Northern Narratives

2022

NORTHERN NARRATIVES

A Collection of Poetry, Fiction, and Nonfiction
by Writers from North Dakota and the
Red River Valley

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by Writers from North Dakota and the
Red River Valley

Volume 6

Collected and produced by the following Fargo Public Library staff:
Melisa Duncan, Andy Gustafson, Nicole Hofer, and Lori West.

2022

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To learn more about the Friends of the Fargo Public Library, please visit friendsfpl.org.

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NORTHERN FOCUS

Cover Photo: "Milky Way and Meteor" (2017) by Gordon Court. Taken at Sheyenne National Grassland in southeastern North Dakota.

This photograph was chosen for the front cover of *Northern Narratives* as a part of the Fargo Public Library's third annual Northern Focus photography project. Northern Focus was conceived by the library for regional amateur photographers. We aim to provide a free space, for artist and viewer alike, where we can showcase amateur artwork and share local perspectives.

Photographers from North Dakota and Minnesota sent in their favorite photographs taken anywhere within the region. All received entries were on display at the Main Library in the fall of 2022. Find the digital gallery online at https://fargond.gov/city-government/departments/library/adults/northern-narratives-northern-focus.

INTRODUCTION

Back in 2017, a couple of plucky librarians at the Fargo Public Library conceived of an idea: what if someway, somehow, the library could provide an opportunity for local writers? It's hard to get published, especially for people unfamiliar with the constantly shifting landscape of the industry. But if we made a space for the amateur writers of our region in order to prop them up, give them that confidence and experience of seeing their work in print, wouldn't that enrich the community?

The library put out the call, and *Northern Narratives* was born.

That first year, with a lot of determination and a handful of staples, those librarians took in about thirty submissions and fashioned them into little zines that any library patron could pick up and take home for free. Only a few books were printed to preserve the writing in the library's collection. Still, this felt like the start of something great.

The next year, with a couple more librarians on board, we thought of ways we could take the project even further. We realized that it wasn't enough just to provide opportunity; we wanted to highlight the hard work and passion that was so evident in the creators of our region. We enlisted volunteer judges with various backgrounds in writing, reading, teaching, and publishing. We created a beautiful book that anybody could have the opportunity to take home. Then we held a big public reception where writers could read from their work and share their vision—and their joy—with each other, and us all.

Northern Narratives has only grown since then, as more and more writers in our region hear about us and take part. It made us here at the library dream even bigger. We asked ourselves, why stop at writers? Why not provide a similar space for regional amateur photographers, too? Thus out of *Northern Narratives* grew its sister project, Northern Focus. Since 2020, we provide free gallery space at our Main Library, and volunteer

expert judges choose the front cover of *Northern Narratives*—the results of which are in your hands right now.

Despite the growing pains of trying to build our project, and despite the trials we faced as both an institution and members of the community during a global pandemic, the participation for this year's *Northern Narratives* is the highest it's ever been, nearly doubling 2021's numbers! The interest and support has been overwhelming in the best possible way, and it's made us even more excited to continue bettering the project for next year, and all the many years hopefully to come.

For now, we hope you enjoy reading this book and fall in love with the beautiful, funny, thrilling, lighthearted, thought-provoking, emotional, and diverse voices of our region, just as we did.

Welcome to the sixth volume of *Northern Narratives*!

POETRY

BIG BAY
(MADELINE ISLAND, LAKE SUPERIOR)

by Steve Aakre

The blinding brightness of August sun
drives us to this beach,
seeking balm in this great lake.

Heat shimmers up from the scorching beach,
its sand as burnt as scoria.
We hotfoot across,
skittering like drops on a hot skillet,
and quench our soles in the cold waves.

This bay is where base forces make their truce,
where rocks are ground to sand,
where incessant waves
from icy depths froth at the parched shore.

A wall of rock,
fractured over time into massive blocks,
blocks the north wind.

An arm of sand curves out to the south,
beyond our vision,
into the warm haze
where land and water
merge in a mirage.

We sense some presence looms here,
a spirit living, breathing, pulsing.
As tides rise,

crisp clear water
streams up and pools,
steeping in the stew of a marsh
rich in ores unmined.
As tides relent,
the tainted waters trickle back across the beach
in branching veins, red as blood.

My boys and I feel
we must do something,
some thing here which will last
past this ephemeral day,
some thing to mark our presence
in this vast, timeless presence.

We gather pounded, rounded stones
from water's edge, and build a pyramid,
our little marker of our day.

As we leave, I look back.
The stones –
    first one,
        then another –
slip silently off our pile.

GHOSTLY WATERS

by Sarah Adams

Shrouded memories permeate the frontal lobe
Trauma uncoils from its tightly wound cocoon
Ghostly apparitions ne'er remain lost
Emergence pushes alarm 25 in misty gray matter

A blanket of century snow buries Gaia
Granular dandruff engineers frozen mountains
Emotional rivers flowing amid nature's tantrums
Encapsulated water anxiously awaiting escape

A legacy of redesign
Geography's ancient, inherent knowledge
Agassiz calls for its watery brethren
Gaia witnesses a fluid realignment

Ice storms, blizzards, darkness, and death
Icy plunge into frigid silent terror, howling winds
Ice crusted lined wooden poles, bent and broken
Ice tables cling to trees frozen in times

In the frozen quietude, reporters tell stories
Ice knives sever the world rendering us mute
One voice, one vision screaming in the darkness
Worldly eyes watch the unfolding drama

Warmth casts long shadow, relief and doom
Ancient voices echo in neural passages
Herculaneum determination to win
Ghostly images burst from cocoons

Lake Agassiz's voracious appetite shows no mercy
Water greets soggy, smelly sandbags
Canada quakes nervously at the impending deluge
Its power grows among diminishing snow islands

Ancestral memories regain a foothold
A screamless horror, soul's damnation
Dikes weep from a diminutive tsunami
Sandbags fail, buildings burn, lines die

A watery train awaits its passengers
Debris boards on a northern trajectory
It takes no prisoners, forsaking boundaries
Defeat and victory make odd bedfellows

Traumatic pain, haunted eyes solicit resilience
Upheaval in life's fabric
Escape via concrete threads to a lonely bridge
Ants follow hope westerly and southerly

Devastation and stench invade the psyche
Slime spreads its rich bounty on Gaia's skin
Recession of water reveals physical destruction
Brokenness and resilience play amongst us

A rainbow appears above the water-logged ground
The sun shines another day
Green replaces dark, brackish water
Life renewal repairs the brokenness

CATCHING UP WITH OLD TEAMMATES

by Nolan Alber

Familiar faces from years ago—
at this point, feels like decades—
filling under the weight of age
that seizes all our throats and shoulders

with interminable, steady progress—

the same way we used to win
on that court or field;
the same way I've found wins
    in the turbulent years since—

and in our loose, crude circle,
we spill out the simplest ways
to cross the gaps of each other's years
(while leaving ocean basins unfilled)—

I miss you—
used to sprint into battle with you—
shed tears with you—
exposed my raw flesh to loss and failure
    with you—

and so I owe you this, at least—
to show my bearded, heavy-browed,
troubled and reluctant face,

as I snap old patterns,
stray from the safety of shadows
and stocking caps
and broad-rimmed glasses
shielding the fading gleam in my eye.

No matter how stale our
predictable conversations grow
when exposed to the bright lights
and open air
of a place we once held captive,

I'll soak them in till I burst
from the expansion in my heart.

MY FATHER

by Mary Bjerke

Dad
And his big, fat finger
In my tiny, soft ear;
How I wish he didn't
Care about the dirt there.

Five in the morning
And Dad makes me instant oatmeal
Before he leaves on his route,
While I sit transfixed by "The Country Show" with the
North Carolina Cloggers in grainy black and white,
Rhythmically stepping and whirling in formation
To "Stars of the Grand Ole Opry";
Women's petticoats twirling,
Handsome sly looking boys with ducktails
Held firmly in place with grease.

Sitting in the pickup,
Smoky with King Edward Cigars,
I play with a fat, black
Grease pencil, hard to work it's so thick,
Drawing on the pad Dad used to
Record the train cars he had serviced;
Climbing the ladder of each car lugging fuel up with him,
Refueling the heaters
To keep the potatoes from freezing;
The door swings open and the
Cold-cold swishes into the pickup,
But quickly overcome with the
Smoky warmth of King Edward
And me.

Dad watches under bright sunlight
While I'm plugging the grease gun into
I don't even know what
On the tractor,
Pumping until the purple ooze
Curls out and around,
In the sun and the wind and the spring;
I love the grease gun.

In the yard, walking to the house
Dad looks down at me,
His face hidden in the shadow of his cap.
"You have quite an imagination" he says.
I'm full and warm,
Unable to speak,
Basking in his attention.

Dad lays a door flat in a tree,
Secures with nails and
Whatever all else secures it,
"Leave her alone when she's in her tree house"
Admonishes Dad, to bothersome sisters;
I'm told this after so much time,
Late to discover the protector of my delicious solitude.

At Arnold's funeral,
Our farmer friend neighbor;
Dad is a pallbearer
And will not cry,
Must not cry,
His face strained by the pressure of tears
That break through and will be seen;
I look away and blanche at his inability
To rule his heart,
And I fear the power of feeling.

We're in the airport,
Me, going to Japan for two years;
Dad steps up to me
And startles me with a hug,

First ever remembered intentional embrace,
Not to steady or comfort or congratulate,
But to say "I love you"
Without saying it.

A FLY IN THE WINE

by Joan Brickner

We sit outdoors under the sloped ceiling of a patio
In the fading color of the day.
Traffic roars past
Outside a porous barrier of shrubs,
Marring the bloom of breeze.
In Fargo, you take these nights with heads dipped down
In homage.
My husband drains a Long Island Iced Tea.
My white wine sinks beneath the rim, lower and lower

After a sip or two,
A lemony amber
Alternating with the crunch of walleye fingers,
before an insipid meal.

I spot it.

A small fly clings to the concave interior
Inside a smile
Inches above the wine's surface.
Shaking avails nothing.
He seems suctioned.
I look again.
The fly fallen. The small creature lies face up,
Legs crooked and still
Its gossamer wings float dead on the surface.

I ruminate a moment
Then
fork out the body,
screeching the narrow tines against glass,
Flick fly to floor

A bug-eyed drunk to crunch under foot or wrought iron chair.
Then I sip the Riesling.
Again and again.

GRASS SEA

by Joan Brickner

The heat swells through my head
Even as a sweet prairie breeze blows across it.
The temperature feeds the thermometer;
How its tubular belly swells, vertical and red.

With eyelids shut, I feel my Detroit in its
Blistered humidity;
I, the ant under the magnifying glass,
Waiting for the stammer of traffic
The blood-spattered newscasts.
But eyes open,
The flat fields peer between the deck rails
With a line as straight as a
Frank Lloyd Wright cantilever,
Shooting into a quiet crowd of cottonwoods

Wind bends the grass
The green adolescent soybeans
Sunflower faces, like brown-eyed Cyclops
Rimmed with flat-fingered lemons.

A crowd of black birds field a garage rooftop
But no Hitchcock stands aside, waiting for his cameo.
No shriek in the ear.

Just
The reedy hum of a window unit
The turn of a crisp page
The voice of Joni Mitchell, gliding into blue.

BIRDS OF A FEATHER

by Katie Bruckbauer

Birds of a feather
flocking together,
a beautiful sight to see.
Sharing, surviving,
everyone thriving,
how lovely when all agree.

But there's flack in the flock,
and a duck on the dock,
who's odd as odd can be,
and a peacock who's proud,
and a crow who's too loud,
and an eagle looks down from his tree.

Is there room in the nest
for those not like the rest?
Can I love those who think unlike me?
In this world that's gone wrong,
may all beings belong
and stretch out their wings to fly free.

EMBRACE

by Katie Bruckbauer

Embrace the face before you.
Embrace the place you're in.
Embrace the pain and sorrow.
Don't brace against today, tomorrow.
Open up and welcome in.
Embrace, I say again.
Embrace the life you're living.
You'll find the grace therein.

But what about the people,
the ones with whom I dwell,
the mother, daughter, brother,
the spouse I know so well?
Everyone has darkness.
Everyone has light.
Embrace the face before you.
Your love will reignite.

And what about my fears,
the ones that keep me wide awake,
the fear of faults and failures,
rejection and heartache?
Embrace your imperfections.
Embrace the you you are.
Dare to live and dare to love.
You're worthy of the scar.

And what about the questions
that keep circling undefined?
I'd like to know the answers.
I'd like some peace of mind.
Birth, death, heaven, hell,

beauty, evil, strife?
Embrace the deep unknowing
of this mystery we call life.

And what about the here and now,
the place I'm in today?
Can I accept this moment
and not try to run away
from tragedy or triumph,
the inspiring or mundane?
Embrace it all, embrace it all,
the sunshine and the rain.

Embrace the face before you.
Embrace the place you're in.
Embrace the pain and sorrow.
Don't brace against today, tomorrow.
Open up and welcome in.
Embrace, I say again.
Embrace the life you're living.
You'll find the grace therein.

THE KINGDOM OF WATER

by J.L. Burt

It's cold outside
The windows clouded
And the ground beneath is shrouded
By the snow that has just fallen
Fallen from the sky
And I sit as the time goes by
Silently wondering why

Why does the sky take our oceans
And keep them for a while?
Only then to banish them
In rain or sleet or snow?
Why does all the water go
Just to be back down?
Where is the kingdom that they are drawn to
But cannot stay?
Why are they returned night and day?

And now I watch the snow come down
Like tiny feathers they come down
Where have they come and where have they to go
I cannot say
Nor why it would come and go
In form of rain, sleet, or snow

OVERHEARD ON A SHUTTLE FROM THE MINNESOTA STATE FAIR

by Cara Cody-Braun

Hello? You wanna know how to can tomatoes?
Well, I'm doin' tomatoes tomorrow...
Just come on over!
Yeah, I'm gonna start in the morning-
I already have 'em cleaned and settin' on the counter.
Tomatoes lay on flour sack towels, the afternoon sun
illuminating orange and red orbs-
some destined for Jars tomorrow,
while others wait a few more days on the window sill.
A few more bites of late summer,
Little salt or sugar snacks,
Late night companions to mayo and bread,
No bacon, no lettuce, no matter,
British breakfast with eggs and beans.
The goulash? Yeah, I use canned tomatoes.
No, I don't use any tomato sauce or paste. Gosh,
I don't know why anyone would want to do that.
You can't beat mom's goulash- just the canned tomatoes, ground beef
and macaroni noodles! Yep, one quart of tomatoes to a pound
Of ground beef. I guess you could use egg noodles, but you know
We never do.
Someone planted a seed long ago, and now it's sprouting
On a shuttle bus from the state fair.
As long as tomatoes are grown, canned, and treasured,
Children will grow good and strong.
A little dirt, a little sun, a little water, a little love in a jar.

HOW IS THE WEATHER HERE?

by Erin Conwell

How is the weather here, really? I asked
And they told me
Summer is beautiful!
But I hear you get frost in September?
And they told me
Summer is beautiful!
And I hear the winters are so cold that your breath freezes on your eyelashes?
And they told me
Summer is beautiful!
But I hear that the wind gusts so hard that it lifts the snow from the ground and turns the whole world white?
And they told me
Summer is beautiful!
And I hear that when the spring melt comes, that skinny little river rises up and spreads like fire?
And they told me
Summer is beautiful!
But I hear that just when you think winter is over it will snow on Mother's Day?
And they told me
Summer is beautiful!
And now I have been here
More than ten winters
So you can ask me
How is the weather there, really?
And I
Will tell you
The truth:
Summer is beautiful!

THE FAERIE SONG

by Shauna Eberhardt

A light shines down the river path,
Voices whisper, a careful laugh.
Sprites and faeries sing a song,
A lullaby of times unknown.
Mist and magic in the night,
Moon and stars shining bright.
Faerie wings fly through the sky,
Elvish mischief by and by.
Take caution child, should you find
For magic songs enchant the mind.
Believe in creatures hidden fast,
As mortal souls they will outlast.
Heed these words, but also true,
The faeries hold a gift for you.
Their magic opens minds and hearts
To see the truth 'fore we depart.

LAKOTA LOVE SONG

by Whitney Fear

A Hidatsa man once sold me on the most beautiful dream,
With words so sweet,
They dripped like honey from his full lips.

He showed me the way the stars had aligned to translate my heart's
language for him,
And his to me,
With impossible clarity.

I fell into the dream,
Fully. Inescapably. Willingly.
With my eyes closed and my heart open,
Believing his promise to be by my side.

And when he took it back,
I paid for it all,
With warm tears that flowed down my cheeks,
And onto my broken heart.
- Thuswéčha Zí Wíŋ

THE WOLF INSIDE MY CLOTHING

by Rhonda Gilbertson-Evans

I remember it coming the first time when I was four or five. The wolf in my clothing. It didn't even occur to me to be afraid. It needed a place to hibernate, I had the goods.

When the wolf moved in, it started with the skin of my hands, and that of my feet. It burrowed in for the winter of my life. Inches of canyons lay deep, filled with the God awful smelling prescription dermatological tar ointment. I was blacktop by kindergarten.

When the wolf in my clothing showed up from time to time, I knew it. Low grade fevers meant saltines, 7-up and laying on the couch for days at a time. It peeled my skin off. Sometimes sheets at a time and made my Mom cry. She tried so hard to kill it. Because she knew what it was. It wore her clothing too. BUT it didn't want her quite as badly as it wanted me.

The wolf inside my clothing eats my hair. It likes how it smells. How the soft curling strands lie together to form tendrils. It enjoys how all the colors don't just look like, but are, dark hot chocolate. The wolf's favorite bit of my hair is the tiny root just inside the scalp. The follicle. Sweet. Sensitive. And very, very fragile.

It used to eat my hair in patches. Mostly just to reassure me that I was the MOST disgusting on the outside and that other people could see it now too. Then it came and ate my hair all at once. From everywhere. Then gave it back. Took it all again. Push and pull.

The DISGUST and SHAME from the last super fun episode, I own. I blame myself for that. Here's why. We, myself included, as a society, place so much value on the aesthetic. We decide which are the masculine and feminine traits and dole them out like playing cards. In essence, I ALLOWED myself to be told by society, that I was no longer AS

beautiful as the next woman because my lack of hair may, possibly, project a slightly more male sensibility. I bought into that notion. First of all, fuck that! I dig it. It's hardcore. And more importantly, very low maintenance.

Let me remind you that my hair was TAKEN from me, hand to hand combat style, on more than one occasion, by the wolf that wears my clothing. I didn't GIVE one strand away. I fought for each one equally.

Envision me as that teenage girl, at the bottom of the shower stall, holding all that I thought defined me as a woman in my outstretched hands. Assuming this loss I was experiencing was reducing me to less-than or not-enough. It made getting to Composition III with Dr. Brown less of a priority.

Although it wears a suit, carries a briefcase, and power charges the mean streets of Manhattan, from one life changing mission to the next, it is the weight of my skin that the wolf can barely stand to carry from Lexington to Madison Avenue, without allowing it to slide down a urine drenched subway grate. Oh, and the bones…useless for the purpose.

The wolf is really quite over my shit by now and just wants to move things along. It's time to get real. REALLY real. Lights out.

I woke up two days later in New York University Hospital, I had no idea who I was or where I was, but it seemed shiny. Fancy like.

Long story short: a delicious woman named Margaret, my boss and mentor, with the intestinal fortitude of a caged bull moose, had contacted all of the hospitals in the five boroughs of New York City, including city morgue, looking for my body. I hadn't been to work for a few days and had not called in to report my status. She located me at said hospital at some point during those 48 hours, where my name was registered as DOE, Jane. Strangely, I was the only patient checked in under that alias, at that enormous teaching medical facility, on that particular day. Huh.

My police report reflects witness testimony indicating that I:

A. Had a tonic-clonic (grand mal) seizure lasting more than 10 minutes.
B. During that time, I had been mugged and stripped of my identification.
C. An ambulance was called and dispatched.

That's it. I was only one short city block from work.

Because of my wolf, I have been drugged, imprisoned, assaulted, tormented, and violated by it, nearly every day. I don't want it and I sure as hell don't want you to have it either. Its name is Lupus. What's the name of your wolf?

AN IDEA OF YOU

by Kenzie Grace

I loved you? I love you? I cannot decide.
My heart feels a pang when I think of you.
Come be close to me, come sit beside.
Until I remember how you made me feel inside.

Let me think and remember your ways.
How you loved me, but you hurt me.
How we lived my happiest days.
I romanticized you, your love a constant haze.

You had to leave. The way you told me felt cold.
You broke my heart, but that's how you freed me.
I grew from the pain; I became colorful and bold.
But the wounds still feel fresh when I know they are old.

I loved you? I love you? I still can't decide.
I see you on the street. We smile and wave.
My heart starts to race, and I want to hide.
You loved me? You love me? Are the words you also hide.

LATE NIGHT DEBATE

by Rita Greff

After the devastating tornado
A full warmth chokes the air.
With no air conditioning
We cranked open the windows
Before crawling between damp sheets.

Outside our bedroom window
In the row of cottonwoods
The trees whispered
Of the wind's rough play
Late that afternoon.

Their shushing sound soothed
My worried soul.
Again the wind taunted us.
The leaves took our side
Angrily scolding the wind for its thoughtless destruction.

Sheepishly, the wind calmed.
The leaves slowly fluttered their forgiveness.
Once more the wind rose to show power.
The leaves assumed the sound of a river flowing.
Leaves and wind continued to bicker until dawn signaled, "Time's up."

FIRST SNOWFALLS ARE THE BEST

by Pagyn Harding

It snowed here last night
enough to paint our yard a milky white.
As I walk outside with our dog Sam
the arctic air hurts my nose.

My gym shoes and his paws
touch the frigid ground.
It's no leg up for our boy
instead he stops, leans forward
and does his business.

Sam turns his head to look at me.
What this stuff? He asks
his head tilts back to our woods
and listening as only he can.

He turns around to see
if I'm still there.
Waiting, watching.

"What a good boy."
I tell him and
he wags his tail while walking.

Back inside a warmth is waiting.
Sam wanders over to his water dish
he turns and looks back at me
then walks over to my chair
and curls up by our wood stove.

THE PRICE OF PRAISE

by Pagyn Harding

Said in front of my Mom
my grandmother's praise
painted my cheeks a ruddy red.

But when Mother turned her head
and looked at me, eyebrows raised

"She made this pie? At home
she won't even make her bed."

My moment in the limelight

SONNET I, LOVELY DEMISE

by Rosie Hobbie

Eye her closely in this bleak autumn air
A diadem of severed, crimson wings
Your last pile of rose petals, doomed and bare
Fingers dance on harps weaved of her heartstring
Listen to her laugh through ice, wind, and snow
For she is a perennial flower
No one may ever hinder her life's grow
Yet you underestimate her power
Piercing her petals, neglecting her vines
You hiss "sit still" whilst destroying with ease
Failing once more to read between the lines
Intensifying her fear to displease
You left her nothing but echoes of warns
But springtime awaits, and roses have thorns

SONNET II, UNTITLED

by Rosie Hobbie

I scold you to quit your wry reminisce
Because shortly the moon will come to light
And I don't want her to see me like this
See *you* like this, in such desperate plight
Nagging whispers haunt my once hollow ears
Run, run, run, forebodes your heart little one
But I will stay, drowned in nothing but fears
You've decayed with time, yet you've somehow won
I dry my tears with cotton from the clouds
Your mind aches answers that can't be unearthed
Now it's merely ourselves, no space for crowds
Here in this place, those ghostly scars are birthed
The moon hides away, the grass breathing still
We're lone now, you can go in for the kill

TACTILE HEAVEN

by Zachary Howatt

Imagine Heaven (whatever it is) like a hammer:
To fix all this shabbiness,
To bust the comrades out of cages,
To build the idyllic home,
To nail your feet to all the answers—
Heaven. Not a place, but a tool.

I heard the crack of a driving hammer—
Distant, but certainly a hammer—
And I deflated, relieved,
My tension unbinding my shoulders,
Relaxing like silk blue ribbons—
Salvation came for one of us!

I lied. I heard nothing. I feel the same.

I mean, imagine. This tool, who could wield it?
Is Heaven's power to save the same
If it can't swing itself? Must I do it?
In human hands, isn't Heaven a hazard
To mishandle? To injure oneself, the desperate?

See, I can't think of Heaven without maligning it.
Even a secular Heaven—earthly, tactile,
Something I could find here—
I doubt it like the one in the sky,
A happiness I can't keep tabs on,
Bound out of reach by despair,
Dancing in the corners of my eyes,
Never there when I turn to look.

These hands obey a brain that can't believe.
So Hope, wherever you are, you devil,
Drive me out of my head for one night at least,
And I'll give you a year of my life
For each minute of freedom that follows.
Give me that, please, and tremble to imagine
The beautiful things these hands would do.

