different. There are a few songs on these particular trips I can always count on her playing. *Got Money* by Lil Wayne starts with its drum roll, "m-m-money" and Lil Wayne's raspy cackle. We sing as many words we know, which are almost all of them, making hand gestures and dancing as much as the slack in our seat belts will let us. We drive the few miles to the Beverage Depot and peruse the aisles as if we've never been there before. Walking by the pre-made margaritas in their multi-colored array: classic, strawberry, mango. The craft beers with their modish graphics that make one feel hip and bohemian. We take our time, more time than we ever need because the anticipation is as much a part of this as the going out.

Our drive back has just as much pluck and punch as the drive to. Our voices carry throughout the car. I let myself sing off-key, which is not hard for me to do, and if Morgan's in a particularly good mood, she rolls down her windows.

When we get home, we make ourselves a drink in "fancy cups," which is anything other than the plastic cups we use for water and soda throughout the week, and then she goes to her room, and I walk across the hall to mine. My hair is usually still wet from a shower, and I have to blow it dry yet. I hog the bathroom for the next half hour and blow it dry with a round brush, like a blowout, but way less professional and tame. My hand often cramps into a concentrated, stiff position around the handle of the brush. Sometimes I feel it might get stuck like that for an elongated period of time, but I brush and roll, brush and roll until each layer is dry. Morgan's hair is often already dry, so she styles hers. Curl or straighten. Braid or wind up into a top-knot. When we start to get ready, I sometimes don't see her for the next 45 minutes, depending on what each of us is doing.

Always the same. We get ready on opposite ends of our old apartment. Every few minutes, she walks over to the bathroom to ask if her lipstick matches her outfit or to ask if she can pee, to which I always respond *yes, of course; you know you can kick me out whenever*. Still, she asks anyway. Or I walk over to her room to ask if my shoes match my shorts. Or we meet in the middle to belt out the last verse of a Cardi B song playing on our TV in the living room.

We are separate, but together.

Of course, we need each other's help too. I don't know that I'd enjoy our routine nearly as much if not for Morgan's reassuring "yes" to the choker necklaces I'm fond of wearing. "Yes, to the choker always," she says. Or her brutal honesty when telling me that a white blazer dress makes me look like I'm "trying to be a sexy scientist, but it's not exactly working, and it's also not Halloween." Maybe we don't necessarily need each other's help because we are grown women, but it doesn't take away from the fact that we are lucky to have each other there as an option.

There's a purity to the getting ready, to the small routine before we go out, the idea that it's the early end of a late night and anything could happen...

There's a moment right when we leave the house—right before we pull the string on the small lamp near our front door that we keep on for a night lite—where I feel as though the rest of the night won't live up to what we've fantasized in our heads. That the best part was in the trying, the

putting an effort into our looks, making ourselves feel beautiful for a night, the sipping on a pre-made margarita mix and listening to music as we try on clothes we never wear but will never throw away either because maybe one day that bralette will have the perfect occasion to wear it to, or maybe one day those jeans will fit again. There's a moment when I worry that the best part of the night has already happened, and the rest will be a let-down. A built-up, idealized fabrication. There's a purity to the getting ready, to the small routine before we go out, the idea that it's the early end of a late night and anything could happen, and I think that perhaps I prefer that place of limbo, of opportunity—the place where nothing untoward or even *good* has happened yet—more than I do the overcrowded, quotidian bar. I know this. Every time we get ready, I know this to be true, and though Morgan and I have never really talked about it out loud, she knows this to be true too.

Still, we can't help ourselves. We pull the string on the lamp by the front door, and we go out anyway.

BIO: Miranda Campbell is a third year MFA student at Georgia College and State University. She works as a graduate assistant in the school's Special Collections and is a freelance editor for Triplicity Publishing. Her nonfiction appears in *The Laurel Review*, *Hippocampus Magazine*, *Chaleur Magazine*, and is forthcoming in *littleddeathlit*.

A TREE WITH NO ROOTS

KEN CHEN

I am wholly and completely my own person, an individual defined only by myself.

Or at least, that's what I'd like to believe. I'd like to believe that I am an individualist with an independent mind, that I do not cower in the face of the unrelenting pressures of society. I'd like to believe that who I am is a result of what I have chosen, not what has been chosen for me. But this is simply untrue. It's not that I feel independent because I have chosen to free myself from the bondage of conformity. Instead, I feel helpless because I've become untethered from any sort of anchor. I feel as if the ground is crumbling beneath me while my feet scramble for purchase. I feel like a minuscule sailboat, struggling to stay afloat while the shadow of a tsunami bears down upon it. Sometimes, I feel hopelessly alone, like I have no one. Like I have no roots.

Let me explain.

From the darkest recesses of my memory, I can recall a time when I felt a sturdy connection to my heritage. I was undeniably Chinese, as much as one could be without citizenship. While my Chinese lagged behind my English, I had a steady grasp of the language and culture. I sang Chinese folk songs with that adorable, out-of-tune voice that only a three-year-old could muster. My favorite food, pork buns, had yet to be supplanted by pizza and steak. I was semi-literate, able to recognize an array of complex characters — amalgamations of a series of lines, dots, and dashes.

When in Guangzhou, I
yearn for my own bed and
the temperate climate of
Ohio as I sweat rivulets and
cough at the oppressive
smog and choking haze of
cigarette smoke. The China
I know is not one that
resonates within me.

It seems like a lifetime ago. Today, I can barely understand colloquial Chinese, and when prompted to speak, I can only stutter out short strings of heavily accented words. I'm functionally illiterate. What's worse is that I often recognize characters that I once knew but now can't quite place. I only visit my family in China every other year, if even that often, and I don't know their hobbies or their interests. I don't know their stories, their greatest victories, or their worst defeats. I know nothing about the obstacles that life has undoubtedly thrown at them. I don't even know

their names. They're family, but I hesitate to call them friends. They're hardly acquaintances. They're *strangers*.

Whatever semblance of a connection I once had to that nation has been wholly and methodically stripped from me by the embrace of Western culture. Hearing the word 'Beijing' does not conjure up the sounds of boisterous family gatherings or the taste of rich, incredibly greasy, Chinese cuisine. Instead, it summons the acrid stench of pollution and the sound of repulsive men hacking up phlegm in the streets. I don't reminisce about those immense megalopolises from the comforts of my small-town, Midwestern home. When in Guangzhou, I yearn for my own bed and the temperate climate of Ohio as I sweat rivulets and cough at the oppressive smog and choking haze of cigarette smoke. The China I know is not one that resonates within me. It is not one that I carry with me as a symbol of 'my people,' for they are not my people. They are a collection of individuals as foreign to me as they would be to any other American. As is the case for so many Asian Americans, assimilation wrapped me up in its unbreakable tendrils, caught me in its inescapable grasp, and forced every ounce of 'Chineseness' from my body, from my mind, and from my memory. My bonds to China — my roots in that culture, that people, that nation — have long been severed.

In essence, I, as a friend once remarked, am a Creamsicle. Superficially, to the average white American, I would seem unquestionably Asian. My brown, almond-shaped eyes, jet black hair, and tanner — dare I say yellow — skin tone betray my heritage even to the quickest of glances. I fit the stereotype perfectly: I have an aptitude for academics — especially math — and I am the principal cellist of my school orchestra. However, once one peers beneath the surface, it does not take long to realize that I'm as white as the vanilla ice cream at the center of that Creamsicle.

I should be able to fit in then, right?

Well... kind of.

Apparently, my overly sarcastic, hyperbole-prone personality is somewhat likable. However, no matter how many close friends I have, no matter how many times I'm voted onto Homecoming Court, I can't shake the feeling that I don't quite belong. This disquieting impression was not ameliorated in the slightest when an invisible, inexplicable hand unceremoniously doused my Creamsicle in a rainbow sprinkled epiphany.

As if I hadn't spent years of sleepless nights wishing for something else, something better, something *normal*, only to arrive at the terrifying conclusion that I could never change: that this *thing* was permanently and inextricably part of me. I remember wet palms and white, clenched knuckles and averted eyes.

I remember the day I told my mother, with every millisecond of hesitation, every beat of my racing heart burned indelibly into my memory. I remember the bitter taste of those two words, the acid of my saliva, as I choked out "I'm gay?" with the pathetic inflection of a question. As if I weren't sure. As if I hadn't spent years of sleepless nights wishing for something else, something better, something *normal*, only to arrive at the terrifying conclusion that I could never change: that this *thing* was permanently and inextricably part of me. I remember wet

palms and white, clenched knuckles and averted eyes. I remember, vividly, her reaction — her stunned silence, followed by a meek "how can you be sure?" And maybe I imagined it, but I heard — I felt — that tiny, ephemeral twinge of disappointment in her voice buried beneath the obvious worry; I saw the inklings of disillusionment cloud her eyes, and I witnessed the torrent of questions flash across her face — I remember every single one of those silently deafening questions.

How is this possible? How can this be happening? Do I know you anymore?

Who are you?

In that moment, I knew that no matter how much she loved me, in her eyes I was not the son she had raised. I had hidden an intrinsic, fundamental, part of myself from her for *years*. How could I be any more than a stranger?

To say that my sense of belonging evaporated in that moment would be just incorrect. That sense of 'otherness' had already taken root and flourished long ago, so I was already intimately familiar with this uneasy feeling. My mother's reaction only acted as the final brushstroke, adding the finishing touches to my definition of myself — different, foreign.

Alien.

And so, here I am. I'd like to be able to write a fulfilling, satisfying resolution, perfected with flowery language and beautiful metaphors. I'd like to be able to end this with a cliché "I have found my place because I have realized that the opinions of others are meaningless and because of the wonderful people in my life who have accepted me, flaws and all," or something to that effect.

Something positive and optimistic. And to some extent, it's true. I'm no longer the boy whose voice splintered when he stared into a mirror with eyes crisscrossed by jagged, crimson veins, struggling to find the courage to admit, even to himself, that he could never love a girl the way he was *supposed* to. I no longer live my life as if pushed and pulled by the whims of racial insecurity, uncertain of which stereotypical caricature, which cheap replica of a human being I was *supposed* to embody. No, I am no longer that boy. Today, I would not hesitate to say that there are people I know whom I'd trust with my life. Today, I have the permanent, unbreakable bonds that I once could barely even wish for. I have my roots.

Yet still, I wouldn't say that I'm perfectly content or comfortable. I don't feel as if everything is as it should be. Maybe I'm destined to, one day, find a place and a people that will wash away all of the pain and fear as easily as tears were washed from my face.

Maybe I'm destined to, one day, find a place and a people that will wash away all of the pain and fear as easily as tears were washed from my face.

Or maybe I'll never find this utopia or experience this euphoria. Maybe no one ever feels this way, and maybe those who claim to are merely lying to themselves in a futile attempt to chase away the self-doubt and insecurity that attach to each and every one of us like a second skin. Maybe, no matter how many connections I make — no matter how many roots I grow — I'll always be on the outside looking in.

And maybe that's enough.

BIO: Ken Chen is a junior at Wyoming High School in Cincinnati, Ohio. This is his first serious experimentation with writing, and it is a reflection upon his identity, specifically how certain aspects of it have influenced both others' perceptions of him and his own definition of himself.

RETIRING TO PARADISE

KARLA CHRISTENSEN

In a cloud forest valley two hours northwest of Quito, the capital of Ecuador, there is a town called Mindo, famous for its variety and number of birds, its waterfalls and outdoor sports. My section of Mindo is called the Delta of Tranquility, which it is. I came from the United States to retire on my small social security pension and take, as I like to say waterfall, flower and butterfly therapy. The delta of Tranquility is on a hill, a little on the outskirts of this small city of 5,000 permanent residents and many more tourists.

My casita is in my landlady's garden enclosure, on a street corner, surrounded by huge trees and bushes and a chain-link fence. My Landlady is about 10 years younger than my 66 years, Ecuadorian, and she has owned this place for 20 years. She is a Swedish massage therapist, Gestalt therapist, Zen meditation teacher and assistant to shamans, with a practice in Quito. She often brings her clients to this garden in Mindo to heal. Every client plants a tree or flower before they leave, so over the last twenty years, her garden has acquired everything I can conceive of wanting in a garden: pineapples, bananas, oranges, mangos, papaya, avocado, coffee, cacao, and yucca. Flowers that smell good bloom all year round: roses, hibiscus, bougainvillea, lilies, gardenias and jasmine, bromeliads and orchids and huge flowering trees. We also have herbs for ceremonies including guayusa and ayahuasca, and for cooking, like lemongrass, basil, and thyme.

The main work in caring for this garden involves chopping things back, as in this is a cloud forest and everything grows very fast. We pay a gardener once a month to come with his machete and chop.

My casita is on the other street, with my own entrance. I have a large bedroom with bath, and a kitchen connected by an outdoor living area under a bamboo and metal roof. Because I have a covered porch, I spend most of my day outdoors where I sit on my sofa on the porch and watch the blue-gray tanagers, Flame-rumped tanagers, and masked trogons coming to eat the extra bananas on the palms. Or I lie in my hammock, even when it rains, and watch hummingbirds.

My landlady is here sometimes and in Quito the rest of the time. When she is here she sits at a table on the other side of the garden doing business, and I'm here on my side, typing at my picnic table. Occasionally we share a meal, either one we have cooked ourselves or from a restaurant downtown. When she is gone the veil of tranquility is total, only enhanced by frog songs, the scent of gardenia and roses, and the mist of rainfall.

When I venture out of my Delta of Tranquility, it is to exercise or to go shopping for groceries. Remember truck farmers? There are vegetable and fruit trucks here that come from the agricultural valleys between Mindo and the coast. There may be some schedule, but I don't know it yet. As well as parking in town, they move around the neighborhoods shouting their wares. Some have only one product, for instance, 10 mandarin oranges for \$1. That was two weeks ago. This week there are 10 small mangoes for \$1, or 30 naranjillas (a citrus fruit) also for \$1. The produce seems to come as a result of overflow during harvest season, so one must eat what is offered that week. It's the opposite of my usual mode, "I think I'll make potatoes au gratin," and I go buy potatoes. No, it's more like I'm lying in my hammock and I hear the loudspeaker and wonder what he's saying. "Potatoes," I think. I run to get my keys and cross the Rio Casa Zen (where the broken hose has been fixed twice but still is overflowing), issue out my gate and flag down the truck. I buy a bag of potatoes, and wonder, "Where will I store these? What shall I make with them?"

"Are they organic?" I can hear my friends back home asking. Well, maybe or probably not, or if the truck is old and the veggies are pretty ugly, then yes, these people probably can't afford chemicals. The use of GMO products is officially not sanctioned so probably it is not common. No use asking. Everyone says "yes," since they use the word organic to mean not plastic, or only that it grows. They know the correct answer is "yes." After a few minutes of intense cross-examination they may say, "Well, we only use a little bit of bug spray." There are a few permanent small fruit and veggie shops in town as well, but if I want the good fresh stuff for great prices, listening for the truck's loudspeakers is the best option.

These trucks also circulate in Quito, and throughout Ecuador. The difference is that Mindo is such a small isolated town, many things are available only from trucks. There are trucks for internet service, satellite service, to pick up old appliances, to sell bedspreads or shoes, pineapples, macadamia nuts, or tires. Being ready to run outside at any moment demands that I have keys to the gate in my pocket, cash, and an ability to make out auctioneer-speed Spanish.

For more varied shopping I go to the neighboring town, about an hour away. The locals just stand on the bridge overlooking the river and wait for a ride. This is a small town, and they know everyone, so it's more a matter of getting a ride with a friend than hitchhiking, especially for the school children. Everyone contributes a dollar or so, and cars and trucks are generally full. For me to employ this method is more like hitchhiking, since I'm new here. People have to feel a little brave and certainly helpful to stop for me. But they do. And then there is the challenge of assessing whether I want the ride offered. I don't mind at all riding in the back of a small truck with children, hippies, adventure sports enthusiasts, or cargo like inner tubes for rafting.

When I am hiking on roads outside of town taxi drivers I have used will stop and offer freebies. Once I got off the bus at the wrong stop about a mile down the highway, and when I wandered into a yard, the people there drove me to Mindo. Another time I hitchhiked on the back of a motorcycle coming down a dirt track into town. Generally, everyone on the country roads seems to be in the habit of picking up walkers and helping them along. It's not the company that must be assessed, but the skill of the driver.

...he was dressed like an aristocrat from the last century in a suit, woolen vest, and colored handkerchief. This old fellow tuned his radio to harpsichord music and got on the highway going about 15 miles an hour.

In the next town of Los Bancos, there is a bench outside a pharmacy where people from Mindo wait for a passing friend to offer a ride. Recently an elderly gentleman in an old jeep stopped for me. He said he recognized me from the street in Mindo. He had a wonderful face, to my mind very Spanish looking with his long forehead, long nose, and long upper lip, and he was dressed like an aristocrat from

the last century in a suit, woolen vest, and colored handkerchief. This old fellow tuned his radio to harpsichord music and got on the highway going about 15 miles an hour. There was something a little wrong in the steering of either the jeep or the old man, so we wandered from side to side a bit while the rest of the traffic passed us at 65 mph on the curving two-lane highway.

It's always a pleasure to come up out of the valley and see the fog-wreathed distances, and at 15 miles an hour, I saw every leaf, flower, roadside toucan and distant view! As I thought I might die soon in a traffic accident, I decided to settle in and enjoy every moment left to me.

The music was lovely and peaceful. Every long while my companion would say something utterly obvious like, "There are many trees here." But of course, eventually, we returned safe and sound to my delta of tranquility.

Some days I walk for an hour in the countryside, viewing the various hostels, their gardens, and entryways, watching for toucans or quetzals, listening to canaries and parrots pass in chattering flocks, and admiring the gigantic plants. Other days I walk about two kilometers to a pool filled entirely with fresh chilly water. There is also a smaller pool heated with solar panels, but the big one is wonderful for laps. It takes a little resolve to get in but afterward it is bliss. So far in two months no one else has been using the pool or even staying at the hostel. Each day I speak a bit with the resident caretaker who has so little to do that he cleans the pool five times a day. The pool water comes down off the mountain, has no chemicals, and is utterly clean; and the pool is surrounded by bamboos and orchids, banana and coffee and mango trees.

Some days I am so lazy my exercise consists of picking up the guavas in my yard and throwing them into the compost, or raking the leaves, or sweeping and mopping, but most of all, climbing into the hammock to sway and watch the sunlight and breeze among the leaves, bromeliads, and jungle flowers. But then I am retired now and living in paradise.

BIO: Karla Christensen is a U.S. citizen who is retired and a permanent resident of Ecuador. Karla is a teacher of Transcendental Meditation, a technical writer for alternative health companies, a published poet, an artist and mother. Her most recent book is *Myths and Legends of Ecuador* in English with original watercolor illustrations.

WHAT I LEARNED WHEN I WENT BACK TO SCHOOL

ROSANNE EHRLICH

Let's just say I'm over 60, the daughter of liberal, politically active parents...more than Democrats: Registered Independents. And, like almost every born-in-New-York leftist around my age would brag, I was a "Red Diaper Baby." I went to the March on Washington in '63, supported the Wall Street sit-in. And I went to a liberal college...Sarah Lawrence.

Yes, at my age, I know I am slightly out of it, but of a do-good, equal-rights heart. I didn't care about all the differences, even between trans, a-sexual, unisexual, sex for all, not to mention the initials: LBTG, PD, OC, or, it would turn out, the "transgender." Everybody should get along, is my feeling. Or maybe it was my mother who taught us that certain things are not any of our business. No judgments. What's personal is personal. That included: talking about money-- (my father's salary), and no, no talking about the other thing... (no way, avoid, no mentioning it) ...sex. "One man, one vote, was what was important."

As I said, my diaper was Red.

Recently I moved to Westchester and it occurred to me that my old college could offer me some great resources...lectures, performances, the library. I signed up to be a "Friend of the Library." All the books I could read.

So, I drove to the campus, with its green lawns rolling out all over the place. The three-story, Tudor style buildings sat on ivy-covered hills over-looking more green. But now the campus was three times the size it was when I attended, and those graceful stone and brick buildings looked shoved aside. Across the street were the newer ones, boxy, with their huge windows set in beige brick walls.

So much glass, lots of glass, I think.

I park my car, aware that this was once "my" (for four years) campus, and look around to see that it's almost empty now as it's early June and almost everyone has left for summer vacation. Two young men, carrying black violin cases, walk towards their car, parked near mine.

Then it was all girls. At 18, you're a girl and you are perfect.

In this perhaps, overly-nostalgic mood, I walk up and over a small hill by the parking lot to the library with its own brick and glass shapes. They jut out at angles and give the feeling the whole building might take flight at any minute.

It's the first time I've come back and visited the campus, I have never gone into this new (to me) building. I enter the double glass doors, scan my "Friends of the Library" card and, with the building inviting exploration, I begin to wander around. I walk slowly through the main floor, exploring the airy modern rooms washed in natural light. It's completely quiet, empty of people but for a woman sitting at the Information Desk. She is in her 50s I guess, beautifully dressed -- just a bit outrageous. We smile and nod at each other and I walk onwards, looking for some pattern to the rooms.

I decide to visit the bathroom which the woman at the Information Desk tells me is downstairs, at the far end of the main room. I climb down the spiral staircase to the floor below. Opening the metal door at the bottom of the I find a big room, warmly-lit and filled with study tables, it is silent, almost as if it were deserted. Then, by the back wall, I see a nice-looking, neatly dressed, middle-aged man.

As I walk further into the quiet room he moves out of sight, disappearing around a far corner. Walking toward the back where I had been told the bathroom was I round the same corner and he's gone. There is a door with its sign reading:

"All Gender Restroom. Anyone can use this restroom, regardless of gender, identity or expression."

That must have been where he went, I think. It's a Transgender Bathroom! No, it's a "Unisex Bathroom" a bathroom where men and women pee together.

When I went here it was an all-girls school, the bathrooms were only for women.

Where did the male professors go?

It's a Transgender Bathroom!

No, every person under 30 knows this.

I'm prepared...no big deal.

It's quiet, nobody is around.

I have to go into a bathroom with a strange man?

This is a transgender bathroom. They must have stalls.

Grow up.

Think younger.

I'm pro-everything except guns, without thinking about it.

Who cares who goes to the bathroom with whom.

I am near the door and I push it in. I can't see if there is anyone else in the room, the two stalls have sides almost up to the ceiling and I go to the far one, door already ajar. Past the other door with the (ominously, I think) closed door. Quickly gliding into the far stall, I close the door and carefully prevent it from slamming shut.

I can't see if there is anyone else in the room, the two stalls have sides almost up to the ceiling and I go to the far one, door already ajar. Past the other door with the (ominously, I think) closed door.

Avoiding any and all surfaces. I squat to pee while reaching out to lock the stall door and trying to look under the common wall to see if I can see his shoes. I can't tell if I hear anything.

He can hear me peeing.

Will he rape me?

Wow, did I really take in the message from the far right?

I am careful to very quietly and quickly rinse and dry my hands and push the outer door open

To breathe free air again.

Then I see him coming out from a door opposite me, the other door also marked with the same sign: "All Gender Restroom." I hadn't noticed it across the way.

He nods and walks around the corner and disappears into the main room.

I'm a "Friend of the Library," I think and immediately go upstairs to the Research area to look a few things up: Polyamorous, Non-Binary, A-sexual, Two-Spirit, Intersexual, Other and Unisexual. Not to mention BDSM, bondage, domination, submission, and masochism.

First, the word transgender.

BIO: Rosanne Ehrlich's novel *Attack* was published by Ballantine Books under the pen name Collis Ehrlich. Flash pieces have been published in *Persimmon Tree* and *Panoply*. She has published poems in *Fredericksburg Literary and Art Review* and also written several television documentaries for *The Great Ships* series on *The History Channel*.

EULOGY FOR MY UNCLE, THE PARTS OF HIM I KNEW

In memory of Pieter Jan Rol, 1958-2001

EVE HARBURG

My uncle had elbows. I saw the flight attendants' carts hit them when we flew to the Netherlands for a family reunion. That's why he didn't like aisle seats on airplanes. Oh, and he was tall. That's why his elbows got in the way of the carts in the first place.

My uncle had eyelids. I heard my mom ask him to pull down the ones beneath his eyes when we were having dinner at my grandparents' house. My mom is my uncle's sister. She is also a doctor. She must have thought his lower eyelids looked sick because the next time I saw him, he was in the hospital.

My uncle had a belly. Not a huge one, but when I hugged him goodbye after we had cream puffs for dessert at my grandparents' house, I had to stretch my arms more than when I hugged everyone else. Maybe he just ate too many cream puffs. Maybe he didn't like cream puffs at all.

My uncle had hair. It was long and blond. Then he went to the hospital, and it all fell out.

My uncle had a plastic bracelet. A nurse put it on him when he checked into the hospital. It was supposed to help the people who worked there tell the sick people apart from each other, but it didn't help my mom tell the sick people apart from the healthy ones. She told me I wasn't allowed to hug my uncle because *I* might make *him* sick. I think she was scared because my uncle's lower eyelids didn't get sick until after she looked inside them.

My uncle had a pink bowl. I was in charge of holding it in the car when we drove him back to the hospital. His temperature was too high to watch TV in my room anymore. When we got to his hospital room, my mom told me to wait outside. Then my uncle vomited up everything

he had ever eaten in his entire life. My mom tried to close the door, but it was too late. I saw what the pink bowl was for.

My uncle had a heart-shaped stone. It had the word *HOPE* engraved on it. He kept it on the table by his hospital bed.

My uncle had a heart-shaped stone. It had the word *HOPE* engraved on it. He kept it on the table by his hospital bed. It was the dumbest thing I ever saw. I can say that because I gave it to him.

My uncle had a son. His son is my cousin. My cousin came to live with us when my uncle's lower eyelids got sick. He was going to live with us forever if he had to, but he and my mom didn't get along. Sometimes I hoped that my cousin would get invited to sleep over at his friend's house even though I would miss playing with him. He is my kind-of brother, but I love him like a real brother. My real sister didn't play with me anymore. She was in middle school, and I was still afraid of the dark. After my cousin went to live with his real mom, I hoped I'd get my family back. It was almost the dumbest thing I ever hoped. The dumbest thing I ever hoped was that I'd never get the heart-shaped stone back.

My uncle had a ghost. I couldn't see it, but my mom could. She saw it almost every weekend. What happened was my uncle went to a different hospital that was really far away. I went to see him there once, but after that, I had to listen to my parents whispering about doctor stuff when I wanted to know how his

As far as I could tell, my uncle's alphabet had spelled words like "rejected bone marrow." I didn't know what that was, but it sounded like the ghost inside his bones.

lower eyelids were doing. My dad is a doctor, too. Anyways, my parents said there was something wrong with my uncle's alphabet. They called it his CBC. Everyone knows that's not how the alphabet goes. The last time I heard my parents talk about it, their faces looked really sad. As far as I could tell, my uncle's alphabet had spelled words like "rejected bone marrow." I didn't know what that was, but it sounded like the ghost inside his bones. The stuff I heard about but didn't see.

My uncle had a black leather jacket. I had seen lots like it at the motorcycle shop where he worked. The building across the street was painted neon purple everywhere, even over the windows. My cousin told me he knocked on the door one time to see what was in there and the lady who answered was not wearing clothes on top! I think he liked that story because he saw her

boobs. I have seen lots of boobs before in locker rooms, but I only saw my uncle wear his black leather jacket once. It was at his funeral.

My uncle had elbows. I saw them up against the sides of his casket. I cried.

BIO: Eve is an acupuncturist by trade and a writer by nature. A native of the Pacific Northwest, she is currently trying Southern California on for size—and sunshine. She draws inspiration from music, the outdoors, and the will of her patients to keep going when healing seems out of reach.



Image by featured artist, Lennen Sanchez

IN THE SECOND HOUSE

KATHERINE HEIGH

Before he is admitted to the hospital, my grandfather leans heavily on the burgundy reclining chair in my living room corner. I offer him every comfort my house can provide. He no longer has a bladder, or half of one of his lungs, or a spleen. I ask him if he wants me to put the newest season of *Trailer Park Boys* on for him. Grampa (Sun in Aquarius) replies that that's not a good show to watch with kids around, to which I agree with a shrug, before he asks, "Do you have anything on there about serial killers?" It's his pancreas this time, or so the doctors say when he is admitted a week later.

Irritated, I pull sticky strands of fake spider webs from my clothes and skin, hoping they won't end up in the food I am preparing. I remind myself that these webs are less disruptive than some of the other Halloween decorations that my partner, Amy (Sun in Libra), has been putting up all over our house. Specifically, I think of the red light bulbs that replaced all the regular bulbs—coincidentally, on the day my period arrived earlier than expected.

Frustrated but resigned to being caught in this web, I pull open the door at the back of the kitchen. Behind it the dingy mudroom that serves as a laundry room, and, when it is too cold for us smokers to go outside, a smoking room. There I find my sister, Teisha, dreadlocked and nine-months pregnant, smoking a cigarette and chopping up some marijuana with a small pair of scissors. As I sink into the cold, stained loveseat between the jittery dryer and the record player, she greets me. Then, Teisha (Sun in Gemini) grins as she gossips, "Logan and Molly are fighting. Logan threw his phone." I look up from my own phone. "He threw his phone when he was talking to her and it cracked." I (Mercury in Taurus) start thinking of something to say in response before she adds, "They're good now, I guess." I shake my head and return to my phone.

I was heartbroken, disinherited of the life I had known and had assumed I would continue to know, when the family split up into more nuclear-type family units and scattered...

When we were kids, Logan, Teisha, and I lived in a yellow-brick duplex that had eight bedrooms in total, four on each side. My grandparents rented one side, and my mother the other. That house was always full of aunts, uncles, and cousins. When I was twelve, I was heartbroken,

disinherited of the life I had known and had assumed I would continue to know, when the family split up into more nuclear-type family units and scattered, moving into boxy, high-rise apartment units. I always dreamed of moving back to that exact house and filling it with friends and relatives again.

Again, for the third time that week, Logan (Moon in Pisces) texts me asking to borrow money, presumably for booze. And again, I send the e-transfer. I have lost track of how much debt he has accrued with me since he started sleeping on my couch two weeks ago, saying only that he needed space from his girlfriend. Teisha (Scorpio Rising) has whispered that the rift was caused when Molly asked him to stop drinking. I haven't asked, and Logan (Sun in Scorpio) offers no more information than necessary. In the eight years they have known each other, Logan and Molly have periodically separated and reunited, and I long ago lost interest in keeping track of their comings and goings.

Teisha pays Logan eight dollars and two pepperoni sticks to help her set up her room for her soon-to-be-born baby. Down the hall, I recline on my bed, reading a book required for a university course. Beyond the walls, my two siblings bicker, their voices rising and falling as geese honking in the distance overhead. While we were growing up, I never could keep up with their mutually agreed upon antagonism, their torrential arguments over nothing and everything, so I (Sun in Taurus) would often retreat to my room to read. I became adept at ignoring their back-and-forth, at reducing their fights to white noise. I can read despite them.

Before long, my eight-year-old daughter (Sun in Aquarius) bursts into my room and begins making my bed into a blanket fort in which she will watch anime and flop about without regard to my presence. Our housemate, Bryn, (Sun in Leo), is snarling grind-core growls in the attic in preparation for a jam practice that evening. One of the cats is vomiting long and hard outside my bedroom door. Downstairs, the front door swings open, crashing against the overburdened shoe rack behind it. Amy has returned from picking up my grandmother from the

hospital where she was visiting Grandpa. The doctors suspect the cancer has returned for what they suspect will be the final time.

There is something, probably a fake spider web, itching my butt-crack. I put down my book. The house is pretty crowded right now.

BIO: Katherine Heigh is an emerging writer from Peterborough, Ontario. Her work has been featured in *Chicken Scratch: An Anthology of Student Writing*, *The River Magazine*, and several online publications. She has written two forthcoming chapbooks: *PTBO NSA* (Bird Buried Press) and *To the People Who Used to Live Here* (Gap Riot).

LOST AND FOUND

LAURA IODICE

It all begins with a single glove. A leather glove. Black. Different from the deep red ones that are common at the community center where I now volunteer. I'm a sixty-four-year-old retired English teacher and I'm still hoping to find ways for words to build up rather than tear down. Words aren't enough, though. Actions matter, which is why I appreciate verbs. Take the verb "to find," for instance. The verb and all it implies are key to this tale, a key that neatly fits the lock. Let's turn, as illustration, to the lone black glove; just a noun and its modifier. In order to understand its relevance, we need context; we need action; we need to find out why one glove matters. To find: a transitive verb that relies on context to reveal meaning.

Not all verbs are conditional, though. Consider the verb "to belong." It's a strong verb capable of standing on its own. I belong; you belong; we all belong. Which leads me to the subject of our inquiry, the community recreation center located on our city's south side, co-founded by two former Golden Glove champions, both now seventy years of age. Each moved to our northern rust belt when their families fled from the Jim Crow south in the early fifties. Each is a local celebrity within the community – one as a result of his sterling performance as a national Golden Glove Champion while touring Germany and rooming with Olympic Gold Medal winner George Foreman in the sixties; the other while rooming with fellow inmates at Attica State Prison during the horrific riots in 1971, before returning to the streets to fix what was broken, both within himself, and within his community.

Somehow, despite their divergent paths, both childhood friends found their way home and built this center together as a place for those who have lost their way. The center serves all kinds of people, mostly male, many from impoverished neighborhoods across the city. There's Ghana, a refugee whose name is really Ahkeem and who actually is from Guiana. Somehow, the coaches couldn't match the name with its location on a map. To them, those "G" countries in Africa are all the same. It doesn't matter where you're from. You walk through those doors, you're home. You belong. No context needed – no backstory; no history; no explanation, though

certainly, our members don't enter unencumbered by baggage. Still, whatever you carry is inconsequential. No. You commit; you're in.

If you doubt me, just ask Curtis, better known as "Grimes," for the local crime family who gave him up to foster care when he was three because the little boy he'd been couldn't compete for attention with their addictions. After years in and out of foster care, he was adopted at age nine by a city legislator, a pastor, a black woman of high regard. Still, around the center, he's "Grimes," someone whose first battle in the ring has been learning to own his past; his next has been learning to forgive his birth parents and to reclaim his birth name in the hope of revising its significance.

At Faith and Hope, it doesn't matter what anybody calls you; what matters is what you call yourself. Here, it's understood that we all carry markers, some more obvious than others. Calvin wears an ankle bracelet, the kind you get from the local precinct. Part of his parole involves ridding himself of old social habits. At the center, he's learning that he might be able to fight his way out of prison time and perhaps, earn money doing so. The catch is he has to risk his pretty face to succeed. Learning to use gloves instead of knives or guns takes patience, courage and discipline. Without these, he could get hurt. With them, he could still get hurt. The key: learning when to thrust and when to yield.

And my obvious markers? I'm a woman; I'm older than most of these kids' grandparents; and I'm white. I grew up in the Bronx in the early sixties and witnessed first-hand the price of racial segregation and the stigma of addiction and crime. I'm also a first generation American, as my mother was born in Italy. I grew up in an extended family household where Italian was the preferred adult language; where gender patterns were passed down through generations, and where my cousins and I learned how to cook before we learned how to read. The guys don't mind this at all, since when I visit the center, I always bring food. It's a family ritual, and besides they are always hungry. They arrive hungry, but they won't eat. Eating gets in the way of their workout. At the center, eating is what you do after you expend your energy, the energy that comes from discipline, courage, patience; the energy that comes from raw hope.

Food is a reward, but not an incentive. Just ask Jackson, the center's sketch artist and galley cook who is truly gifted but struggles to give up the bottle that stands between him and freedom, not the kind that comes from the time he's served behind bars because of his habits, but the kind that comes from knowing he doesn't need any bars at all in his life to give him peace.

All he needs is his sketch pencil and a clean white page; a griddle, a well-stocked kitchen, and the tough love he earns every time he checks back into rehab so that he can return home to the place where the doors are never closed to him and neither are the hearts within.

One young heart, “O,” whose name is really Orlando, reputedly lives on a nearby street. We really don’t know what Orlando does during the day, before he becomes “Coach O,” the wiry youthful sparring partner who trains the younger guys, even patiently fitting gloves on “King’s” tiny hands, a three-year-old with dyed orange hair who likes to follow his mom, Christian, around the ring when she works on her sparring moves. The ring. Four men, each shadow-boxing in a corner, while “King” takes turns spinning around in the middle to face first one, then another in an imaginary encounter. Red gloves flash in turn as each sparring partner turns to the center and yields to little King’s thrusts, even though he is so low to the ground and so far, away that their mitts never kiss.

Never find each other in an embrace, like they do when Coach Greg joins them in the ring. Coach Greg is another Italian-American, one of the best amateur boxers ever to come out of our city. A contemporary of our co-founders, he too, was lost for a while: lost in retirement, despite his successful career as a local businessman; lost in the failure of his long-term marriage to the love of his life; lost in the empty closets left behind by his three grown children, now successful adults and living on their own. He’d found it all: the house; the perfect wife; three perfect children; the perfect home in the ideal suburban neighborhood; and in losing these, he also found his way back to Faith and Hope.

That’s the center’s name. Faith and Hope Community Center. Not that any of these guys are traditionally religious. They lost their faith years ago, amid the racial scars left by those whom they were expected to trust: the police who stole booty from drug busts and sold it for a larger profit without remorse or accountability; the priests who claimed that trusting God’s messengers would bring salvation, then expected shameful surrender from the young boys they tended. The community leaders who denied the co-owners entrance to the very

They lost their faith years ago, amid the racial scars left by those whom they were expected to trust: the police who stole booty from drug busts and sold it for a larger profit without remorse or accountability; the priests who claimed that trusting God’s messengers would bring salvation, then expected shameful surrender from the young boys they tended.

building they now claim as their own. They lost their faith, but found Grace in its place. Still, even Grace is not a free ride. Its price is courage, discipline, patience.

Which leads us back to that lone black glove left hanging on an outstretched branch, that lonely lost glove, missing its counterpart that would imbue it with utilitarian value; that marker of honesty and generosity, if not of superfluous abundance, found in the very same comfortable suburb where Greg and I both reside. I recognize that glove when I happen upon it while walking my tiny rescue dog, another lost soul, found on a shelter's website and delivered from Texas to our upstate New York hometown, as though destined for our newly acquired, sprawling suburban home.

My husband and I, too, have found our way to a new place, having left our city neighborhood and our one-hundred-year-old house of over thirty years behind; too many gunshots from the nearby projects; too many circling helicopters on overheated summer nights; too many stairs to climb in order to find peace. And now, in this old suburban neighborhood, its ancient trees shrouding the streets with shade; its aging homeowners too frail to stroll the sidewalks as I do now, I find it. My missing black glove, the partner to the gift my now deceased mother-in-law gave me not too many years ago. A gift treasured for its sentimental value, if not its impracticality in the Snow Belt where my husband and I reside.

This glove, left by a thoughtful neighbor who happened upon it on his bountiful front lawn; or perhaps by one of the gardeners who tend the landscape no longer accessible to aging owners; or by a fellow dog walker who noticed it lying on the street when she walked her regular route, her own rescue in tow. Rescues are common in our comfortable neighborhood. Why not? What do we have to lose, having found our way to such satisfying lives?

Upon lifting it from its branch, I remember that my husband and I haven't always dwelled in luxury. We, too, have learned discipline, courage and patience; have relied on Grace to carry us from our humble beginnings to this place, from the Bronx to this Shangri La where the street signs remind us to "Drive Slowly," for fear that we'll injure one of our neighbors' children.