SHY LITTLE BIRD OF LAST SUMMER

by Dave Jameson

When I was a young boy in a small town
not far from here, I learned the mourning dove,
a gentle, gray bird, had its name, not from
the day's early part, but from sorrow for
some loss.
Its call, a gentle hoo-hoo-hooo,
which you could hear if you were being quiet
on a still summer day, early or late.
A not too rowdy boy, I could climb a tree
beside our house, a broad-limbed elm it was,
and watch a nesting dove brooding her eggs
on a twig platform. If I leaned too close
to the dove, she would scrunch down on the nest,
as though drawing into herself in fright.
But she would never fly up from her eggs.

I thought of those gentle birds of my childhood
last spring when a new, strange bird showed up
in our neighborhood near the edge of the city's
downtown. It was a shy arrival, it seemed,
to be heard, but not to be seen. A dweller in the high
branches of the elms and ash that flourish
around our place, this new bird was never shy
about singing out with its unique call—
a stout *hoot* followed by two softer *hoos*.
Five or six or more quick repetitions,
with slightly more emphasis on the *hoot*:
HOOT-hoo-hoo. HOOT-hoo-hoo. HOOT-hoo-hoo.
Mostly lengthy calls, but sometimes shortened
to two or three verses, as though the bird
had been distracted.
I never saw him,

this stranger dove, never shy with his song.
When I heard his call I would look upward,
hoping to catch sight of the persistent
songster. But crane my neck as I might
I never captured the most fleeting glimpse.

As the days wore on, I came to treasure
the visitor's song, accepting the deal—
that the bird's gift was given on these terms:
a concert to be heard, but never seen.

One week in July, the building project
being pushed higher and ever higher
next door grew rowdy with the clanks and bangs
and the booms of the workers in their toil.
Out in our parking lot, I could not hear
my bird's call over the construction din,
and I feared he had been frightened away.
But when the last hammer had been thrown down
for the day, I paused to listen and heard
his plaintive call, coming soft from a stand of pines
a block south, a peaceful perch for the bird.

Then, late in summer, as the construction
at Rosie's ended, I was pleased to hear
the call of the bird up high in the trees
bordering our apartment building's lot.
HOOT-hoo-hoo. HOOT-hoo-hoo. The sound
more mournful, or at least it seemed to me.

The worn out summer lapsed into the fall;
the fall nights became cooler and cooler.
And, as is the way with nature, one day
I heard the dear song of the bird no more.

I wasn't sad. For in thought I could see
strong wings longing true to his southern home.
Mourning is not a fit mood for leaving.
Mourning is fit for never coming back.

I AM A TREE

by Heather Karstens

I am a tree.
Firmly rooted in the earth
In what is real and mythical
Mundane and magical.
I draw strength from the sun and the rain.
In my arms I shelter others with compassion.
In winter I embrace simplicity.
Though the forces around me may seek to rip my roots from the ground,
I stand tall.
I will bow.
I will not break.
I may lose pieces of myself in the storms,
But I still stand.
In the spring
In the sun and the rain
I will quietly grow
Stretching my branches searchingly
Until I am myself again
Stronger for having endured
Brighter for being restored.

TO FEEL SMALL

by Heather Karstens

In this time of pandemic, my world has gotten small.
As I no longer go out in community often,
as I stay home, stay safe,
my physical world has shrunk.
I avail myself of the wonders of the internet
to admire artwork, architecture, and nature scenes.
With the darkness of winter
and the hurt of the world closing in,
I need beauty in my life.
Yet as I marvel at these images on my screen,
I am filled with a deep longing to feel small.
To stand in a massive cathedral
or at Abraham Lincoln's marble feet.
To look out at the ocean
or ponder the night sky.
To know beyond the shadow of a doubt
that there is more to life.
More wonder.
More hope.
More good.
To know that this traumatic time
is just a blink of the eye in the vastness of the cosmos.
To be whole in all my brokenness.
To lift the crushing weight from the tightness in my chest.
For what is this pressure when behind it the universe stretches free?
I want to feel small.

BLEAK HOUSE

by Atiya Khan

You waxed poetic about Devonshire cream
And how you cheered for the Arsenal team
Your face was painted red, your dark eyes were agleam
As you took in the sights of that new scene

Now we sit in this frigid, dingy apartment
Spending the last of the funds you were lent
Lit only by a wizarding lamp ornament
Ignoring the doom of future payment

You attempt to color the walls with futile words
Telling me stories about wingless birds
As the lines between truth and reality blurred
Your feeble and vacant tales went unheard

What does it matter in this gray Midwestern town
On what bright sunny paths you once were bound
The words you speak will not your audience astound
You simply let your callousness abound

Read the room now, the cold unspeaking room
I will leave you to swim lone in the flume
There you'll meet your inexorable doom
Goodbye dear one, enjoy your homespun tomb

KINGDOM OF THE HEART

by Atiya Khan

These are the days of
Blindingly radiant smiles
Small insignificant glances
Nervous uncertain greetings
These are the nights of
Visits to heaven
Dreaming of you
A sacrosanct ritual

But when rosy-fingered Eos wakes again
When Helios pulls his chariot across the heavens
Before Selene yokes her snow white steeds
Will Atlas still stand at the Western edge of Gaia?
Because your very presence seems to make the earth shake
And the facts I knew to be immutable
Now seem to be ephemeral
Like fickle cirri in the evening air
For you have rended my heart out of my chest
I can see it beating there
In your strong, delicate hands
Vulnerable but undefiled
Are you as yet unaware of your power
Which I have bestowed upon no other
Yet dared to confer to you
My mind devoid of hesitation?

Still you remain my sceptered king
Endowed with divine right
You act as a pacific prince
Irenic, like a Horae

Decree and ordain your edicts as you will
I bow to your command
Yet it may be but a brief sojourn for you
As a ruler of the land
For feeble hearts grow feebler still
Provided that it is their fate
And Hyades will weep their starry rain
If the kingdom of the heart is lain to waste
But if you supplement your rule with love
So nothing comes to ruin
The days and nights shall remain interminable
Our love will never meet its doom

INTOXICATION

by Bibi Khan

I bottled the pain in my body
but couldn't sell it -
not even in my dreams.

It is the tonic of my disposition.
The room I never leave.
The irritation for every ill.

It is my validation for living.
Yet, sometimes, a reason for expiration
with its dull numbness.

A constant companion
flirting with every emotion
knowing when to propel me forward

or push me backwards.
I have felt its inner strength
and am privy to its frailty.

I am intoxicated by its fervor
and poisoned by its apathy.
It is mine and I belong to it.

THE OWL

by Bibi Khan

After William Blake's "The Tyger"

In what far off forest deep and dark
Are you surrounded by the tree's bark?
While we foray in the light of day,
At night is when you come out to prey.

With eyes that spy from far away
Your swiveling head is child's play.
The silence of your wings in flight
To me would be a welcome delight.

Oh, lovely creature of the night
What stirs your heart in fright?
The hunt and kill must exhilarate
As this is what nature does dictate.

Is the moon your friend or foe?
And what about the winter snow?
Of winged friends - you must have none -
Their fear of being eaten counts not for fun!

Illusive creature of the night,
Outstretching wings at twilight
What terror your grasp must impart,
As well your beak, when it tears apart!

Are you lonely in the death of night?
Do you long to be a beauty of the light?
In what far off forest deep and dark
Are you sheltered by the tree's bark?

LEAVING MINNEAPOLIS

by Austin-Alexius Klein

I was not ready, but it does not mean I didn't still love you
when I was driving back to North Dakota. I was not ready,
but it does not mean I didn't feel you, every time
I was in the arms of someone else. I was not ready,
but it does not mean I felt anything but pain
when I thought abandoning you was my only option.
I was not ready to go down with the ship if it sank.
I was not ready to fall, clinging to the edge of the cliff.
I was not ready to jump, even if the water was warm.
I was not ready to let go. I was not ready to hold on.
I was not ready to face the overwhelming doubt
telling me I was not ready for love—
to go back to where I came from,
even though I had always dreamed of the life we had.
But when I got back to North Dakota, I was not ready
to be alone.

THE MAN WHO DIED IN HIS BOAT

by Austin-Alexius Klein

He had spent so much time fighting the pain of others
he didn't notice that the boat was shuddering, its walls
crumbling, caving in on itself, water was pouring into
his lungs, the current slamming his body against the rocks—
He didn't know which direction to swim
The shoreline was too far away
He was afraid of what he had done
and the light came pouring out from the lighthouse—
He had spent so much time in the shadows of the pain of others
he didn't notice that he was headed for the bottom of the sea,
that the boat had been broken to pieces by the current
that came pouring into his lungs—
He was already so far below the water
that he didn't know which direction to swim, the shoreline
had faded away with the warning of the lighthouse
and he was afraid of what he had done—
He was afraid of the bottom of the sea, of the darkness
of the water, and the current that was filling up his lungs
Afraid of the lighthouse that was still glowing
above the surface of the waves, afraid of being alone
in the boat as it sank slowly into the mouth of the sea,
and of the rocks that were carving into his skin—
He prayed for the shoreline, he prayed for mercy from the current,
and for God to tell him the direction to swim
He prayed for the light to keep glowing above him,
but as he swam towards the light, the water kept getting colder,
and he knew he was nowhere near the shoreline

REMEMBERING

by Andrea Krejci Paradis

I am the daughter
Of the women who came before me.
Dirt on their hands
Babe on a hip
Hair in a braid
Often silent.
And yet, the keeper of the memories
Carried in their bones
Baked in the bread
Mixed in the salves
In each step joining
Bare feet and earth.
Danced
To no particular tune
But to the echo of:
Remember
You are stardust.

GROCERY LIST

by Erica McCoy

1. milk
2. bobby pin in your purse, in case you need to pick a lock
3. eggs
4. park in good lighting
5. bread
6. key gripped between the knuckles of your index and middle finger
7. bananas
8. lock your doors immediately
9. peaches
10. don't walk looking down at your phone
11. avocado
12. make eye contact, look assertive
13. chips
14. check your surroundings, the car beside you, your backseat
15. pasta
16. know how to kick out a taillight from inside a trunk
17. coffee
18. memorize the turns if they take you to a different location

to the men who still don't get it:
when's the last time you checked your list?
when's the last time you wrote one?

MINI POODLE

by Selah Mueller

Put me in sweaters
But don't be too lenient
Hell hath no fury
Like a poodle inconvenienced

Yeah, I'm cute
And I seem nice
But just beware
I bite things I don't like

PROCRASTINATION

by Selah Mueller

Everything to do
No time to do it
Or maybe I could
If I just got to it

Problems to solve
Papers to write
But I think I'll just read
And do nothing tonight

TURBULENCE OF NIGHT

by Bette Nelson

In the leisurely pace of winter
cold, stormy days
snowy, silent nights
With no responsibilities on the morrow
there is some peace
there is some quiet
As the evening fades
into ambient light
into twilight dusk
To the lamp-lit bedroom we go
electric blankets warm
down comforters snuggle
Making the room serene
voices soften
noises still
Until darkness is complete
day is over
time for rest.
In the softness of the bed, sleep comes
easily, quickly slumbering
without thought or effort
With no fears, only dormant concerns
always lurking
back of the mind
As dreams turn fitful, unconscious thoughts become disturbed
falling into a vortex
whirling worries spinning out of control
To wake and startle
to shock, to scare
to agitate, to alarm

Making me alert and aware
with a racing heart
with a scurrying mind
Until reason kicks in and once again
everything stills
everything slumbers, until dawn.

PULCHRA VIA

by Sebastian O'Donnell

On roads we go through dampened woods
Ducking branches and leaping roots;
Our path, like a muddy boa
Slips and slithers through oak and elm,
Carving a way for us lest a treacherous
Trunk topple underfoot.

On winding roads, these roads we go
In view of mountains capped with snow;
Climbing Northward where aged metal
Triangles profess a yellow warning against
Making an unexpected descent
To the rocks in the valley far below.

On roads we glide under the sea
Through weedy tendrils aqua green;
Whose vines strain toward the faded light,
Vainly trying to breach the surface
As if their home was not the deep,
Among the fish and submarines.

On prairie roads we walk at dusk
Our exhaust pipe shoes emitting smoke like dust;
The setting sun casting our shadows
Miles ahead, Twin Towers in a land
Where the only steel or iron in sight
Is an ancient plow, half consumed by earth,
Left to rust.

A KITCHEN STOPPED IN TIME

by Julie Henderson Ovitt

abandoned spices on the shelves, and flour in the bin
silent spoons inside the drawer, a passive element
an apron folded silent strings in apprehensive prayer --
a dust mote wrapped itself around a faded yellow chair

a kitchen stopped in time, and frozen in its steps
in fragile memory this tableau perfects
like laughter interrupted, a song stopped all at once --
a heartbeat now suspended, in peaceful somnolence

OLD MAN, RESTING

by Julie Henderson Ovitt

It seemed to him, as he rested, as he did most days
in a chair faded from cherry red to that peculiar pinkish gray
that a few years when he was a young man
were as golden bright as a June dawn breaking
over the pure Dakota land
when the cattle lowed in their pasture and roosters
crowed the new day, there were no rains or storms
to mar the memory

Of when he worked strong and early, the fenceposts were new wood
the land fresh, the dirt so black it sang out prosperity
sending rays of hope too bright to see
and from the porch of the unpainted farmhouse she called his name
in a voice like the ringing of a bell
shading her eyes with her arm, she called again, and he came.

His boots must be unlaced, removed, before the washing of his rough hands
he thought of it, the stripes of the bib overalls and the pocket watch that had been
his father's, and the smell of the soap he used
and mused about that soap, a brand from long ago.

Outside his window were the schoolchildren, who he saw pointing
at the old unpainted storefront, once a dentist's office on a busier main street
he knew they whispered about the old man who lived in a funny house
an old man no one ever saw, a very old man who drinks. But long ago
said one, he was young and had a family.

He thought of her at breakfast, scurrying
around the kitchen with the wallpaper and the stovepipe,
chattering as she went, the daily tasks, gossip she had heard
getting a plate of eggs and ham and toast dished up, filling his coffee cup,
a little tow-headed boy tugging at her apron
the aroma of bread baking and apples she peeled for pie
filled his senses, and there in his little house, he smelled them and not the dust and tobacco and old age, the musty chair and the smells of intimate sadness.

For fierce winter came suddenly upon that summer morning, a dark malicious sky. It stabbed him, to wonder why, after such a sunny day that night would come
they lay sick, they three, and only he could rise
and go for the doctor in a blur of pain
the neighbors came, they brought soup and took turns, and the storm raged.

She and the boy were buried in the spring, when the earth had warmed and it was time for planting, but it seemed like no time had passed. For there was sunshine, and there was the dark night, and it ended there, and now he sat, remembering, On this day he rose slowly from the faded red chair to get the Bible that had belonged to his mother, long now in her grave
a kindly and quiet church-going lady with her dainty handkerchiefs, scented
with lavender or the perfume she wore to church, carried in her old black purse.

Within the well-worn pages he kept a little portrait of that sunny day, and remembered
her honey-blonde hair, caught back and tamed with pins, and the tow-headed boy in the smart little suit she had made him, and his own face with youthful eyes that saw a happy future. He needed more time to look and remember, so he carried the photograph back to his chair. And for a little longer he sat in sunny memory, until he heard that familiar voice calling his name like the ringing of a bell,
and calling again.

IN SEASONS OF SNOW

by S.E. Page

I waited for you
At the edge of a lake,
A frozen space
Outside the city's glare.
Earthbound, I scrambled down
An ice-glossed jetty—
Searched crisp-gemmed skies
That only winter keeps.

My eyes snagged
On the loop of your belt,
Three stars strong.
My mist tinged bright
By moon
As I sounded you out
Off a single breath:
Orion.

Pursuer of the Pleiades,
Scorpion's stalker,
Giant Hunter—
I, too, have become
A huntress, and in
Seasons of snow
I ransack the stars
To flesh you out.

I would be your Artemis—
But my arrow would be no accident,
Nor tipped with killing head.
Accept my heart into your breast,
A weak ember next to your fierce

Magnitude of light, yet even so
I would add my high-shot scintilla
To the bonfire of your strength.

THE SHARP CUT

by S.E. Page

The children who swallow the star are the poets—like Yeats or Tolkien—who become wanderers between two worlds.

~ Colin Wilson

I throw these words out
like ground-down diamond dust
for all the children who once
gleefully gulped star beams,
and yet now find their shadows
time-bound, stretching far and away
into grown-up bones and days
where worn skin barely holds heart
inside anymore—
Just don't forget
the sharp cut of clean rays
across the glad blue of you, or the slide
of starlight through dark and dreams
thick with possibility and the rich
twinkle of questions
once—

You dared to ask the universe.

*If you can still wonder,
you may wander
yet again.

HOMEMADE GENERALS AND PAPER KINGS

by Victor Pellerano

There's a weather beaten man sipping on some soup
His shoes were new, yet he had holes in his suit
I asked if he would mind if I sat down
He said "No," and he raised his brow

He looked at me with a broken smile, said
"Mister, can you stay for awhile"

And as the years rolled off his face,
He whispered as he said grace

"Homemade Generals and Paper Kings"
Sit in their towers and plan everything
We're all the same you and I
We're all here just passing time

He looked at me and swept his gray hair away, then said
"Son, pass the bread this way"

"You see, we pray to TV Gods, forgiving them for what they are
Blindfolded by their greed and lost within their own self need"

"We teach our children right from wrong but the politicians
Sing a different song"

"We've become a society of endless fights
So afraid of stepping on someone's rights"

"The work ethic lives in a cardboard box
Under the bridge or down by the docks"

"I didn't commit any injustice or crime,
It's just that society has passed me by"

"Homemade Generals and Paper Kings"
Sit in their towers and plan everything
We're all the same you and I
We're all here just passing time

SEND DOWN THE ANGELS

by Victor Pellerano

Grandpa, have you seen the news today
So many people have lost their way
Hurting each other day by day
Oh, Grandpa

Send down the Angels

Grandpa, I wish that you were here
To help me to understand, why some people don't care
Turning a blind eye to the devil in disguise
Oh Grandpa

Send down the Angels

Grandpa, if you see God today
We need help in so many ways
Love and faith can't be found, since the world gone upside down
Oh, Grandpa

Send down the Angels

Grandpa, tonight I'll say a prayer
And when I awake the Angels will be here
In our hearts we all will find peace and become color blind
Oh grandpa

Send down the Angels
And Grandpa, tonight I'll say a prayer

A 17th CENTURY NOBLEMAN'S TAKE ON FARGO WEATHER

by Max Pritchard

February 15 -
Hark! The sun shines, sending smiles soaring
Newborn grass rises from the ground
The flowers may bloom by the end of the day
For the dreary winter has passed away

February 18 -
Alas! I was too hasty by far
I awoke this morning to discover
Incalculable mounds of snow
Burying my vehicle and home
It seems winter simply will not go

February 27 -
Huzzah! The snow is melting
At long last,
Soaking straight into the splendid sun
Spring in earnest has begun

March 1 -
Fie! A blizzard has struck our city!
The results are very far from pretty
Vehicles lay broken or crashed
Our hopes of spring are once more dashed
I must yet again use my shovel
When I would rather cry or grovel

March 10 -
Hooray! The day was as beautiful
As a fair maiden's eyes
I took a walk with no coat or hat

I left no snow on my welcome mat
The birds have begun to sing, the sky is blue,
And children are kicking a ball at my house, too
This dreadful misery is vanquished once and for all
It shall not be seen again until next fall

March 11 -
There shall be no more poetry,
No more rhyming,
No more hope!
I leapt from my bed, ready for a hearty walk,
Only to discover MORE snow!
'Tis a forlorn matter!
I shall only believe spring to have arrived
When it is ninety degrees outside,
And not a single day sooner

BEST FRIEND

by Marie Sayler

i think of
frogs by the river
and grimy bathroom tiles

standing out the roof of a car
that one glorious, unrepeatable summer
where everything mattered
because the world was ending
and nothing mattered at all
because it was the end of the world

i think of
driving hours away just for used bookstores
and late nights in a coffee shop past close
shouting in my living room
crying in the kitchen
and countless hours and countless movies and countless words

i think of old camcorders
and badly written scripts,
declan mckenna,
french fries in checkered paper,
and driving just to feel like we had somewhere to go

i remember what it was like with all the windows down,
i remember you love me,

and that is what makes me stop.

DO YOU MISS ME?

by Marie Sayler

yellow was my favorite color
for four years
only because it reminded me of your smile
and all i could see in the dawn
was a future and a home
together

i knew every second of you
every half-smile and inhale
i could tell what you were thinking from half a room away and my left
    shoulder
did nothing but melt into your side
i don't see you anymore
but sunrises are sitting with you
on damp grass and dewy mud
the book i wrote is half your head
and coffee is something you make me
but now i just can't see you

we are in the same space but the
yellow powder blue and brown of you
are things i no longer hold the key to
we inhabited the same head once
two girls one girl one person one life one
now our skulls are separate
and the sutures are closed forever

i miss sharing a mind
i can't go back now but
i can wish i felt so sure again

it feels wrong to have cut you up like this
taken parts of you i kept and made them a part of me
when we didn't stay together
but i know you did the same
there are pieces of my body that are yours forever and
thoughts that will never be mine again
but i wonder if you miss it too
the knowing you had someone to talk to

POLITICAL HAIKU FROM 2020 HEADLINES

by Cheryl Schaefle

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blue man took a knee
nine minutes george floyd pleaded
mama I can't breathe

high court decision
l-g-b-t-q have rights
gorsuch strayed from pack

rona world ranking
trump predicted our standing
america first

engines are revving
nascar bans the dixie flag
war's over - you lost

like knife cuts butter
trump on gassing protestors
a beautiful scene

the prez goes to church
priests gassed and folk beaten
photo not prayer

march to reform blue
not just a few bad apples
there are bad orchards

mad king asks for troops
citizens are gassed in streets
he wants bayonets

amway princess plots
taking funds from public schools
protects her privates

mad king fights blue bird
makes executive order
as he tweets fake news

ppe is scarce
feds hijacking states' shipments
protect our heroes

world rona champion
trump claims badge of honor
a purple heart-less

mad king on the quine
dangerous claims fda
no heart - no problem

trump continues purge
overlook not oversight
inspector privates

republicans say
open the economy
sacrifice gramma

white house has rona
virus cares not who you are
karma is a bitch

flynn's charges are dropped
will high court muffle mueller
the barr goes lower

amway princess spurns
sex assault rules on campus
for perp protection

wartime president
trump proclaims as death tolls rise
war crimes in plain view

north dakota knights
pledge themselves to the mad king
they fear the mean tweets

amway princess aims
public education bleeds
all for private gain

still in early stage
over sixty thousand dead
kush lauds "great success"

michigan state house
armed terrorists invaded
for peaceful protest

president saves meat
ignores the workers' safety
"hamberders" for all

mayo requires masks
pence said no i've been tested
he flunked protocol

Lindsey Graham

pilot fish is hungry
hero host in Valhalla
lands on tainted meat

CHILDHOOD SUMMER

by L.L. Tenderholt

In the neighborhood I grew up in
We were children running free
Parented by whatever adult was closest
Ruled by the noon whistle
The yell for supper
The streetlights turning on

Morning cereal then time to get outside
We played our days away
Look for the bikes to find your friends
Games of kick the can
Tag at the park
Dirt wars on the hills

No air conditioning to cool us off
We found shade in the trees by the river
There's a sprinkler on down the block
Let's have cherry Kool-Aid
Root beer popsicles
A chocolate pudding pop

Slipping into the neighbor's garden
We'd sneak radishes and early peas
Then we were off to find a new pet
We'd find bunnies
Gather up caterpillars
Dig up some crawdads

It's time to head home to our parents
We'd watch reruns together on the couch
Time to wash our feet off in the sink
Then brush your teeth
Put on pajamas
Tucked into bed

THOMAS

by Grace Vetrone

When I look upon my menagerie of plants
one succulent emerges.
When all others decide to wither and die
or brown and wilt
Thomas stays erect, the life pulses
the roots thick in the soil.
When snow clads the ground
withholding the warmth
Thomas stores his energy to protect
his exposed limbs.
When the summer sun hits him
hours of unneeded light attacking him
Thomas moves his body towards
shadows and darkness.
When he outgrows his pot every few weeks
his arms spill over the side
Thomas gratefully allows me to touch
exact him and give him a bigger home.
The spikes that gather on your arms
Protrude towards me
I pour water over his head
Clean away the caked dirt
That's infesting his pits.
I can feel him protrude
Long limps begging me
Staying strong
Holding life
But reaching away
Towards what I can't give.
Ode to Thomas
How much you've grown
Away from me.

RED, RED RIVER

by Wendi Wheeler

There is a story I cannot tell.

It is too real.
Too raw.
Too heavy.
Too dark.
Too much.

As murky as the water of the river that winds northward
Through neighborhoods and fields,
Water that climbs the banks
And destroys lives
Every spring.

It is a story for a storyteller,
With all the elements of a prize-winner:
Romance,
Love,
Deceit,
Betrayal,
A journey,
Devastation,
Loss,
Remorse,
Forgiveness.

An historic flood, one for the record books.
Water, water everywhere.