Not so for the center's neighborhood, where gunshots, not street signs determine how fast and how far you're allowed to walk; where safety is as hard to find as a job. Where the center offers raw hope to match the raw fists it serves. Fists protected by gloves, leather gloves. Not the black one left as a token of benevolence, of trust on a nearby suburban branch; no, not that kind.

The kind that you can't afford to lose. The red ones that match the blood pumping through these young veins in pursuit of a passionate life, a life beyond limitations built by property taxes; by white flight and urban sprawl; by gutted schools and lethal distractions meant to disarm a person by disabling, if not destroying him.

What use is this glove without a fist? What use is the fist without a reason to fight? What good is a fight without a worthy competitor? What better competition than the blood that flows through our city's streets where young men and women lose their lives daily for nothing more than a simple stroll down neighborhood avenues where slowing down is antithetical to staying alive.

"Please drive slowly," my suburban street-sign cautions. "We Love Our Children."

"No, No, No!" a mother wails, her son's blood still staining the street below. "Why didn't you hurry home?" she moans.

Those who wear gloves at Faith and Hope know why. They know what it costs to leave their pasts behind in order to courageously and patiently move forward, even while never forgetting where they are from and why they are choosing a ring instead of a street corner to find their way. A ring that houses mismatched members from across our segmented neighborhoods, all fitting together in the place they belong in order to demonstrate that words matter, words like patience; courage; determination. And all with one goal in mind: to find a place; to belong.

BIO: Laura Iodice, a Bronx native, as a veteran secondary and post-secondary educator taught literature, composition, rhetoric and cultural constructions of race and has published professionally. She works as a curricular consultant and racial dialogue facilitator and provides mentoring and job coaching for recently incarcerated young adults. Her creative non-fiction is featured in the online journal and the print anthology of *Crack the Spine*, as well as in *Vending Machine Press*. Teaching is her vocation; writing is her life.

NEVIS

ANIKA JENSEN

In 1818, poet John Keats ascended 1,345 meters to the summit of Ben Nevis, Great Britain's highest peak. Keats had, since childhood, a preoccupation with his own death, prophesying that he would die young thus working frantically to produce art both meaningful and memorable in his few years. He feared, as a famous sonnet deliberates, that he might spend his fleeting time on earth to no consequence, that his life might be met with no solid end and his mortality might have been wasteful. He was wrong, of course. Such fears were unfounded. Keats posthumously became one of the most notable Romantic poets whose lyrics continue to be studied and recited.

Keats was right about one thing; he succumbed to tuberculosis at the age of twenty-five, three years after climbing Ben Nevis. For a man so obsessed with death, then, a few fleeting moments of life above the clouds held the possibility of eternity.

John Keats' story is of loss and regeneration, of destruction and final peace; when the man foundered, he was reborn in his poetry. So, too, is the mountain's story. One face of Ben Nevis displays an idyllic, sloping trail replete with tumbling streams and baby lambs and mountain blossoms, but climb to the summit and there stands a dizzying cliffside with a sheer, sharp drop to the valley below. And while the glen's peaceful sentinel now stands quietly in the morning mist, the mandarin glow of a sun early to rise, it was born in violence when two massive tectonic plates collided and squeezed the earth between them so tightly that layers of quartz, sand, and silt--the ocean floor--were squeezed up toward a new sky. Where the great mountain once stood, a cauldron of magma bubbled and waited until it finally burst, lunging and breaking and revealing the summit once buried deep in the earth. What remains is escaped lava, granite covering the upper part of the mountain, andesite, igneous rock, basalt.

Ben Nevis is quiet now. From violence there is peace and from death, new life. If John Keats has so much in common with a mountain, then maybe I do, too. Keats and I were both twenty-two when we made the climb, and while the poet was only three years removed from his death, I was one year from what could have been mine.

Like Keats, I spend much of my youth anticipating an early death, and, also like Keats, I mulled it over in my writing. By the summer of 2017, my ill prophecy was nearly realized. Gazing in the bathroom mirror, I could see that I was clinging to life with each rib and knotted vertebra, with yellowing skin and thinning hair and dark, dark shadows in a once-ruddy face. One of the many dangers associated with eating disorders comes from one of its many misconceptions: that they manifest themselves in the skeletal bodies of pretty women with clear skin and bright teeth. This has us believe that eating disorders are beautiful, but the reality is not so widely conveyed. People who do not appear to have eating disorders can, in fact, die from eating disorders. It happens frequently. Fat people, strong people, perfectly average-looking people die from eating disorders, the statistically deadliest mental illness, but somehow, we collectively do not understand this because *how could she be anorexic if she is nothing shy of spectral? What do you mean she still gets her period?* But substantial weight loss does not always accompany an eating disorder, nor does it have to. Death does not have rules. Rather, many victims remain relatively similar in size, as I did, while suffering many internal, physical, and psychological consequences. A skinny body is regarded with sympathy and an accompanying desire to help. A larger body with tooth decay and organ damage and depression, less so.

I summited Ben Nevis in June 2018, after one year of intense, daily physical training. Even with my preparations, the climb was trying. To reach the top, one has to scramble up dizzying switchbacks and rocky inclines. The footing is slippery, unpredictable in places, and the risk of snowy ground increases as you go. The air thins. I may have been fit, but the hike was exhausting, and after six days of trekking the West Highland Way with a burdensome thirty-five pounds on my back, I was fixed to collapse at the top.

Had I tried to climb the mountain one year earlier, I may have folded one mile in. At twenty-one years old, I was nearly dead, not the skeleton apparition on the cover of the "Concerned about a friend?" pamphlets at the doctor's office but decaying nonetheless. Anorexia and bulimia had been my normal for five years, and though I had managed to stay functional--and hidden--for so long, my body was beginning to send out warnings that it might not last much longer. The more I starved, the better I felt. There was no appeal in recovering anymore; why abandon my only remaining source of control? I figured. That year, any thoughts of seeking help

that sometimes intruded on particularly hungry nights were extinguished. In the thick of my disease, recovery seemed difficult and unfulfilling. Dying seemed easy.

When my mom first saw me that summer, after I struggled to lift a small suitcase up our porch steps, she wondered where her daughter went.

"There are three possible outcomes," she said, sitting down beside me in my room that night. I told her I didn't want to talk about it, but she kept staring, and her eyes were too green to ignore. "There are three outcomes," she repeated. "One, you'll work with the doctors and me to make a full recovery. Two, you'll spend the next ten years in and out of hospitals. Or three, you'll die before the year ends." She walked away.

The prospect of dying didn't scare me; in a way, my eating disorder and subsequent refusal of help testified that I had always passively wanted to. Frightening me instead was the stark resignation in my mother's too-green eyes, for in them I saw that she would not break her own back, her family's back, to save someone who would not accept rescue. Even now, I can't blame her. She buried her own mother when she was only thirty and would not stand to lower down her youngest child. I cannot remember any other time that my mother has put up walls before me, and on those walls was graffiti, spray painted curses telling me to do it, for fuck's sake, do it for her.

Still, getting better is hard to want. Eating disorders afford victims a sense of control that they often cannot find otherwise, and mine extended its reward to compliments, confidence, and a little bit more attention--positive attention--than I had ever before received. If I could not find acceptance within myself, I found it in the friends who told me I'd been looking good lately and the men who were noticing me for the first time. Too weak to stand, I was floating on a false high that promised to drop me hard and fast once the glamour wore off. To abandon the hatred that crafted me into somebody I could pretend to love seemed futile.

But a body cannot long survive violent tremors before it is crumpled and melted and forced upward, pushed forth from an earth no longer willing to nurture its dead children and exposed finally to the same sun that could not save John Keats. I began to go to sleep uncertain if I would wake up the next morning. Death was frightening for the first time. Bursting forth suddenly were visions of the midnight roads I would never drive with the windows down, the next backyard firefly season I would miss because June had already passed in mourning, the average day and all of its stunning mundanities that might pixelate a life for me. The mountains I

would not climb. Redemption did not exist in succumbing willingly; even Keats worked until the end.

I changed my mind in the evening in August. Sitting outside, a lavender quilt, twilight's daughter, billowed over the grass. There was no light switch or thunderclap, no tinkering chapel bells to denote the grand shift out of resignation, just settling, and where the dust cleared rested the resolution to live that I had always needed. I still can't say where that resolution came from, but a natural process brought it down to me--an avalanche, perhaps, or an eruption. A violent, boiling cataclysm. Between the cracked granite, a blade of grass peeked, and the lavender showed. I called out for my mother.

We crossed a stream and paused at the base of the sloping gravel trail that wound through sheep pastures and crawled steadily up past wildflowers and puddles that the late spring snow left. With dark eyes, we gazed toward the tedious uphill hours. At that moment, I could not see how the trail could ever end.

Fearing afternoon thunderstorms, my backpacking group started up Ben Nevis at four-thirty in the morning in June 2018. The sun was already risen, though tucked behind the mountain, and low clouds loitered by the summit. The glen was quiet. We crossed a stream and paused at the base of the sloping gravel trail that wound through sheep pastures and crawled steadily up past wildflowers and

puddles that the late spring snow left. With dark eyes, we gazed toward the tedious uphill hours. At that moment, I could not see how the trail could ever end. Surely, we were destined to walk until the years ran out, and the mile markers disappeared until we arrived, deaf and blind, at whatever happens next. God, maybe. Or another mountain.

Silence accompanied us in the beginning. Every step brought resonant pain in backs and hips and knees and hearts from the past few days that only the slow, crunching, familiar rhythm of fourteen pairs of boots could relieve, a cadence of footsteps and heavy breathing. My ankles rolled on loose stones. My very bones were throbbing.

And while I walked in silence and in hurt among thirteen souls I had come to love, I peered down the side of the mountain where the rock dropped into empty space and saw the greater journey I had made since August of 2017. I gazed upon myself, a speck, clawing my way up the stream's steep embankments and taking my mother's hand when my arms gave out. I saw her carry me to the trailhead and set me down to make the ascent myself. Where I relapsed, I fell

and bled, and where I stood before the bathroom mirror, red and tearful in my loathing but refusing to take to my knees and vomit, I got up again. My anguish cracked the ancient granite, but still, I moved.

Recovery was more painful, physically than any climb I have ever made. I realized this when I neared the mountain's summit. Though my legs felt torn and broken, and my lungs burned in the thin air, the hike did not hurt like the months of hatred when my stomach boiled from the organ damage I had caused and the new diet I was forced to acclimate to. The hate with which I poisoned myself after every full meal meant a searing headache the next morning. The chronic fatigue had kept me in bed for days. Scaling Britain's highest peak, I did not feel pain but sensation, wonder, a great willingness to be alive in a body that was strong and capable of bearing its weight--finally, its weight--up four miles of sloping rock and soil toward a summit that once burned beneath the ground. On John Keats' path, my own path, I found the top of the mountain.

The air was still, clinging to the dozens of cairns that dotted the rocky peak like the earth's most ancient temples. I moved toward the cliffside. In the lavender dawn, I sat down at the edge of my life and watched the glen below me sleep, watched a sparrow hop back into its nest and nestle into the silence. Soon, when all of the hikers went down for the night, that sparrow would be the highest being in Great Britain, free to watch over its nation in the dark and call it back to light in the morning. Perhaps the sparrow became John Keats' nightingale when, in 1818, he too was the highest being in Great Britain. Perhaps the sparrow kept John Keats' voice alive as recompense for his being taken at only twenty-five. While the mist rolled down the mountain, I watched the bird fly off. Ben Nevis would keep his secrets.

Before we descended back into the valley, I took a stone from one of the cairns. I felt a heartbeat in my palm; the mountain's, maybe, or my own.

BIO: *Nevis* is a nonfiction essay constructed a few days after the author summited the highest mountain in Great Britain. It contains themes of violence, destruction, and rebirth, all while tying motifs of the natural world to the author's journey with an eating disorder. Anika Jensen earned a BA in English from Gettysburg College.

SUN VALLEY, PATH TO TOTALITY

JOEL LONG

for Wendell Thomas

“I saw in his hand a long spear of gold, and at the point there seemed to be a little fire. He appeared to me to be thrusting it at times into my heart, and to pierce my very entrails; when he drew it out, he seemed to draw them out also and to leave me all on fire with a great love of God. The pain was so great, that it made me moan; and yet so surpassing was the sweetness of this excessive pain, that I could not wish to be rid of it. ...” St. Teresa of Ávila

Mid-April at a Rowland Hall all-school in-service, Wendell Thomas, our Director of Curriculum and Instruction, got up and announced with a puckish smile that he wanted to take a group of teachers north in August to see the solar eclipse. He persuaded our school faculty that we would never see anything like it, that it was a historic event, once in a lifetime. He had already convinced the administration to give teachers the day off from opening school meetings, first aid training, class preparation, so we could go to Idaho to see this amazing thing in the sky.

When Wendell sat down, we thought about what he had said. Then we continued the day of professional development, the final school days ahead, the last full month of school, the summer vacation, and the prospect of the new school year in August before the eclipse, too much work to be done. How could we go to Idaho at that time of year? Besides, the doomsayers warned us that thousands would go, traffic jams, freeways like parking lots, gas shortages, water shortages. Bring enough food for days; bring water, they said. Bring gallons of gasoline. Picture Mad Max and the Solar Eclipse, masked marauders and carnivorous antelope. Why risk all that for just a minute of darkness? I am a fool for such things, so I said yes, got a dog-sitter, packed

my bags, tent, sleeping bag, filled water bottles, and got in Bret's Jeep on Sunday morning, and he drove north.

Nothing had changed. Light was still light. We drove six hours to see this. We climbed the hill an hour that morning—sweating, tired—to see this: dry grasses on the hillside golden down to the ravine, stems and yellow clouds of rabbitbrush, stone ridgeline where forty people, their outlines, stood

We climbed the hill an hour that morning—sweating, tired—to see this: dry grasses on the hillside golden down to the ravine, stems and yellow clouds of rabbitbrush...

against hills to the east, blue in distance, detail mute. Nothing had changed. I put glasses on, pure darkness until I turned my gaze upward, found the glowing circle of sun hung, then the circumference bent, something beginning. I took off the glasses: nothing. It was all the same, of course, a morning like all mornings, sun, no clouds, a valley and mountains rising birth-marked with bluish clusters of pines. After a hike to the summit of this hill, our group of teachers, husbands, wives, and children put on glasses, card stock over our ears, took off glasses, described what we saw: imperfect circle, dented egg, a bright sphere flawed. Then it changed: the black round moon pushed against the circle of the sun. Again, we took off our glasses; nothing changed. Glasses on, the moon looked like the mouth of Pacman devouring dark, vinegar in oil. Someone handed me binoculars with lenses covered with Mylar used in eclipse glasses. Then, the sun occupied my vision. The black dinner plate of the moon obscured half. The lit sun showed blemishes, sunspots: could I see sun flares like nerves of fire? I handed the binoculars to Alex, uphill. The moon hid half the sun, and the light changed, the hills, smoky orange. The sun began to look like a gibbous moon through our glasses.

Without glasses, the sun still looked like the sun: don't look. Don't be tempted to look. It returned to full sphere, ordinary. Without glasses, we looked away, down the valley thirty miles of wildfire haze toward Hailey. We looked up the hill toward friends with their glasses on, with their glasses off, sipping water, sipping coffee, eating granola bars or Eclipse Rice Krispies Treats that enthusiasts made to pass among travelers like us. Little changed. I was cold in short sleeves. Ingrid, the upper school principal, wrapped a blanket around her young son Luc near the cell tower. The temperature dropped ten degrees—then more. Someone had drawn the shades, switched on the lamp, let in the cool breeze through a screen at night. This mid-morning, yellow

peach light deepened the grasses: it was still daylight. We may not have noticed if we had not been told, if we didn't have time written in our phones, on slips of paper tucked in pockets, the start of the eclipse, 10:12:38.5, the start of the total eclipse, 11:29:38.7. What do the animals know? We knew, but this was knowledge of coming mystery, fickle knowing, the knowledge we anticipate but never explain. We looked inside the inside of the stellar clock; the gears moved; the planets shifted.

Then, the sun became a gaunt crescent: we stirred. The body begins to ring before the bell rings. We still saw the round sun, but with glasses, light became a scythe, a sickle, shard of China plate, its lucent rim from which we calculate what is lost, how we lose even that, in the glasses defined, two gold horns fused from sacrifice, the Assyrian priestess, holding nothing but darkness that makes the horns glow brighter, our days set against it. We looked in every direction. We were close.

In the last instant, the diamond ring, the sun's rim grew thin orange, first in a long curve diminishing, an ember bubble, the star that made us, that sustains us, shrinking, disappearing altogether, strange spark in a night stream. The hills darkened. Streetlights and car lights blinked on in the village below. Take off your glasses. The moon formed a black circle inside the sun, a stopper, tarnished for the eye. Take off your glasses. The sun shone with white flames radiating around the black moon, a white bracelet, sustained lightning. The dark moon like a smooth oculus at the top of an infinite dome, this round window, opened in emptiness, swimming. I could hear the hot silver fresh from the fire hanging weightless on the center of the sky, sizzling in water that could not cool the heat with blue.

Hundreds of people, my friends, my colleagues, strangers from Washington, strangers from Idaho, from Oregon, Nevada, strangers of the earth, gasped, shouted, clapped, and screamed. I imagine the body so near annihilation, so near ecstasy lets loose such sounds, such mistrals without intent but driven by the moment of greatest force. Here, amidst the gasps, the groans, the exaltations, so many bodies in bliss and wonder, the primal shadow gliding the curve of the continent, our sound escaped into grace. We didn't know.

The blue dome with its oculus fringed with lightning descended. It rested on irregular ridges of the Idaho mountains deepening blue, lifted by pendentives of pink haze. I tried to take photos, fumbled with cameras, trying to still the transitory, to build crude cairns that might later lead me back to this: every heart on the mountain moved like ancient fish through the cool. We

shook; we wept frightened joy, trembling. The ground disappeared, lost gravity inside this particular blue. The sky around the white ring, deep sapphire with the alien hemisphere, a sapphire that grew spectrum lighter to the horizon, where the layer of pink hummed, lifted, sunrise every horizon, no directions now—why even try. The hills held the fluid dark from Dollar Mountain to Hailey, then over the valley, the rocky ridge feathered with distinctly human silhouettes in ecstatic shade. Every scar is swift.

Then the sun came out. There was release, loss, sweet weight lifted from our bodies—more stone, more stone. I’m sure I trembled still, a bell again, struck ringing, ringing even now, and we listen all the way to silence, all the way now to the light returning, the sun changing back into a sphere of light that ancients tell us to turn from, that we confirm will save us.

I do not exaggerate.

Mary came and held me, my longtime friend, my colleague; she grabbed hold of me in her matching green school shirt, held me where I shook, my eyes wet from rapture of totality, and her arms, touched me after all that had moved us to the core, “the pain . . . so great that it made me moan,” electric, circuit struck. We were two of hundreds, two of thousands, hundreds of thousands on the continent who climbed hills this morning, rowed to the middle of lakes, stopped by the roadside to see this thing: the moon covering the sun, the burn of it, the sapphire unfurling from a ring of light. Mary held me. The sun came back. I held her hand to my chest: Oh God!

The sun came out, and our lives cracked open again. The hills lit with smoky light. On the stone ridge the others shook, wept; strangers held each other as the sun came behind the moon and lit mountains again, first light returning to the middle of things.

We embraced our friends. We embraced our colleagues, these teachers, these mothers, these fathers, daughters, sons. We touched their complicated shoulders. We put our hands on their heads, soft places, skulls inflated, expanded beyond the shape that hardened. My eyes were still wet. I put on glasses and looked back to the sun to see the other side, the moon falling from the sun. The ordinary world resigned itself to the ordinary, but we were shaking. Every animal fiber said something changed: ether blue, lightning sustained in a shimmering ring, dawn the middle of day, the sacred scar.