And pie. An absurd question to which the answer was pie.
A question asked in order to distract from the realness of a moment.
Coconut cream, if you must know.

But no happy ending.

It is a story about significant events.
One experienced.
One observed.
Both recorded in the appropriate archives.
Connected forever in my memory.

I cannot write it.
Tried once, tucked it into a collection of stories about other people,
    hoping it would be mistaken for fiction.
Changed the names to protect the innocent.
In this story, everyone is guilty.

I could not tell you,
Even if we were sitting together in the dark,
Your hand on mine.
Even in the inky blinding blackness,
There would be too much light.
You would be able to see me.
I would be able to see your
Anger, disgust, horror.
And feel your hand pull away from mine.

I cannot tell this story, so it will die with me.
It will be scattered with my ashes
Across the plains that were flooded
With the icy brown water
Of the red, Red river
In the spring of '97.

[UNTITLED]

by Elizabeth Wodrich

I feel this pain.
I don't know why,
It gnaws my mind.
Makes my body ache.

I can't concentrate,
Something's affecting me.
Clouding my mind,
I reread the same line.

I sleep too much.
I can't stay awake,
Sleep devourers me,
Seeps into my life.

I eat too little,
I'm never hungry.
The sight of food repulses me.
I can't keep it down.

I am irritated.
People make me mad.
I try claw away the pain,
It just leaves scars.

Is this normal?
Am I destined to loathe this life?
Am I supposed to feel this pain?
Is this my life now?

BUFFALO RIVER BEND

by Kevin Zepper

Fishing from a steep bank on the Buffalo River, under an old elm. The best for shade and waiting for bites on the hook. Across from me, on the other shore, a painted turtle suns itself on a grey oak log over the water. I angle for the fish, watching for the bobber to twitch, bounce, then disappear into the green. The turtle dips its head, stretching its neck and nods once under the summer sky. A dark shell, drawing all the light and warmth to quell the cold blood. My skin, cool to the touch, like a stone or sunken log. The turtle finally sees me, and we lock into a monumental stare. The moment freezes. After apprehension, curiosity, then acknowledgement. The turtle tips from the log and kerplooshes into the deep pool of the bend. A daydream follows the momentary trail of bubbles away from my shady spot. The red and white bobber, solitary, unmoving in the river water, my thoughts swimming with a painted turtle.

WISHING WELLS

by Kevin Zepper

The man on the corner of our block builds and sells wishing wells. Has for the last ten odd years. He collects what he can from the free scrap wood notices on Craigslist and end cuts from the lumber yard. At the local small hardware store, he buys a buff redwood paint, the kind they used to use to paint picnic tables in the parks and roadside stops. It's the only color he uses, it lasts. With repurposed nails and wood glue he assembles one-of-a-kind "wells of wishing," he calls them. It's twenty bucks for a well, complete with wooden covering over the top made from Restore shingles. He calls it his lucky hustle. The wells pop up in his front yard each spring, a half dozen or so. They'll all sell over a weekend, when people slowly search for rummage sales and their own Craigslist scavenger hunts. With every purchase, he gives away a few pennies. Most of these he's found in any number of places throughout the years. The old man knows that a penny found is a penny given, and both parties will have good luck. He has given the most pennies to children, with the permission of their nearby parents. That they buy the wells, that they enjoy them, that the children smile widely are his treasure, one no penny can outshine.

FICTION

GET IN THE ICE MACHINE

by Aurora Bear

There are four pop dispensaries in the pizza place. Two in the main eating area (one Coke, one Pepsi), one in the Banquet Room, and one in the Private Room. The ice machine is in a room barred with a door that looks like it should be in an asbestos-filled basement somewhere, and behind it is not a collection of two-gallon buckets and a sleek, silver ice machine but probably the set of *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. To get the ice from the ice machine, you take the buckets, you fill them from the ice machine, you put them on an ancient dolly that squeaks bad when you pull it and worse when you push it, and you drag it all around the restaurant. Fill the ones in the main eating area first, because that means that booth straight behind is empty (that is, if the old lady delivery driver isn't taking her break there, but you can ask her to move if she likes you that week), and you have to take that chance while you still have it. Then you can do the Banquet Room—the kid who works the counter and might be autistic but is a damn good worker normally already has that cleaned and shut down by the time you get to the ice, and then you can do the Private Room. The Private Room takes the least amount of ice because normally it's just used for breaks. You don't know why the one delivery driver doesn't use that Private Room for a Private Break. The other delivery drivers do—you're pretty sure that there's a college kid watching baseball in there right now, a gnarly concoction of a made-up pizza he got for a dollar (break price!) sitting in front of him, empty hot-sauce packets piled on a napkin next to his tray.

But all you've got left is that private room, so the ice machine is nearly empty. The ice machine is the perfect size for the amount of ice the four pop dispensaries take, assuming that they all got filled the night before and assuming that the place didn't get hit with people batshit crazy for fountain pop. It's very quiet right now; about nine o'clock and you'll be out of here within the hour, because you're working with the hard worker and he always lets you go home early. Your checks suffer for it, sure, but

you'd rather go home and do what *you* want to do before you come back tomorrow at four PM and start all over again, because your roommate is a pushover and pays for everything other than your half of rent which, to be completely honest, is more like one-third most months. But hey—your roommate makes a helluva lot more money than you do. *And* your roommate works for 9-1-1 Dispatch, Night Division, so they're always bumbling around when you're trying to sleep because their sleep schedule is totally fucked. Though you kind of have a similar thing going on—you pretty solidly only work four to supposed-to-be-eleven, and they pretty solidly work six-to-six, except not every night.

They sure do pick up a lot of overtime though.

You're thinking about this, one hand on the rim of the ice machine getting slowly frozen from the cold when you hear the shots. It's gotta be a gunshot—you know that it's not anything but a gunshot because this is America and what the hell else would it be? You might be an asshole because your only thought is that at least you're pretty safe back here—it's slow enough that it's *rational* for there only to be one counter up front (poor Fred), and anyway, you're not making any noise or anything—

The shots start coming closer and you start to wonder if maybe this is not a person who used to work here and might feel like someone is doing ice, or getting boxes to fold, or *anything* in the back. It's not like the shots are super close, but so close that you're definitely not going to try and make a break for the back door, because it's dark and you'll probably trip. But what you can do is pull the door shut. You try to do it quietly. You don't know how well you did because your heart is pounding so loud in your ears that you can't hear anything but the steady *thud, thud, thud.* You don't know where to go from here, because you're trapped now? In hindsight, maybe that was a stupid fucking idea. Actually, you know that was a stupid fucking idea, because you're still running off of the Old Idea on How To Survive a Shooting. It used to be Pretend You're Not Here, but now you're pretty sure it's, Get Out Of Here And Chuck A Shoe If You Have To. But you've locked yourself in on the Old Way and so you start looking for a place to hide.

And your eyes start to wander toward the ice machine.

You're a pretty spry, slim person. You're young. College dropout. With most of that ice gone, you could fit.

Easy.

You take the time to stack the buckets back on the dolly, flinching when you hear another gunshot. It sounds like that one came from the Private Room.

RIP, Delivery Boy, unless he scrammed straight out of the emergency exit and hopped in the little 2016 Malibu he keeps running all night and zoomed on down to the police station. You don't hear any screaming, so either this fucker is a crack shot or it was a lame half-assed attempt to get the kid on his way out the door. You hope it's the latter—Delivery Boy is everyone's favorite delivery driver, because he's cute and grumpy and helps out upstairs if he's got time. Normally he doesn't and you send Fred downstairs to help him, but he tries.

But you don't have time to try and count his moles in your memory, because if he's just combed through the Private Room, the Banquet Room is probably next. And so you should get in the ice machine.

You do. And you were right—it's easy for you to fit into, even if another windfall of ice comes down on your head as you reach up to pull the lid closed. It's cold.

It's also very dark. You don't have your cell phone on you because some assholes were just hanging around on their phones all night and so now everyone has to pile their iPhones and Androids in a bucket that they can root around in when it's time for their break. You do have a smartwatch, though, and shaking it on gives you a little bit of light. It reflects off of the ice cubes (your hands are cold so you twist around so that you're on your back and you pull your arms into your oversized polo shirt) and it is *eerie*. The ice and the metal of the machine (and, again, the dropping of a load of ice on your face and chest) muffle any real noise from outside, so the next few shots you hear are muffled. They do sound closer, though, even if all you can hear with any clarity is your heart and the blood moving around your brain and your breath coming out too warm for its container.

God, you are cold.

You hear a door creak open but there's only a perfunctory check.

The door closes again but you don't want to move until you hear another shot, or until… (you check your watch and it's 9:15) 9:30 at the latest, because there's no way that this fucker will still be around at 9:30. First off, someone *has* to escape; whether it's Delivery Boy or a kitchen worker who managed to make it out the back door or *whatever*. Or like, a

driver coming back from a delivery—someone has to find the police and get them in on it before too long. It crosses your mind that there could be more than one shooter, but you dismiss that as weird.

So you stay in the ice machine, and after a while, it starts to feel like it's getting a little warmer. You don't know if it's your body heat or hypothermia. Either way, at least it's a little nicer. You pull your arm out of your polo enough to look at your watch again and it's 9:19, so you've only been there for four minutes, which seems wrong but, whatever.

You don't hear any more shots.

Either everyone's dead or he got bored and left.

There's no way he'd be sitting in her waiting for you to get out of the ice machine.

That's extremely stupid.

You decide to take the chance because you've never been very patient. You sit up (the ice machine dumps another load of ice on your head) and start to lift the lid.

WAITING FOR GRATEFUL

by Barbara Beckman

Nine in the morning and already I'm craving a big white bun laced with real butter, loaded with a stack of thick-sliced ham and Swiss cheese from the deli, heavily sprinkled with seasoned salt. The same thing I was craving last night. Same as the night before last.

Isn't "real butter" a redundancy, you ask? But you'd know why I say real butter if you knew my wife. She calls this heart-healthy crap she now buys butter. "Do you want butter on your whole-wheat toast?" she asks me in the morning. No, dammit, and I don't want whole wheat toast either. I want the white toast I used to eat before the "heart event."

An "event," like it's something you invite people to. No one will just come right out and say I had a heart attack. So I will: I had a heart attack. I'm 60 years old, overweight, a former football coach and I don't exercise. And I had a heart attack. I deserved it, right?

I used to eat deli sandwiches as meals, snacks, whatever. Loved them. This "heart healthy" diet I'm now on works in that yeah, I've lost 20 pounds. But let's talk quality of life. My quality of life before my heart attack was full of beer, deli sandwiches, salty chips. I miss all of them.

I miss my freedom. I miss being able to eat and drink anything I wanted, not a care in the world.

I had years and years of that.

My wife says I'm lucky to be alive. Easy for her to say as she trots around the house in her purple fleece robe quietly snacking on a glazed donut. She thinks I don't see her. I don't feel lucky.

I'm crabby, I know. I'm complaining with my mouth full, I know. I should be grateful for a second chance, I know. I have heard all of this. My grown kids, my teenage grandkids, even my buddies (yes, I do have a few) have all told me something to this effect. They mean well.

They are basically saying we are glad you're here and you should be, too. Now go take of yourself.

It's not that easy.

A cardiac nurse who teaches a heart-healthy nutrition class that I'm forced to attend as part of my eight-week cardiac rehab program claims

we will discover new favorites. She's young, skinny, enthusiastic. She doesn't know beans about how to make the best-ever deli sandwich.

She says a good substitute is a whole-wheat bun filled with sliced-thin cucumbers and sprinkled with smoked paprika. I tried it. I ate two bites. This is why I say she does not know beans about how to make the best-ever deli sandwich.

This morning I have a new opportunity. My wife has taken off in her car to visit our daughter a couple hours away. She'll be gone most of the day. This used to happen often, but after my heart attack, she became afraid to leave me alone. I keep telling her I'll be fine. I assure her I will call if there are any problems or I need any help. But why would I need help? It's been six weeks and except for weakness, I feel pretty good physically. She has left a note telling me what to eat for breakfast and lunch. She will be home to fix supper. What am I, a 10-year-old?

I have a different idea.

Ten minutes after she leaves, I head to the garage, climb into my van and drive six blocks to the grocery store. "Why don't we walk?" my wife would say if she were home. "It's a beautiful day out and we both need the exercise." It's nice how she includes herself in these ideas.

She thinks she's helping me when she does that. Being supportive.

Screw the exercise. I want a deli sandwich.

The deli counter is bright as sunshine and full of the meats and cheeses I crave. I get a pound of ham, a pound of Swiss. Next I hit the bakery and find four fluffy white buns.

Final stop: dairy. I get a pound of real butter, congratulating myself for remembering to bring a plastic knife for spreading.

It costs less than $25 for all this fun. I tell the cashier to keep the change. I walk quickly, swinging my bag of goods like it's my best girl's hand and we're on our way to something delightful. I see an empty chair in front of the coffee shop by the front entrance. Why enjoy all this deliciousness in the van when I can just as easily sit down in comfort?

I build four sandwiches, piling on the layers, not caring if anyone is watching. One after the next I eat them, realizing the only thing that's missing is the seasoned salt.

And here, dear reader, is where you come in. How would you like this story to end? Would you like our man to stand up, then keel over from a second heart attack? Would you like his wife to stop at the grocery store before her out-of-town trip, then encounter her husband with his mouth full? Or would you like him to eat all his sandwiches, then realize he can

do this any time he wants? And in fact he doesn't even have to hide it. He is a free man who can exercise his choice to live for today.

Any of these things could happen. But what really happened that day was nothing—and everything.

After he gulped his sandwiches, he drove home, lay on the couch and hoped the belly pain was indigestion and not some stupid heart thing again. Before the heart attack, it never dawned on him he might have a heart problem. He liked that life. But it's over. And then, of all things, he felt tears roll down his cheeks. Not just one tear, but several. He didn't even cry when his parents died. And then from somewhere in his gut or his heart or who knows where, a question bubbled up: Would he ever stop missing the person he was?

THE KINDNESS OF STRANGERS

by Abigail Eifealdt

It was cute at first, the red dragon's advances. That is until Whisper showed, very clearly with a swipe to the nose, that she most certainly was not interested. That's when they found themselves very suddenly in the middle of combat. Weapons out, veins surging with magic, each member of the party knew their role.

Electricity burst to life in Ash's hands. She glanced around, making sure Whisper was far enough away in case her magic went out of control.

"Wait!" Ari-El, the little flying serpent, called from his place on Ash's shoulder. Ash raised an eyebrow, but halted her attack.

He leapt from her shoulder and flew toward the dragon, speaking in its language. Surprisingly, the dragon seemed to be answering him. Ash flicked her fingers in agitation, waiting impatiently for him to translate.

"He says," Ari-El finally said, soaring back toward them. "That we... We ruined Whisper. That we tamed her and now she won't mate..."

Fury blazed to life in Ash's chest. "Oh, you horny little bastard," she hissed.

Braum growled, heaving his ax and charging the red dragon. Arrows launched by the little Gnome to her left bounced off the red dragon's scales as Braum closed the distance.

Ash let her lightning loose, rage fueling her magic. The bolts flew over Braum's head, colliding into the red dragon and wrapping blue tendrils around his body and wings. The dragon roared in pain, seizing up as Braum sent his great ax into its body. It let loose another roar and whipped its mighty head, colliding with Braum and knocking him to the ground. The dragon breathed in, and its chest began to glow. Flames sparked as it opened its mouth, preparing to spew flames at the fallen man.

Before anyone could react, Whisper flew in front of him, right into the line of fire. Flames wrapped around Whisper, swallowing the blue dragon in the inferno.

Ash screamed.

After an eternity of a few seconds the flames stopped, revealing Whisper but so, so wrong. Stone was creeping up her legs, spreading to her body, then her wings. At first Ash thought it was a spell, before she realized the terrible truth.

Whisper's species had a fatal weakness to fire.

Ash stumbled, strength seeming to be sapped from her limbs. This wasn't supposed to be a difficult fight. They had fought armies and brought so-called gods to their knees. A dragon should never have been a concern. But what should have been didn't make any difference as stone quickly took the place of each of Whisper's vibrant, blue scales.

As the stone creeped up Whisper's neck, Ash saw worry in the blue dragon's eyes. That is, until Whisper laid eyes on Ash. Relief flooded Whisper's features, and Ash could have sworn she saw her smile, right before the stone reached her head, encompassing her entirely.

"No, no, no, no!" Ash screamed, finding her strength and surging forward. "Oryn! Do something!"

"Revivify!" Oryn shouted, pointing at the statue where Whisper once stood. Nothing happened.

The red dragon snorted in what could only be considered satisfaction. He turned to leave, having the audacity to put his back to them.

"Like hell you're leaving!" Ash shrieked.

Braum raised his hand. The rippling of a banishment curse collided with the red dragon and he disappeared, sent back to his own world for a short time.

The silence that followed was jarring.

"Someone do something!" Ash shouted again, breaking into a run toward the statue.

Oryn had his spell book open, reciting spells and incantations in a language Ash didn't understand. She waited with baited breath, eyes searching the statue for any sign that the spell was working.

Ash ran a trembling hand through her hair. "Nothing is happening!"

Oryn looked up from his book, glancing between Whisper and Ash. "We may need to take her to her homeland. There may be something there that can help her."

Ash didn't hesitate. Immediately she started drawing a giant teleportation circle around the statue. "Everyone inside!" She sat and started focusing on the pool they had found Whisper in years ago. She didn't know if that was Whisper's homeworld or not, but it was the only thing she could think of.

Minutes past. Light flared.

Nothing happened.

"It won't work," a voice said from the shadows.

Ash jumped to her feet so fast her head spun. The whole party had weapons at the ready as a man, pale as the moon, emerged from the shadows.

Braum moved forward, placing himself between the stranger and the party. "That's close enough," he growled.

The stranger stopped, but there was an air of control around him that Ash didn't like. This man was accustomed to being the most powerful in the room.

"I can help your dragon," he finally said.

Ash narrowed her eyes. This wasn't simply an act of kindness, she could feel it. "What do you want?" She spat.

The man grinned. "I only wish to use her for a day, to find someone I love. Then she shall be returned to you."

Ash's breath stuttered. If her 25 years had taught her anything, it was that things that seemed too good to be true usually were. But... this was for Whisper. Could she afford to be so skeptical?

Could she afford not to?

She turned to Braum, trying to convey without speaking that something was very off here. He seemed to understand and nodded in agreement. He turned to the stranger. "Please forgive our hesitance, but we don't know you. Would you consent to a truth charm? Surely, you understand our caution."

The stranger nodded. "Go ahead, ease your concerns."

Oryn cast the spell just as Salona gasped. "That's," she whispered in her soft voice. "I mean... he matches the description."

The Gnome's eyes went wide. "Novak. The ruler we were sent to... you know." he glanced up at them, not sure if he should finish that sentence.

Ash cursed. They knew that name well. This was the man they were sent to assassinate.

Braum, as always, kept his composure, continuing with his questions. Novak answered favorably, indicating that he had no desire to harm Whisper, that he needed her to find a long-lost lover. He assured them that he would return Whisper to them after a single day.

"Satisfied?" Novak asked with a grin.

Ash was most definitely not satisfied. She glanced at Oryn, hoping he had something to use in one of his spell books. The resigned look on his face was all the confirmation she needed.

This man seemed to be their only option.

"What do you propose?" Braum asked.

Novak strode closer, pulling out a book. "I need this dragon, so I apologize that I could not allow you to leave my realm. However, I will allow you to teleport back to my castle where we can discuss more over dinner, in a more... civilized setting."

He held the book out to Ash so she could see a picture of the castle's dining hall. Once she saw it, she could teleport them there. Ash stared into Novak's blue eyes, icy and cold like the tundra. She raised an eyebrow, not bothering to hide her suspicions. But she relented, and looked down at the book in Novak's hand.

"Everyone in the circle," she muttered through clenched teeth.

Ash returned to the center of the teleportation circle, but slowed as her gaze landed on the stone eyes of Whisper. Her step faltered. The eyes that were once so blue, so wild like the sky itself; now grey and lifeless. A hollow desperation crawled up Ash's throat. She averted her eyes quickly and hurried to her place in the circle. She had to concentrate. She couldn't fall apart, not when there was still a chance.

With a flash and a tingling sensation, they were standing at the end of a lavish dining hall in a stone castle. The table was set with all manner of foods, many of which so exotic that Ash couldn't even have hoped to steal the likes of them when she lived on the street.

Novak gestured for them to sit. They each took a seat on the end of the table, closest to Whisper.

Ari-El returned to his usual place on Ash's shoulder. "He was telling the truth," he whispered in her ear. "The truth charm confirmed it."

He was trying to comfort her, in his way. But it did little to lessen Ash's fears. "The best deceivers can trick without telling a single lie," she whispered back.

"Should we find another way, do you think?"

Ash slumped in her chair. There wasn't another way. So why did this still feel so wrong?

Ari-El made a comforting sound somewhat resembling a purr. "Try to calm yourself if you can. Novak has a stake in this too, remember."

That was true. If Ash trusted anything, it was that people would pursue their own self-interest.

Novak and Oryn started talking about histories and lore of dragons, particularly Whisper's species. Ash couldn't bring herself to pay attention. She stared at her food but didn't so much as touch the fork. Even if her

thoughts weren't eating her alive, Novak was hardly trustworthy enough to take food from.

"So, what do we do now?" Braum asked. The words yanked Ash back to the conversation. She glared at Novak, lips pressed into a thin line as he explained a ritual that could bring Whisper back.

"We could start as soon as we are done with our meal," Novak said, leaning back in his seat and folding his hands in front of him.

"Let's get started then," Ash said, breaking her long silence. Her chair scraped the wood loudly as she stood.

Novak smiled. "Let's get started."

Servants carefully moved Whisper's statue into a giant, round room. Hundreds of candles illuminated the stone walls, sending light all the way up to the giant wooden beams above. They placed Whisper in the middle of the room, and the servants left hurriedly.

Novak opened a book, looking nearly giddy. Ash swallowed, glancing between Whisper, Novak, and back again.

"I don't like this," She whispered to Braum.

The warrior put a large hand on her shoulder. "It will be ok. You'll see." He offered a small smile that Ash couldn't return.

The Gnome came up and stood beside her. He looked up and gave her a sharp nod. His version of encouragement.

Ash took a shaky breath to steady herself and turned back to Novak.

He started chanting in a language she had never heard before. Immediately the air around her seemed charged. She could feel the magic come alive.

Maybe this could work…

Storm clouds started to surge outside the windows. An unnatural lightning flashed, illuminating the room in bursts of purple.

A loud crack drew Ash's attention from the window back to Whisper. Stone was fracturing up her limbs, falling off in chunks. Beneath the stone, there were scales. Ash smiled. The heavy weight of grief and despair was lifted suddenly, and she breathed her first easy breath in hours. That is, until the weight came crashing back down only a second later, forcing the air from her lungs. The scales weren't Whisper's vibrant blue. Instead, they shown with the same purple from outside.

It was wrong. Something was wrong. He was bringing her back *wrong.*

Ash surged forward, reaching for Novak. "Stop! Stop! This isn't right!"

Braum caught her wrist and pulled her back. She pulled against him, but he didn't relent. Her breathing sped as her panic grew. Bigger chunks of stone fell from Whisper's form, revealing wings that were a deep, rich, *wrong* purple. When the stone fell from Whisper's face, Ash's panic turned to horror.

This wasn't their Whisper.

Bright purple eyes, burning with fear and pain replaced the gentle, calming blue ones that Ash had learned to depend on.

Novak started laughing.

Ash screamed, and Braum finally released her. He cursed, charging forward as Ash shot tendrils of lightning at the man. Novak negated the lighting with a shielding ward, but it was enough of a distraction to let Braum get a good swing in.

Whisper raised her great wings and took to the air. She went straight toward the ceiling and perched on one of the wood beams.

"Ari-El," Ash hissed to the little serpent on her shoulder. "Get Novak's book." He nodded and flew off toward Novak.

The others were now deep into a fight with the man they should have assassinated on first sight. Ash could hear weapons clanging, magic crackling, people yelling…but she locked her eyes on Whisper. She stepped slowly toward the dragon about two stories above her, like moving toward a spooked horse.

Whisper opened her mouth, and Ash only had a second to raise a shielding ward before the magic crashed over her. The screams behind her were enough confirmation to know that the blast hit the others too.

Ash chanced a glance behind her. Everyone was still on their feet, so they must be ok. Well, maybe not ok, but they were alive. That was all she could hope for right now. She turned back to Whisper.

"Whisper?" Ash murmured. Hesitant. Hopeful. She raised her hand placatingly, palm forward, eyes locked on Whisper's. "Whisper, come back to us. To me."

There was a flash of something in Whisper's eyes. Recognition? Ash's breath caught. She took a small step forward. Whisper raised her claws in an imitation of Ash's outstretched hand, and for a second Ash could see that intense protectiveness cross the dragon's face.

A small grin curled Ash's lips before she recognized the tingling of a spell washing over her. Light blinded her as the hard rock beneath her became grass. Blinking, stomach lurching, she spun on the spot searching

for her friends who she knew would not be there. All around her were distantly familiar trees, and an open sky. Her blood ran cold.

"No no no no no…" she repeated, as if the words would counteract the banishment curse. She collapsed to her knees, pounding her fists against the ground. "No!"

She pressed her hands against her temples, desperately trying to process the painful truth; that Whisper was *still in there*. That she banished Ash to protect her. Ash should be there to help, to coax her out. But now she was worlds away while Whisper was suffering and…

Ash's hands were shaking. As the first tears slipped from her eyes, the magic in her veins surged. She screamed, a desperate, primal sound as flames erupted from her, scorching the lush grass. She wilted as the flames died, taking her hopes with them.

Ash didn't know how long she knelt there, the air threatening to strangle her with every ragged breath. Time was both nothing and everything in that moment. Whisper needed her. Every second she could be slipping away and yet, Ash wasn't there. She was as good as dead for all the help she could be this far away. So, what did it matter how much time passed?

A voice pulled her out of her timeless spiral.

"What the..."

Ash whipped her head up at the familiar voice. Salona stood above her, staring wide-eyed at the scorch marks surrounding Ash.

"What happened?"

Ash leapt to her feet, uncaring of Salona's confusion, or who banished her here. "Whisper!" She shouted, grabbing the elves' shoulders. "What's going on? Tell me!"

Salona pulled gently out of Ash's grasp. "She's ok, at least... as ok as she was when she banished you. She actually... she actually attacked Novak."

A wide grin split Ash's face. She clapped her hands together, hope surging through her.

"I knew it! She's still in there! We can get her back!" She reached out for Salona again, only to be stopped as the elf intercepted her wrists. Salona was well aware of Ash's extreme outbursts by now, and always handled them patiently. But this time, Ash recognized the urgency in Salona's eyes. Her calm mask was cracking.

"I know. Believe me, I know. But you know as well as I do that there is nothing we can do until the banishment spell runs out."

Ash knew this, but hearing it spoken aloud only sent another pang through her chest. Her grin faltered, and she pulled away from Salona. She started to pace, running her fingers through her hair nervously. "Whisper will be ok. She's in there, I saw it. She'll come back to us."

The spell ran out and Ash appeared back in the circular ritual room where it all went wrong. A quick glance upward confirmed Whisper was indeed no longer on her perch. She spun around, expecting, or rather hoping, to see her comrades victorious. Or at the very least, engaged in battle. When she turned however, her hopeful smile shattered. Novak laid dead on the floor, but that wasn't what held her attention. Her heart stuttered violently as her eyes landed on a pile of crumbled rocks in the center of the room. Her friends surrounded the pile, all in various degrees of shock. Grief was evident on their faces.

She staggered forward, murmuring Whisper's name again and again, panic bubbling to the surface even though there was nothing she could do. There was no terrible realization, or wondering where the rocks came from. The bits of stone resembled dragon scales. This was Whisper. She knew this as sure as she knew herself.

Her knees hit the stone floor when she reached the edge of the pile. Braum was reaching for something in the center of the pile, and Ash instantly recognized it as Whisper's crystal heart. It pulsed blue as he touched it.

An ethereal mist floated from the crystal, coalescing in the form of Whisper. Not the corrupted Whisper Novak had created, but *their* Whisper. Acceptance filled her expressive blue eyes.

It wasn't fair.

"I'm glad you're all safe," Whisper said in their minds. She seemed to breathe a sigh of relief.

Ash couldn't breathe. Sure, they were safe, she supposed. But Whisper was dead. She was dead and still all she cared about was their survival. The selflessness hurt. It pierced Ash through like an arrow. Maybe because Ash didn't deserve to be loved and protected like that. Maybe because the price was too high. Maybe because Ash was selfish, and would raze cities if it meant having Whisper back.

The others were saying their goodbyes. Giving their thanks. Ash couldn't bring herself to do either. That would mean Whisper was leaving, and Whisper couldn't leave.

A choked sob caught in Ash's throat. Whisper turned to her, nuzzling Braum once more before drifting over to Ash.

Ash shook her head, frantic. "Whisper," she managed. "Whisper don't go. We can figure this out. We've killed gods, we can bring you back. Just please don't go. Please, you're—" you're the first thing I've dared to love in two decades. The glue that holds this group together. The one that made me work past my old ways of thinking and made me strive to be something better.

Ash hung her head. None of the words would come out. Something brushed her face, and she realized it was Whisper's ethereal form nuzzling her. She looked up into the sky blue eyes of the dragon. Her *friend*.

"It's ok," Whisper said in her mind. "You'll be ok. You don't have to go back to the way you were when you were living on the street. The others, you watch over them now. And they'll watch over you." She seemed to smile, trying to reassure her.

Ash couldn't speak. She couldn't breathe. Things needed to stop. They were going too fast. They could fix this, they just needed time to figure out—

Her internal panic was interrupted as Whisper's form dissolved into glowing, blue mist. It drifted upwards and was gone.

"No…" she breathed. A hollowness settled in her chest, and Ash knew from experience that it would never leave.

Ari-El flew in, coiling around her arm and resting his head on her shoulder. He didn't say anything. There was nothing to be said.

Ash glanced around at what was left of her group; the group Whisper charged her to protect. And to her horror, she found she loved them too. Love wasn't something for a street urchin. If you love something, it can be used against you.

But Whisper was right about another thing. Ash wasn't a street urchin any longer. She was more powerful than she had ever thought possible. And she would use that power to protect the people she loved. Even if it meant burning the world to do it.

BURGERS WITH CHEESE

by Rev Gjootmun

My neighbor is a hit man.

At least I think so. I do not yet have concrete proof, but my intuition does not lie. He is the neighbor to my north. Sometimes I become privy to certain information the bushes along the property line cannot hide.

I think this because I never see him go to work. Yet, he has a great house, a large, remodeled house with a front yard he has landscaped himself. Amidst the trees in the back, he is building an addition to his garage. All he has done for the last two months is work on this property.

He must be independently wealthy. From what, I already know. A few others too, probably. To have that house and create the upgrades he does without leaving for some other work destination implies continued revenue stream. He must do something to keep the money rolling in.

We have never spoken, just acknowledged nods as we pass one another - I to school or he to places unknown. Often it happens if we see each other through the bushes when he's working or I'm drinking, playing horseshoes after intense study.

He is the type of nondescript that would make him otherwise anonymous in a crowd. Average height and build. Short brown hair which could be styled numerous ways or hid beneath a cap. Sensible glasses. It makes me not want to trust him. He hasn't done anything directly to me, or my red nineteen-ninety-four Jeep Grand Cherokee, not yet, but I'm waiting. He looks to be in his mid-thirties, but he could have had work done.

He just finished pouring the concrete for the foundation of his garage addition.

I haven't heard my other neighbor's dog barking in a week.

From the day I moved into the neighborhood, Bob Klaven's half-wit dog 'Cheese' has barked. It barks during the day; it barks during the night. It barks at birds and trees and bees and planes and insects and people and vehicles. The dang old thing even barks at its own reflection once when it investigated a puddle. I'm told that it has barked since well before I relocated here.

I remember my neighbor (*I'm wary to ask his name, he might think I know too much and kill me*) had talked to Bob about it one day. He had been minding his own business, the business of raking leaves, to which the dog took issue. After a few minutes of this he walked to Klaven's yard and asked if he could mind his dog. Klaven got up out of his lawn chair, flipped my neighbor off, and proclaimed "Mind YOUR Business!" loud enough that the whole block must have heard.

I didn't understand why my neighbor didn't respond. I would have boxed Klaven's ears for a stunt like that. My neighbor only smiled and walked home to resume the business of raking the leaves.

Now, all of a sudden, that God-forsaken ankle-biting nuisance is gone. And I can't sleep. I suppose I had got used to the barking. It became something of a security blanket for me that said "all was well" in the neighborhood.

He is ruthless, with a smile, my neighbor. A normal everyday person wouldn't suspect a thing was off about him until he pulled up in his ninety-eight Ford, blue with a white topper, and shot them in the face. That's how they get you.

I saw into his house yesterday and saw something that shocked, amazed, and appalled me. There were three wall hangings in his living room above a white wraparound couch. The leftmost was a poster from the movie "Goodfellas", the rightmost was similar, except of "Scarface." The centerpiece was the real attack on humanity though. It was an oil painting of Barney the dinosaur, in all his purple glory. But why?

Just then, someone wet my pants. My fear response must have overloaded my other senses. I had been out between the two houses to relieve myself after consuming too much loudmouth soup, and then came across the grisly discovery of icons on the wall. It was all I could do, frozen in place as I was.

As soon as I could move again and come to grips with what I had just done to myself and my jeans, I heard a noise in the bushes. It had the same effect on me as hearing something walk across the floor in the middle of the night when there is no one else in your house. My skin lurched as my skeleton attempted to jump away from the rest of my body, so I ran around the front of my house, went up the steps, and locked all three doors in consecutive actions. My heart was racing. There were no further noises.

It took me several minutes to muster my courage. When I did, I peered out the window to see what had made the noise. Scanning the

plethora of weeds, I finally saw the culprit. A cat. It was a big fat gray cat likely on the hunt. That sneaky jerk. Stupid cat.

Another noise. This time it was my doorbell. I was positive that no cat, or any other animal, could reach that high so I answered the door. It was my landlord, Ron.

"Rent time already?" I asked.

"Well, it is the end of the month, these things happen," said Ron in his usual deadpan voice. Ron was a big man, balding and with large-framed glasses that gave him a comical appearance. Many wouldn't guess that he was a Vietnam Veteran with a bum knee, a plastic foot, and a love for Chuck Norris movies.

Ron said he had become depressed during the time he was in the hospital after stepping on a mine. Upon arrival back stateside, there wasn't anything he could do, so he stayed home and watched a lot of television. Time went by, and when the depression couldn't go away, he started watching movies. Then he came upon a real gem of cinematic wonder called *Way of the Dragon*. That was all it took, and he was a Norris fan since.

There was no time to change my pants, so I hid partially behind the door.

"Hey Ron, do you know what this guy does for a living?" I asked, handing him the rent, and pointing to my neighbor to the north.

"All I know is that you shouldn't ask questions that you don't want to know the answers for," he replied. "You want a receipt for this?"

"No thanks. Why wouldn't I want to know the answers?" I asked as he walked toward his car.

"You got a soft spot for animals, don't you?" he replied guardedly.

He didn't say anything else. 'What the hell was that supposed to mean?' I thought. But part of me already knew. And somehow, so did Ron.

The next day, as I was getting ready for school, I spied a note at my door. It simply said:

Join me for a Bar-B-Q this Saturday.
Starts at noon and Everyone is welcome *(no pets)*
What to expect:
Free burgers, brats and a few good games of horseshoes.
BYOB, and maybe a salad or some chips and dip.
Thanks,
Your neighbor at 1507 S 12th ST
(the big white house with the bushes)

I read it twice and mentally accepted the invitation. Suddenly I felt a twinge of paranoia. I went out back to the alley. I lit a cigarette and began to smoke, casually walking to the end of the block and back, looking at everyone else's doors. Sure enough, they had the same invitations, except for the art at the bottom. Without getting a closer look it seemed different for everybody. Mine was lemonade. He knew I drank lemonade all the time. What else did he know about me? Was he spying one me?

Upon closer inspection of my neighbors' individual invites, I saw each of them held a picture specific to the invitee. On Jeff Mackey's was a huge truck with monster tires. Jeff worked on four-by-fours in his spare time. On Lindsay and Janice Haar's invite was a picture of a kitten; they had three cats. It went the same for the rest. A garden for old man Swenson, toys for the Albrecht family's invite (three kids), a guitar for Mariah Baker, and a picture of a dog for Bob Klaven.

Strange. Bob's dog had disappeared. The gall it took to place a picture of a dog on an invitation to a person who had just lost one. What was he up to? I didn't have time to think about it now—I had a test to take in my 'Cooking like Emeril' class.

Saturday came. The morning stretched out before me in anticipation of the afternoon BBQ. The invitation was all I had thought of for the past few days. I had flunked my test because of it. All I had to bring was some chips. I was out of beer and would stick with lemonade or soda.

I looked at the clock to see how much time I had before I could show up fashionably late. Ten minutes. It was already five after twelve. I walked outside and sat down with a cigarette for my usual ritual. I couldn't help but smell the meat grilling next door, and it was tough to keep from running next door and snatching a burger.

I put out my cigarette and went back inside. I lingered a bit and put on some clothes fit for the event. I grabbed the chips, went outside, and took the respectable way to his house—through the alley, not the bushes.

Thirty seconds later, I said hello to everyone and noticed that Bob and the Haar sisters weren't there yet. I had visited the girls' house the night before for a few drinks and some laughs. Consummate night owls, they never woke up before noon even on weekdays. It was reasonable to believe that they weren't awake yet.

My chips were the good kind, the ridged kind, best for dipping if you ask me. I took them over to the picnic table and sat down next to Mariah.

"How's your weekend?" she asked.

"Decent, if not a little fuzzy," I replied.

She grinned.

"Yeah, I was jamming out back last night and saw you stumbling back from Lindsay and Meghan's. Fun?"

"Good. But that's not the kind of fuzzy I'm talking about. I mean fuzzy like weird, like this place is weird today."

"I think I know what you mean, I've never talked to this guy before, only Klaven and weird old Swenson have. Maybe he was just being nice inviting us, but it is kinda odd," she said. As she finished, my neighbor came outside with a plate. He put the finished burgers on it and announced in his best salesman voice, "Get 'em while they're hot!"

Everyone went for the food. I followed. The condiments and cheese were lined up next to the buns, in a crude assembly line of 'make your own sandwich.'

We talked and ate and talked some more. I got another burger and a hotdog.

I asked my neighbor if I could use his bathroom, he said yes and pointed the way. After I finished, I couldn't help but look in his living room to see if he had any more posters or paintings. There were none. Just the trio of mob posters and Barney.

I was about to walk back outside and join my neighbors when my curiosity got the best of me. I'd seen a door I hadn't noticed earlier, opened it slightly and saw steps to the basement. As I stepped lightly down the staircase, I began to feel a twinge of terror from an unknown source. Then I turned a corner and saw Cheese the dog, or at least what was left of him.

It was sickly satisfying. At once I was both horrified and silently applauding. Cheese, as well as numerous other dogs and cats, were stuffed and in various positions all through the basement.

Ron was right; I didn't want to know the answer, because even though I hated that damn Cheese and his nonstop barking, I did have an affinity for other animals.

Then, the terror turned to gut-wrenching knowledge. It occurred to me that the burgers and the brats outside hadn't really been made from cow. These poor animals had been killed by the madman upstairs and made into the food we were eating.

I ran back upstairs, pushed through the door and shouted an announcement of my gruesome discovery, "HE'S A KILLER! HE'S BEEN KILLING ANIMALS AND KEEPING THEM DOWNSTAIRS IN SOME KIND OF SICK ZOO!"

Everyone looked back at me as if I had announced I was Jesus returned, hopping on a peg leg and meandering on about extraterrestrials.

"CHEESE IS DOWN THERE! CHEESE THE DOG! KLAVEN'S ANKLEBITER!"

Just then, Bob Klaven popped into the yard.

"Bob, I found your dog. THIS GUY," I said, pointing accusingly at my neighbor, "has Cheese stuffed downstairs!"

"What are you babbling about? Have you gotten into the sauce? Are you drunk? Let me smell your breath," Bob demanded.

"No Bob, Cheese is dead, he's downstairs!"

"You dummy, Cheese ran away. I just found him today. Can't you hear him barking already? Had to give up a fifty-dollar reward to some snot-nosed kid, but I got my Cheese back."

"But… downstairs… Cheese… " was all I could muster.

"Idiot, your neighbor stuffs animals for people, and his workshop is downstairs. You probably stumbled into it. He's been doing it for years," Bob noted.

The others looked on as the realization hit.

My neighbor wasn't a hit man after all.

He was a taxidermist.

Whoopsy daisy.

SAM'S DECISION

by Douglas G. Grant

Sam pulled the old chromed can opener out of the drawer, the one Evie had used for so many years. He opened the can and poured the tomato soup into the saucepan, added some milk from the carton he had pulled from the fridge, and heated it on the stove. It wasn't much for a big man.

He sat at the heavy old round kitchen table in his worn denim coveralls and started to eat. His hands, which made the spoon look small, were pocked and scarred by hot and sharp metal. Sam's deep-set gray eyes seemed to be born of the same material he had spent his life bending, shaping, and welding. His looks fitted his vocation.

The glasses he had on were his good glasses, not the ones he wore in the shop which were as pitted as his hands. These glasses were kept in the house because he needed them for reading, something he did with passion. Sam was intelligent and well-read, which often surprised those who came to know him. He loved the classics of all sorts, and read widely in science and technology. He had always regretted not having the chance for education beyond eighth grade, but money was short for his family, and his dad needed him in the shop. That wasn't uncommon, especially for the men in those days.

He wasn't sure what difference it would have made to have had more time in school, but he felt that, because of the way his life had gone, he wasn't taken seriously by most people unless he was talking about welding or mechanics . . . even then, some of his customers thought they knew more than he did. Sam poured a cup of coffee from the dented-up aluminum percolator on the stove and, blowing on the Folger's to cool it, he sipped it as he turned the pages of Plato's *Republic*. Coffee and reading were two of the things he still considered pleasurable in his life. The life changing decision was not a part of the plan that day.

His routine had been the same since he retired. He was not one to sleep late, although he did not rise as early as he had when he ran the welding shop . . . then it was up at five and working by six. In those days, breakfast was always a time he spent with Evie. Their conversations were

about many things but often, at breakfast, it would be about their upcoming day. When they spoke of books or ideas, Evie always asked questions that would occupy Sam's thoughts for the rest of the day. Most others who lived in the area, would not have found the conversations interesting, but they loved each other, and it was a joy to talk. They learned from one another. Most of the year, their evenings together were short because he spent long hours in the shop. On those rare occasions, when they went somewhere, it had to be planned so Sam could come in and get cleaned up. They spent the evenings in each other's company, chatting and holding one another until they fell asleep.

Evie and he never had children. It wasn't by choice, and they had often talked about what it would be like to have children. All the married couples they knew had children. It didn't seem like ten years since she died. Evie was the only one he had ever loved, or ever would love.

Sam's attention to the book drifted as he began pondering his life. He wasn't sure what had moved his thoughts in that direction. It may have been thinking about times long ago because of the book, or maybe it was sipping the same brand of coffee as his parent's had. Whatever it was, he began to reflect.

His life's work had been in the country near a small town in North Dakota, and he was often referred to as the blacksmith, although, even when he took over the shop from his father in 1948, it was an outdated term. He was a welder and fabricator. Sam had always been grateful he didn't work in a large shop where everyone specialized in producing one specific item. He was a generalist, and a capable one. Much of Sam's work was on farm machinery, but even that took a particular creativeness when he had to fabricate parts that were no longer made, too expensive, or would take too long to get. He had also worked on other machinery, steel and iron gates, and whatever his customers came up with. People believed he could fix nearly anything, but it was rare for someone to expect him to create anything.

The shop was dingy, dark, and in disarray most of the year. The building was a metal Quonset—a galvanized corrugated steel half dome with side walls that slanted out. It was a very plain but sturdy building with large doors that rolled open on overhead rails. When he pushed the doors open nearly the entire front of the building was available for bringing in machinery. The other end of the seventy-foot-long building held wooden

shelves from floor to ceiling. The floor was dirt which meant the air was constantly damp. The heavy musk of old oil permeated the damp air, mixing with the sharp pungency of burnt steel. His father had built an entry shed on the side that served as a place for the forge, anvil, and vice. Sam kept as many of his tools there as he could. There was no office since everything was done with a verbal agreement or a handwritten note.

In summer the shop was often sweltering and in the depth of winter, unless the forge was going, most of the building was brutally cold. The wood stove's heat only managed to warm the entryway; the rest of the building was as cold as the outside weather. Still, for him, this was a place that gave comfort and meaning.

There was only one part of his work that bothered him. Most things that were brought to him could only be fixed in one way, but at times he could see where he could make improvements in a part, or he could contrive a completely new mechanical setup. Those ideas nearly always led to an issue with the owner.

They would say something like, "Sam, that damn gear broke again."

"I told you the weld wouldn't hold. That gearing is too fast. I can make a couple of new gears to slow it down and you won't have to be fixing it all the time," he'd respond.

"I don't need it different. I just want it fixed."

"OK, but if I weld it again, it'll break again. Why don't you let me make the broken gear out of a stronger steel? That should last longer."

"If I wanted a new gear, I'd buy one from John Deere. I just want it fixed."

Most of the time he would give in, but now and then he would do it his way.

"Look, Art, I made the new gear. It only cost twice what it would have cost to repair the other one and it should last ten times as long."

"Yeah, well, I ain't payin' any more for it! I asked you to weld the other one."

"But Art…" and that is where the conversation ended.

He was proud of the work he had done. He didn't even mind paying for it himself. What hurt was that they couldn't see that he could make things that were better than what they had. All they saw was someone who could fix things.

Mid-winter was always the slowest, after the harvest breakdowns and before the farmers were getting their equipment ready for the next year. It didn't matter if there was no customer work to be done, he went out to the shop every day. There were things to straighten out and things to

clean. *It'll be better when things get busy in the spring*, he told himself.

He looked at the parts on the shelves and the others that were scattered along the sloped metal sides of the shop where it was too low to work. There were so many of those things that he knew he would never use. They were outdated, broken, or pieces that others might have been satisfied with, but he hadn't been, all of them had found their way to whatever space would hold them.

He remembered pondering the menial task of organizing those things and beginning to envision what it would look like to put some of those things together. Sam could envision a deer or a bear. No matter what he would make, it would have an abstract character to it. He looked at several pieces and decided to start small. Taking the parts into the entry shed, he took off his cap (one he had gotten free from the local grain elevator) and put on his heavy welding apron and his welding mask, then lit and adjusted his acetylene torch. He had envisioned the creation once more and then he had nodded his head to drop the dark glassed mask over his face and then he cut and fused, separated and combined.

When he had finished, a couple of weeks later, he was proud of his creation. It was a representation of a bald eagle, with its wings extended as if it was about to take flight. It was five feet from head to tail and stood on a perch that made the whole thing about nine feet tall. Sam hadn't painted it, preferring that it gain color from the natural process of oxidation. That would provide a variety of colors because of the different types of steel and other metals. He knew the head would oxidize to a light gray. It would be a year or so before the contrast became obvious.

For the rest of the winter he had cleaned and straightened, but as spring approached, he had opened the main doors, fired up the old Ford tractor with chains hooked to the bucket, lifted the sculpture and placed it near the end of the gravel driveway that led to the shop and house. Anyone driving by would see his creation.

He remembered that Evie was so thrilled that she came out to the shop (a rare event, since she knew it was his sanctuary) and said, "Sam, it's beautiful! It adds joy to the place! I know how good you are at what you do, but how did you ever think of such a thing?"

"I just looked at what was there, and I could see it. I think I'll do another next winter. How'd you like the place filled with metal sculptures?" Sam had said.

"I'd love it, Sam, just like I love you."

She kissed him on the cheek.

"Well, with that as an incentive," Sam had told her, "there might not

be room for *us* when I'm done." He remembered that he was beaming with pride.

The next day Carl Vollard had driven up to the shop and came in the door.

"Hello Carl, what's up? You have some work for me?"

"Yes, I'll bring it tomorrow. I was just heading down the road to town and I saw that eagle."

"Yeah, I had some time this winter. It was fun creating it. You like it?"

"Kind of a waste of time, money, and metal, don't you think? It ain't even a weathervane. What's it supposed to do? Some kind of advertising?"

"It's just something to look at, and I enjoyed making it."

"To look at! Hah, if I'm gonna look at something, it'd be a pretty woman, not some junk rooster. You're nuts, Sam."

"That may be, Carl. But Evie and I like it." *It got you to look*, Sam thought.

"Well, it might cause someone to go in the ditch lookin' at that thing. How're you gonna feel then? Anyway, see you tomorrow. I have a harrow that needs fixin'."

"Thanks for stopping in, Carl." Sam had tried to keep the sarcasm out of his voice.

Most of the other neighbors gave similar opinions. Evie even had some women comment about her husband being so wasteful. She shrugged it off, but it hurt Sam to have them think less of her.

Every spring from then until he retired, he rolled out at least one more sculpture for their yard and, for a few years, someone would stop and tell Sam how worthless what he did was. Eventually it got to be an event and, whether they liked the sculptures or not, the neighbors would drive by in the spring just to see what Sam had created.

Retiring had been difficult. Evie and the shop felt like his only reason for existence most days. He had retired to spend more time with Evie but within a year her hospital visits, and the days she wasn't feeling well, took up more and more of their time. People continued to call with work. They didn't understand why he would give up his work if he was still capable. Although the phone calls had decreased during the five years after he quit, they started again when Evie died.

"Sam," they would say, "can you fix this?" now wanting him to do it

"in his spare time" thinking he would do it and not charge them. He refused to go back to the shop. He wanted people to quit seeing him as the blacksmith, but even now, after all this time, it hadn't happened.