Gravity returned with daylight. We gathered our bags, our bottles, our blankets. We lifted our bodies from the ground, the lichen-covered rocks, the dirt, and grass. We returned to sight

and found the path that led us down. Gravity led downhill, away from this light. The trail had switchbacks, so we turned back to the sun then, donned glasses, watched the moon drift away. With Jeremy and Anne behind me, I walked down the trail, mostly quiet, sometimes spouting wonderment or sighs, the incompetence to speak about such things. How could we come down like this? How could the everyday world just return? What could possibly happen to us now? No, we were not ruined: the eclipse scrubbed our nerves clean so they are transparent, now, for the next impermanent sublime. There will be beauty again and again. The event pushed the boundaries of ourselves. It opened space for new beauty, the mystery that will enter and find a dwelling place inside us to speak when it is dark when our bodies need to wake again, when we will open our eyes to what might come and say yes, yes again.

BIO: Joel Long's book *Winged Insects* won the White Pine Press Poetry Prize. *Lessons in Disappearance* and *Knowing Time by Light* were published by Blaine Creek Press in 2010. His chapbooks, *Chopin's Preludes* and *Saffron Beneath Every Frost* were published from Elik Press. He lives in Salt Lake City.

STRAPPING BRUSHES, BATMAN

STEPHEN MEAD

Paintings, in many ways, are windows and doors, especially when framed, for even the most abstract presents a kind of vista if given the proper space and distance in which to view it. In my kitchen, which has a slanted bridge-shaped ceiling, there are prints which function as skylights, or ship portholes to be more precise, since they are at eye level, just angled back.

All of these paintings are glued right to the plaster, their frames long since used for my own work and given away as gifts. Two of these images are details from Renoir's "Luncheon of The Boating Party." They provide company in a room where even a small table can scarcely fit, let alone chairs. They are also legacies for an age I've only visited via foreign flicks or historical novels. Their very brushwork has something of a murmuring crowd about it. The expressiveness of a gesture, the animated blur of a mouth; it's as if I can almost hear the voices and hushed laughter of these Parisian diners, feel the sensuality of their heat amid the food, the wine, and the waves lapping with distant background skullers.

"Why shouldn't art be pretty? There are enough unpleasant things in the world," Renoir has been credited (and also maligned) for supposedly saying. Renoir actually started out his career as a porcelain maker's apprentice. Later, after immersing himself in Impressionism, he tried to concentrate on what he felt would have more accessible public appeal. Near the end of his life, crippled by arthritis, he strapped brushes to his arms in order to paint.

Yes, out of what was definitely unpleasant, he managed to continue creating art of the lovely, though another biography of Renoir intimates that no matter how much he painted, he always felt as if he was still trying to get his craft right.

Of course, as is the way with all generation zeitgeists, the ones once considered forerunners, in thought or technique, even critics darlings on occasion, do fall out of favor, at least in some quarters, only to be labeled as hackneyed and cliché. This is especially so if their work attains nearly legendary mass approval. Tsk tsk. All of us struggling artisans should be cursed with such a fate.

On my fridge, put up with freebie magnets from health conferences and the like, I also have napkins which depict these same Renoir boating scenes. Can't remember where I pinched

these from, but I do find it amazing that we can have museum pieces reproduced on such a large commercial scale. I wonder if there are any Renoir ancestors who benefit or if the estate has no copyrights left? How does that song go which says Napoleon is just a pastry now, or that Monty Python ditty about decomposing composers, "You can still hear Debussy, but Debussy cannot hear you." ?

It cracks me up when rivaling factions of the days' *Vanity Fairs* start arguing about who's still a genius and who's a sentimental coot. I grew up with those sorts of frighteningly maudlin prints on cardboard which showed starving cats and dogs with big eyes in dark, dank, bone-littered alleyways. Hide the razors, no wonder I have a melancholy streak. Such work is as scary as that once popular wallpaper of large devouring purple flowers. Try sleeping amid such a "Little Shop of Horrors" Seymour, the carnivorous plant motif.

I look at a Renoir and see,
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porcelain...

Compared to that, I look at a Renoir and see, especially in his flesh tones, what he must have learned when distilling hues in porcelain, or when conveying the sweep of a woman's patterned bustle as she danced, even the very air taking on the colors of her world. I see him singing a song of one's self, a song of the body

electric or, given his time, the body of candlelight.

I grew up in a household where we listened to the six o'clock news over dinner, all the local and international reports of man's inhumanity to man between sports, weather, and *Pass the butter, please*. Certainly, much of my own art, my daily life, has been affected by this schizophrenia, this knowledge that others still perish while some still thrive. For a while, in a past residence, I was a bit like Anna in Doris Lessing's "The Golden Notebook" taping photos and news clippings of atrocities to walls, but the hope for perseverance, the need to believe that beauty and glory and tenderness exists as well, has always been the other gut thump. I suspect I will always be wrestling with such duality, as do we all, finding some way to strap brushes to our arms when the arthritis of truth would have us too painfully crippled to paint at all.

BIO: Stephen Mead is an Outsider multi-media artist and writer. Since the 1990s he's been grateful to many editors for publishing his work in print 'zines and eventually online. He is also grateful to have managed to keep various day jobs for the health insurance. Poetry on the Line, Stephen Mead.

SUNDAY NIGHT SHOE SHINE

NANCY PAYNE-HAMBROSE

As a child, any time I got to spend with Dad amounted to the thumb space at the toe of a tight shoe.

Dad was a general handyman in the surrounding neighborhoods often leaving early in the morning and returning home by dinner time, physically drained from a hard day's work. A relentless laborer, Dad often said he was a Jack of all trades and a master of none. His dilapidated truck would grumble and bumble up the driveway every evening. Moments later, usually through the basement door, my exhausted father would appear, covered in saw or sheetrock dust. Dirty and tired, he had about enough energy left to eat a full meal, share in some small dinner table talk, shower, change into pajamas, and then pass out in his lounge chair, with the news or another T.V. program humming low, lulling him to sleep.

When I was little, I didn't participate in sports or need consistent homework help, but I liked to write. I even went so far as to create a pseudo writing studio for myself in the corner of Dad's basement workshop. I made use of the materials around me: a trash-picked bow back chair, a small rugged table that tottered when I leaned on it, and a quirky lamp, all of which Dad found and claimed as his own as he cleaned out houses after people moved or passed away – yet another handyman trade he practiced. I even used Dad's workbench and military footlocker, places to set up loose-leaf and pencils, a dictionary and some grammar books -- a place to think in quiet. Each time I visited my workspace within his own, I never found my items moved, so I guess he never minded my writing tools in his workspace; or, maybe Dad did mind and simply never told me. In hindsight, I suppose I chose this spot in the house because I was looking to spend more moments close to my father. In honest reflection, any rare time spent with Dad always felt crowded to me. In a family of four children, I wasn't the oldest, the youngest, or the neediest, and if I wanted to ask or tell Dad something, there was usually an audience. So, any time – even 10 minutes spent alone with him --was like saving new black patent leather shoes: the special pair you keep for the holidays because you so want to avoid the first scuff or crease.

In my childhood, around 7:30 each Sunday night, the most coveted time for me was the rare alone time with Dad on the basement stairs as he shined my shoes. He took great pride in making sure his children's shoes were gleaming for the week, his dignity as a father on display as we walked. After my bath and pajama routine, I would eagerly await my turn to spend 10 minutes with Dad. Leather Mary Janes in hand, I would approach the basement door. A waft of sweet, orange-scented Castle's hand grime soap greeted me as I turned the doorknob and descended the basement stairwell. I perched myself on the top step of the landing and handed him my shoes. Once I was seated, Dad would slip the shoes on my feet. From toe to heel, Dad's calloused hands and careful eyes would meticulously inspect my shoes like a surgeon intensely studying his patient. He'd wink at me and smile, asking what I was going to read to him tonight, for it seemed I was always working on a poem or a short story. While I revealed a notebook or scribbles on a piece of paper, he'd pull out his wooden shoeshine kit from underneath the basement stairs. The box came complete with all the worn accouterment: multiple horsehair brushes with palm prints from years of use, shoe shine cloths, tins of various KIWI shoe polish, lanolin, travel-sized Johnson's Baby powder, some Q-tips and cotton balls for buffing, Vaseline for buckle shining. And so, our brief Sunday evening encounters would begin. I would read to him my latest piece, trying to keep cadence with the swoosh of the brush strokes or the zip of the buffing cloth, and my father would listen. As my first editor, Dad would offer honest, raw critiques about my writing: he'd point out a likable word or character, a part he didn't like or understand, a sentence he would want me to write or read again.

I would read to him my latest piece, trying to keep cadence with the swoosh of the brush strokes or the zip of the buffing cloth, and my father would listen.

Yet, our time together on the basement stairs didn't always follow this routine. Sometimes I came to him without a story to read, but ready instead to hear one of his stories about his childhood on Van Hook Street in Camden, the summers he spent as a boy working on a farm in Vineland, the way he courted my mother, or the story behind his latest trash-pick find. Sometimes, he'd help me practice my times tables – a heavy chore for a poor math student like me. He'd help me memorize a prayer for school, tell me a joke, teach me how to whistle, reveal a way to deal with an annoying sibling, pushy classmate, or overbearing teacher, correct me for

one of my many shortcomings, and later, listen to a hopeful student council speech or offer simple advice about how to handle a boy's growing interest.

On snow days off from school, Dad would line my black buckled snow boots with plastic bread bags, a make-shift insulator to keep my feet dry from the slush and snow. By the time I trudged home, saucer sled flopping behind me, the boot buckles would be frozen solid. There I'd sit on the basement landing, layered in clothes, utterly frozen, and beyond tired from a winter's afternoon of play, struggling to unbuckle my boots. It was my Dad's strong and rugged hands that would easily loosen the iced straps. I could then slide my cold but miraculously dry feet from the boots. As a child, I remember being amazed at the dual use of bread bags and dazzled by my father's innovation. My Dad was not a well-educated man but a well-seasoned student and A+ graduate of a 'street smarts' education. His pragmatic ingenuity outweighed any limited schooling; his tough hands were in no way the outward sign of his huge, gentle heart and soul.

In middle school, I graduated to saddle shoes for cheerleading and was introduced to a new tool for his craft: the little blue box and glass bottle of Esquire's Lanol White polish. Sometimes, Dad let me hold the cap and bottle until he was ready to dip the tiny sponge. A few times he even let me invert the bottle onto the swab. Afterward, from my poor attempts at this, I had a little white ring of Lanol White polish on my index finger. Later that night, I would lay quietly in bed, fighting sleep, picking away at the dried white polish on my fingertip, thinking about the silly story, funny joke, sincere writing critique, or bit of wisdom he selflessly gave me that evening.

By the time high school came and I was wearing heels, the shoeshine Sunday evening dates with Dad gave way to papers to type, novels to read, a part-time job to handle, and friends to talk with on the phone. I felt like I had betrayed him. As I whizzed by him, busy with my growing schedule, Dad would say, "Let me see your shoes." Like a soldier in a military line up, I'd stop at the commander's voice, straighten my legs, and put my heels together. He would give the shoes a once-over and say, "Leave those shoes on the basement landing." By the next morning, there were my shoes lined up with other family members' shoes, all shiny and new, ready for the week.

Years later, when my daughter Miriam and I returned to New Jersey, my Dad gave me a treasure I cherish to this day. Among a few new sweaters, a perfume bottle, and new book to read that first Christmas home, there were practical gifts from my father under the tree: a small

ladies' toolbox, complete with a handheld drill; a portable car battery charger with the directive: "You have my first grandchild in the car; you can't ever be stranded," and my very own shoe shine kit – complete with Kiwi polishes, dabs, swabs, and buffing cloths. Tucked inside my shine box, something else was wrapped in brown parchment paper: I opened the wrapped gift. Into my lap fell one of my father's own shoe shine brushes he used on my shoes when I was a child. I ran my fingers over the well-worn handprints in the wood of the brush. I was speechless for a few moments. I thanked him profusely. He winked. I believe he understood the depth of my gratitude.

The battery charger was used religiously on cold winter days when my first single-mother clunker wouldn't start in parking lots. The handheld drill gave me a renewed sense of independence as a single woman beginning again. I learned to drill holes, hang pictures of Miriam as she advanced through her school years, and attach the legs to a picnic table for the yard. And the shoe shine kit graces my home still. Inside my shoeshine box is Dad's beloved horsehair brush and sweet memories of times spent with him on the basement landing each Sunday night. These moments were timeless lessons wrapped in his salt-of-the-earth wisdom as he buffed my shoes, cared for my feet, smoothed out my writing, and polished my life: Like shoelaces, tie things up and don't let them linger or run loose. Turn on your heels and walk away from others who mistreat you. Stomp out hatred where you see it. Walk in faith and love. Stand for what is right. Polish up your act. Brush yourself off and start all over again.

BIO: Nancy Payne-Hambrose is a dynamic educator and writer. With 30 years' experience in the classroom and professional writing circles, Nancy brings a wealth of seasoned insights about learning and an engaging writing style to her readership. From Haddon Heights, New Jersey, Nancy lives in joy with her husband Christopher and their daughter Miriam. For more, please visit nancypaynehambrose.org.

A TEACHER'S RITE OF WRONGS

JAMES PENHA

This year marks the fiftieth anniversary of my forced entry into the teaching profession. I had been working on my Master's in English at Penn State when graduate-student draft deferments were eliminated. Seeking an alternative means to avoid being sent to the Vietnam War, I signed on to the "instant teacher" program of the New York City Board of Education. Facing a shortage of teachers, the City's schools created in 1968 a program through which selected college graduates studied mandatory courses in Education at CUNY over eight summer weeks in anticipation of a September placement as a full-time secondary-school teacher, as well as a Master's degree in Education at the end of that first year of teaching. The City did not promote the program as a path to the draft deferment all K-12 teachers in the country received at the time. It didn't have to. For me and all the males who signed up, that reward, far more than a job or a degree, was the prize on which we kept our eyes.

The eight weeks of lectures, readings, and demonstrations hardly prepared us for a real-school classroom experience. I'm not certain any coursework can. Teachers learn how to teach only by teaching. The passage usually takes years. Its rites, at least in my case, can be unexpected and unforgettable.

Assigned to teach Language Arts in a Long Island City junior high, I was, despite my callowness, unabashedly of the sixties and so eager to expand the required curriculum with the non-canonical journalism of Norman Mailer and James Baldwin, poetry of Eileen Myles and Allan Ginsburg, lyrics by Bob Dylan and The Beatles. And so it was that I carefully typed the words of Lennon-McCartney's "She's Leaving Home" onto a Ditto Master, that vital but damnably difficult device for duplicating diagrams and texts as classroom handouts. During the actual lesson, I played the cut from my personal copy of "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band" as my eighth-grade students read along from their printed-in-purple papers: "Stepping outside she is free."

The daughter in the song left a note “she hoped would say more.” What, we wondered together, would she have wanted to write? Why didn’t she say more? We discussed the lyrical counterpoint of the parents’ dialogue contrasting with the narrative of the girl’s actions. What do you make, I asked, of the mother’s wondering, “How could she do this to me?” How does the mother’s reaction change in the penultimate stanza? I wandered around the room asking students to explain how they judged the thoughts and the actions of the characters in the song.

After a wonderfully raucous forty minutes of our own counterpoints, we said “bye, bye” to each other for the weekend.

I had yet to leave home. I was sleeping in my bed in my parents' finished basement when the phone rang early Saturday morning. "It's for you," yelled my father from upstairs. "Your school."

“My school? Where I teach?” I replied crankily, sure my father had gotten the message wrong. But when I picked up, I recognized the voice of my Assistant Principal. The distraught parents of David, one of my eighth-graders, had reached the Principal with a day-breaking phone call to report that their son had run away from home sometime during the night. The boy had left a note saying little more than that he wanted to be free.

I felt woozy, not from interrupted sleep, but from guilt and fear. The AP continued, “I’m calling because—“

I steeled myself for the accusation.

“—his parents said David always talks about you and your class. They are hoping you might have some idea where he might have gone.”

In fact, I did. It was a long shot, but earlier in the week, when we were studying John Keats’s sonnet “O Solitude,” David let on, when we read “let me thy vigils keep / ‘Mongst boughs pavillion’d”, that his favorite place to “dwell” with Solitude was the New York State Pavilion, the by-then-abandoned tent, and towers Philip Johnson and Richard Foster had designed for the 1964-65 World’s Fair in Flushing Meadows.

“Maybe,” I offered the AP, “David’s parents might find him there.”

They did.

And although David must have mentioned our Beatles lesson when his parents asked him why he had run away, I never received blame or sanctions from them or from the school.

But, oh, how I berated myself! I felt guilt profound enough to move me to consider

quitting teaching, thereby forsaking my students and the deferment. It took the AP, in whom I finally confided my responsibility for David's leaving home, to convince me that it takes years of experience before a teacher gains the special sensitivity to know when to provide what we now call a trigger warning or to discern from a comment, a grimace or a furrowed brow when a student is troubled. Perhaps, he suggested, when David reported how much he needed to be alone, I should already have realized the boy had problems that begged for my intervention.

"This won't be the last time one of your lessons or one of your comments—a hapless joke even—has unintended consequences," the AP warned me.

"This won't be the last time one of your lessons or one of your comments—a hapless joke even—has unintended consequences," the AP warned me. And he was right. David's running away was only the first of many steps and missteps in my coming to comprehend the awful power of a teacher to shape lives—in ways for

which we assiduously plan . . . and in ways we cannot always but must try to imagine by getting to know our individual students as best we can.

By the time I moved to a private high school two years later, I had done so with more confidence, even relating in my interview for the new job, my story of David's leaving home in response to the principal asking what I had learned about teaching in my previous position.

Only four years older than my senior students, we spoke in and after class as contemporaries facing the tumultuous world of the early seventies from similar perspectives. I came to know my students as well as I knew my friends, as well as I knew myself.

So it seemed perfectly natural from time to time to invite students to dinner at the apartment I now shared with three colleagues from the same school. And it seemed natural, one night, for someone, amidst the remains of our pizza dinner, to light up a joint and pass it around the living room where we sat. When the marijuana reached my student Frank, it seemed more than natural—it must have seemed requisite—for him to pass the doobie on to me. He did so, saying amidst the smoke, "Mr. Penha?"

Mr. Penha? Mister? The incongruity of Frank's extending a reefer accompanied by my title brought me low even as I inhaled the pot. I was Mr. Penha, Frank's teacher, not some stoner pal. Although neither of us made a big deal out of our mutual embarrassment at the time, we found ourselves quiet and uncomfortable with each other back at school. I never apologized to Frank for the incident. I should have. We remained awkwardly estranged until Frank graduated.

My discomfort lasted for the next forty years, the whole of my teaching career. Never again, I swore, would I make the mistake of befriending a student in a way that attenuated my professional responsibility to her or him.

I strove ever to be amiable, accessible and committed to all future students, but I erected a kind of scrim, an opaqueness, in my personality, to convey my posture as a friendly teacher rather than a teacher friend. Students saw it; they felt my reserve as much as they experienced, I hope, my dedication to their learning.

Of course, I made plenty of other mistakes as an educator during the next four decades, but I did avoid errors of the kind I made as a young teacher with David and with Frank.

The professional passage I learned to tread from those wrongs was a hallway through which I sought to become intimately acquainted with the needs and talents of my students without ever allowing them to consider me something other than their teacher. Guide, advocate, mentor, counselor, yes. But never a peer.

BIO: A native New Yorker, James Penha has lived for the past quarter-century in Indonesia. Nominated for Pushcart Prizes in fiction and poetry, his LGBTQ stories appear in the 2017 and 2018 anthologies of both the Saints & Sinners Literary Festival and the Seattle Erotic Arts Festival and in the 2018 Lambda Literary Award-winning anthology *His Seed*. His dystopian poem "2020" is part of the 2017 Not My President collection. His essay "It's Been a Long Time Coming" was featured in The New York Times "Modern Love" column in April 2016. Penha edits *The New Verse News*, an online journal of current-events poetry. Twitter: @JamesPenha

KEEP DREAMING

ANTHONY RUBINO

One night, a few weeks ago, a literary agent who was interested in one of my stories was visiting me. She watched with dismay as I frantically searched my desk, but I couldn't find the story. Her arms were folded, and the expression on her face said, "You've got to be kidding me."