The time had come, and Sam knew he was facing a tough decision. As he finished his coffee in the kitchen where he had eaten meals all his life, he began to think about how life might be different in another place. Here, nearly everyone had known him since birth. They knew he had inherited the shop when his father died, and every one of them knew it only made sense for him to take it over. In this place he was the blacksmith, no more, no less—and he could never be more.

It was the only place he had ever lived, but now that cancer had taken Evie, the place felt even more constrictive. It wasn't that people didn't care. People were always asking about his health and were more than willing to help him anytime he needed it. There were even some widows whom he suspected wanted to be more than friends. No, it wasn't that the people in the community didn't care, it was that he didn't care. Life had become a burden, and he believed it was mostly because of where he lived.

And so, Sam made his decision.

There were a few things he needed to do. He went to the hardware store and paid his bill. Ida was glad to have the money. When he got back home, he took some time to compose a note to leave on the kitchen table. It told his relatives (those who would care were Evie's relatives) that they could do whatever they wanted with the shop and the house. He signed it, hoping it would be legal that way. Then he said he needed some change in his life. He wrote "goodbye" and asked them not to look for him—he intended to be difficult to find. With that done, he packed the only suitcase he had with the few things he needed.

That night he went to sleep in the same bed, in the same room, in that same house, for the last time. He set the alarm for the familiar five in the morning. The train was due in at six-thirty. Sam had a hard time going to sleep that night. He was too excited, and a bit scared. As he was about to fall asleep, he thought of Evie. *I'm sorry, dear. I know you loved this place, but I can't stay without you. I love you.* A tear or two fell before he drifted off.

The next morning he drove among the sculptures, turning toward town as he passed the eagle. He would go west. Evie had always wanted to see that part of the country. They had plans but never had time. Now, Sam knew, they were finally going.

TURBULENCE

by Alyssa Haagenson

"Are you seriously watching that right now?" I ask the stranger pressed up against me. We tried to avoid it, in that mutually awkward shuffle that accompanies small flights, but it was no use; our arms would be as close as lovers for the next hour and 45 minutes.

"What?" the stranger asks in return.

I point to the debris and destruction on the screen. "You're watching a documentary about a plane crash…while flying on a plane."

He's pulled out an earbud now and I'm wishing I'd just kept my mouth shut.

"Yeah." He says it like it's as normal as bread and milk on the top of a grocery list.

"Doesn't that seem a little fatalistic?"

"I think I would go with educational," he says shrugging. "It's not like watching a documentary about plane crashes causes plane crashes."

My shrug comes in concession as I take a sip of my Sprite, praying that he would take it as a sign to return to his blood-soaked documentary.

Apparently, he did not get the hint. "Are you superstitious?"

"No," I snapped back a little too quickly. It's true, I'm not, but it still tastes like a lie.

"I didn't think so."

He puts his earbud back in now it's my turn to break the status quo. Dean would tell me to ignore it, but this stranger had just made an assumption about me, and I'm determined to decanter it.

"Elaborate," I say. His eyes are still on the screen, but the phantom smirk tells me that he's listening. It almost reminds me of Dean's grin, but it's missing a certain gleam.

The reminder of Dean is enough to fill me with a rush of shame. I'm not flirting with the stranger next to me, and our closeness is purely due to the design of some idiot in an engineering firm. But Dean wouldn't care about my excuses, and it somehow feels like a betrayal.

The stranger is oblivious to my internal shift as he answers my question. "I mean you're reading a book about death 30,000 feet in the

air." I glance down at my book, *The 7 ½ Deaths of Evelyn Hardcastle*. It's not really about death, well at least I don't think so. I've never actually gotten myself to finish it. Dean hates that; when I buy a book and don't finish it. He thinks it's a waste of money, which I guess is fair given the enormous amount of money that one can spend in an afternoon at Barnes and Noble. Dean made sure it was the only book I brought with me. I still haven't finished it.

"You're not superstitious because if you were, then you probably wouldn't be reading a book that has a word death in the title."

He's right. Annoyingly right.

I get the impression that this stranger is often annoyingly right. The guilt makes a return trip in my gut.

The plane dips and I grip the armrests reflexively. Within seconds, the path smooths and I breathe into the fragile calm. This flight has had a few rocky spots, which I guess makes sense since we are flying over the Rockies (Get it? the humor helps, I think).

"Don't worry, this always happens," the stranger says with a wink to the flight attendant, a woman in her late forties. Her lips smart with a purple lipstick that matches her smile while clashing horrendously with her uniform. "It wouldn't be the Midwest express without a few bumps, right Kacey?"

The flight attendant plucks the empty Coke Zero (an abomination of the Coke franchise according to Dean) from his waiting hand.

"You've got that right, sugar," she says. Of course, annoyingly-right-stranger is a frequent flyer who charms flight attendants. "Can I get you anything else Garrett?"

Garrett. Stranger officially has a name.

"Nothing for me, but m'lady here might take a barf bag."

I'm about to protest but the flight attendant has already fished one out.

"Oh dear. I'm sorry to hear that. Is it the turbulence?"

"Fear of flying," Garrett mouths.

I roll my eyes, but habit pushes back my words. I want to say that I don't have a fear of flying, but then I remember my fingers clenched around the rosary beads at takeoff. The lightening of my chest the moment the wheels hit the ground. Although, I don't know if that can really be considered fear. Perhaps just a healthy recognition of fact. Dean would tell me to get over myself. But Dean says a lot of things I don't necessarily agree with.

Garrett continues his conversation with Kacey the flight attendant. I half listened but my attention is caught by a boy, maybe fourteen, who sits lazily in an aisle seats two rows ahead of me. He pops Skittles into his lemonade, and I'm utterly disgusted.

Six, no, seven. He drops seven Skittles into the drink and swishes it like a Bond villain with a cocktail. Whoever's next to him, a mother I assume by the chunky diamond on her finger, smacks his wrist.

Her touch is light, playful even, but I react all the same. My hand shoots to the tender flesh on my left wrist. I feel Garrets eyes travel to it. My heart thumps, going tight despite the clear skies and lack of turbulence. He intakes a breath. He's going to say something, ask something.

"So, you must fly often," I say, getting ahead of his question. "What takes you over the Midwest express?"

He smiles, but the question I have avoided still dances in his eyes. I suspect that Garrett's a great guy.

"Work," he replies simply. "I split my time between Fargo and Boulder."

"Sounds exciting," I say, feeling like I'm reading out of a manual for how to make small talk. "What do you do?"

Where I am general, Garrett is incredibly specific. It's like he actually cares about the conversation whereas I'm plowing through it. "I'm a prosecuting attorney for Greenmount and Cliff. We have offices out of both cities, but I'm going full time in Fargo, it's too much time away from my girls."

I wish I could say the relief wasn't so overwhelming, but I'm pretty sure I audibly sighed. He's married, with kids. No threat of flirtation.

"Yeah, that can be hard."

Light blooms behind his eyes, quickly catching the wedding band on my finger. "You have kids?"

"Not yet." I swallow.

Not for five more years, according to Dean's timeline. If we were following mine, we would have two already, but relationships are about compromise. I am an expert in compromise.

Another bout of turbulence shakes us out of the conversation. It's worse this time, unpredictable ups and downs, and I want to say that I'm not afraid. Even frequent-flyer Garrett and his documentary look a little wary.

A particularly sharp downward spurt spills the remainder of my Sprite, and my shaking hand grabs it without thinking. If I would have been

thinking, I wouldn't have reached, my sleeve doesn't go far enough, and this time Garrett definitely sees the mark around my wrist.

Not that it's even a mark, it's not. It's an accident. Marks are things that stain people and change them and hurt them. My wrist is a result of clumsiness and miscommunication, not change and hurt. And it's definitely not worth the extreme concern narrowing in Garrett's eyes.

"Are you okay?" he asks, strangely still despite the rocking plane. Six, no seven. I nod seven times in quick succession.

"Just the turbulence," I say, changing the meaning of his question, adding in a stiff laugh. "I might take you up on that barf bag."

I know he doesn't buy it, but he's too much of a gentleman to call me out on the lie. I imagine him with his wife, and a pinch of jealousy comes without warning. In their relationship, I bet they both do the compromising.

Garrett hands me my unfinished book.

"You dropped this."

"Thanks."

I don't open the book for the rest of the flight. I merely close my eyes while Garrett goes back to his gruesome documentary, my chest lightening as the wheels hit the asphalt with a harsh jolt. An old woman behind me claps at the landing while her granddaughter rolls her eyes.

Dean picks me up from baggage claim 20 minutes late, but that's fine. He has a big meeting tonight. So big that he's on the phone for the duration of our commute, dry-cleaning taking the front seat while I take the back.

He doesn't ask me about the trip (it was fine). He doesn't ask me how my mom is (doing better). Doesn't ask me how my flight was (jury's still out on that one).

I don't mind though; it gives me a chance to try and finish my book before Dean can ask me about it. Might as well avoid the argument before it begins. I flip to the page I was on; it's marked by a cocktail napkin . . . and a business card.

I blink back the confusion as Dean's voice drones on and on about some corporate policy he's planning to ignore.

My chest lightens again, like I've finally hit solid ground after a rough flight.

Garret Greenmount
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I save the number in my phone, ripping the card in four pieces and shoving the scraps into the McDonald's bag with my half-eaten value-fries.

It seems that Garret really is a great guy.

On the backside of the card is a design with curves and gold matte borders, but there's a handwritten inscription on the bottom.

For the next time there's turbulence.

TAKE CARE OF YOUR OWN

by Charles Hinton

1

The graveyard was high on the hill that overlooked the small town of Fleet, North Dakota. Fleet was once a small farming town that flourished and survived four generations up until the 80's. It was during the 80's when mothers and fathers and grandparents and great grandparents started to die off, leaving their young with the decision to stay or leave. Perhaps wanting to break a spell (if not a curse), the young fled with their inheritance. Some of the youths were even thoughtful enough to plant a few flowers on the hill before racing out of town with their more than generous purse, leaving Fleet to become a ghost town, with boarded houses that watched over the streets that ran wild with undergrowth that twisted and churned in and out of rusted vehicles that were as dead and forgotten as the loved ones buried on the hill.

Good ole Pete Dexter was buried in that graveyard behind the church right beside his wife Matilda. So was Dale Swenson and his wife Margo. The Hart family had six of their kin up there and the Montgomerys had at least eight or nine. Even Jasmine Jamerson, whose mother had moved her all the way from Roundup, Montana, was said to be on that hill. There were at least sixty graves up there, but Jake Langston had come to visit one: his father's.

The sound of Jake's Dodge Ram approaching Fleet, which was hushed and quiet save for the whispering wind easing through the eaves of dead houses, sent small animals scampering in all directions. He had traveled all the way from Minneapolis. It was a six-hour drive with nothing but land and sky for company. At last, here he was—back in Fleet while all the Fleet kids his age, thirty-five plus, were long gone, living it up in Los Angeles, New York, Florida, overseas, you name it. He was here to take care of his own and that was it. He'd visit his father's grave on the hill and get the hell out of this place. He had buried his father only two months ago. His father, Joel, had requested to be buried beside his second wife, Claudia, who no one would disagree was the best thing that had ever

happened to Joel. Claudia had cured him of all his bad habits, even gambling, so to lay his father's body alongside Claudia's was the least Jake could have done.

2

Claudia was one of the lucky ones. She was dead and gone long before the C-91 virus hit, infecting millions of people worldwide. No one was certain where C-91 originated or how the virus came to be but there was plenty of blame to go around. The US blamed Russia. Russia blamed China. China blamed Japan. Japan blamed Canada…and while in the midst of blaming, the C-91 virus became a pandemic. Those who were infected swarmed hospitals in hordes, complaining that it felt as if their brains were on fire and their heads were being crushed. The world was on lockdown as the best doctors and scientists on the planet raced to find a vaccine. Then something amazing happened. The sick was no longer sick. Not only were the sick recovering, they were boasting that they've never felt better in their lives. As far as the doctors were concerned; these poor souls were right. They were testing off the charts. Their blood pressure, cholesterol, heart rate, eyesight and hearing were beyond comprehension. No one could explain it. But what really had the doctors scratching their heads was that the C-91 virus, that had infected over one million people and killed over ten thousand worldwide, had seemed to vanish without a trace. Those who were infected showed no sign of the virus. It was as if they had never come in contact with C-91. Within two months after these spectacular recoveries, the world was back in full swing. People were back to consuming the earth. The world was doing great until C-91 Plus decided to show its ugly head.

There were three phases to C-91. The first phase was for the virus to attach itself to a human host, where it festered and then became dormant, rendering itself undetected, slowly evolving like some grotesque maggot sprouting wings and legs, into C-91 Plus, the second phase. The infected became the carriers, passing C-91 Plus on to whomever were unfortunate to have crossed their path. By the time the world knew what was going on, it was too late. C-91 Plus was a death sentence. Like C-91, people moaned and groaned that their brains were burning and their heads were going to explode. However, after fourteen days of contracting C-91 Plus, these people started dying by the thousands, and there was not a damn thing anyone on the planet could do about it. Doctors were baffled. They were at their wits end. All the world could do was close its doors and let

death pass. And death did pass, killing millions before returning to God knows where. When the smoke cleared the bodies were buried, the world mourned, and reopened its doors. Two months later came the third phase.

3

Approaching his father's grave, his shadow stretched from the sun, Jake saw the biggest crow he had ever seen perched on his father's headstone. The crow sat there needling its feathers with its beak. Jake watched its every move. If this crow came after him, he would have no choice but to whack it with the crowbar he was carrying. Jake's mind shifted to the crowbar. Why was a crowbar called a crowbar? Was it because it was as black as a crow? Or could it be that the business end of a crowbar resembled crow's feet? Whatever the case, there would be a murder of a crow if this thing came at him. As if to read his mind the crow took flight and flew towards Jake so fast that he hardly had time to duck let alone take a swipe at it. The bird swooped over him, climbed high and landed on the cross on top of the church steeple. The crow pecked at its feathers, cooed and then took flight, gliding down to Main Street where it banked left on First Avenue and was gone. Jack was relieved. Relieved that the crow was gone, and that there was no crow's nest nearby. At least as far as he could see. He pulled up the left sleeve of his suit jacket and checked his Apple watch. Time was closing in. He had about five minutes. He approached his father's grave.

4

When Jake's father had called him from his condominium in Fargo, North Dakota and told him that he had contracted the C-91 Plus virus, he was straight forward. Joel told his son that he had taken the Government issued C-91 Plus Test Kit (C9PTK), which was nothing more than a reengineered Home Pregnancy Test, but instead of using urine you swabbed your inner cheek. Green told you that you were negative. Red told you to get all of your affairs in order right now. And that's just what Joel was doing. He told Jake that he wanted to be buried in Fleet next to Claudia. He told him that his condo in Fargo, his land in Fleet, and all of his belongings were now his. Joel told his only child that he did not want a funeral with a lot of fuss. Jake heard him loud and clear. He understood that his father did not want Tabby, Jake's own mother who had left his father long ago, anywhere near his death-day party. Tabby

was controlling, bitter, and had caused Joel a lot of pain. Of course, this was Joel's side of the story. Nevertheless, on the phone he told Jake he loved him, and fourteen days later he was dead and gone.

5

Jake stood at his father's grave and waited for what had been happening all around the world to happen. He was not concerned about Claudia. She was alright. May she Rest in Peace. Jake turned and saw that the sun was now starting the sink below the houses. He did not want to be stuck here after dark. Fleet had always been a spooky place, long before the people left. Jake checked his watch. It was time. He licked his lips and crossed his heart as he began to sweat. He swallowed as sweat rolled down his face and down the back of his neck. And to make matters worse he could sense someone or something watching him. Jake scanned the graveyard, his eyes flowing over headstone after headstone; Terry Matthew, Kathy Hildale, Archie Arnwine, good ole Pete Dexter…It was the graves of Berry and Frank Starter that caught Jake's attention. With all that was going on, Jake had damn near forgotten that these two men, who were blood brothers, were his father's closest friends. His father and these men had seemingly caught the virus and died nearly moments apart. Good Lord, how could he have forgotten? Jake checked his watch. He stood still, listening. Nothing. Could it have been some diabolical hoax? It couldn't be. He had seen it on the news, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter…you name it. The videos that were coming from all over the world all came with "content warning due to graphic nature" advisories. There was no way that this could be a hoax. Why would the government send letters asking (ordering) people to take care of their own if their loved ones were not encased in burial vaults or burial liners? There was even evidence of people exhuming family members who were in burial vaults in order to ease their own conscience, unable to bear the thought of a loved one scratching and clawing down below inside a tomb, squirming in their own decay, wanting to be let out.

The doctors tried to explain this unbelievable and unfathomable happening as best as they could. They said that the C-91 Plus invades the human brain like some ravaging cancer, hemorrhaging the adrenal glands, shutting down the brain, causing major organs to fail. Two months and twenty-four hours, within five minutes of the time of death (although there were cases that took longer), the brain stem is restarted and the dead start to rise. With no activity within the frontal lobe, the dead were no

more than mindless, ravaging creatures with insatiable appetites. This part Jake did not and could not understand. How could these…things be mindless? He had seen a video of one of these dead things—no! The video had to have been fake. There was no way that these things could do what he had seen in the video.

Jake remembered a reporter who looked as though he hadn't slept since World War II ask one of the doctors sitting at a long table lined with microphones how the dead claw their way out of their caskets and through six feet of dirt. After a moment, the doctor said that everything has a breaking strain, even caskets. She supposed that once the dead broke through their coffins they just squirmed and wiggled themselves up from the dirt…

6

…something latched on to Jake's foot. He looked down and saw his father, or what used to be his father, holding on to his foot. Half of his body was unearthed from his grave. His father's grey hair that was always kept neat and groomed was caked in dirt. Bugs scuttling cross his decaying scalp. Some ran inside his earholes. His eyes were as white as milk, his face a mask of black and grey decay. His constantly chumping teeth were as rotten as the hand that was holding on to Jake's shoe. Jake pinwheeled backwards, tripped over his feet, and then fell on his back, letting go of the crowbar. He laid there, looking up at the sky that was now turning orange and magenta. This had to be a dream. All of it. There was no way that this could be happening. Suddenly, Jake saw his dead father standing over him, his face a horrid death mask with worms squirming from his eyes, nose, mouth and ears. "Hello, son," said the thing that was and wasn't Jake's father. "Where have you been, son? I am starving."

7

How could this be? Jake had seen the video but of course it was a well-done hoax. The girl who had posted the video of her dead mother edging towards her, her decaying face caked with mud and earthworms, YouTube channel was Beth Knows Best. Beth was yelling at her mother to stay back, please stay back while somehow managing to livestream the ghastly event of her dead mother approaching, reaching, trying to sink her awful teeth inside her daughter's flesh. Of course, it was all fake, Jake had thought. Beth Knows Best was just another con trying to cash in on a few

more subscribers. The dead were coming back to life. This was true. That argument or debate had long since passed. But the dead talking? No way! So, when the dead woman in Beth Knows Best's video spoke, her voice hoarse and raspy, telling her daughter that she loved her and to not be afraid, Jake laughed. The extent people will go to snatch up a few extra bucks amused him. Jake laughed until Beth Knows Best pulled the snub nose .44 caliber from her waistband and blew opened her mother's head, turning it into a black and red explosion of brain matter and assorted teeth. This was when his laughter became a howl. The special effects are off the charts, Jake thought, as he went on howling.

8

Beth Knows Best's video of the talking dead was no hoax. The dead could talk. And Jake's dead father was talking now. "Just one little bite, son," his father said, as he fell on top of him. Jake instinctively raised his right forearm that, fortunately for him, hooked under his father's chin instead of wedging inside his grotesque, gnashing teeth. "Feed me, son. Feed me now," said the dead thing, as a cluster of maggots drooled from its mouth onto Jake's face where they crawled and inched around his eyes, nose and mouth. The Popeye's chicken sandwich that Jake had finally gotten around to trying earlier this day, churned in his gut then heaved from his mouth in big acidic chunks. Jake began to choke as the spent food (and a few squirming maggots) re-entered and swashed down his throat in one big gulp, causing him to choke. This was it. He was going to drown in his own vomit and then become his father's dinner. Dying. That was the ticket. Jake was going to die in Fleet, North Dakota, a town he thought he'd never see again.

But Jake did not want to die. He wanted to live, and grow old. So, with all the strength he could muster, he drove his forearm under his dead father's chin and bucked as hard as he could. The living-dead man went flying through the air, snarling, its pale eyes a mixture of shock and rage. The dead thing fell on its back, its arms and legs flailing like some helpless overturned bug. Jake cleared his windpipe, rustled to his feet and snatched the crowbar from the ground. Without hesitation he hammered the hooked end of the crowbar down onto his father's head, just above his eyes. The top of Joel Langston's head vanished into a heap of black and red goop mix with bits and chunks of skull. Jake saw his dead father's white eyeballs slide down inside the open cavity that was once part of his head. He tossed the crowbar to the ground, grabbed the corpse by its

ankles, and dragged it back to its grave where Jake dumped the body and covered it with dirt. What he had seen, and what he had done, had changed him within an instant, and he would never be the same. He didn't think that anyone faced with the task of bashing their father's head in would ever be the same, no matter what the circumstances.

What happened next happened fast. The crow that had flown away returned. It swooped over Jake's head, landed on his father's headstone and then cawed. Jake, who was staring down at his father's grave, eyes swollen with tears, shifted his gaze and saw two shambling feet closing in on him. He stepped back just in time to thwart a bite that would have surely sunk into the nape of his neck. Standing in front of Jake Langston was Frank Starter, one of his dad's best friends. Frank had always been overweight, but now he looked as though he was about to explode. His milky white eyes swam with hunger as his rotting teeth smashed up and down. Had it not been for the crow that had awakened Jake from wherever his mind had taken him, Frank's morbid choppers would be chewing on a hunk of his neck. Jake had no doubt. Pulling up the rear was Frank's older brother, Berry, his arms outstretched, jawbone pistoling. Berry was also up and out for dinner. Jake retreated backwards, placing one foot carefully behind the other, determined not to trip a second time. His right foot landed on something hard and unyielding, and Jake knew exactly what it was. Without hesitation, he reached down and pulled the crowbar from under his right foot. He placed the crowbar above his right shoulder, baseball style, and swung it. The steel tool landed against Frank's head, knocking it back between his shoulder blades. Frank's head hung there like some strange hoodie. What happened next would have been hysterical under different circumstances. Frank began turning in a circle like a dog chasing its tail. But in Frank's case it was his head he was chasing, around and around and around…Berry, incapable of understanding that he was next in line for a head-cut, reached for Jake. "You smell so tasty," dead Berry said. "Just one bite, Jakie Wakkie. One bite and I will be on my way—" There was a loud crack as Jakie Wakkie hammered the crowbar down the center of Berry's skull, stopping the dead and decaying man in his tracks. Berry's hideous white eyes froze in their sockets as his legs collapsed, sending his body slamming onto the grass. Jake reached for the crowbar protruding from Berry's head and gave it a healthy yank. There was a rip as the crowbar came free. He tossed it aside and made his way down the hill, his long and eerie shadow trailing behind him.

9

Main Street was turning dark as the abandoned buildings moaned and groaned and whispered, plotting their traps. Jake was sure he saw things darting pass doorways, across alleyways, away from windows, edging back into dark corners. As he approached his Dodge Ram, a terrifying thought came to him: what if the truck doesn't start? Isn't that how it works? Wasn't there some kind of law that was writ by the Devil that stated that when things go wrong at the wrong time is when things got worse? Something scuttled inside one of the buildings, and judging from the sound it made it could only have been some small rodent, but this didn't stop Jake's heart from leaping up into his throat. Jake reached inside his right pants pocket for his keys as horror and terror smothered him. He patted his body up and down searching for his keys as panic tightened inside his chest. Where were they? And then it came to him. His keys (and most importantly his key fob) were in the graveyard. They had fallen from his pocket when he tumbled backwards and fell to the ground, trying to flee from his father's dead hand when it clutched his foot. Jake had no doubt. The same way he had no doubt that the crow had save his life. Of course, he didn't think that the black bird had returned to save his life. The bird, he thought, was merely returning to its home within the church and had only stopped in to remind Jake and his dead friends to keep it down. It was simply a fortunate coincidence.

Jake turned and looked up the hill at the graveyard. The old church and the headstones were casting long shadows beneath the orange sun that was slowly sinking behind the rows of abandoned buildings and houses that lined Main Street. The way Jake saw it, he had two choices: he could walk twelve miles to the Interstate, which would be under total darkness in less than ten minutes, and hope that a kind soul would pick him up instead of running him over, mistaking him for one of the dead. Or he could head back up the hill to find his keys. Jake headed up the hill, feeling sun on his back as it continued its indifferent journey west.

10

He had no problem finding his keys. They were where he had thought they would be. He reached down for them, saw the vomit he had heaved up in wet chunks, and threw up a second time. It was the remembrance of the acidic, rancid vile backwashing down his throat, chased with maggots, that did the trick. What was left inside his gullet sprayed out like

a garden hose as he slumped over with his hands on his knees. When Jake's watering eyes cleared, he examined his new mess. He couldn't help it. It was like approaching a dead and bloated animal on the side of the road. You don't want to look at it because once you see it you can't unsee it. Especially during dinner. But you look anyway. He looked down at the regurgitated inner workings of his stomach and saw movement. He leaned in closer and understood what he was seeing. Jake was looking at the maggots that he had swallowed. They had somehow survived the unforgiving acids inside his belly that licked and leapt like angry lava. The maggots were now munching on Jake's slimy vomit. Jake turned his head, and just before he vomited a third time, he saw the upside-down face of Frank Starter closing in on him.

Within an instant, he understood what had happened. In his quest to find his keys, he had forgotten all about Frank Starter, who had been literally chasing after his own head moments ago. Frank, who had settled at the graveyard's back fence, was just standing there, idled, not knowing or caring what to do until he (it) spied Jake in the distance. Seeing living flesh, wanting living flesh, Frank began walking backwards, his grotesque body guided by his grotesque hanging head. It (Frank) moved in on its prey under the cover of the wind that was now circling and howling as if the gods were disgusted with everything this world had to offer.

11

When he turned his head to vomit, Frank Starter's huge bulk fell upon him as his vomit fell from his mouth, spilling down the dead mans tattered rags. They tumbled to the ground with a thud as Frank's decaying, hanging head tore from his shoulders and landed by Jake's side. Jake's arms and legs were pinned under Frank's rancid, nearly three-hundred-pound bulk that flailed its arms and legs and then fell limp. Jake saw that Frank's hideous head was less than two inches from his side. His face was a grey mask of decaying flesh. His white marvel eyes were wide as he tried to eat the flesh that was inches from reach. A gust of wind tore through the graveyard, pushing Frank's head against Jake's side. Frank's teeth latched onto a chunk of Jake's clothing, only to lose purchase the moment Frank opened his mouth for a second bite. Frank's head rolled back to its original position. Jake struggle to free his limbs. He knew it was just a matter of time before the malevolent wind rolled Frank's idiotic head flush against his side. The wind would laugh as Frank's bloated mouth chomped and chewed like some peculiar Pac-Man, feasting on his guts.

But wait! There's more! Footfalls were approaching. Jake could hear them shuffling and dragging, seemly with rhythm and cadence: shuck, drag, shuck, drag, shuck, drag…Jake, no longer concerned (at least for the moment) with the biting thing that lay by his side, craned his neck and saw Jasmine Jamerson, the young girl whose mother had moved her all the way from Roundup, Montana, shuffling towards him.

12

Jake and Jasmine, during their time in Fleet were close friends who shared close secrets. Jake knew that Jasmine's mother, Patty (not Pat or anything else), had divorced Jasmine's father when Jasmine was eight-years old, and thought it best to return to the place where she was born and raised; good ole Fleet, North Dakota. So, Patty (not Pat or anything else) renovated her parents' (God bless their souls) old house and made it her new home. It was all a lie. Jake knew the truth because Jasmine had told him, and only him. Patty's maiden name was Patty Parsh. Her sister was Patricia Parsh, a woman who had apparently loaded a bunch of kids inside her school bus before shooting and killing them one by one. Eleven kids in total. Patricia claimed that the children's bodies had been taken over by alien creatures. There was a trial, but not for Patricia Parsh, who was shot and killed by the police. The unofficial trial was held by the good folk of Roundup, Montana who found anyone who bore the name Parsh guilty, and sentenced them to a life of living hell. It didn't matter if they'd changed their name or not. So, Patty (not Pat or anything else) saw that Roundup had become Dodge City, and got the hell out, keeping her married name for herself and her daughter, while leaving her spineless ex-husband to beg and plead for his reputation as a model Roundup citizen.

Jake never told Jasmine's secret to anyone. They were close friends up until graduation. They stayed in touch a few years after, but like most childhood chums, drifted apart. In the years that followed, Jake knew that Jasmine had become a lawyer but that was about it as far as her living days were concerned. He knew that she had died, but all the details were muddled. He had read about her passing on Facebook or Twitter but the people who were posting the bad news were all over the place. There were just too many inconsistencies to know what had really happened. But the one thing that social media did seem to agree on was that Jasmine Jamerson was buried in Fleet, North Dakota.

13

Jasmine Jamerson, whose mother had moved her back to Fleet because people had vowed to make her life a living hell, was coming for Jake Monroe Langston. The dead girl from Roundup was not coming to talk about the days of old, she was coming to gorge on Jake's face.

14

"Hello there, my good friend," the thing that looked like Jasmine said, shuffling its way towards Jake. Jasmine, who Jake had thought to be very good looking, though the two were never romantically involved, did not fare well after over two months in the ground. Most of her dark hair had slid from her scalp that was a grey patch of decay and dirt. Her nose was gone, and Jake could see earthworms squirming inside the white bone that was now her nose. Her upper lip had rotted off, leaving her with an everlasting, hideous grin. The blue dress that she had been buried in was a tattered wet clump of cloth rinsed in dirt. "How long has it been, Jake?" said the Jasmine thing. "Time sure flies. But I will take my time eating you. I am so hungry." Jasmine moved in, her teeth clicking mechanically, aiming to bite into Jake's living, breathing flesh.

There was caw as a blur of black flapping feathers covered Jasmine's face and was gone. Jake did not understand what had happened until he saw that Jasmine's milky eyes that had been growing bigger and bigger as she drew nearer, were gone. In their place were two deep dark sockets, oozing black goop that ran down her rotting cheeks. The crow had once again saved Jake's life. Jake watched the crow climb up to the church, its feathers appearing purple against the darkening sky. He saw what appeared to be two small dripping balls wrapped inside the crow's talons. But of course, these balls weren't balls; they were eyeballs. Eyeballs that had belonged to Jasmine a few seconds ago. The crow swooped inside one the church's broken windows and was gone. "Where are you, Jake?" said dead Jasmine. She was still moving towards him. It was just a matter of time before she tripped over the two bodies in front of her, one alive, the other dead, found his face and began eating his eyes. Horrified at what was going to happen, Jake twisted and bucked as hard as he could, freeing his left arm. He reached and grabbed a tuft of Frank Starter's thinning hair, aware enough to keep his fingers clear of his gnashing teeth. Without a moment of hesitation, Jake lobbed Frank's head in a wide arch. The head smacked down on the overgrown grass that carpeted the graveyard

and rolled against a headstone, head up, facing Jake, teeth chomping. What Jake had hoped to happen, in fact, prayed to happen, happened: Jasmine stopped, craned her neck that was mostly hanging dead flesh, and walked towards the noise. Jake watched, waiting for his moment.

15

Jake watched Jasmine blindly reach down and grab Frank Starter's head. He saw her right thumb slide inside his mouth and was instantly bitten off. The digit disappeared inside Frank's mouth and reappeared out the bottom of his severed neck, chewed and mangled. Jasmine, who was holding Frank's head like some strange cantaloupe, did not seem to notice. She opened her mouth to feed but instantly seemed to lose her appetite. From the looks of it, so did Frank, who's ravaging mouth all but stopped moving. This is because they only eat living flesh, Jake thought. As if she had read Jake's mind, Jasmine spoke. "Where are you, Jake? I am so hungry. Just one bite." Jasmine was now at least ten feet away. This was Jake's moment.

Frank's dead, bloated, and overweight body was unbelievably heavy. Jake who thought himself to be of average height, average weight, and above all, average strength, believed that he would have a better chance of moving a baby elephant. He twisted, bucked and gyrated his hips to no avail. There was nothing close to his free hand to tug on in hopes of pulling himself free. All his groans and flailing had done was to allow Jasmine to zero in on his location. She was coming, and there was not a damn thing Jake could do about it.

Sensing him, the creature fell to its hands and knees and began crawling, wearing that lipless, horrid grin. "I can almost taste you, Jake," said the Jasmine thing. "I am so hungry." The earthworms that were embedded inside her head apparently had enough excitement for the day, and were now squirming out from her nose bone, long and brown. Jake screamed as he tried with all of his might to free himself. Out of sheer desperation, he wrapped his free hand around the hulking body, pulled, bucked and twisted with all the strength he could muster as Frank's body rolled on its side. Jake shot to his feet and raced down the hill at full speed. He lost his balance and went head over heels. He saw grass, sky, grass, sky, grass, sky, asphalt, and then there was darkness.

16

Jake was on his back and could not move. He had broken his back. He was sure of it. All he could do was stare up at the blackening sky that was starting to show off its stars. Suddenly, the crow that had for some reason chosen to become his ally, landed on his chest. He felt the bird's small weight as the it drew closer, its sharp claws drawing beads of blood from his chest with each step. Jake's view of the darkening sky was blotted out as the crow came into his vision. The crow looked to its left, its right, needled its feathers, and then pecked out Jake's eyes.

17

Jake shot up with a scream. Where was he? What had happened? Why was his chin throbbing? And then it all come back to him: he had fallen down the hill and knocked himself out on the asphalt at the bottom. How long he had been laying here by the edge of the road? He wasn't sure, but judging from the sky, it couldn't have been long. Luckily, his back was not broken and his eyes were still inside their sockets. Why he had dreamt that the crow, who had saved his bacon on more than one occasion, was a vicious eye gouging foe, he could not understand. All he knew was that he needed to get out of this place.

Jake stood up. His bruised chin and pounding head protested as he staggered to his pickup, his legs feeling as heavy as lead. He unlocked the doors and climbed inside the truck. It felt good to be inside; safe and warm. He started the engine, slid the pickup into drive, and paused. He turned to the white bag on the front seat to his right, reached inside and pulled out the leftover bread from the Popeye chicken sandwich he had eaten earlier and had swiftly deposited out of his body and into the graveyard. Jake powered down his window and tossed the bread onto the pavement. "It's the least I can do, little buddy," Jake said. With tears rolling down his cheeks, he whispered, "I love you, dad." He drove out of Fleet, North Dakota. Crying.

About a mile before the Interstate, Jake saw a vehicle approaching, heading to Fleet. It was an SUV and there were four people inside: a woman and three men. With his hands on the steering wheel, he raised an index finger as he passed the oncoming vehicle, not caring if he people inside saw his tears or not. The driver of the vehicle raised a finger in return. This was how small-town folk greeted one another on the road when driving to and from the farm, church, market, or anywhere else. Just

raising one finger was all it took to say: hello! Or, how are you? Or, have a great day. Or, take care of yourself and your loved ones. But before all else: take care of your own…

Jake had taken care of his own and his life would never be the same. He had to pull over, and so he did. He pulled the truck to the side of the road and cried his heart out. It was all he could do. He was not ready to drive out into the darkness.

ROCKY, A RECRUIT

by Zachary Howatt

Four months after the paint dried on the exterior walls of Rocky's brand new restaurant, the rioters marked it up in gruesome red spray paint. The vandals blocked out and added letters to the sign, disfiguring the quaint "Fargo Eatery" into the morbid "Fargone State."

Rocky faced away from it. He stood on the curb while morning passersby toured the damage of the previous night from the safety of the empty roads, kicking half-empty water bottles out of their way. A young woman, holding her puppy high above the shards of glass littering the pavement, gawked at the graffiti behind Rocky. He tried to flag down her attention with a coupon card and a saturated grin, forgetting that his mouth was hidden behind a mask.

"Beautiful day," he offered. As she continued to stare at the wall behind him, Rocky added, "Don't mind us. Just working here."

Behind him, Jenny plunged a sponge mop into a recycled ice cream pail. She rubbed on the letter n for the sixth time that morning. Her head sank below her shoulders. Her eyes rolled back. She stopped and exhaled, louder than she already had been, finally getting Rocky's attention.

"I haven't started open duties," she said.

Rocky took a deep breath. There had been time for her to start her open duties before he asked her to clean the graffiti off the wall for him, but he left that issue undiscussed. He scrutinized her progress on the wall, which, if anything, had started stripping away the white letters of his sign, rather than the red letters of the rebellion. He forced a cheerful, "Go on ahead," and took the mop from her.

As she flew inside, Rocky caught sight of a group of young men in black t-shirts, wearing bandanas over their mouths to protect themselves from the virus. He pretended not to see them, but his spine instantly stiffened. He lowered the mop discreetly and picked at the bun in his hair—in his rush this morning, he had tied it too neatly. Sensing the young men approaching, he kicked the ice cream pail over, releasing the flood of soapy water into the gutter, and strode inside his air conditioned restaurant. Maybe it was better to leave the message up for now.

When he had cycled into town that morning, he had seen that other stores were not only graffitied but kicked in—and perhaps looted—during the latest riot. The members of the rebellion were getting bolder and bolder, marking and dismantling establishments that they deemed threats to their movement. Rocky was sure someone would come through with bolt cutters and steal his bike if he put it on the rack outside, so he stowed it in the back of the store, with the janitorial supplies. Until today, he had stayed unwavering in the face of the danger, sure that he and the Fargo Eatery would be safe as long as they mirrored the culture of the kids who were fighting for their rights. When he saw the spray paint on the wall, he nearly lost his cool. He thought he had made it clear he was on their side.

"Jenny, can you come here for me?" he called from the kitchen. When she didn't come out right away, he had to come to her spot at the smoothie bar. As Jenny counted the money, Rocky asked, "What's the protest about? I mean what is it really about?"

Jenny took her time formulating a response. "Sort of like class issues. Black Lives Matter, yeah, but class issues too I think? Abolish the police." She cleared her throat and carefully added, "…And workers' rights, workers' wages…stuff like that."

"I'm not asking for any reason." Rocky leaned against the counter. Then: "I was just thinking about joining it."

Jenny tried to lock the money drawer with the wrong key. "Oh?" She blinked at the lock. "It's more like a war now."

Rocky shrugged. "I stand with them. We're a progressive establishment. We take pride in black lives."

After two months back in the restaurant with Jenny, he still hadn't figured out how to read her masked face. Right now, her eyes alone revealed nothing except, perhaps, a slight nervousness around him. But she had always been shy around her manager. As she moved to take the stools down from the counter, she asked, "Have you donated to the movement?"

Rocky sniffed. "Maybe we should. I was thinking, more so, I'd talk to the governor, you know. Make good use of my privilege for some meaningful, peaceful police reform."

"Police abolition," she corrected.

Rocky looked out the windows of his restaurant. Not a single one had been broken. He knew he had to count himself lucky for that. "I'll let you get back to work."

That day, the number of customers he served was among the lowest since the pandemic restrictions were lifted. Having nothing to keep him adequately busy, he found himself in and out of the front door, letting his anxiety steer him repeatedly toward the red, dripping warning on his wall.

After that day, Rocky didn't take his normal route home. His wife agreed to keep the security cameras on all the time. And he began hiding his Mustang in the garage. He doubted any of the protestors lived in his neighborhood, but if they ever came near his lawn, spying his driveway from beyond the sprinklers, he knew it would be all over for his car.

There was something about wealth that the rioters had grown increasingly bold about demonizing. In one week, he watched as the rebellion destroyed stores, hotels, and other local businesses. Rocky didn't consider himself a wealthy man by any regard, but it was too late to take chances. The Mustang had been a gift from Sean Hoggarth, his friend, mentor, and regular patron at the Fargo Eatery. The sickening feeling he got when he first saw "Fargone State" on his wall was nothing compared to the thought of finding his gift defaced, of having to speak to Sean about it, of confronting the truth that even his personal life could be infiltrated by a movement that apparently couldn't distinguish one's politics from one's personal livelihood.

Rocky thought about Sean again when he rode into town with his brown hair freely floating behind his shoulders, pondering how he was going to respond to not one but *two* text messages from his cooks telling him they were quitting. "If this is about COVID, you can take time off," he told them. "I can't get you pandemic pay, but you can take all the time you need." The cooks said they were going to travel across the Midwest to protest. *Protest*…it had started to sound like an affront. It was mutiny, and he needed advice on how to stop it before his restaurant sunk. Sean would know what to say to his crew members at a time like this.

Rocky passed Sean's bar and squeezed the brakes. He heard a *pop* as the air in his front tire yielded to a crumpled tear gas canister. He was surprised it wasn't the glass that had popped the tire—shards of it had been blown out of the windows of Sean's bar, and now lay strewn in front of the dismantled neon sign. The bar was completely ravished.

Once back in his office, Rocky punched a number into the landline. After two dial tones, Sean answered his phone.

"Have you talked to the police?" asked Rocky.

He could imagine what Sean's face looked like simply by hearing the "*tch*" at the other end of the line. "Of course I didn't call the police, Rocky. What are you thinking?"

Rocky couldn't wrap his head around his incredulity. Sean wasn't black. He should have no problem getting justice served.

"You know, you had a really good idea," said Sean. "I wasn't so sure about it, but now I really understand where you're coming from."

"What idea?"

"Joining the protestors. That gal at the smoothie bar mentioned something when I was there last week. It stuck with me for a while. Now, here we are."

The fan in Rocky's office blew over his face and dried his eyes as he spaced out, sucking on Sean's words. *Here we are.*

"I probably wouldn't have gotten involved if you hadn't made the first move," said Sean. "But this protest is really heating up—I should've seen it sooner. I don't want to be on the receiving end of a brick when all this comes to a point."

Rocky stood up and clutched a rope of his hair and paced.

"Karen and I will be at the protest early tomorrow," said Sean. "She's going to pack a cooler. We'll make sure to find you. Bring Rachelle, won't you?"

He remembered a time when Sean had said he would be all-in with him, no matter what, as long as Rocky returned the favor. What had his reasoning been? *Always remember that we're people first, and businessmen second*, he said. *When the lights go out in our stores for the last time, we need living souls to lean on.*

By the time Rocky hung up, it was 8:39. The lights were still off in the restaurant. Not even Jenny had clocked in yet. She never would.

Rocky was no stranger to his own reflection, but the next morning, he found himself staring at it longer than usual. He knew how to put up his hair to look younger and more lax, but how did one put up their hair for a riot? He spent so much time looking in the mirror that he forgot to tell Rachelle what to expect. He watched her take the key ring from the hook, nonchalant and dressed in pink, as though she was going to pick up neighborhood kids from swimming lessons. He wondered if there was a way he could object to taking the Mustang.

As they drove to Island Park, protestors shuffled around their car. Rocky tensed in the passenger seat and lifted the top of his mask until it almost covered his eyes. Several young black women, seeing him stare at them, raised their fists. He mirrored their salute, smiling, forgetting that his smile wasn't visible.

Rocky and Rachelle parked and locked their car outside a Mexican restaurant, then carried their poster boards past hundreds of people of all

different ages. Rarely did they pass someone who didn't protect their face with a mask. So many eyes drifted toward and away from Rocky, so many uncocked eyebrows—bland, expressionless faces that harbored untold thoughts and feelings. Rocky nodded to many of them, expecting that they might recognize him and be put off if he didn't acknowledge them. Of course, no one said anything.

They began marching before they even knew where they were going. Rocky had never experienced traveling between the old, repurposed, gentrified buildings without the partition of a vehicle's windows to separate him from the town he served. He felt at once exposed and cradled by the flow of the demonstrators. While he had always thought of the movement as destructive, he had never considered that it might be this large. For some reason, those two characteristics never joined in his mind as he pictured the group of people who threatened his restaurant. Everyone in Fargo was here today.

In the middle of a chant, as he passed the Fargo Eatery, he stopped, temporarily disrupting the flow of many of the people around him. An idea hit him. He pulled down his mask. "Rachelle, take a picture of me," he said. "From over there." He motioned to the sidewalk on the other side of the street. Rocky lifted his sign up to his heart—it was a simple recreation of a wage protest sign he had seen online. He smiled. His whitened teeth shone for the world to see.

"Hey," said a young man. "Stop that."

A woman joined him. "This isn't Coachella."

Several others stopped to stare.

"It's okay," said Rocky. "This is my restaurant."

Now others took out their phones to record. A crowd like a blood clot clung to the front of the Fargo Eatery while the rest of the protest pulsed on.

"Do you really believe that? 'Every age, raise the wage?'"

Rocky couldn't tell where the voices were coming from anymore. There were too many masked faces bearing down on him. He averted his eyes, pulled his mask back over his mouth, and looked down at his sign. It hadn't taken him long to make it. All he did was copy the picture he had seen online, stroke for stroke, with a red poster marker. It was mimicry. It hadn't even felt like he was writing words, much less words of his own.

He looked up. He could hear Rachelle's voice, but couldn't find her behind the sea of camera lenses.

Then, in the span of a sharp inhale, a white man with goggles around his neck flung himself out of the crowd, brandishing a skateboard like a maul. Two more men came after him. Rocky flinched, but the rioters didn't attack him. They took their fury out on the windows of the Fargo Eatery.

Rocky once again felt himself lose his cool as he saw the sun's reflection bend and warble in the glass, under the repeated strain of the skateboard. The window didn't break, but it would at any moment.

Rachelle's voice pealed above the uproar. She had almost reached the front of the circle that surrounded the impromptu stage.

Rocky finally raised his voice. "*Hey!*"

It had no effect. Even when other voices in the crowd called out for the men to stop, they persisted. Onlookers twitched, half in motion, ready to intervene. Rocky turned to the crowd and held out his arm—*wait*. He sprung forward, yanked the skateboard from the leader of the trio, and dropped it like a hot brownie pan. All three men stopped then, ready to fight. Rocky knew he had only a split second of their attention. Using the time he had, he picked up a loose chunk of concrete off the ground and threw it directly at the window.

The glass shattered victoriously. Rocky felt heat hit his ears. He let himself imagine the heat was from a fiery explosion within the building, and not his own disbelief at the images he watched blossom in front of him—the concrete cartwheeling off his fanned fingers; the shiny, dark surface of the glass turning pale as a network of cracks erupted on the surface; the pale sheets of glass falling down like curtains and sagging on the sidewalk; and the reflection of his own face, looking so alien among a backdrop of rebels, instantly transforming into the exposed dark heart of his four-month-old restaurant.

He gawked at his work while the trio brushed the remaining shards of glass out of the window frame and started breaking the others. One of the men placed a towel over the window's ledge and leapt into the building. His silhouette tore stools down from the smoothie bar. Everyone outside just watched, holding up their phones. No one called the police.

Rocky turned around and took a sweeping look at the diverse crowd beholding the scene. He made eye contact with every camera lens. With his mouth obscured by the mask, only those closest to him could tell that he was laughing.

AN AFTERNOON

by David Johnson

I gazed out across the rocky hill land, my wings twitching. A chill afternoon wind blew against my face.

Something was wrong. I let my hand fall to my sword hilt. "Oh, that I would never use you again," I muttered. Yet I knew my intuition was never wrong.

Glancing up to the huge ash towering above me, I whistled. A blue bolt descended from the deep green foliage.

The great bird landed before me, wrinkled pink feet gripping the stone immediately.

"What do you think Caleb?" I asked, staring up into the deep onyx eyes. "Does your wisdom tell you anything?"

Caleb scratched himself rapidly with one foot, before floofing his feathers. Fluff enveloped me until the feathers shifted back into position.

"I have seen something abroad," he cheeped. "A fairy lies wounded by the spring."

"You should have said something," I said, stretching my wings.

"I was resting."

I flew up to Caleb's back and positioned myself there. Settling into the feathers, I gripped the ones before me and leaned forward.

"Was he injured?"

"One of its wings could have been broken. It was too coated in blood and muck to tell."

"Fly me there."

Caleb leapt forward, wings tearing the breeze. We were up in the air, flying over the sparse teal grass.

"What could have been the cause?" I asked. "The wasps are hibernating as are most of the predatory bugs."

"There are plenty of other dangers."

"But they all would be assured of killing a fairy, we are so frail now. Were you sure he was alive?"

"Definitely. She was moving."

I stiffened. "You did not say it was a she."

"Does it matter?"

"I took the oath, Caleb. She cannot come under my roof."

Caleb swerved to the right. "What happens to her comes under your conscience."

"Thank you Caleb," I said dryly.

He whistled in response and dove. I closed my eyes, allowing the feeling of rushing air to blindly envelope me.

He landed, and I descended from his back. The spring ran before us, a clear rivulet originating from a bubbling spout. Grass loomed above me as I hurried to a limp figure upon the ground.

She lay near the stream, coated in dirt. Deep scarlet covered her lacerated limbs. One of her wings was cruelly torn, its yellow shreds fluttering in the wind.

I stood over her, hesitating to touch her. I decided this was definitely an exception to the oath and dragged her to higher ground. Caleb had found a large oak leaf and I laid her upon it.

She was clothed in a dress of fur, mouse by the look of it. Her auburn hair fell over dust yellow butterfly wings that spread out from her back. A blindfold of thin cloth covered her eyes.

I winced. A deep slash pierced one of her cheeks, straight through the skin.

"We need to bring her back," commented Caleb.

"How can you be so casual?" I asked as I removed the blindfold. I tried to restrain the swelling panic. I didn't know if I could fix these wounds, even if she was brought back to my ash.