My heart sank as I thought, "There goes my big chance."

I woke up relieved, it was only a dream.

Later on, as I sipped on my coffee, I faced the dream's obvious message. My desk was piled high with books, magazines and scribbled notes, and needed to be reined in. Do I really need those little sculptures, and pieces of pottery taking up half the bookshelf? And what about the pseudo-scholar rock that I found in a stream upstate? One trip to the Asia House Museum, and I'm suddenly an ancient Chinese scholar! There's definitely a Walter Mitty side to my imagination.

My dream with the literary agent was a timely wake-up call that said: *Your writing space needs a makeover*. Because my desk was a maze of books, magazines and scribbled notes, I had missed some deadlines. Even though the results weren't miraculous, that dream did nudge me to start getting my work in order.

Psychologists go on and on about the science of dreams, REM sleep and all of that. I'm much more fascinated with the numinous quality of dreams, their mysterious symbols, and what they mean. For many years I have been exploring the art of dream interpretation from an artist's point of view, and in this piece I will share some of my field notes with you.

I'm much more fascinated with the numinous quality of dreams, their mysterious symbols, and what they mean.

I attended a writer's workshop recently where an editor advised us to consider going into analysis in order to get in touch with our unconscious thoughts. "You'd be surprised," he said, "when you get into a jam with your writing – your unconscious can help pull you through."

Hearing that, I nodded in agreement, knowing how valuable working on dream interpretation was for me. The psychologist Carl Jung wrote that the subconscious mind, and the dreams that emerged from it, contain a wealth of information and guidance. I like Jung's

common-sense approach to dreams. He wrote that, "99% of our dreams are compensation dreams." By that, he meant that a dream will very rarely restate something that we already know. It will usually compensate or balance out our attitudes to make us aware of something we don't know.

Say, for instance, you know that you are a good tennis player. You wouldn't have a dream showing off your tennis acumen. On the other hand, say you're a good poet, yet you have no confidence in your poems; you think they suck. You might have a compensation dream that pictures someone sitting on a couch, reading your poems aloud to their lover. That dream may help balance your viewpoint and lead you to consider, "Hey - my poems are pretty good."

Are dreams always this easy to interpret? I wish! But as in the case of my literary agent dream, if you pay attention to them, and wrestle a bit with their meaning, you may find that your dreams truly are a hidden resource.

Part of the reason I'm writing this is that I don't hear people talking about their dreams much anymore. At one time it was a popular topic. Now, it seems like all of our attention is focused on the present, the factual world, and its constant commotion. This is amplified by the 24-7 news cycle, which is a relatively new experience in our history as human beings. I think the information overload that we are fed takes us away from our core. It tends to divert us from our natural tendency to search out the more metaphysical meanings of life. And we may find some of the answers to our life's questions in our dreams. Even if they at times seem incomprehensible, with some effort, it is possible to unravel at least part of their meaning.

Over time, I've had a series of dreams about my writing. Each dream made me aware of something I hadn't known before. By sharing these dreams, I hope to give readers some idea of the insights our nighttime visions can bring. I think this is a natural avenue for writers to explore. In a way, the scenarios of dreams usually unfold in the manner of a short story or a play.

The Poet Chanting Dream

I dreamed that it was winter, and I was looking around an abandoned lot, seeing if I could find something good there, like old tiles or a vase. I noticed a lamp that still had its shade on it, half frozen in the ground. I walked past the lamp to the corner of the lot. When I looked back, there was a woman who reminded me of Maya Angelou, wearing a dress with African Designs. I knew she was a poet. She began walking around the lamp that was half frozen in the ground while singing. The dream ended with her walking around the lamp, chanting.

When I woke up, I was intrigued by the dream's imagery. I knew Maya Angelou from reading her essays, and I had seen her on TV. I felt she spoke with stirring intelligence, a depth of feeling, and a wonderful sense of humor. When I had the dream, I was trying to write about my experiences as a high school art teacher. Although I had many notebooks filled with ideas, I was blocked and having trouble getting the stories down on paper.

Over time, I pondered the imagery of the dream. I found the image of the frozen lamp jarring. I saw the lamp as a symbol for the light that we share with our writing. That light in the form of the lamp was half frozen in the ground. It needed the warmth of the poet's chants to defrost it and make it usable.

In Tavis Smiley's book, *My Journey with Maya*, he quotes Maya Angelou saying, "It's not simply a matter of listening with our ears but listening with our hearts. The heart hears deeply. The heart hears with compassion. And of course, the heart – the loving heart – hears with patience."

My unconscious self-made a wise choice when it chose Maya Angelou as the poet whose chanting would help unfreeze the light of my creativity.

The Dorothea Brande Dream

Sometimes what you read during the day may appear in your dreams at night. That happened when I read the book *Becoming A Writer* by Dorothea Brande. This book of writing advice was originally written in the 1930s and was reprinted in the 1980s with a foreword by the novelist John Gardner. Ms. Brande's book seeks to help benefit the writer's creative process by showing us how to enlist the help of our psyche in our work. Ms. Brande pays particular attention to the subconscious, which she feels is an under-used asset in the writer's toolbox.

Brande suggests that, after you've done your research, and you have your idea set, let your subconscious have a go at it. She advises getting up early, at 6AM, and then don't even stop for coffee, just begin working. She is confident that, with a little practice, your subconscious will assist you in writing your story.

Although I shuddered at the thought of starting work without a cup of coffee, I did get the gist of what she was saying. The author Alberto Manguel reveals a similar writing secret in his book, *The Library at Night*. He writes that, "I've learned from long experience that if I want to write on a certain subject in the morning, my reading of the subject at night will feed my dreams not only with the arguments but with the actual events of the story."

Since our dreams do occur in the deeper realms of our being, if you were to start writing just as you emerged from sleep, your prose might retain some of that essence.

I found Ms. Brande's advice on how to make the subconscious mind a creative partner in our writing process enlightening. One night, I fell asleep while reading, *Becoming a Writer*, and I had the following dream: I dreamed a woman was sitting at a wooden desk in her study, with a bookcase behind her. The desk lamp glowed. Its warm light shined on the woman's face and illuminated the surrounding room. I stood in front of her desk and she looked up from the papers that she held in her hand. She gazed at me with serious intent and said in a firm voice, "You Have to Be Honest, America Wasn't Built on Dishonesty."

The dream was so striking that, when I woke up, I wrote it down. I realized right away that the woman was the author, Dorothea Brande. The lamp's warm light was a prominent feature in the dream. It related it to the symbol in my half-frozen lamp dream. Now, since I was no longer just taking notes, but actually writing my book, the lamp was on. I thought about what Ms. Brande said. The first part of her statement was clearly writing advice; "You Have to Be Honest," she said.

That sounds simple enough, yet at times, it's hard advice to follow. Apparently, I needed encouragement to go deeper and risk revealing more.

The second part of her statement still puzzles me. "America Wasn't Built on Dishonesty." That sounded to me like an invocation; something that should be etched in stone. I'll have to think some more about that. Perhaps some of our politicians would benefit from pondering on that statement too. I admit it's still beyond me.

I found *Becoming A Writer* a plain-spoken and valuable book. Did my dream make me a more honest writer? For me, it meant that I should risk being more personal and be more honest in that way. My Dorothea Brande dream showed me that getting inspired by a dream every now and then isn't such a bad thing.

The Doctor's Bag Dream

The last dream I want to share with you also concerned the stories I was writing about my days as an art teacher. I dreamed about one of my former students, whom I'll call Reggie. In the dream, Reggie was carrying a black leather doctor's bag. The bag was filled with file folders that contained my stories. Reggie put the bag down, and while he wasn't looking, someone walked off with it. I told him, "I shouldn't have put my stories in that expensive looking bag."

I was sure the thief wanted the fancy leather doctor's bag. We went looking for it, and we found the leather bag tossed by the side of the curb.

I opened it and it was empty! The thieves had taken my stories and left the expensive leather bag.

The dream surprised me. In my conscious life, I wouldn't think that I'd value a leather bag, a material object, over a work of art. Yet my dream depicted that I considered the bag more valuable than its contents. I had to take a step back and reflect on that.

Then I wondered: why had the dream made it a doctor's bag? For some reason, my subconscious mind replaced the medical instruments in the doctor's bag with the files that contained my stories, signifying a similarity between them.

The dream surprised me. I sensed that my deeper self was showing me that my writing had a healing potential. I'd never considered that side of my work before. That was unusual because when I taught art, I was very aware that there was a healing aspect to painting. Now, my subconscious self was telling me that my stories had a similar potential, to be a medicine of sorts. That moved me to think about my writing in a different way.

About dream interpretation, the Jungian analyst Jolanda Jacobi writes, "The unconscious is a skilled and cunning craftsman, selecting just the symbol needed for the individual at the special time." The doctor's bag was such a stirring symbol that I wrote that dream down in a few different places, so I wouldn't lose it or forget it. Even as I write this, I'm still bemused that I had such a dream. Now, when the dark clouds of doubt start to roll in, my doctor's bag dream encourages me to, "Keep going, you might be on to something good."

I mentioned at the beginning of this piece that the unconscious self can be a valuable friend to a writer. Beneficial insights can be garnered by taking the time to interpret our dreams and ponder their meaning. Perhaps this essay may tempt some of my fellow writers to delve a little deeper into their nighttime visions.

BIO: Anthony Rubino is a writer and visual artist. His work has appeared in: *Heart and Humanity Magazine*, *The Offbeat*, *The Moon Magazine*, *The Young Ravens Literary Review*, *Riverbabble* literary journal, and *October Hill Magazine* (Fall, 2017). Anthony lives in New York City with his wife, and their trusty pooches.

I COULD ONLY HEAR HER SILENCE

JUANITA TOVAR

She failed me, failed our fate, failed the memories we could have built together. She stopped. Stopped replying, looking for me, meeting me. She paused the flow of emotions that ignited our connection.

I was laying down late at night, watching cars' lights come and go, filling the room with moving silhouettes. I texted you. I knew from the clues you left on social media and through one of your articles published online, that you were not well. I told you what I tell almost no-one. 'I really care about you.' I meant it. I was ready to be there for you, to hold you if you needed me. I was committed to give you my all, my time, my thoughts, my affection.

I pushed on the blue button, confidently, without anxiety. I did it as I remembered the last time we had been together. How your shoulders descended whenever I spoke. The way your eyes widened and your lips revealed a smile when you told me about your recent trip to Paris.

I recalled that after I told you I had recently lost someone, you put your hand over mine and opened your arms so I could meet your embrace.

Snapshots of the moments in which I enunciated my sins to you calmly, completely unafraid to reveal truths that could destroy my relationship, my stability, my life, came to mind. They reminded me how unburdening my secrets made me feel closer to you.

How it made me think that when you said, typed, rolled your tongue to the sound of the words 'I L-O-V-E Y-O-U,' you really meant them.

I saw myself falling, peacefully descending to the realm of dreams, feeling the warmth that our memories would elicit in my body, resting reassured of the connection that we shared.

She didn't answer. Hours, days, and weeks started to hit me, slap me on the face, hard.

I kept on looking at my phone. There was nothing. She had vanished. She kept on acting as if we had never happened. As if those quiet afternoons filled with uninhibited laughter needed to be erased. As if the dinners in which we sat raw and emotionally naked in front of each other needed to be wiped from my memory.

I could only hear her silence. It was loud, deafening. Pressing. It made my throat tighten, my teeth clench.

I went through the motions.

First, there was *bewilderment*. My hands pressing on my phone, eyebrows rising when I would wake up to find no written trace of you.

Eyes not wanting to look, sight avoiding the Instagram page that narrated your everyday life. Feelings being puzzled by the big white smile you revealed on your pictures, the colorful places you visited, and the dark, grotesque humor you expressed on your captions. I did not want to look. I didn't want to listen to the inner thoughts that pierced and damaged me. They were approaching, pulsing through, slowly filling my mind.

Time kept on flowing, on hurting me with its passing of seconds, hours, and days.

Then *sadness* rushed through.

The car full of faces began to close in on me. I looked down, trying to breathe slowly, catching my breath. A pressure in my chest began to build. My nails now were tightly pressing, closing in on my thighs.

I first felt it while sitting on the subway. I was going to meet with your boyfriend. He had a professional opportunity I wanted to take, to seize. I kept on seeing the stops passing by. The car full of faces began to close in on me. I looked down, trying to breathe slowly, catching my breath. A pressure in my chest began to build. My nails now were tightly pressing, closing in on my thighs. That didn't work. Their voices became too loud, too quickly. The pressure of their shoulders against mine intensified, it felt aggressive. Now with my feet tapping on the floor, I closed my eyes, tightening my grip on the subway pole that grounded me. I kept on thinking: you just gotta endure three...two...one more stop.

The sun came down after the meeting. I could not hold it in anymore. It needed to be released, to flood and overwhelm my mind. To rush in and empty me.

I called Karl and told him, “I need to not be home, I need to take the night and take it all in, I have to get drunk. I must drown my mind with anything that comes my way. I have to figure out what I’m feeling.”

And so we did. We sat in a dark room. His face lightly touched by the entrance’s fluorescent light. Face to face we drank. Our eyes meeting only when the woman singing in the background stopped. Glances locking on each other in between her breaths and in those moments the saxophone filled in her silence.

I kept on talking. Couldn’t seem to stop. Fast, quickly. So as not to catch too much breath. Talking to understand, to grieve, to flush the stream of feelings that had been confined within me.

Emotions fell down my cheekbones. Made my throat tighten, my face press up against the inner space of his shoulders: to hide my flushed cheeks, absorb my tears, and shield me from my own sadness.

Now there’s *anger*. I feel it ebbing, rubbing up against me. It comes, it goes, in cycles, at night, in the morning. I could feel it flaming up my chest after your name lit up on my inbox.

I know it will be gone. Eventually, in time. I need to accept it. I have to gather the patience, the strength so I can bear to watch it disintegrate slowly, unfold right before my eyes.

BIO: Juanita Tovar is an emerging creative nonfiction writer with only a small scattering of published pieces. She currently writes for Spoiled NYC and acts as the creative director of their art department. Juanita is a bisexual woman from Colombia and has lived in New York City since 2014.

THE PRIEST AND THE DANDELION

JEANNE WILKINSON

The Iowa roads stretched out flat and forever with no sign of a tall house rising in front of us, and certainly no church. We were floating—directionless, rudderless—in the middle of an opaque ocean undulating with earthen waves that stretched into eternity. Tallie’s boyfriend, sorry, Tallie’s “spiritual advisor,” Luke, had poetically advised us that we couldn’t miss the tall steeple rising out of all that flatness like a beckoning hand, but apparently we could because all we’d seen for miles were two cones of shallow light spreading like a spill of skim milk over the road, light that ebbed and flowed into the black sea surrounding us...an odd kind of luminescence that hid more than it exposed, thin and blue, making me feel like we’d left regular earth and entered an abandon-all-hope purgatorial space with no entrance or exit.

...all we’d seen for miles were two cones of shallow light spreading like a spill of skim milk over the road, light that ebbed and flowed into the black sea surrounding us...

Not that I believed in purgatory. I wasn’t Catholic, for God’s sake. I wasn’t even Lutheran any more, not really, even though I’d go to church with my family now and again just to make them feel better about me.

Fortunately my car was a Rambler, so after thick drops of rain began to hit the window and drum on the roof, when we had run dangerously low on cigarettes and could not go on for another freaking bleak surreal wiper-swooshing mile, I pulled over to what seemed like the side of the road, flipped down the front seat and *voila!* The Rambler became a bedroom. Using our spare clothes as pillows along with some old holey wool plaid car blankets, we reclined in comfort and shared the last cigarette, its tiny red tip giving brief form to our exhausted faces, the smoke forming a temporary barrier to the sweet invasive stink emanating from the manure-laden wilderness we’d washed up in.

Ironically, it comforted me, that shit-smell: a reminder that we were on earth after all.

In the morning the sun blasted into the car and crowded out the smell. Either that or we'd become at one with it during the long night, a possibility that seemed worse than the actual odor. We rose up on our elbows and looked out to see a tall, white house wavering in the steam-dripping windows and next to it a blurry church, both of them hovering unsteadily on top of a slight hill that seemed like a mountain after the vast flatness we had driven through.

We got out of the car, rumpled and crusty in the searing spring sunshine, shaking out the wrinkles in our bell bottom jeans while staring in amazement at a not-far-off green island rising in the middle of endless plowed fields, an oasis in a place otherwise as empty as outer space, nothing moving except the odd cloud-shadow snaking over lumpy furrows.

"Unbelievable," I said. "It was right here all the time."

"Look at that!" Tallie exclaimed, taking her hand out of a nearly empty potato chip bag—breakfast—to jab a greasy finger into the sky.

"What?"

"That sword on top of the church!" Just then a fresh gust of wind swung the pointed shaft around.

"It's not a sword, silly. It's a cross. Right on top of Luke's beckoning-hand-steeple."

"Wow. A cross weathervane on a church," Tallie mused, digging noisily for the last crumbs. "I've never seen that before."

"Iowa, land of wonders," I said, sliding a piece of chocolate into my mouth—breakfast. "No one ever told me it was so spooky and weird."

"You'll feel better after you meet Luke," Tallie said, mincing her way over the soft muddy shoulder of the road to the trunk where she grabbed her leather overnight bag and handed me my old stained army bag. "He's, you know, a man of light."

"You *are* in love with him, aren't you?"

"No," Tallie sighed. "I told you, Luke is my..."

"I know, I know: your 'spiritual advisor.' Thalia Thompson, who usually spends Sunday mornings sleeping it off, who has a boyfriend waiting patiently back in Minneapolis, who begged her best friend to drive to Iowa on Easter weekend so she could get 'spiritual' advice, which her best friend somehow agreed to against her better judgment..."

“I did *not* beg. You offered. And anyway, Luke says love can’t be owned by two people. It’s everywhere, for everyone.” Tallie glanced at her watch. “It’s after eight—he should be up. He always does his meditation in the morning.”

“Meditation? That doesn’t sound very Catholic. What’s he doing hanging around with a priest?”

“Father Terrence was teaching a class in seminary school—Luke says he’s brilliant. They’d stay up until all hours talking about God and life and all that,” Tallie explained, slamming the trunk shut with a loud bang that sent several crows squawking blackly up into the sky, just like in an eerie Van Gogh painting I’d seen in my art history book. “The Father was some big deal church guy out East until they sent him here.”

“Luke went to Seminary school? You’re in love with a priest? Isn’t that illegal?”

“First of all, I’m not in love; second of all, Luke’s not a priest,” Tallie said, staring at her reflection in the car window. “Oh, great. I look like a raccoon, don’t I?”

“A little. What about me?”

“You look fine. Well, you might want to comb your hair. But Luke likes the natural look, so I guess I’ll give it a try,” Tallie said, dabbing at yesterday’s eye makeup with a tissue dug out of her jeans. “He was going to be a priest until he figured out the collar was just another straitjacket society makes us wear. Religion isn’t just about one thing,” Tallie reported, wetting a section of tissue with her tongue. “It’s about the whole universe. So who cares if you’re into some guy in sandals or if you dig rocks and trees?”

“Rocks and trees? That’s a religion?” I asked, digging for my comb in my cluttered knapsack.

“You know, Mother Earth and all that. Well, let’s go see if he’s up.”

“Fine with me. My teeth feel like Mother Earth has moved into my mouth.”

As we drove up the long gravel driveway, the ragged lawns on either side of us were busy pushing up bright spears of spring green. To our left, the be-steeped church sported stripes of purple shadow alternating with stark white lines of clapboard, this dark/light drama interrupted at intervals by tall stained glass windows catching glints of sun that refracted in our eyes like jewels. To our right the matching rectory sat sedately as a pair of folded hands in the shadow of

an oak, the only tree in Iowa as far as we knew, a sheen of chartreuse fuzzing its muscled branches.

Father Terrence stood at the top of the long driveway, framed by a blindingly blue-washed sky, his wrinkled, veiny hands reaching out to both of us. I was surprised at how smooth his fingers felt, how slippery. “Oh, my dears, my dears. Such a pleasure. Such a pleasure,” he said, waving his cigarette above our heads like a smoky blessing. “And you, my dear Thalia, Lucas has told me so much about you, so much...”

“Welcome to Iowa!” said Luke as he emerged from the house, tall and angular with long dark hair rippling down his straight back, looking just like the Jesus portrait I’d grown up with. “Do you want some breakfast, Terry? I thought I’d make some eggs for the girls.”

“And of course you had only your rice,” the Father said, shaking his graying, lionic head. “Such a pure soul, our Lucas. He tried to teach me the wonders of, what is it, this macrobiotic diet, but alas. No. Coffee is fine for me. Too early in the day for my unruly stomach.” His hand shook as he reached for the cup Luke held out to him. “Such a pity you two weren’t here last night...the Good Friday ceremony...so touching, and Lucas so beautiful in his robes, dispensing the body, the blood. And weren’t the good plain souls of Iowa made better for it?” He reached over and touched Luke’s hair with a trembling finger, letting it run across his cheek. “Yes, you should have been here.”

“Oh, we’re so sorry...”

“...we got a little lost.”

“But now you are found. And on such a beautiful morning! And behold: tomorrow will be even better!” Father Terrence announced to no one in particular, his hand lifted to the sun like a child reaching for a great bright toy. “Spring is in the air, our Master cometh, the spirits rise...shall we show them the church, Lucas? The scene of the crime, so to speak?” he chuckled, showing large nicotine-stained teeth that contrasted badly with the white of his backward collar.

“Well, I guess the eggs can wait. Okay with you girls?” Luke asked.

“Sure,” said Tallie. “God before gut, I always say.”

I almost laughed out loud when I heard that, but managed to keep it to a tiny, unnoticed smirk as we walked over the spongy ground to the door of the church.

“Have you heard about our plan? Our wonderful plan? God has sent me to Iowa to plant some very special seeds!” Father Terrence enthused, running long fingers over the shiny pink

bulb of forehead that led to his receding mane. “You see how I have fallen under the spell of these marvelous rural metaphors, as did our dear Lord in his time. But via these special seeds, the scriptures will come alive for all my good country brethren who will find resurrection taking place not just in the dark spring soil but in their plowed and fertile hearts. Of course, not by my efforts alone! No, never alone! Only at the beck and call of our dear Lord Himself, and with the kind assistance of my wonderful Lucas, and now you two lovely young ladies!” the Father cried, waving his cigarette over our heads and taking a deep breath, which ended in a phlegmy, chesty cough. “Oh, my. This country air. Good for the soul, but a distraction for the body. As I was saying, we will lift their tired, small-town eyes up, up, up...and oh! Visions of light! Visions of joy! Shining all the way back to the Holy Fathers in the East who will see what a pure heart can accomplish no matter...oh...arghh...ach...” The rest of the Father’s words were lost in a round of hacking coughs.

Luke opened the creaking double-doors of the church while Father Terrence put out his cigarette in a tall metal ashtray placed conveniently on the top step, and the four of us stood looking down the center aisle where beyond an abundance of white lilies shone a large gothic-style window, rising nearly floor to ceiling with sections of red, blue and green glass glowing around a central golden cross.

“Wow!” I exclaimed.

“Well said, my dear! A wonder, is it not?” exclaimed Father Terrence. “The Arts and Crafts movement, of course.”

“But what’s that?” Tallie asked, pointing to a large grayish lump lying to the left of the altar.

“That is our *tomb*,” Father Terrence whispered conspiratorially. “Which will have no power over those who believe!” he cried out dramatically, making me jump nervously. “Papier-mâché—can you believe it? Our dear Sunday School has worked so hard! Such a lovely group of youngsters, little angels dedicated to our great work.” He pushed open the front of the gray mass to reveal a platform long enough for a prone body if one didn’t mind close quarters. “Tomorrow, tomorrow and tomorrow,” he said, his dark eyes glinting meaningfully, “he will lie in the tomb, a dead and broken vessel for all to see until the tomb is closed, whereupon he will emerge unseen from the small opening in the back! And lo and behold! When Mary Magdalene and the Angel roll away the stone, the tomb will stand empty! But never fear, because our risen Jesus will have

gone around the church to enter behind all the good parishioners who stare despondently at the sadly empty tomb until the silent Jesus, our very own risen Christ, is seen to be walking down the aisle, filled with glory, alive and triumphant! Can you just see it?” His cigarette-less hands fluttered in the air like pale stringy wings. “Well, back to the house—I have something to show you!”

As if the tomb hadn’t been enough, I thought. On the way back across the muddy yard, Father Terrence took my hand in a fierce cold grasp, like the grip of a marble statue. Looking back, I saw Tallie whispering furiously to Luke, probably telling him that we couldn’t possibly participate in this peculiar spectacle in front of a congregation of unsuspecting, hardworking farmers and farmer’s wives and rosy-cheeked children who were expecting a normal Easter—it was all too odd, too bizarre. But no, Luke’s handsome face was smiling, his strong white teeth flashing as he spoke deeply and no doubt spiritually back to Tallie, his hand on her shoulder, her neck, and she was looking up at him, lips parted, naked eyelashes blinking up a storm...

“Rise and dance!” Tallie commanded, pointing a lace wing at me, and for some unfathomable reason, I obeyed, smoothing out my red satin brocade robe-dress and getting up off the floor to add my ruddy shimmer to Tallie’s white whirlwind. We moved around the huge, almost empty living room to *Led Zeppelin II*, letting the spirit of the music invade our bodies and work its way through our arms and legs and torsos—I couldn’t believe I was dancing this way, not to mention going along with Father Terrence’s crazy plan...tonight a redly shining star, tomorrow Mary Magdalene...

The four of us had already listened to *Abbey Road*, Luke and Tallie sharing a joint while I sucked in a small few tokes and, never one to turn down a drink, sipped at the bourbon-and-Seven-Ups poured by the Father, who himself drank it straight.

“My, I *am* coming to appreciate this music,” Father Terrence was murmuring. “Of course, it’s not Bach, but these boys will do in a pinch.” Tallie had brought a new copy of *Abbey Road* for Luke since his was skipping in all the important places, ruining the flow of music that merged into one long mystical, even transcendental series of songs. In my opinion, the second side of *Abbey Road* in particular was a very special type of experience, one that rose out of the miasma of everydayness to assert its importance, its continuity, its completeness, its beginning,

middle and end. At least that's how I saw it after reading Dewey's essay "Having an Experience" in Philosophy 101 last semester.

The four of us had listened to the Beatle's Side Two like chants from heaven, holy messages of love and peace, but Led Zeppelin seemed to demand more than meditative rapture. I was drawn upwards into the shadow-dancing room, my feet moving amidst scraps of leftover lace and silk shining in the candlelight like bits of heavenly debris, this latter courtesy of Father Terrence's magic trunk full of rectory cast-offs that Tallie and I had plundered.

With permission, of course. After our egg breakfast, the Father had taken us to the basement where a wooden trunk stood, a treasure box filled with curtains, tablecloths, rich brocades, delicate laces, fine-grained linens—I'd never seen so much beautiful cloth. "Take what you need, lovely ladies, to become the angel," he said, pointing at Tallie, "and the Magdalene!" he said, pointing at me. Overwhelmed by the gorgeous contents of the magic chest, I decided, well, where's the harm, after all? Why *not* be the Magdalene? I could see why he'd chosen Tallie for the angel as she had a distinctly cherubic cast to her face, totally inappropriate for a fallen woman, while I...well, I guess I was Mary by default, unless the good Father had seen something else in me, something Magdalene-ish...

In any case, Tallie and I had taken our time going through the trunk, finally choosing the white lace for her and a rich red and gold brocade for me, and since the rectory had no sewing machine, we'd done what we could with needles and thread.

I could feel the Father's eyes on us from his velvet wing chair as we flew around the living room in the floating, flying results of our labors. He poured himself another tumbler of Jim Beam while Luke took a last hissing drag of the joint...and now here was Luke rising off the floor, adding his thin t-shirt to the floor's burden of cloth, then his loose linen pants a puddle at his feet—apparently clothing being a hindrance to true expression—while his long sinewy arms and legs moved towards us in a mesmerizing study of dark, light, light, dark...a thick river of hair rippling down a spiny naked back...our three faces floating moons in the hazy room, light, dark, dark, light...

And in the wing chair, the Father: sipping, watching, watching, sipping...

Later that night I awoke with a start. Where was I? Oh! The couch...the rectory living room...covered to my neck with a quilt, my body still encased in its brocade gown. I'd been

dancing, then sitting down to catch my breath, then...nothing! Now I had to pee so bad it hurt...and where was the bathroom? We'd been using the old outhouse in the backyard because of the Father's complaints about balky plumbing, but I didn't want to face that opaque Iowan wilderness all alone.

The living room, lit in dim slices by a fingernail moon, opened on to the stairway that I now climbed, trying not to creak the ancient wood. The house was so quiet. Everyone must be in bed. Where was Tallie sleeping, and which door led to the bathroom? This one. No. Instead of sink and toilet, two naked bodies lay spoon-fashion on a mattress, glowing, lit by a single candle...Tallie and Lucas—spirit and flesh apparently united. I began to close the door but stopped halfway...there was something so beautiful about the light hair next to the dark beard, the interlace of candlelit limbs, the layered haze of incense...the whole scene luminous...in a strange way even holy...

"Shhh! Don't waken the sleeping angels," Father Terrence whispered, staring at the golden bodies, his words careful and slow, his right hand holding a half-full tumbler, the left waving a freshly lit cigarette.

A cold hand touched my shoulder from behind.

"Shhh! Don't waken the sleeping angels," Father Terrence whispered, staring at the golden bodies, his words careful and slow, his right hand holding a half-full tumbler, the left waving a freshly lit cigarette. As his glance moved over the bodies, a strange light flashed in like a meteor and then out, leaving his eyes soft and unfocused. "Can I help you with anything, my dear?"

"The bathroom. I couldn't find it. And oh, do you have an extra cigarette?"

"Of course. Here, take mine! Little enough I have to offer you this night, lovely girl!" he murmured, handing me the glowing cylinder. Then he leaned into the room to blow the candle out, his long shadow passing over their bodies before darkness erased them fully. The door closed slowly, quietly and I took a deep drag as I followed Father Terrence's dim form down the invisible hallway.

"These old houses, so many doors, so many rooms, not unlike my Father's house," he said, opening the bathroom door with a flourish and switching on the light. "Here you are, good Mary. I'll be down the hall if you need anything else, yes...down the hall..." He walked away from me, one foot placed carefully in front of the other, mumbling things, words I could only

catch in waves, if at all, that sounded maybe like “forsaken” or “forgive them” but I was no doubt imagining things in the eerie half-light.

I entered the bathroom and the blazing bulb revealed a harsh apparition staring back at me, wavy, winter-white and ghostly, dark half-moons under my eyes, bare mouth pale and wan. God! I looked away and the night all at once twisted in my stomach—oh, why had I smoked the Father’s cigarette? I leaned over the toilet as a knot loosened inside me, rocking my body as I gagged and gagged again with nothing coming out except thin spurts of something horrid and sour. I flushed the toilet, praying that the plumbing would work, watching thankfully as the awful brown bile braided into clear water, swirling and swirling until it finally snaked its way downward into oblivion. I tore off the red dress, threw water on my face and held my hands under the faucet, drinking and drinking, forehead pounding. Downstairs, in white cotton underwear, I crawled under the quilt while the room went round and round over my head...like something forcing me to dance, not letting me stop...

The next morning, I stood outside the church, peering through a window that had been opened a mere crack, for airflow, apparently, feeling like a voyeur but unable to look away from the scene inside, at the winged Tallie rolling away the so-called stone. I heard the congregation take a collective breath when they saw that it was empty, and then another shocked inhalation as a white-robed apparition walked down the aisle, holey hands out, eyes upward, glassy, staring, the angel running to meet him, holding his sagging robe up off the ground behind him so his thin hairy legs and dirty toes showed, the angel’s own lace trailing behind her, revealing pale calves with delicate ankles and pretty pink-painted toes.

I felt bad, really, that Mary wasn’t there to greet her Lord like in the script...I could still see the Father’s rapt face as he described how it would be—the Magdalene, the first to see Him alive on earth again, kneeling in awe, so joyful, so thankful...

But no! How could I do the Resurrection with a hangover? Not that Mary Magdalene had been all that pure, apparently...but when they’d woken me up at seven, everyone bright and cheery like last night had been a lovely walk in the park, I knew I couldn’t go through with it.

Was it the lilies I feared...lilies with their cloying smell that I knew would set the Magdalene off in a disgustingly inappropriate round of public gagging, or was that just an excuse? Was I, more profoundly, a moral coward, rejecting this Catholic ritual as if I were an

uptight Protestant who couldn't countenance such pagan goings-on? I'd seen the disappointment in Father Terrence's face, the loss of his lady making his eyes go dark and deep as an endless empty midnight corridor echoing with shadowy murmurs about thirst and betrayal and forsakenness...well, too late now. Too late...it was finished, so to speak. Jesus had disappeared once again into the side room with his angel and Father Terrence, backlit by creamy white flowers, stood looking solemnly at his congregation, his black eyes calm and serene, thank God, no trace of late-night-wandering on his face...only that slight tremble in his hands when he lifted them for the benediction...

I left the window and walked to the front of the church where the road was lined with cars and trucks, most of them old, battered and scratched like they'd plowed a few fields themselves. What did all these farm people think of Father Terrence and his outlandish ceremonies, I wondered, breathing deeply of spring, thankful that there was no farm smell permeating the air this morning, unlike two nights ago—had it been only two nights ago?

This morning the air was filled with music, the rich throaty voice of the organ entwining with a woman's lilting soprano wafting out of the window in a sweet ordered tangle of notes and tones, but no snaky whiffs of dung or lilies, thank God, because those would have sent me reeling, toilet-bound once again. Not that I had anything in my stomach to get rid of. Food seemed to be a foreign concept in this little Iowa oasis...only a couple of eggs yesterday, some brown rice and a frozen spinach soufflé that Tallie had scavenged out of Father Terrence's freezer, digging the box out of a nest of hoarfrost where it lay buried behind all the ice trays.

Just thinking of that watery soufflé made my stomach growl like a bear out of hibernation—I'd never been so hungry! I sat down on a huge stump of an ancient tree, arms folded over my stomach while the April sun beat on my head, its oily warmth flowing down like blessings from above. When I opened my eyes again, the scraggly yard had changed somehow, transformed into a green blooming place, full of succulent, plump leaves of all shapes and sizes...hadn't I heard somewhere that people eat dandelions? I got up and picked a young spiky leaf, popping it into my mouth and chomping down. A rush of spice filled my mouth...delicious! I pulled more and more, denuding the yard of its tart and tender dandelion harvest, and then tried some other weeds, too, not even thinking about the poisons my mother had always warned me about, all those wily woodland berries and plants lying in wait for a child's innocent, endless appetite—but how could anything in this churchyard possibly harm me? It was a cornucopia, a

gift from God! Or would that be Mother Earth, all these plants resurrected from her fertile breast like a spring miracle? Was it like Luke said? Could religion be about rocks and trees as well as guys in the sky or skinny dudes in robes?

All at once, a green glow rose inside me, spring sap spreading from stomach into limbs, fingers and toes. I felt somehow cleansed, inside and out, and I wanted to dance again, to raise my arms to the blue sky and bring down the sun like yellow honey on my head. But a last rippling cascade of hallelujahs along with the shuffle of feet marked the end of the service, so I kept my seat as the first people emerged from the church, some smiling, some somber, but none looking particularly put out by Father Terrence's tomb shenanigans.

Savoring the last tangy bits of dandelion flesh, I wondered why no one knew about these treasures in their own yards. And I also wondered if maybe Jesus had come back because he'd wanted to taste the world again...to hear the music, the song of the birds just one more time, to feel the soft breezes in his hair and the sun on his face. Sitting on my stump, I saw Mary Magdalene in my mind gathering together a big green salad for Jesus, both of them folding their hands in reverence, thanking Mother Earth for her largesse while in the distance, Luke, Tallie and Father Terrence—white robes shining in the April sun—emerged from the church like beings of light.

BIO: Jeanne Wilkinson is a writer and artist living in Brooklyn, NY. Her writing has been featured on WNYC and NPR, *Columbia Journal* and *Digging Through the Fat* online. A chapter from her memoir was published by *RavensPerch*, and another chapter recently won a top award in *New Millennium Writings*.

Note on this memoir: All names have been changed, and while much of the dialogue has been recreated for the sake of narrative flow, the events are true.

A CANDY CANE CHRISTMAS

PATRICIA WOOD

"Mommy, can I have a candy cane?"

The sweet coo of my youngest daughter's request rang in my ears, and the hopeful look in her eyes was enough to melt any Grinch's heart. The sweet peppermint treat seemed to strike a chord with both of my young daughters' palettes this holiday season, and so the deeply discounted boxes of red and white happiness made their way into the grocery cart.

Sitting down that evening in front of the lighted tree after my littles were tucked safely into their beds, I peeled back the wrapper to savor this Christmas confection for myself. As the sweetness touched my tongue, I inhaled the mintiness and became lost in holidays past.

"Jess...Jess..." I loudly whispered my sister's name.

It was Christmas morning, and my older sister lay on the top bunk, pretending to be asleep. I quietly got up, walked over to the dresser, grabbed the overflowing stockings and crept back into my bed, right after I clunked my sister's down on top of her bed, too. She mumble-groaned something, and I let the festivities begin. Candy canes rimmed the top of the stocking to be enjoyed later in the day. Gum, chocolate, a small toy, jewelry... the possibilities of what lay within those red felt walls were endless. I could hear the sound as my sister's stocking dumped above me. The question remained though if we were allowed to get out of bed yet. The Christmas tree and its waterfall of presents that always lay beneath it directly out our bedroom door was forbidden before everyone else woke.

Waiting... listening...

The percolating of the coffee pot alerted me that at least one parent was up and it should be safe to exit.

"Come on... can we please just open one before he gets here?" I pleaded with my father.

Christmas mornings were not the climactic frenzied opening of presents perhaps possible in other houses. Our family consisted of six children and my eldest brother, Bobby, lived about an hour away. Nothing could begin until he had arrived. My brother is an early riser on a normal day, let alone Christmas morning when his siblings are still active recipients of Santa's bounty, and so we didn't usually have to wait long for him, but still, we waited. Sometimes Dad would cave and let us open "just one," or I would get something in my stocking to help pass the time.

Plus, Mom usually was pulling freshly baked Monkey Balls out of the oven, their cinnamon sugary, nutty deliciousness eased the pangs of waiting to open presents.

"Mom! Mom!... Mom! Look!" I shouted, proudly holding up my recent unwrappings.

When my brother finally arrived and the frenzy of flinging Christmas wrapping commenced, I always remember being eager for Mom's attention, wanting to show her what I got. Even when I was much older, and the mysteries of Christmas were no longer in place, I still couldn't wait to show her. There was something really special about our living room filled with the tree, gifts and family members. It wasn't just that I was getting presents, but the feeling in the air was palpable, and the magic of those moments envelope me as I sit reminisce. After-dinner was filled with a fashion show trying on new clothes. Evenings playing with new toys or games with the family, sharing in one another's company, and basking in the glow of the Christmas tree, left us sated by the wondrousness of the day.

"Hey, let me see your keyboard," I said to my friend Amy.