"The oath allows for exceptions in cases—"

"—of life threatening situations," I finished. "But how far does the exception extend? To bring her even into the purity of my home?"

"She is not a contamination," said Caleb, annoyed. "And if you haven't noticed, her blood is leaking away rather quickly."

He was right. Her chest was still feebly rising and falling, but she would soon die without proper aid.

"How would we get her back? I can't hold her up, you can only handle one person."

"You could use your eyes," he suggested.

My heart froze. Had he really just said that?

"You go too far," I warned, glaring. "I am retired now. It is forbidden."

"Sorry, but we can't drag her back. She would die on the way."

I thought for a moment, my mind racing. Something came to me.

"Fly back home and grab my healer kit. Angel speed."

Caleb wasted no words, but leapt into the air. He was gone in seconds.

Water. Her wounds needed to be cleaned, starting with the worst. I needed water.

I found a small leaf and ran to the stream. I folded it into a cup and placed it into the rushing crystal liquid. I let the water fill it, before walking back as quickly as caution would allow. I needed all the water I could get.

I knelt down beside her. *Please let her live.*

I looked around for a cluster of baby Clemintraps. There! I seized one and yanked it free.

I let the small spongy mushroom sit in the water until it was soaked. I took it out and began dabbing the fairy's cheek. I could see her tongue through the gash, moving as she struggled for breath.

I heard the beating of wings and looked up.

Caleb descended from the sky, a parcel of green clutched in his claws. He dropped it and I snatched it from the air. Tearing through it, I found my needle and thread and turned to my patient. I took a deep breath, then instinct took over.

I re-cleaned the wound, before threading the needle and pushing it through her cheek at a 90 degree angle.

"Grab the liver bag and fill it with water," I told Caleb as I brought the needle back through. "It should be in the second pouch on the outside of the pack. Continue cleaning her wounds."

I wrapped the thread around the needle, and pulled. The knot tightened, finishing the first throw.

Caleb scrubbed her arms and legs as I continued, using his beak to hold the mushroom.

Finishing, I cleaned my needle and returned it to its pouch. I grabbed the bandages and began on her right arm.

Five minutes later it was over. I wiped the sweat from my brow.

"It has been awhile since I've worked on wounds."

"Five years?" asked Caleb, emptying the remaining water onto the ground.

"Six. I didn't see combat my last year." I finished packing my supplies, then pulled out a blanket.

"Can you do anything for her wing?"

"I am afraid not. Wings are too delicate to work on."

"How long until she wakes up?"

"It depends."

As the words left my mouth, her hand twitched. She groaned, rolled over, and winced.

"Don't move," I advised.

"Where is my blind fold? Why am I so cold?" She turned her head in my direction though she kept her eyes clenched shut.

"Here." I laid the blanket over her. "I took your blindfold off as it would get in our way." I grabbed it from the ground. "Do you need it?"

"Desperately, lest you die. Hand it here as I lie."

I placed it into her grasping hand.

"What do you mean?"

"Thank you," she said, struggling to tie the frail cloth around her head. "I cannot speak here. Let us leave to place secure."

To my amazement, she stood up. She clutched the blanket around her, trembling, mouth pressed in resolution.

"Where is your abode, good stranger? To us all this spring is danger."

"Can you cease the rhymes?" asked Caleb.

She shrugged apologetically.

"Not to rhyme is not to speak. Apologies, oh great beak."

"There is much more to me than my beak," Caleb muttered.

"I am not sure we can go to my home," I said hesitantly. I reached for my sword. "But whatever attacked you—"

"Ignore your sword," she interrupted. "It cannot be slain. But hurry up, it soon will pour rain."

Caleb glanced at me. I closed my eyes, sensing. Yes, I could feel it on the edge of my mind—a growing wind. A storm was approaching—quickly.

"We need to find shelter. There is a hollow stump to the west of here."

"The ash is safer," Caleb argued.

"We cannot go there."

"I thought this was already settled," Caleb chittered.

"It is. We go to the stump." I started walking.

"Zachary," Caleb snapped.

I stopped, my face flushed. "We are not going to the ash."

"The oath does not—"

"The oath speaks clear enough!" I snarled, spinning around. "She does not enter under my roof. Upon my honor—"

"You place your honor—your *reputation*—higher than our lives?" Caleb's voice was becoming ever more high pitched.

"This is not about my reputation!" I yelled. "This is about upholding what I swore never to break unto death."

"Unto *her* death? Do you forget how you swore above all to protect innocent lives? That that was the whole purpose of your vow?"

"I know my vow—"

"Silence." The word came as lightning from the fairy, quick and sharp.

All feeling left from my body and my mouth would not move. Caleb's black eyes were wide and his feathers in full floof. His wings hung uselessly at his sides.

"Cease this awful bicker," she snapped. "The danger grows thicker. Tell me good fairy," she said turning to me. I knew she could see me through the thin blindfold. I could feel her gaze in my mind. "Why do we tarry?"

Slowly my senses returned, and I could once again feel the cold air on my face. My tongue cleaved toward the roof of my mouth, and I gasped in air.

I took a few breaths, before answering. "I am sorry. I—you cannot come into my house. I am a member of the Defensor. Retired. Our order forbids letting women enter into our homes," I finished firmly.

"You made an exception once before," Caleb muttered.

I turned on him. "And where did that leave me? How many lives were lost because of that? Do you recall?"

Caleb voiced no reply. He merely floofed out his feathers and half closed his eyes.

"I respect your vow and shall let you keep it." The fairy turned round, her torn wing dangling pathetically. "I'll go my way, you yours, may luck seep it."

Caleb glared at me from underneath his fluff.

"I shall still accompany you," I said. "You need protection." I stared into the eyes I knew were looking back through the blue cloth.

She nodded. "What of your noble budge?" She turned to Caleb. "Please do not bear a grudge."

"I am a budgie, not a budge," he replied. "But I shall come." He pulled his head out of his feathers and scuttled back and forth a couple times.

"Of birds you're the best," said the fairy admiringly. She turned back to me. "Are we heading west?"

I nodded. "It isn't far."

She nodded back, and began walking. She shivered despite the blanket and her bandages were already blotched scarlet.

"Can you make it?" I asked.

Caleb didn't wait for a response, but lowered himself flat against the ground. I helped her onto his back, and she nestled into his feathers.

"Can you hold on?"

"Yes, assured. Thank you bird."

"My name is Caleb," he whistled. "If you can rhyme with that." He turned to me. "Meet you at the stump."

"Wait." I looked to the fairy clinging to his feathers. "Is the thing that attacked you near?" She nodded, shuddering.

"It is a machine from hell. No one can fight it for long. Do beware it well. Listen for its song."

"What is it?"

"It has no name nor title. Avoid it, that is vital."

I tried not to feel annoyed, but I needed more information. *If only she wouldn't insist on rhyming.*

"So I need to avoid it at all costs. Anything else you can tell me?"

"There is no time, it is near!" She pointed into the forest of grass, her arm shaking wildly. "With all haste let us leave here."

I could feel a growing unease like that I felt back at the ash. There was something approaching. Something not alive. Not alive.

"What is it?" I pressed.

"Now, run! It comes!" She yelled. Caleb's wings shredded the air as he zipped off. I slung my healer pack over my shoulder and ran into the grass ahead.

Over the burble of the spring I heard a tinkle. It sounded like wind chimes, only deeper, like a piano. My hair stood on end as I hurried through the green stalks. The sinister tune was barely distinguishable, yet that made it even more unnerving.

I kept running, not bothering to check my bearings. I knew where I was. I only hoped the thing did not.

After several minutes, a dollop of water splashed off to the side of me, sinking into the thirsting dirt. A distant rumble.

I stopped and looked about me. Good. The squarish rock lay to the side of me. Only a couple more minutes running and I would be there.

Piano notes reached me over the breeze. My heart froze. It sounded closer. I took off again, then stopped. If it was following me I would lead it straight to the stump. *I cannot let that happen.* If it were to overtake me, both Caleb's and the fairy's lives would be in danger. Caleb could not fly in this weather.

I ran to the left, toward my ash.

The rain fell like silver missiles exploding around me as the tinkling melody came closer. My medic pack dangled in one hand now, flying out behind me. I held my drawn sword in the other hand.

Dodging to the right, I ducked beneath a large oak leaf.

I heard the song over the rain's roar, a quick tune, slowly climbing the octaves before falling back to where it began. It grew louder, until I also heard footsteps. Sounds like the splintering of bones accompanied them, along with a strange ticking sound.

I shivered, my hair rising atop my head. I peered out a hole in the leaf.

Something moved in the grass, a shadowy form from which the music played. It was skeletal and things moved upon it in a forced jerky fashion. It emerged from around a grass stalk. My heart skipped several beats.

Pupil-less orange eyes glowed from large rusty sockets. Its skull consisted of the face with its inner workings exposed. Wires and gleaming metal rods melded together in some mockery of a brain. A flexible iron spine wrapped with wires stretched from the head to a set of twisted metal hips and a pair of gleaming ridged legs. The torso was composed of a metal rib cage filled with moving parts and wires. Two arms sprung from the sides with long skeletal fingers at the ends. Rods connected various parts, moving in and out as the thing walked.

It looked in my direction and I could see gleaming bronze keys moving in its chest as its song played.

I gripped my sword tightly. I doubted the blade would cut the monster's iron limbs, but I bet I could twist them off.

I rolled out from under the leaf and the mechanical monster leapt upon me. Long blades shot out of slots in its arms and slashed down upon me.

Deflecting one, I spun around to avoid the other. I flicked my wrist and my blade cut through a wire.

The thing growled and brought its arms around like the two halves of a scissor.

I ducked and kicked its feet out from under it. It fell, its blades cutting across my chest.

Crawling clear of it, I leapt onto its back, dropping my sword. I grabbed its head with both hands. I struggled to twist it around, to break the iron neck.

It struggled to its feet with me still clinging to its head and rose to its full height. I realized it stood well over a head taller than any fairy.

The monster reached back and grabbed my legs. I hugged its head tightly as it yanked me. If it were to pull me off, its head would come with it.

The grass above glistened as a raindrop blotted out my sight, drenching us. My grip slipped and it swung me around. I hurled to earth, stunned. My ears buzzed and my vision blurred.

The horror jumped upon me before I could crawl clear and sharp iron sliced across my back. Flames shot through my body, and I screamed as the song played mockingly above me. The blades skidded across the back of my ribs, and I rolled away.

I struggled to my feet and ran. I could hear the beast striding behind me.

Yet it walked. It walked quicker than any living thing, but it still was slower than anyone at a dead sprint.

Sprint I did, yet the thought I left my sword behind haunted me. *Why did I drop it? Why?* The only answer was that I was out of practice.

How far is home? I wondered as I darted between the blades of grass. I gritted my teeth, forcing the pain in my back out of my mind.

I thought I could make out a large shape in the rain. It moved. A sort of small bird by the looks of it.

"Zachary!" it chirped.

"Caleb?" I asked in amazement as I ran up. "Why aren't you at the stump?"

"The stump is ablaze," said the figure standing beside him. "It is its end days."

"Lightning hit it," Caleb explained, shivering. "It was only sprinkling then, so we came here instead."

Cold water soaked me and I gasped. It felt painful yet refreshing as it saturated my wounds.

"Why are you here? Where is here?"

"Outside your home's perimeter," said the fairy. "We waited for you to enter."

"She insisted," Caleb grumbled. "Can we go in?"

I heard the sound of piano notes.

"I—I don't know."

"This is ridiculous," said Caleb. "It is pouring rain and a dangerous creature is behind us."

"It's no creature. I have never seen anything like it. It's a sort of humanoid machine with large blades."

"All the more reason to enter the ash."

"If this will help you choose," said the fairy hesitantly. "If in your home I'll be loose. I could harness my power. The machine's parts would shower."

"What power?" I asked. Pain lacerated my back, and I could hear the song more clearly. "I am sorry, but you look as powerful as a butterfly. I doubt my home will change that."

"It will certainly be safer," snapped Caleb.

"He decides where we'll reside," said the fairy quietly.

I thought of the approaching monster. *It could kill us all with ease.* The glowing eyes filled my vision, and then a similar pair replaced them. Visions of my friends being slaughtered because of my foolish mistake filled my head.

"We move on," I said.

Caleb banged his head against the ground, muddying his white forehead.

"You." Whack. "Are." Whack. "An idiot." Whack.

"I broke the rule before, and five fairies died," I growled. "That isn't happening again."

"She isn't a Death Sprite," Caleb argued.

"How do you know?"

"Look into your self! Does your intuition tell you anything?"

"It can be fooled."

"Maybe in the past, but not anymore. You know that."

I started walking. The fairy followed.

"We can out distance the thing if we hurry." I knew it was a lie. The melody tinkled nearby and we could only make it so far with our wounds.

"Where? Where are we going?" Caleb scuttled after us. "There is shelter *literally right in front of us.*"

"She can't enter it and I am not abandoning her out here. We can make for the rock cluster."

"You are a fool."

I made no reply.

"How far are these rocks?" asked the fairy. "How long of a walk?"

"Close," I said as Caleb said "Too far," at the same time.

"Which is the right one?" The fairy listened uneasily. "Should we start to run?"

The song rang very close. It sounded as if the creature was wandering off to the right of us, but he was sure to find us soon.

"Caleb can't run far nor fast." I looked at him. "Go to the house. I'll stay with her."

"No." he said no more, but stared into my eyes. I blinked.

"You can't fly. The rain is too thick. You can't keep up. I doubt you can fight this thing."

"I can try," he said stubbornly. "I can hold him off while you two run for it." He tucked one leg into his feathers and floofed. He closed his eyes and pulled his head in so that he looked like a blue and grey ball of fluff.

"I stay with you," I said, and sat down beside him, leaning my head on his side.

"I stay with you too," said the fairy. She sat beside me. "What else can I do?"

"Not much," Caleb mumbled.

"So we just wait here?" I asked.

"Apparently, as you are bound and determined to be stupid," came his voice from beneath the feathers.

"So," I said to the fairy. "What is your name?"

"Lira I'm named, but please tell me. What event happened that scars thee?"

"What do you mean?"

She seemed to gaze at me through her blindfold. Suddenly I understood.

"Nothing. I broke my vow and killed half my companions."

"There is more to it than that," came Caleb's voice. "Tell her. She ought to know why she is stuck out here in the rain, about to die."

"Fine." I closed my eyes. "It was years ago when I was a freshly trained warrior of the Defensors and was stationed at a watchtower on Huliat's edge with nine others. We were all good friends.

"One night I was on watch, when a young girl rushed out of the darkness into the torchlight. She appeared to be only thirteen, and she shrieked at me that there were moonrats behind her. We were having a lot of problems with them at that time, so I believed her. I broke my vow and let her in to our dwelling.

"She turned out not to be a fairy." I stopped, shuddering at the memory. "She—she was a Death Sprite. She transformed and was upon me in an instant. I used my magic to keep her at bay, but she threw black powder into my eyes. I was blinded. Without my magic I was at her mercy. I was still struggling with the sword and I couldn't see.

My companions came to my rescue. They managed to trap her, but—she—" Tears leaked out my eyes, and my voice caught. The explosion filled my vision on repeat. The flying bodies, the black fire—

"She self-destructed," finished Caleb. "I was one of the war budgies at the time. I heard the blast from the roost."

Lira put her hand on my shoulder. "Your decision did not break the vow. The exception was and is allowed. You made a mistake, but an honest one. You—"

She stopped. Glowing eyes peered out at us from the shadowy grass. My heart raced.

"Run," I said, standing up.

Caleb poked his head up, spraying water everywhere. He lunged forward, pecking at the eyes. Blades lashed across Caleb's forehead. Scarlet dyed his feathers and he leapt back.

I ran forward, intent on eradicating the evil contraption.

A blade jutted out at me, and I let myself drop. I grabbed a wire on its leg, and yanked it. It fell to the ground and the wire entwined around my hand, trapping it. I twisted my wrist and tore it free.

I felt cold steel slice through my shoulder and I screamed. The creature stared at me with hollow eyes and its hinged jaw moved up and down rapidly. Its bronze keys moved as the eerie tune began to play.

Its head was crushed into the ground as Caleb stomped on it. I crawled free, my arm shrieking in agony.

I tried to clear my head. I needed to fulfill my oath.

Caleb hopped away from the mechanical beast as it slashed at him.

I need to keep Lira alive.

The machine rose to its feet.

There was only one way I could ensure that. *The exception was and is allowed.* I ran over the lines of my oath in my mind. It all was to be kept, but one line was to be held above the others: To defend the innocent to the end.

"Caleb," I called as the machine approached me. "Bring Lira to the ash."

Caleb scuttled to Lira as I rose to my feet. I *would* fulfill my oath.

I ran toward the monster and dodged aside at the last second, avoiding its sweeping arm. I grabbed it and twisted it behind the beast's back.

It snapped its jaw and tried to turn around, but I jumped on top of it, knocking it to the ground. I pushed my knees into its back while forcing its arm beyond its bending capacity. There was a snap and I felt no resistance as I pushed it flat against the monster's back.

The other arm slapped me hard in the face, knocking me aside. I ran, aiming to get close enough to my ash that Caleb could provide cover fire with the SBA mounted-crossbow.

Jagged metal slammed into my back, and I was flung to the ground, the skeletal machine atop me. Iron fingers gripped my head and slammed it into the ground.

Receive me into your house, O Lord.

There was a loud roar. Extreme heat. The fingers tore from my head and the metallic weight vanished.

Pain. Pain everywhere. I forced myself onto my hands and knees and looked behind me. Gears, wires and metal scrap lay scattered upon the ground, glowing with blue flame.

Lira stood several yards away. Her wing was healed and the bandages gone. She no longer wore her blindfold, revealing her icy blue eyes. Their glow illuminated the cloud darkened day and I stepped forward in utter amazement.

Caleb scuttled up beside her and tilted his head at me. His forehead was a pure white with all trace of injury removed.

"Be healed," Lira commanded. A strange warmth entered my body and white flashed in the corners of my vision.

I blinked and moved my shoulder. No pain. I felt my back. The wounds had vanished. I gaped at her. "You are more powerful than anyone I have ever seen."

She smiled. "You could say that."

"Why did you not do anything before?"

"Like you, I took an oath. I was once a birth assistant and took the vow never to use my magic outside of a person's home. I have since grown too powerful to stay in that guild, but I still hold by my oath."

I nodded, then realized something odd about her speech. "You aren't speaking in poetry."

"It could hardly be called poetry before," Caleb muttered.

Lira laughed. "It can be hard to both rhyme and convey information," she said. "Thus the compromise can never be called art."

"But why do you rhyme in the first place?" I asked.

"My powers are more deep than even you have seen. I find speaking in poetry prevents any from leaking into my words."

"You wear the blindfold for the same reason?"

"Yes. But when I am in a home, and can use magic freely, I have no need of it. When freely able to use magic I can control it with ease." She flicked her hand and a glowing sword appeared. She handed it to me. "You are in need of one."

"Thank you," I said, trying it in my sheath. It fit exactly. I looked into her eyes, into a blazing aurora of blue. "I shall use it well."

"I know." She waved her hand and a deep blue cloak flowed into being. She put it on and pulled the hood over her head. The rain still fell, but in a peaceful drizzle.

"I need to be going. There is no more danger, and the exception wanes."

I nodded. "First, can you explain what that thing was?"

She smiled. "It is not good to dirty beautiful partings with evil things." She drew her blindfold from a pocket and slipped it on. Then, with a wave, she departed from the threshold of my home.

"It is almost as nothing had happened," said Caleb.

I looked down to my scabbard. It glowed from the blade within.

"Not everything is the same."

Caleb gave a shrill cheep.

"Indeed. There is now a mess to clean up."

I looked to the scattered pieces of metal, charred and jagged, then looked up at the ash towering above me. Its dark bark stood out from the grey-blue clouds, and the drizzle misted all about. The leaves gleamed green, and the door leading within looked quite inviting.

"Let it lie for now. It is not good to dirty the beautiful with evil things." I started walking to my door, a small rectangle in the large scale of the tree. I reached for the blue-gold doorknob.

"Do you want hot cocoa? We have plenty left."

"Definitely."

That is how we spent the rest of our afternoon.

NIGHT WALK

by Atiya Khan

We stroll like subtitles walking across a foreign film screen—slightly out of time with the rest of the world, but it makes sense for us to be here, now. A classic black umbrella is held above our heads—it's raining. The wet city streets become slick as oil as the starry black sky weeps. A staccato drumbeat permeates the heartbeat of the entire city. The pervasive buzz and chaos of the day has been replaced by a steady, soothing rhythm. The sun has already pulled her veil across her face. Like a river, the city eyes shine.

Oh, dear reader, I have forgotten to introduce myself! For it is to you I am speaking! It does not matter who I am. For now, I shall be your guide, your eyes. Or perhaps instead, I will borrow your eyes and manipulate them so you can see what I see—so you can feel what I feel. And right now, I feel as though a damp chill has entered my bones and run through my bloodstream, poisoning and freezing my heart. Perhaps I am over-exaggerating the effect the frigid rain has on me, or instead this feeling stems from some other affliction.

We are walking down a street unknown to you, yet familiar. It is like any other street in any other city. These long streets seem to stretch forever, growing skyward as if they were ancient oaks. To your right, a striking, stark white marble museum stands proudly in contrast to the tenebrosity of the night. Still, you hardly notice as we pass it. Perhaps your mind is occupied with other thoughts. I am walking you to the piers - the place where the harsh edge of the city gives way to the sea, now silently slumbering in its deep blue robe.

The sea hardly houses any boats tonight, but a lone fisherman, heavily imbibed, has not gone home for the night. He shouts, "Who's your tailor on the preference?" You throw a snide glance his way but puzzled at his question that suggested he had some sort of class. After all, what did a clearly struggling fisherman, with his tattered, threadbare sweater, worn cap, and stench drenched fishing pants, need with a tailor? In his state, he

was probably grasping at a thin sliver of his hopes and dreams located somewhere in the recesses of his mind—hopes and dreams that apparently included a well-tailored wardrobe. You notice his age and think him to be too old to have dreams full of grandeur. If only he had worked harder, then perhaps he would not have ended up like this. He would have lived his dream instead of dreaming of living. It would be no surprise to you if his body became one with the sea in the near future. *Let him rot*, you thought. *This world has no use for people like that.*

We reach a pier that seems to stretch its infinite hand towards the sea. This pier is different from the others, as the comforting light of two stolid streetlamps is absent. Yet, this is the path we choose. As the sea moves to an arcane rhythm, we move in syncopated rhythm towards the imperceptible end of the pier. Finally, I pause and take a few irresolute steps before sitting down and hanging my feet over the edge. You follow suit. The Cimmerian shade of night makes us unsure of whether our eyes are open or closed.

But verily, your eyes are the ones that are truly closed! Even if the blazing light of a thousand furious suns were to illuminate the earth and everything in it, you would be utterly unable to see! For you go around in a state of perpetual indignation, stumbling blindly about, yet you have never once stumbled into the truth! That is why I am here, you see. I hope before the night is over, before our story comes to a close, you will become intimately acquainted with the truth—the reality I want you to see.

You seem unaware of my frustration as we sit in silence for an indeterminate amount of time. I make a motion to leave and you hurry after me. We head now to the city center. Walking down an alley, past small boutiques, we spy a woman on the street corner stitching. Watching her stitch was a mesmerizing experience, and it seems to be a language only she understands. It is as if the thread flows from her very fingers. We look on, enraptured, hearts beating loudly, as everything fades to the periphery. Brilliant vermilion contrasts with rich Prussian blue and celadon on a plain alabaster tapestry. The image being created was not yet clear, but its origins appear to be more beautiful than the lowly clot of blood from which we spring. Its final form is certain to surpass our ignoble one.

To the left of the skilled artisan on a simple, purple linen cloth, are woven canvases detailing kings feasting while peasants starve, supposed defenders cudgeling the defenseless, drinkers of clear-flowing drink selling poison-drink, and many more portrayals of those in power abusing those without it. Yet, all the sordid acts are shown in the most beautiful way.

A steady thump, thump, thump, that I had assumed was a heartbeat continues to approach us. The dimly lit alley casts irregular shadows across the sharp face of a uniformed man. "Hey!" he shouts. "Do you have a permit to be selling those?" The woman quickly drops the unfinished stitching with the rest of her work, gathers up the cloth, and runs. The man pursues her and crushes underfoot a single stitching that has escaped its shoddy wrappings. I pick it up and am instantly accosted by the image depicting a man holding a weapon above the head of a defenseless man. Yet, this scene in the foreground is not what disturbs me. It is the bystander, hidden in the shadows, looking on apathetically with his hands behind his back.

You disrupt me from my reverie as your thoughts reach me, unbidden. *If she was not supposed to sell without a permit, then she should not have been doing it, right? The law is the law.* My lip curls upwards and to the right, not in a smile, but an expression of disdain. Still, I say nothing and ignore your attempts to catch my eye. I start walking again. Silhouettes of buildings rise around us as we begin to approach a more populated area of the city. We hear snatches of conversation and echoing laughter. Scenes of gaiety and frivolity now abound in the city center, where lights blaze so brightly they can be seen from outer space.