She had a cute little battery-operated keyboard, a toy that would make cool synthesizer sounds, and I liked to mess around with it when we played at her house. It was this inspiration which caused me to put just such an item on my Christmas list one year. Christmas morning came, and as my father was handing out gifts, he placed a large box on my lap. Oddly, a hush fell over the room as I peeled back the paper to reveal a full-size keyboard. Not a toy, but rather a full-fledged musical instrument. I looked up at my father, his eyes glazed over with what appeared to be tears. My father did not cry. At that moment, I knew that no matter how much this was not the gift I had imagined, it meant a lot that my parents had provided it. And the giving didn't stop there. This gift came with what ended up being five years of piano lessons, and daily practice sessions of an hour in length that I grudgingly endured. "You'll be glad you took these lessons when you're an adult," I recall hearing, and as any teenager would, I scoffed. Now as an adult looking back, with children of my own, I know the sacrifice our extravagant Christmas mornings entailed. I know the joy of your child's face as it lights up in excitement over a present. I know the anxiety induced by a fear of not seeing that look, and I wish I did still know how to play the piano.

The phone rang and I jumped over boxes to answer it. "You need to get to the hospital right away." Looking around at the total mess, I quickly grabbed my things and headed out the door.

Dad had been in the hospital that Christmas, and we all went to visit him after dinner since he couldn't be home with us. It was a week or so later, and it seemed I was the last to arrive at his room that day as we all gathered around his bed one last time. A nurse came in and did something with his machines, and then we all waited. I grabbed my father's hand as he lay in that hospital bed. My oldest brother grabbed my other, dangling at my side. My eyes flicked back and forth from the machines to my father's face, to my mother who sat across from me on the side of my father's bed

holding his other hand. I watched and waited. It did not take long, but in those last few seconds, my father squeezed my hand. My breath caught, and I glanced up at the machines thinking something miraculous must be happening, but it was instead the last gift that my father would ever give me.

It did not take long, but in those last few seconds, my father squeezed my hand. My breath caught, and I glanced up at the machines thinking something miraculous must be happening, but it was instead the last gift that my father would ever give me.

A tear rolled down my cheek as I sat there on the couch, the glow emanating from my tree. I pulled the candy cane from my mouth and inspected the end now tapered to a sharp point. So sweet, so piercing.

I had not been able to make it to my mother's house this year for Christmas. The weather had its own agenda, keeping us hostage behind quickly falling mounds of snow. Who knows how many family Christmas' at my mother's place are left and what the future holds for my family and this holiday? The Christmases of my past hold such a special place in my heart, I can only hope that whatever the future holds, that my own daughters will be able to look back each year and be filled with memories like those I hold so dear. Memories that make me laugh that fill my heart with joy and love, and even the ones that make it ache. Through it all, Christmas really is the most wonderful time of year.

BIO: A former high school English teacher turned stay at home mom has led Patricia on the adventure only two little girls can provide, as well as providing an opportunity to chase her once forgotten dream of being a writer.

featured artist

ARTIST STATEMENT

LENNEN SANCHEZ

Lennen Sanchez was born in Puyo Pastaza, Ecuador while his parents were on a Peace Corps assignment. He was raised in the Berkshires of Western Massachusetts, and is currently living in Fairfield, Iowa. His art is in a constant state of evolution, influenced at the moment by perceptions of shadow.

Lennen states, “There is a sense of depth that comes with understanding how different shades of black can create currents for the eyes to follow. This new chapter feels like a little rebellion.”

His preferred medium is paint, although he is experienced in sculpture, as well. Lennen says, “Layers are the crux of my works. Different types of paint produce different feelings of depth and texture. My paintings are meant to be touched, they are tactile and fragile.”

Sanchez received his Bachelor of Fine Arts from Maharishi University of Management in Fairfield, Iowa. While he appreciated the skills, techniques, and knowledge he received at the university, he shares, “Art is like life, or work. It comes from within. It’s like breathing, an essential part of me. I just gotta do it to survive.”

You can reach Lennen Sanchez via email at: lsanchez@mum.edu

December 2018





Image by featured artist, Lennen Sanchez



Image by featured artist, Lennen Sanchez



Image by featured artist, Lennen Sanchez

poetry

NINA AND SAM IN HEAVEN

DENISE ALDEN

I used to bring Nina Simone ice. She was always nice to me. She used to call me “Daahling.”

Sam Shepard, *Motel Chronicles*, 9/28/80

Maybe they’re in the desert, Egyptian and Sonoran all at once,
Miss Simone next to Cleopatra and Hatshepsut,
Sam alone with his broken down truck on the road to Baja.

Maybe they’re back in the piano bar, just the two of them.
Sam no longer serving Scotch to the undeserving,
now next to her on the bench as she sings his favorite song,
full-throated, sans her wig; a moment in paradise together.

Her voice weights his eyelids to dreams, but he keeps them open.
Old Testament wrath wraps around the two of them, the hairs on the back
of Sam’s smooth neck straight as soldiers as her voice thunders,
changing the sky into bruise colors.

Her voice shatters the ozone as we shiver down here
on the hottest day of the year, not knowing why.

BIO: Denise Alden lives and writes in Eagan, Minnesota. Her work has been published in The Aureorean and Pif Magazine. She considers herself lucky to have an exciting and thriving poetry community in Minneapolis and St. Paul. Her other interests include entertaining and meditation, and she remains obsessed with Hamilton.

WITNESS

MICKI BLENKUSH

Beyond my neighbor's fence,
not a field of tulips, but enough.
A quorum of red and yellow
all along my vision's canvas.

At night I hear them best.
Buds folded in a murmur,
metronome without the tick
nodding in softlit breeze.

The geomancy of sovereign, yin
as the waning moon --
a fleeting congregation
unconcerned with rule.

Just before their petals stumble loose
around each barren stem, they open
to their fire-eater fullest --
tilting back, looking up.

LAKE GEORGE FLUX

MICKI BLENKUSH

It takes showing up
to see the fugue
between freeze and thaw.
Last month ice skating
and today an open furrow of melt
allows the ducks to swim a moat
beyond where citizens have tossed
sticks and rocks,
trying to break through.

The ducks stand on the edge
and preen beneath their wings
while behind them on the ice
twigs and stones cast impressions
burned by the sun.

Every year the thaw reveals
new patterns --
alien spiders or fireworks
emerge then fade
like underdeveloped film.

Overcast slush
folds into streaks of light
as though stirred by a giant ladle,
while transitory circles

confess a hidden vortex
beneath November's first freeze.

It takes a couple walks
around the lake to notice
a parable of footprints.
Each impression bubbles up
as though past-pressured steps
could release them back to float
across the unlocked water.

BIO: Micki Blenkush lives in St. Cloud, MN and works as a social worker. She was selected as a 2017-2018 fellow in poetry for the Loft Literary Center's Mentor Series program and was a 2015 recipient of a Central MN Arts Board grant. Her writing has recently appeared in: Postcard Poems and Prose, Typishly, and Crab Creek Review. mickiblenkush.com

JOURNAL

ACE BOGGESS

A fly, a gnat, something other
descended my windshield in pendular arcs,
piece of it broken. I panicked,
thought it a spider because of its swings—
right & higher into the peak of a smile,
left & lowering into the cruel frown.

Made it home before the thunderstorm,
where sonic cracks rattle windows,
flicker lights. Outside, rain
owns far more earth than I did once,
before rehab & prison, before divorce.
I want to sing along to sullen
lyrics water speaks onto my roof.

My mother retired today,
her last hours of work in a life of same.
We celebrate with Smirnoff & pasta.

I'm thinking of starting a journal
after years of ruled silence.
If I write in it today, my first line must state:
A fly, a gnat, something other....

Speaking of my mother,
she's become a celebrity at my readings,

although she's never been to one,
because she said a few lines I wrote down
in my reverent way that still earns laughter.

In my journal, I'd have to describe
how I slew another fly, a gnat,
something other. It startled me,
climbing the breast of my cantaloupe shirt.
Movement caught me storm-like & I struck.
The fleck of gray-winged black fell
into my pocket. I had to dig it out.

BIO: Ace Boggess is author of four books of poetry, most recently *I Have Lost the Art of Dreaming It So* (Unsolicited Press, 2018) and *Ultra Deep Field* (Brick Road Poetry Press, 2017), and the novel *A Song Without a Melody* (Hyperborea Publishing, 2016). His writing has appeared in Harvard Review, Mid-American Review, RATTLE, River Styx, North Dakota Quarterly and many other journals. He received a fellowship from the West Virginia Commission on the Arts and spent five years in a West Virginia prison. He lives in Charleston, West Virginia.

MONODY TO THE MELODIOUS MOUNTAIN

YUAN CHANGMING

Twenty minimeters of pink petals.

Twenty minimetres of stretch and reach

Floral foil, twenty minimeters

Of soil, grass, dew, bush

Sitting in green meditation about

The balance between yin and yang

Myriad of leaves,

Falling down with mists

Of last night approaching – twenty minimeters

Of ethereal presence, kissing

The thick ridges – is the soul

The melody of equanimity?

Insects sloughing off

In chameleon-rhythms.

You stopped as you heard them

Twenty minimeters of dandelions rolling against
The vastness of sky and mountain

BIO: Yuan Changming published monographs on translation before leaving China. With a Canadian PhD in English, Yuan currently edits *Poetry Pacific* with Allen Yuan in Vancouver; credits include ten Pushcart nominations, the 2018 Naji Naaman's Literary (Honour) Prize, Best of the Best Canadian Poetry, BestNewPoemsOnline and nearly 1500 others worldwide.

FALLING TREES

CATHERINE COUNDJERIS

Great truths lay covered in moss,
In the quiet of the woods,
A colony of ants, march to
Airy chants, in boots invisible.

Philosophers play with thoughts
In the maxims of their towers;
Struck by falling trees
And the scent of wild flowers.

Birds find strands of music in
The golden and the brown, from
Braided hair and pinned
In the soundless scape of land.

Honey combs drip poetry
From the secret of their hives,
And bees recite their lyrics
To the mushrooms near the edge.

BIO: Catherine Coundjeris is a former elementary school teacher. She has also taught writing at Emerson College and ESL writing at Urban College in Boston. Currently she is living with her family in Frederick and she is working on a YA novel. Catherine volunteers as an ESL Coordinator with the Literacy Council of Frederick County and she is very passionate about adult literacy.

BIKING AMONG BUDDHISTS

ED DAVIS

Blazing summer days when the sun's
high in the sky and shelter's as scarce
as a breeze, I bike past a cow committee
beneath the field's only tree.
Bovine bodhisattvas, they meditate
on impermanence, know where they're
bound yet accept the suffering of samsara.
Empty, expressionless stares declare
their karmic settlement with slaughter.
If they mind their fate to become steak,
burgers and stir-fries, they do not protest,
petition, plot coups or foment revolution.
The truth they've found is that all beings
are consumed and lose their lives
to become earth and sky. To pretend
immortality is the greatest lie,
not worth a tail's batting of a pesky fly.

MUSEUM OF THE MIND

ED DAVIS

—After reading Pema Chodron's *When Things Fall Apart*

So you've come to this place where
an elder sycamore arches upward
off the bank above water
passing slowly as a ship
glimpsed afar off.

Is it one of those memorable
images you'll recall
a year from now, or ten:
embossed, engraved, soft-lit:
leftover bones from
the charnel house of nostalgia?

Better to live now, feel
this deck beneath your feet,
love the tortoise-shell cat
sleeping on a chair nearby,
smell your sweat mingling
with the dark roast of the day,
leaving it all unenshrined
in your mind's museum,
knowing that totally, tenderly,
you don't know a single thing,
and that it could not matter
less.

BIO: Ed Davis' poetry has appeared in many anthologies and literary journals such as Leaping Clear, Hawaii Pacific Review, Stoneboat, The Vincent Brothers Review, and Wild, Sweet Notes: Fifty Years of West Virginia Poetry. His full-length collection, *The Time of the Light*, was published by Main Street Rag Press in 2014.

THE PASSENGER

KELLY DOLEJSI

Instead of her body, she found instructions
for a bird feeder. Supplies included glitter paint,
one milk quart, sunflower seeds, some finches,
one hour with a preschooler. Instead of a soul,
a verbose description of a strawberry moon,
a professional photo of its inverse pupil low
over a Swedish lake. Instead of her voice,
a missing boy, age 11, black baseball cap,
and she told him going home may refer to
1 Film; 2 Literature; 3 Music; 3.1 The long
yet undeterred migration of the Arctic Tern.
Instead of her heart, 23 [REALLY] fun things
to do when you're on the edge of a lonely abyss.
Instead of enlightenment, Kayak.com. The sky.

THE CHICKEN

KELLY DOLEJSI

It wasn't only the red cart, she thought:
the white chickens were also wet. And so
the chickens began to shower with her.
To stare at her eating her eggs. When it
actually rained, they all pattered around
in the warm kitchen, searching for vanilla,
folding in blueberries. Clucking as muffins
rose like brown water in the arroyo, their
blueberries exuberant as tumbling plastic.
People like best what they remember,
she thought, and sat at her desk to write
a long, difficult poem, sometimes gazing
out at a gray afternoon, at downfall
disguised as weather, or as an image.

BIO: Kelly Dolejsi's work has been published in Cincinnati Review, North American Review, Denver Quarterly, Fifth Wednesday, West Texas Literary Review, and Timberline Review, among other journals. Her chapbook, *That Second Starling*, was published by Desert Willow Press in 2018.

DWELLING

ROBERT FOCHT

Start with heartwood blocks, their characters carved
in low relief, six equal surfaces
solid and square, covered with symbols you
come to decipher. Build a home, detailed
down to every dovetail, with steady hand
as precise as Pythagoras. How true
and spacious are these rooms! Forget the roof.
Let the night sky pour jet liquid into
each seam. Did you hear the doorbell? Answer
the unexpected visitors, neighbors
who know nothing of carpentry. Charm them
with cantilevers and kerfs cut across
the grain. Have them heft your hammer. Watch with
them as kingdoms grow from the green oak walls.

SOMETHING ABOUT IT

ROBERT FOCHT

I saw flame leap from the eyes of a moth.
Set free, she flew straight to her sister,
the moon. Hubcap, crystal, bellwether,
bearings: essential lubricants
in modern machinery. Oil up
and get to the posedown.

I hear you. I'll do something about it
very soon.

I saw you at the river. It changed course
when you smiled. Power of the orb,
a woman's womb, best of friends.
Moth and moon feel much less friction.

I hear you. I'll do something about it
very soon.

BIO: Robert Focht, a graduate of New Jersey City University, has studied with Maureen O'Brien, Marcus Eisenstein, Patricia Carlin, Dennis Nurkse, Rachel Wetzsteon, Terese Svoboda, and Brenda Shaughnessy. He has had work accepted by Poached Hare, Deathbed Capers, The Hoboken Terminal, Red M, and Steampipe. He is presently working on an unauthorized autobiography.

AMONG ANIMALS

NELS HANSON

The transported grizzly when released
doesn't run into the wilderness
with relief but turns and attacks
its cage. The lioness set free in Africa
sees two men who bought it
from a pet store in Paris years ago
and races forward. It stands tall
on back legs and with front legs
embraces them in thanks for
remembered kindness. Red in
tooth and claw? Try humans,
that most dangerous animal.
It's hard to live among so many
dead who carry guns and never
learned of love or mercy
but you're not in the wrong
world. You're here to recall
not forget. Who cares if it
costs your life? Which life?

BIO: Nels Hanson grew up on a small raisin and tree fruit farm in the San Joaquin Valley of California. His fiction received the San Francisco Foundation's James D. Phelan Award and Pushcart nominations in 2010, 2012, 2014 and 2016. His poems received a 2014 Pushcart nomination, Sharkpack Review's 2014 Prospero Prize, and 2015 and 2016 Best of the Net nominations.

UNHEIMLICH

MICHAEL HARDIN

The peach trees are blossoming,
the house has been cleared out—
the kitchen cabinets bare,
the junk drawer finally empty.

Left are the green couch,
the dining room table,
the shelves of books in the library—
staging is what the realtor calls it,
but longing is how it feels.

The trim has been painted white,
the first time in fifteen years.
The ceiling in the kitchen,
where the upstairs tub leaked, patched,
looks new in the ancient farmhouse.

With us removed, the house looks finer,
different and not ours.
The “For Sale” sign was put out yesterday.
The house in limbo, seeking purpose.

I feel its loss, like the loss of our Pekingese
who died last year, in this house;
their souls comingled, sort of.

Our new house does not yet feel ours either,
we too are in that liminal space,
until the boxes are unpacked and the clutter created,
and the scuffs on the walls are all ours.

Last year the trees finally bore fruit,
enough for a salsa, a promise
no longer ours. I lock the front door,
haul a bag of trash to my car,
and drive to the space in between.

ISAAC

MICHAEL HARDIN

You selected the stones artfully,
wanted each one precise. The base
was broad, it rose like a ziggurat,
but not too high. Protected

by the pungent allure of juniper,
you hewed branches, straight,
lined them neatly atop. Its simple beauty
deceived me, no bullock or ram.

You asked me to lie clotheless,
it seemed aesthetic. You made sure
the proportions were elegant.
The wood was smooth against my back,

I closed my eyes, absorbing the sun,
so far, so warm. I sensed you
above me, opened an eye
and saw the dagger. I glimpsed

the obsession in your eyes, felt it in God's.
You blinked, thrust your free hand
against my jaw, turning my face.
The clench in your fingers foretold

the knife's progress, it would puncture

my heart. I couldn't resist. You fought
the angel sent to stay your hand,
convinced the test was not complete,

my blood still required for your covenant.
The angel prevailed, gave you a ram,
a weak substitute. You asked me
to slay it, slit its throat, drain its blood

on the altar, said this promise
would be passed to me and my son.

Michael Hardin, originally from Los Angeles, lives in rural Pennsylvania with his wife, two children, and two Pekingese. He has had poetry published in *Seneca Review*, *Connecticut Review*, *North American Review*, *Quarterly West*, *Gargoyle*, *Texas Review*, *Tampa Review*, among others. He has recently finished his memoir, *Touched*.

THE GUARDED OLD MEN

D. R. JAMES

So much like old men, these shaggy oaks, staggering back from porch past lot line, as if in a crowd grumbling. So aged and graying. So obviously arrayed, each in its closed circle, its world. Each shade-throwing trunk is a trunk of a line by which expire the green-secrets of Earth. Each leaf is a scrap to a soul. When I was a boy, my parents and theirs would talk at the table complaining. Dad would turn his eyes to mine, “Communists,” he’d seethe, and the others would agree. Now, as the sun descends, what gruffness I behold—feeling hungrier than squirrels and insatiable.

BIO: D. R. James has taught college writing, literature, and peace-making for 34 years and lives outside Saugatuck, Michigan. His work appears in various magazines and anthologies, his latest of seven collections is *If god were gentle* (Dos Madres), and his chapbook “Surreal Expulsion” will appear this spring from The Poetry Box. www.amazon.com/author/drjamesauthorpage

EMOTIONS

RUSTIN LARSON

Fear is a valid and constructive one, as good as any.
It's like trying to find a good street-level parking spot
on Friday night. If three passes around the block
don't do it, then maybe a visit to another town
is in order. Happiness is overrated anyway.

For example, everyone wanted to see the butter cow,
so we hopped in the Plymouth and drove to the fairgrounds.
The night howled with freaks, double-decker Ferris wheels
and unwed mothers biting bouffants of cotton candy.
Stock cars splintered on the track in front of the grandstand.
Flaming tires ejected and spun and whistled like girandolas.
There were decapitations and severed eyeballs
and nervous breakdowns. We were all going to see the butter cow.

In its refrigerated display case, it stood mooing,
all its flesh and blood and bones made of butter,
chilled to 45 degrees Fahrenheit. A woman stood to slap
more cholesterol on its voice, and she stood there
shivering in a red and white maple leaf sweater
she bought while on vacation in Calgary in 1965. Moo!
More butter! It made us crave popcorn and late nights
hypnotized by the black and white television swamp thing.
It made us want to ski behind the Belvedere while wearing silver blades.

Mostly, the butter cow made me crave revolution,
even though I was six and relied on a steady allowance
of quarters I squirreled away in a plastic Baba Looey.
I feared the screaming matches between my parents,
and I hid in the family's bomb shelter and ate the emergency
Frosted Flakes they stored there. I prayed to the butter cow,
even though the Reverend Huhok said it was wrong.
I prayed to the butter cow and then danced on the mown
summer night with my sparkler machine guns.

BIO: Rustin Larson's poetry has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The Iowa Review*, *North American Review*, *Poetry East*, *Saranac Review* and other magazines. *The Wine-Dark House* (Blue Light Press, 2009) is his latest collection. *Crazy Star*, his previous, was selected for the Loess Hills Book's Poetry Series in 2005. Larson won 1st Editor's Prize from *Rhino* magazine in 2000 and has won prizes for his poetry from The National Poet Hunt and The Chester H. Jones Foundation among others. A seven-time Pushcart nominee, and graduate of the Vermont College MFA in Writing, Larson was an Iowa Poet at The Des Moines National Poetry Festival in 2002 & 2004, a featured writer in the DMACC Celebration of the Literary Arts in 2007 & 2008, and he was a featured poet at the Poetry at Round Top Festival in May 2012.

WHAT THE TREES ARE FOR

JORY MICKELSON

What is the nature of a nest
when hollowed—what good

the thatching of grass
and mud, the fallow

bowl without substance
to fill it—ornament

collecting dust and museum light?
The notecard stating: *this*

is history. But the drone
of a fly's wings, the robin's ability

to raise two sets of young
each summer, even the unforgiveable

shine of crows
tell us what the blowing

stretch of tree are for—
the green and flickering light.

CONTEMPLATION

JORY MICKELSON

The enormity of silence
crowded with its solitudes, empty
after empty face, as one of Giotto's frescos

as it ages is set to air, the color crumbling
until not even the shadows of its hue
remain. Grape-clustered heads crowd

about the savior's crib—plaster
particulating to dust, carried into the lungs
of the centuries' worshipers.

The scaffolding of noise
remains, even when we step
into quiet's cordoned room. Silence

like a hammer bangs a chord
against the edges of all
we thought we' left

behind—the many coins
worn smooth, within the dark
pocket of our minds,

we secretly worry through.
Left alone we can't help

but hear their jangle, count

out revenge or finger old regrets.

Each round figure a vignette
against the skull. All that silence—

such noise. All of our lives,
the chosen and discarded coming
together in the mind, while we

stand among the crowd.

BIO: Jory Mickelson is a queer writer whose work has appeared in *The Rumpus*, *Ninth Letter*, *Vinyl Poetry*, *The Collagist*, *The Los Angeles Review*, and other journals in the United States, Canada, and the UK. He is the recipient of an Academy of American Poets Prize and a Lambda Literary Fellow in Poetry. The author of three chapbooks; most recent is *Self-Portrait with Men in Cars*, published in 2018.

LOOKING FOR THE UNIVERSE

STEPHANIE NIU

A person who looks at the table and can see the universe is the person who can see the way.

-Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Miracle of Mindfulness*

It is nearly sunset; the neighbor's chicken
exploring our yard.
His gleaming crown red as a new cut.

I look at the chicken and search for the universe:
think about the farm my father grew up on,
helping him mix leftover rice and
coarse cornmeal into mash
as if I was a painter. Delivering the paste
in plastic bowls and watching them step closer,
tasting. Hoping they eat more.
The time my sister and I found
a nest-perfect tree, spent an afternoon
building the perfect swaddled hideaway for
Georgia robins: soft cloths, cotton balls,
a pillowed sanctuary loaded with crushed corn.
How I envied birds then.

The chicken is enormous,
cream-colored. Seeing something across the yard,
he barrels across, plump bottom swaying.

Here is the universe:
the sound of a chicken's
nails on tiny stones in the ground.

Here is the universe:
my mother cooking eggs in sweetened milk
so my sister and I will grow fatter, healthier,
us turning in disgust.

Here is the universe:
the steep hill behind my friend's house
where my sister and I go after school,
not yet hungry, and
run and run until our legs can't keep up.

BIO: Stephanie Niu is an undergraduate at Stanford University pursuing a degree in symbolic systems. Her poems have been published in Rigorous, Snapdragon Journal, Liminality, and Writer's Block Magazine, among others. Outside of verse, she experiments with art-making through dance, videography, and machines.

WHERE OTHERS HAVE A THROAT

SIMON PERCHIK

you have the need for tides: shorebirds
helping their young find the sea

and though your mouth is closed it wants
a nest that will begin as a whisper
become the long arm reaching out

to keep from returning with an empty shell
as the cry that could no longer hold on
—twice a day someone is calling for you

will light a fire on this beach, asking it
to be patient, the sea will come, lifted
as smoke side by side and forward.

EVERY DAY NOW WHEN THE WATER BOILS

SIMON PERCHIK

you pour it across these leaves
no longer breathing on their own

—they absorbed all its oxygen
and though there are no flames
you make from the clouds a tea

that empties without any answers
only treatments, slowly at first
then darkening, stripping your skin

for turbulence, stirred the way each night
rises from the ground –how much longer
before the fire, before it's too late

and heat mean nothing—your mouth
still taken along as the splash
between your lips and another's.

BIO: Simon Perchik is an attorney whose poems have appeared in *Partisan Review*, *Forge*, *Poetry*, *Osiris*, *The New Yorker* and elsewhere. His most recent collection is *The Osiris Poems* published by *boxofchalk*, 2017. For more information including free e-books and his essay "Magic, Illusion and Other Realities" please visit his website at www.simonperchik.com.

INVOLUNTARY SOLITUDE

JONATHAN ANDREW PÉREZ

How far the tracks exist,

migrant molds between
minerals, acidic olivine Quartz,

this feldspar, mica
that diva in mid vogue
don't move! On the sunny side of the ocean,

this edenic amber rays
that micropic estuaries that centuries in

in Gangrene emeralds
in Giants footsteps,

valley's cleavage

hexagonal prisms
society pirouetted
but never caught up out the gunk.

A double chloric fizz like calcite, successors in topaz and garnet

festooned the mystery of centuries of involuntary solitude.

WOODCOCK IN THE FOG

JONATHAN ANDREW PÉREZ

I saw an old man, or a woodcock,
waiting out the fog, turns his will
over, untangling thick fishnets
with the hourly tide.

The Sardine Factory
behind him,
the cold vast bay,
the harbor swirled in
saltwater ponds,
calm, composed,
the fallow sea meant
little to him, moral
inventory, as the
fleet that hauled
in buoys, dead seals,
and left tread marks
on the way
to further shoals.

Now the splinters
of the sky, now
the December muse
offers her wool skirt
in retribution for
the wait, one drift-
wood pile iced

with change, fearless
and the ice plants
that with tendons
stretch beneath
the swing-set that
creaking *bahk bahk*
sounds as if there were
someone to catch.

BIO: Jonathan Andrew Perez, Esq. has published poetry in Prelude Magazine, The Write Launch, Panoply Magazine, Paradigm Journal, Junto Magazine, and was featured in Silver Needle Press. He has forthcoming poems in Yes Poetry Journal, Westchester Review, Watermelanin, Raw Art Review, and Swimming with Elephants. His poem on Emmett Till was featured in Aquifer, U.C. Florida's Latino/ Latinx publication. Jonathan was selected by The Virginia Quarterly Review 2018 and Cave Canem for their poetry workshop. He is in the process of completing a chapbook, "White Hispanicism." He has a day job as an Assistant District Attorney as a prosecutor.

PARABLE OF THE POSSUM

SHANA ROSS

In the headlights it looked dead,
Then it reared and stared me down.
I thought of the guy I knew who
Was hit by a driver who locked eyes with him

And did not slow, assuming volumes were downloading
Across the distance, everything he was thinking
Beamed, bored into those eyes in the road.
My friend thought: I am seen

He sees me. But all that and still a crash.
We won't call it an accident.
There were no charges; we didn't know we needed
To file immediately, so retribution and justice

Vanished before the bruises, much less the time it takes
Bones to reknit into something that can hold a man.

The possum glares and shuffles.

There's no one behind me – I am driving

In the suburbs after ten pm, I am alone

There is no danger in stopping.

Easter is next week and I have nearly seen

A resurrection, a defiant wildness

That will eventually kill this creature —

But not me, not me, not me.

BIO: Shana Ross is a poet and playwright with a BA and MBA from Yale University. After lying fallow for 18 years, her work has been published in or is forthcoming from Anapest Journal, Anatolios Magazine, Ghost City Review, Indolent Press' What Rough Beast project, Mad Scientist Journal, SHANTIH Journal.

JOAN MIRÓ

AUTOPORTRAIT II, 1938

MARGARET ROZGA

Against the dark, darker than blue,
a constellation blooms. Energy
breaks through and stars pirouette
blue, and balance of quarter moons
waxing, waning, tipped blue
topped red, topped grey—not
a dream, that would be bluer—
and red, half red whirls, half circles,
sky-flowers petal yellow
from center outward, a centrifugal force
I become as I paint.
I paint the Mediterranean sky.

BIO: Margaret Rozga most recent book is *Pestiferous Questions: A Life in Poems* (2017), written with the help of a Creative Fellowship at the American Antiquarian Society. Rozga has also been a resident at the Sitka Center for Art and Ecology and the Ragdale Foundation. Her poetry and essays have appeared recently in the Mom Egg Review, Peacock Journal, Whale Road Review, and Leaping Clear. She writes monthly columns for Milwaukee Neighborhood News and the Los Angeles Art News.

SELF PORTRAIT WITH GARDEN HOSE

J.R. SOLONCHE

It is dusk.

The sun notices you through the branches.

It shows no interest in you beyond
adding your shadow to the shadows.

You water the new plants:
Day lily, spirea, boxwood, knockout rose, barberry, sage.

You hold the garden hose straight up.
The water leaps straight up.

The water is a fountain leaping straight up.
Then the water falls.

It is cascades of silvery bows.
It is dusk.

You are the god of rain,
pornographer of plenitude.

You are the god of rain,
masturbator of multitudes.

You are fecundity.
You are father of flowers.

IT IS THE BIRTHDAY OF JOHN KEATS

J.R. SOLONCHE

It is the birthday of John Keats,
and I wanted to write a poem
for his birthday, something
formal, a sonnet or an ode,
something with stanzas,
iambic meter and rhyme,
you know, something in his style.
Unfortunately, I haven't been
able to do much of what I
want these days. For instance,
this morning I wanted
to make love to my wife.
We went for a walk instead.

BIO: J.R. Solonche, Professor Emeritus of English at SUNY Orange, has been publishing poems in magazines and anthologies (more than 400) since the early 70s. He is author of *Beautiful Day* (Deerbrook Editions), *Won't Be Long* (Deerbrook Editions), *Heart's Content* (chapbook from Five Oaks Press), *Invisible* (nominated for the Pulitzer Prize by Five Oaks Press), *The Black Birch* (Kelsay Books), *I, Emily Dickinson & Other Found Poems* (Deerbrook Editions), *In Short Order* (Kelsay Books), *Tomorrow, Today & Yesterday* (Deerbrook Editions), *If You Should See Me Walking on the Road* (forthcoming from Kelsay Books), and coauthor of *Peach Girl: Poems for a Chinese Daughter* (Grayson Books). He lives in the Hudson Valley.

HOW TO CONTROL THE WORLD

EMILY STRAUSS

if he could only dictate the sunset—
the precise hues of orange, red-yellow
at just 346°, tinted with a little white

clouds against the fading sky
at the indigo horizon, Venus already
shining, the way the rust becomes

shaded darkly now with dusk
oncoming, the gray tones soften
the bone-dry air saturated with red

dull and washed out, the sunset lost
of its clarity, light fading, the Purkinje
effect— blues now black. He exhales

defeated by tones he can't design,
his shoulders sink as one more day
folds, having failed to measure

the exact nature of beauty, the orange
tinted clouds against the distant sky,
blinded in the face of shadows.

FIXED OBJECTS

EMILY STRAUSS

We are no longer fixed objects, a shriveled
pear on a bare tree, a holdover of fall
frozen now in winter, we are not fixed
in a bowl of blue light, we move slowly
gracefully, in wide circles, and our sun moves
and our galaxy moves, expanding
from an invisible origin, and finches fly
on vague volcanic caps rising above the waves.

We see their colors and designs, we have learned
about ice ages, continents drifting, earth tilting
we forget those little finches, the wonder
of them lost against the tangled strings of black
holes in this universe among many possibilities,
not fixed like a pear on a limb
swaying in the storm, not the center, only a pattern
of stars sprinkled over sails on a wide ocean
as Darwin wrote his daily observations.

BIO: Emily Strauss has an M.A. in English, but is self-taught in poetry, which she has written since college. Over 450 of her poems appear in a wide variety of online venues and in anthologies, in the U.S. and abroad. She is a Best of the Net and two-time Pushcart nominee. The natural world of the American West is generally her framework; she also considers the narratives of people and places around her. She is a retired teacher living in Oregon.

JESU, JOY OF MAN'S DESIRING

LESLIE SMITH TOWNSEND

rehearses beneath my feet
wafting through the vents
of this old house. It slows
and turns, picks up speed
and confidence as it cradles,
breathes, and blesses me. *Go,*
it says. *Be beautiful and lovely.*
Hear, see, touch, and taste
the glory of this world. You
are light. You are brilliance.
You are found.

The ash heap cannot
bring you down. You
levitate, like the sun coming
over the mountains.

IN HONOR OF LAO-TZU

LESLIE SMITH TOWNSEND

I'm tired today
want to close my eyes and sleep,
though the cracks of conscience
won't permit such vagrancy,
even as the day's demands
vacate and rain pounds
at the window frame.

A male and female cardinal
court in the Dogwood trees.
Sunlight glistens in a shaft
of light on new mown grass.
How to fill the gap
when cancellations free me?

I read the *Tao Te Ching*
where emptiness is fullness
and not doing is the Way,
but I'm not good at nothing
and today, not good at something either.

Birds twitter, cars buzz, and I listen,
till listening is sufficient,
showing the way to the heart of things.

BIO: Leslie Smith Townsend is a poet, essayist, and memoirist whose work has been published in LEO, Journeys, The Louisville Review, Courier-Journal, Arable, Literary Mama, Christian Science Monitor, Friends Journal, Gyroscope Review, and in the anthologies, *Voices of Alcoholism* and *Show Me All Your Scars*. She is a graduate of Spalding University's MFA in writing program. She is the recipient of the Betty Gabehart prize in creative nonfiction, a grant from the Kentucky Foundation for Women, and a fellowship from the Vermont Studio Center.

THE GRASS BLADE'S TALE

LOURDES TUTAINE-GARCIA

For years, I noticed only things that moved:

the pas de deux of day and night,
touching only at dawn and dusk;

oceans, compulsively
emptying and filling at the whim of tides;

the sun, pulsing heat and light
to fill a gelid universe.

I, too, was trapped in circular journeys,
never leaving nor arriving,
always landing in barren ports,
reading my passport to rehearse my future
of tiny journeys—
orts from my consumption of time.

One day, a pamphlet accosted me,
taking advantage of a breeze
to plaster itself against my chest:

Visit Elsewhere!

*A glorious place woven from filaments
of hope and uncontrolled voyeurism.*

Call home when you get there!

From the gleam of shiny pages shot a bolt,
converting me into a blade of grass
destined to bloom green flowers no one admires.
Firmly rooted beneath a mower,
I was regularly beheaded until
winter glaciers overcame me.

Only then did I grasp the wisdom
of practicing wonder in one place—
 inhaling ... exhaling
 filling ... emptying
 becoming ... unbecoming
 in circles leading everywhere.

BIO: Lourdes Tutaine-Garcia is Cuban by birth, American by citizenship, Cuban-New Englander by culture, legally blind by misfortune. Her laurels include a B.A. in English (Vassar College); M.A. in Corporate and Political Communications (Fairfield University); several decades as a technical writer. Her work has appeared in *The Adanna Literary Journal*, *Avocet*, *The Hour*, fiftywordstories.com, and *The Advocate*; *WBFY Poetry Woodshed* and *WBFY Poetry on the Bay*, where she's also discussed poetic craft and vision. Because she also writes novels, she is a member of Women's Fiction Writers Association. Most recently, she was selected as one of the best prose writers in the 2018 Mid-coast Maine by Best LitReview. And to prevent you from thinking that all she does is write, she also enjoys raising porcupines.

THE UNFINISHED COUNTRY

CARTER VANCE

I draw the lines, they trace themselves
straight, true to paper scaffold
crackling up against a vision
Of lands great and beyond sky's reach,
sumptuous, possible and laid before.
Too coloured from rain to grip
quills again, if I weren't
so sullen I'd do it
myself without a moment's
Mulling over the shape
air makes over borders.
As if skipping lightly, traversing
taps through boiling last lances,
my shapes are not so undefined;
capitals have roots to road,
set down on high, from distracted hands.
In that they weren't so different,
in delirium tremors,
Than the last time I stepped
out into newfound soil,
terrain yet to be overrun with
razor wire and shadow figures
That rode and came along
through buses and Buicks to be here.

BIO: Carter Vance is a writer and poet originally from Cobourg, Ontario, Canada, and a current resident in Ottawa, Ontario. His work has appeared in *The Vehicle*, *Contemporary Verse 2* and *A Midwestern Review*, amongst others. He is a 2018 Harrison Middleton University Ideas Fellow. His debut collection of poems, *Songs About Girls*, was published by Urban Farmhouse Press in 2017.

AN UNREQUITED LOVE FOR THE DIRECTIONLESS

DAVID XIANG

Naturally, it is night
Above this concrete bridge with its
Starry eyed river dotted in white, sometimes red,
Pulsing and pushing underneath, a constant sound

Forward, or backward, it does not matter.
Always too fast, and then we are running
Taking all these directions.
Growing old in absence.

Rain falls again to the tune only our ghosts hum
In this silence between breaths
Mingling of afterthoughts and where we think
Home is, cascades into the banks

Only then do we remember these colors
Pulled into the current below and
Painting the runoff with your receding footsteps
Leaving half the picture.

We stay here, we tell ourselves this
Time is always new, vainly look for a familiar face
Circling the path. Yesterday, we planted our echoes
For a conversation to come back to

And in many autumns there will be a forest
Guiding the waters this way and that.
One day it catches up to us, as old friends do,
Takes us anywhere but here.

A LION, OR THE DESERT IT CAME FROM *AFTER* THE SLEEPING GYPSY

DAVID XIANG

When I was small and stayed quiet
I belonged to the horizon, an unseen
Hitchhiker in soft pursuit of dusty green.
Here, the dunes roll on and on, a cadence

So large I forget the beginning. Discreetly,
Almost intentionally. Without remorse.
And still more sand to climb, more wind
Leaving my mane blown forward and tangled

Too many times. This one is different,
There is a musician, and there is music,
A sound just beyond my ears, so fitting
It is only there if you forget where you are.

It wilts in a question I cannot answer,
But I stay, pollinated by all these scents
Each a reminder of what lies at the end.
Or not at all. I know where to look,

Where the moon hides its kin, at the foot

Of the last rolling hill, buried in this painting
So loud it is silent, just desert all around
Valleys and peaks redrawn, tracing a new

Direction. You're asleep as I listen, obliging
My shadow to dampen the scene. Tomorrow
You'll see tracks beside you, and the next,
And the next. Maybe it's the same place.

BIO: David Xiang currently studies at Harvard College in Cambridge, Massachusetts. He started writing poetry as a freshman in high school, after attending the Kenyon Review Young Writers Workshop. In 2015, he was selected as a National Student Poet, America's highest honor for youth poets. He gave his inaugural poetry reading at the White House at the invitation of former First Lady Michelle Obama and has shared his experiences with poetry at high schools and conferences all over the nation. At Harvard, he has taken classes with Josh Bell and Jorie Graham, and is on the poetry board at the Harvard Advocate. He has been recently published in the Cordite Poetry Review and the Bluffton Literary Journal.