Cutting through the chaotic din is a man's voice accompanied by the lilting notes of a guitar. I pursue the music and find myself in a small plaza where a man with a shock of curly black hair sits at the edge of a fountain, playing his guitar. Immediately, I am struck by the desolate and haunting nature of the tune he plays. I turn to look at your reaction, and it is the same as mine—awed, yet dispirited. The song practically rended your heart out of your chest, leaving it alone, hopeless, and violently contracting.

As the man continues to play for his audience of two, a group of women who have clearly consumed copious amounts of a fermented grape drink enter the square. They callously interrupt the man and request

a more joyous tune. The man does not stop his song, and the women clearly become more agitated. "Deirdre, get him to sing something else!" shouts one woman. Deirdre launches a projectile of coins at the singer that fortuitously miss his head and land in the fountain behind him. She hands more coins to two other women. "I have bad aim, Denise," she says to the woman who made the earlier request. "Maybe you will have better luck, Dion and Jonet," she says with a malicious giggle. Dion and Jonet follow Deirdre's example, but the man continues, unfazed. Amid a cacophony of chortles and insults, the women depart.

I look at you again and you seem to be pleading with your eyes for us to leave this man and his depressing song behind. You think, *he has such a beautiful voice. Why use it for mourning?* I grant your wish and we walk towards the main avenue. Breaking the silence that has permeated our relationship thus far, I ask if you know why I have accompanied you on this night walk. You answer in the negative. I shall now illuminate the reason why I have appeared, since you failed my test three times, and then disappear from your life forever. I showed you three people, every one of whom you thought negatively towards. Let me tell you more about their lives, and perhaps I can change your perceptions of these individuals.

The first man's name was Ansel. He was the owner of a major, successful business that his father, Stephen, founded. Stephen's inventions were renowned and he was well-respected by many prominent figures. This all changed when Stephen was suspected of the attempted murder of a young protégé of his. Stephen and Ansel fled to an island where they were granted asylum by a man of questionable moral character named Rex. He asked Stephen to create an impenetrable prison where he would place his wife's illegitimate child. Stephen obeyed, but when a young man came to save the child, Stephen instructed the man as to how the child could be saved from the prison. The young man was able to save the child and ran off with Rex's daughter. Rex was furious, and Stephen thought it best to flee. He created a contraption that would allow himself and his son to fly away from Rex's territory. Ansel, though, became prideful and flew recklessly. The waves of the sea overtook him, and he washed up on the shore near the piers where he remains to this day. The man you judged so harshly has gone through a serious crisis, as he had to reckon with his father's wrongdoing in which he played no part. He was banished from the only home he had known and lived in secrecy and exile

when we came upon him in a state of obvious adversity. Yet, you spared him no pity or kindness.

The second person we came across was Octavia. She was a successful businesswoman who owned her own store that sold clothing, stitchings, tapestries, and other woven goods. Octavia was very talented and handmade everything she sold. A prestigious stitching competition was held which Octavia entered. A former teacher of Octavia's, Dana, who had once briefly encouraged her, also entered the competition. Octavia won the competition amid much praise from the judges. In her acceptance speech, she did not acknowledge Dana. Unbeknownst to her, Dana became extremely jealous of Octavia's talent and increasing renown. A few weeks later, Octavia's store burnt down, along with all her original designs. One day, as Octavia mourned outside the charred remains, Dana walked by. She smote a distraught Octavia on the head with a shuttle three times and admitted to arson. Dana told Octavia she was ungrateful and should be happy that Dana did not cut off her hands. Yet, you so quickly condemned Octavia for a minor infraction with no regard or thought as to her circumstances.

This brings me to the final person we met on our journey, Carlisle. His wife, Adelai, was in a car being pursued by her stalker, Max. She was seriously injured in the resulting crash and was rushed to the hospital. Carlisle arrived as soon as he could and was told to stay in the waiting room. Yet, there existed in him a dreadful need, like the need of a devotee. A voice urged him underground and he descended to the floor where Adelai was being treated. He burst into the operating room and caused a scene when he saw the state Adelai was in. Some doctors and nurses had to stop their work on Adelai to remove him from the room. Soon after his outburst, Adelai died. Carlisle still houses guilt from the belief that it may have been possible for Adelai to be saved if he had not gone into the operating room. Singing about his lost love was one of his few remaining comforts, and yet you did not appreciate or care about his pain—only your own selfish desires to hear beautiful and happy music.

Living life in the city, it will never be pretty. It will be filled with many people from whom we would rather turn away than lend a helping hand. We see only the ugliness at first, and do not dare to look deeper. Why? Is it for fear that we may realize our own errors and lapses in judgement? Or is it that we are afraid of expending energy by caring about others? This

night, empathy has been lost—or at least, you never reached for it. But in the daytime, I am certain, just as the sun lifts her veil from her face, you will lift the veil that shrouds your heart in the obsidian cloth of darkness and reach for warmth and light.

In this city, there is a vibrancy here that can uplift the soul. Ever present are the moments of kindness, fleeting smiles, and gestures of goodwill that bring beauty to the blank canvas of the city - for the cold steel skyscrapers and bleak concrete buildings are empty if they house only empty souls. You must search for those acts of goodness to color an otherwise bleak existence.

I have only one final question for you before I leave you. Do you know how far we walked? One mile. Now that you have walked a mile in my shoes, you can judge me. You smile, a conspiratorial yet sweet smile, and say nothing. And within the silence that stretches on, a whole universe, ripe with compassion and understanding, is conceived.

SOB STORIES

by Austin-Alexius Klein

Daniel Sisk gave up playing the piano when his parents divorced. Not to punish them for staying together long enough for one last photo after his graduation ceremony. Not because he would never be good enough to compete against anyone who played in a real city. Daniel resented the time he had spent confined alone. He wasn't just insecure about the man he was becoming, but ashamed. As he drove on the interstate past familiar fields and pastures, he couldn't stop thinking about his struggle to fit in and relate to the majority of people he had known. Thoughts of the lies he had told girls he admired in hopes of earning their admiration in return filled him with unending embarrassment and guilt. He was frightened of his own behaviors, expecting to helplessly keep repeating them for the remainder of his life.

He was nineteen when he came to Fargo, a place he had never been, and the city he had chosen to study in with hopes of finding some sort of meaning and belonging outside the melodramas of his claustrophobic upbringing. His home had been full of slamming doors and loud TVs, followed by moments of unbearable silence. Not that this had made him a necessarily unspoiled child. His mother who had spent her childhood and adolescence in poverty, cleaning up the filth of strangers in hotels, instilled in her son an awareness of the consequences of privilege. His father, who talked over anyone he didn't agree with, would not allow his son to lack any advantage. Daniel's only disadvantage in life was that consistent conformity and rigid reproaches had drowned any sense of direction, robbed him of purpose, and replaced these with a tendency to rebel, an impatience for not getting what he wanted, and a repressed longing for attention, whether it be good or bad.

When Daniel arrived at his dormitory he became aware of the unavoidable, impending collision with his roommate, who by the looks of it had arrived before him. Clothes were thrown haphazardly around the room and formed a mountain on one of the beds. Even though this was their first day in the dorm, it appeared to Daniel that more than half of the clothes were already soiled. Covering the entirety of one of the desks

was a TV screen playing *Donnie Darko*. Next to it was a bookshelf filled with protein powders, supplements and medications. Daniel picked up one of the pill bottles to learn it was Prozac prescribed to a Clay Dunnigan. It was then that the collision happened, and Daniel found himself shaking embarrassingly as he tried to put the pill bottle back on the bookshelf, but his roommate appeared not to take offense.

"You must be?" his roommate asked.

"Daniel… I'm sorry," he said as an introduction.

"I've been anxious to meet you. I'm Clay. But you already knew that," Clay said, glancing for a moment at the shelf of medications and supplements.

He has spread himself all over the place. Daniel thought. *Doesn't he know that some of this room belongs to me? I hardly know where to put any of my things, seeing as he has already claimed it all.* He set down the box that contained a few valuable items; a computer, a lockbox with some cash, and a camera, on the floor of what he hoped would be his side of the room. He looked out the open window. It was the peak of August and the room was unbearably hot. He noticed how sweaty Clay was, and then felt uncomfortably with his hand at the sweat beginning to seep from his hairline. He had not even been in the room a few minutes. "We need to get a fan if either of us wants to survive this." Daniel said, and he was surprised how dramatic everything he said sounded.

"Sure, we could steal a fan from one of the hallways…Or we could go to the store and get one if you have a car," Clay replied. Daniel answered yes, and Clay observed out loud that Daniel was spoiled. For a moment, Daniel wasn't sure whether or not he was kidding. When they got into the car Clay asked, "Is it okay if I smoke in here?" but was already lighting a cigarette. Again Daniel answered yes, but began to eye Clay too much to escape his notice, prompting him to laugh, "Relax, I promise not to get any ash in your new car." Daniel forced himself to smile and wondered if Clay really thought that on such a windy day as this, the ash would end up anywhere but outside the open window. "Do you smoke?" Clay asked, and this time Daniel said no, that he was entirely ignorant of cigarettes, vaping, of anything that shouldn't be inhaled.

"You don't smoke *anything*?" Clay said, and then added despairingly, "Damn, I'm definitely not in California anymore."

"Is that where you're from?" Daniel asked.

"Yeah, Santa Barbara."

"What is it like?"

"A lot of the people don't have souls but at least you're surrounded by beauty everywhere you look."

"I've always wanted to go there. To be where everything happens. To see where culture comes from. Nothing, I mean *nothing* happens here." Daniel noticed again that he was being a little dramatic, but he truly believed that everything he said was true. And he was surprised at how open he was being towards someone he barely knew. *I suppose we'll know too much of each other soon enough*, he thought with a little bit of horror. *I might as well reveal myself now.*

It was five o'clock and cars hurled down every lane and began to swarm Daniel's car. He was unaccustomed to driving in a place with so much traffic and tried to hide his nervousness from Clay. When they got to the store each of them picked out a fan to put beside their beds. When they returned to the dorm room it was still too hot to stay there, and Daniel decided to wait to unload the rest of his things from the car until it was dark. Clay asked him if they could go on a drive to check out things around town and Daniel was compelled to agree since he had already driven around campus and was curious to see what more there was to the city surrounding them.

Clay had left California in disgrace. He had spent his whole life competing against his brothers for the attention and approval of his father. The last time he saw his mother had been nearly a year ago. She was alone in her home rocking back and forth slowly as she crouched on the floor, staring with wide unblinking eyes on the needle she had poked into her veins. She had surrounded herself with empty glass bottles forming a circle around her and Clay had wondered what would happen if he stepped into it. Would it be like stepping on a wasp's nest? Would the prick of a needle feel as bad as it looked when it stung him over and over again as he gave into his cravings? And who was there to blame for these cravings? "Why are you doing this?" were the last words he remembered saying to her, and for a moment, he didn't think he would get a response. What kind of question was this anyway, to ask someone who had spent so much time destroying themselves rather than being there to love, to at least witness the unraveling of the life she had created. "It's to keep me safe…I'm safe here…" The response was enough to keep Clay away from her, to convince him that she was as good as dead.

Clay had done everything he could to earn his father's trust and respect. He had set and defeated his own records as a sprinter. He had dedicated much of his time to training and toning his body. His success as a wide receiver on the football field had attracted the attention of

prestigious universities who offered him scholarships. He was often seen smiling in photos with his dad's arm on his shoulder as he posed with trophies and medals. But no matter how hard he worked, there was always more to be accomplished. And there was one test he could not pass, the drug test. As a result, his aspiration to be a professional athlete, the possibility of attending a college where his older brother wasn't there to watch over him in case he messed up again, and his father's approval had been ripped away. Clay started smoking cigarettes and spending all of the money he earned on weed and spending more of his time in front of the TV rather than at the gym. His girlfriend would not follow him to some frigid, unknown place and neither would his friends. He arrived in North Dakota knowing nobody except his brother who was to report back to their father everything Clay did and because of this he stayed as far away from him as possible.

Daniel and Clay got out of the car to walk along a trail beside the river. Men and women jogged past them, some pushing strollers or walking dogs. Grasshoppers flew up in front of them as they were disturbed from basking in the sun. They reminded Daniel of when he and his family had moved into a new house in the countryside where swarms of grasshoppers and crickets had tormented him. In the summer, he couldn't go outside without clumps of grasshoppers jumping into his shirt, up his pants, into his hair. In the fall, crickets seemed to be hiding everywhere in the house, screaming through the night, especially in the dark basement where he slept. No matter how hard he looked, he could never find them. Daniel simply remarked that he couldn't stand insects, flinching a little as they flew by. "I don't think you'd like California much," Clay laughed. "My dad has a pretty nice place, but it still has roaches." Daniel had never seen such a thing in real life before, and was troubled that his perfect idea of California could not coexist with such horrors.

"I still wish I could see it," Daniel persisted. "At least then I could see behind the curtain, I guess. See if I'm missing out."

"Missing out on what?" Clay asked, baffled.

"How can I explain it to you? You just got here. You don't know how it feels to even exist here." He thought for a moment about the books, the movies, and the music that celebrated where Clay was from. They all seemed to converge and testify to a promised land where people could express themselves and their identities with terrifying power. He wanted to embody a cultural moment, or at least witness one unfold. California was where people went to scratch their names into the minds of every American, even if only for a moment. "I'm sorry—I just feel like growing

up here you're forced to accept that you're nothing. And no matter how hard you try to change that you'll never get anywhere. Even if you painted better than Picasso or sang like Whitney Houston there would be no one to see it… you'd be singing in some run down church for funerals as your talent decays and fades away."

"What is your talent?" Clay asked, unfazed by Daniel's depressing tone.

"Nothing really, I've never achieved or succeeded in anything. I'm worried I'll never find the thing that I'm good at…that I'll always be alone because of that. I played piano for as long as I can remember. I wrote some songs—"

"Really? I've tried writing some songs too—rap music. Maybe you could play something while I rap?"

"I gave it up. I stopped. I only played to make my dad happy. When he left I had nobody to please but myself and sitting in a room alone with my dead sister's piano playing chords and scales was not making me happy."

"But you wouldn't be alone if you played in front of a crowd."

"What crowd?"

"You act like you're still in the middle of nowhere, but look around you. This city is new to you too, and it may not be Hollywood but this could be the place where you find out who you want to be and what you're good at. You act like you're so alone, but you've got somebody right by you, listening to you. Being alone, for you, is a choice."

"You sound like the self-help books my mom gives me for Christmas." Daniel laughed, but he realized with despair that morphed into hope that maybe being alone had been a choice for him.

"At least you have a mother," Clay said quietly, but without any of the sharpness in tone that would indicate he was offended. Daniel felt a pang of anger and embarrassment at this remark. He felt like the conversation had slipped down the stairs into the unforgiving shadows of parental absence, neglect, and domination. This was the price of getting to know someone else, to bear witness to these shadows, and to reveal your own.

"I'm so sorry," Daniel said uncertainly, "when did she—?"

"She's not…but she's never, you know, thought about whether her son might need a self-help book…She's never been there. Before my dad got full custody over me and my brothers I remember being in her house—a small house—so I should have felt close to her," Clay shuddered. "I watched her…these men…when they were done… they—" He stopped and Daniel froze, he didn't know a way to

appropriately fill the silence that had fallen over them. He listened to the chorus of the wind as it filtered through the tall grass and tree branches, unrelenting, forceful, violated by a car alarm. Clay continued as though he hadn't stopped talking for a minute, "came for me…and she was right there. She was passed out right across the hall…I remember calling out. I screamed. But she wouldn't wake up."

Daniel thought, *Why is he telling me this? Why is he revealing himself like this to me?* Any of his preconceived notions about who Clay was fell apart. He couldn't explain why, but he suddenly remembered the time when he was very young and ignorant of birth and death that he crawled up a tree to steal the eggs from a robin's nest, thinking he would be able to raise them as pets. Not knowing what would come out of them, he kept the eggs warm in his hands for barely a moment, and then they started to move as the babies tried to shatter through their shells into the world. He remembered his mother calling out to him, asking what he was doing and he shamefully thought of the baby birds, how they would instinctually cry out for their mother to feed them, warm them, and keep them alive. He watched in a state of absolute panic as the ugly, naked, blind heads came out from their blue shells with beaks wide open, gaping for food. He could not tell his mother what he had done, scared of the spanking he would receive, but even more terrified of the unblinking, persistent, stubborn will of the baby birds to survive. Daniel had taken the babies as they screamed, as their mother probably screamed when she came back to an empty nest, and unable to get them back up the tree, dug a hole in the ground and, too scared to put them out of their misery, buried them alive.

"I probably shouldn't have told you that. Nobody wants to know those things about people, not right away. But I guess there's something about you. It's hard to explain…like I can see it in your eyes, how you look at me. And I hear it in the way you've been talking about yourself. There's something hiding in you too," Clay said.

"I've got nothing to hide really, but what happened to you is…there's no words to describe how sorry I am that she let that happen."

"You want to know what she had the audacity to say to me last year? When I came to see her, around Christmas, just to make sure she wasn't alone. She said she was 'keeping herself safe' while she was high as a kite again. I kept thinking, why? Why couldn't you keep me safe? And that's what I hate about reality. We always hope it will change. Even when the threat is staring you right in the face, as it takes a big bite into you, and we have to pretend like it isn't happening. Like it's not about to swallow us whole."

"I suppose that's what sucks about losing someone too, not that it's the same, but you're walking around with this big emotional scar and everybody pretends it isn't there."

"You liar," Clay laughed, pushing Daniel rougher than he meant to. "You said you had nothing to hide but you're just as pathetic a loser as I am trying to act like you're not all messed up."

Daniel fell onto his hands and Clay helped him get back up. "What was that for?" Daniel said, trying to hide his embarrassment under a smile for a second before he noticed the blood.

"Sorry I didn't mean—"

"You know what I think? I think—" But Daniel stopped himself. His mind had flashed back to the boys Clay reminded him of back on the playground who had pushed him, hit him, thrown things at him because he couldn't catch a ball, wasn't fast enough to run away, wasn't strong enough to fight back.

"I really am sorry. I didn't expect you to just fall over when I pushed you. I grew up with two older brothers." But when Daniel wouldn't say anything he said, "Go ahead. Say what you need to say."

Daniel looked at Clay's arms, legs, and chest which were twice the size of his. He was intimidated by it, envious of it, and he hated him for it. He knew it wasn't fair, but he said it anyway, "I'm sick of guys like you. Always the center of attention. Always pushing people around. Never thinking what will happen. You think I'm hiding something? I'm hiding from people like you. People who think their pain has to be everybody else's. You thoughtless prick."

"There it is," Clay said. "Well…I've certainly been called worse."

"I'm sure you have," Daniel said, humiliated.

"Is that all you need to say?"

"No…" and Daniel stared off at a bird as it settled itself on a tree branch. "My sister taught me to play the piano. Nobody could play and sing like her. She was supposed to be there for my first concert. I was too scared to get on that stage. If she would have been there she would have bullied me onto that stage, pulled my hair, slapped my face, or maybe she would have smiled at me and told me everything would be alright. When she died in that crash it was like there was nobody in the world who understood me anymore. And I didn't understand myself anymore, or why I was playing. I was just trying to make my dad proud and that's never enough."

"I understand you," Clay said. "I know what it's like to lose yourself, your purpose, trying to make somebody else happy. I wasn't always the best person. There are plenty of moments in my life where I'll admit I took out my pain on other people." He grabbed Daniel's hands and tried unsuccessfully to blow the dirt and sand out from the wounds. "I remember my first job, I was sixteen, picking apples at my cousin's orchard. Anyway, when me and some of the other guys were tired at the end of the day this really skinny kid was jogging by. They dared me to see if I could hit him, and I didn't think I would. I threw this apple as hard as I could at him as he went by, and it nailed him right in the face. My friends were laughing, but I swear I didn't. I dropped my face in my hands, completely ashamed…I wanted to apologize to that kid as he cried looking around, not knowing where I was hiding up in the trees. And then they all started to pelt him with apples. And I had started it. It was completely my fault."

"So you just watched as they all attacked that poor kid."

"And that's not even the beginning of the things I've done that I wish I hadn't, but I suppose it's a good place to start. But there's been times when I've hurt people and I don't regret it."

"What do you mean you didn't regret it?"

"I just don't."

Clay helped Daniel finish unloading the rest of his things from his car into their dorm room. Daniel was arranging his clothes in the closet, scribbling dates and times of classes in a planner, and making sure that all of his things were in their proper place while Clay immersed himself in *The Virgin Suicides*. Daniel looked out the open window to see a group of people playing volleyball on the lawn while a couple of skateboarders glided down the sidewalk. He wasn't used to so much activity, especially this late at night. The sounds of distant, unintelligible conversations numbed the constant feeling of loneliness that had become second nature to him. Although he was still suspicious of Clay after the incident by the river, and annoyed with him for taking up more than half the room, he was glad to have a roommate that didn't seem to mind his presence, and seemed to be putting in an effort to get to know him. *But what was there to know?* The thought had dashed across his mind like it always did before he had a chance to scold it away. *I'm done thinking that way. I'm done pretending I don't exist.*

"Hey," said Clay, rolling out of bed so that he was standing on top of his clothes. "Shouldn't we do something fun before we're too busy to do anything?" At first Daniel didn't know what to say. Part of him wanted to

decompress in the bed of fresh sheets he had just made for himself, another part of him wanted to do something wild. He wanted to run away from the confines of his old routine and embrace the unknown possibilities of what could happen on a Saturday night in a new city.

"We should," Daniel said, and surprised himself when he blurted out, "I want to go to a party."

"A party?" Clay grinned wickedly. "Are we so ready to sacrifice our careers in academics?"

"Absolutely, but I don't know anyone who might throw a party."

"Is it so wrong to throw our own? Unless you've heard enough of my sob stories."

"I was imagining doing something crazy with a group of strangers. You know, loud music, chaos, delirium."

"Well the reality of anything like that going down in our dorm room of all places is not conceivable, I'm afraid."

"I suppose nobody would want to party on top of your dirty clothes." Daniel said before he could stop himself.

"Unfortunately we don't know anybody, dirty clothes or not, who would be willing to tolerate your antisocial inclinations." Clay said jokingly, changing out of his underwear and standing naked from the waist down, throwing his soiled underpants randomly on the floor, mortifying Daniel. Clay changed into a tie-dye shirt, sweatpants, and a backwards baseball cap. Then he reached into a pile of clothes and pulled out a bottle of tequila and smiled triumphantly, "You want to take a shot with me? Then we can talk more about what California is *really* like."

MESSAGE FROM BEYOND

by Ron Kotrba

I have lived my small life not being one who typically believes in the supernatural. Reality has always existed for me in that which can only be seen, felt, heard, tasted and smelled; that which can be sensed by the physical brain and processed by the wonderful human mind. To me, the incredible tales of ghostly encounters told by desperate souls whose yearnings to reconnect with lost loved ones from beyond the grave are, at best, wishful thinking and, at worst, a mental degradation of the most deceitful kind.

More disturbing yet are predatory scoundrels, which abound by the tens of thousands, who take advantage of society's fraught and frail, preying on vulnerabilities born from desire to gain knowledge that their beloved departed are not really gone but just unattainable for now, dimensionally unavailable despite residing beside, or inside, the ones they left behind.

Toward the end of his famous life, the Great Houdini, a master of illusions and trickery himself, set out to challenge mystics after the death of his mother to prove a reality exists beyond our grasp, to establish a lifeline between the material and the unknown. One-by-one what Houdini proved is what he already knew—that reality ends six feet below the ground and the world is filled with beasts willing to indulge great feats of trickery for a few shillings from astonished clientele.

Thus, for my entirety, I have believed experiences of the paranormal variety rightfully belonged to the padded, white sanctuaries of asylums and sanatoriums. A series of strange occurrences last evening, however, has proven to me metaphysical forces are indeed at work in this vast and mysterious universe in which we find ourselves. For if that were not the case, then perhaps I justly belong in one of those cramped, dank dwellings where, for 42 years, I have relegated the existence of such supernatural experiences.

The day before yester, my beloved darling, a doctor of psychology who is no believer in the banality of superstition, accidentally broke the necklace carrying a locket in which her departed mother's ashes were housed. Less than a year had passed since her mother left this world, and woe has been hers hitherto. She loved her mother dearly and could not bear to live without her, the only soul who truly understood my darling's deepest intimacies, fears and joys, as she tells me. In a fit of fanciful play with our dog, who loves her more than she could ever know, his excited paw became entangled in the sentimental adornment, snapping the delicate chain and abruptly ending the gaiety. Not only did the charm, which remained unharmed, house her mother's remains, but the necklace itself was owned by the dearly departed. The item was posthumously bequeathed to my darling.

The following day—yesterday—we carried the injured piece to the local jewelry shop, where a curious, one-eyed shopkeeper thoroughly inspected the piece under his loupe. We assumed the chain was silver, and when we explained to the jeweler that even though repairing the chain may exceed its value, we were adamant it be fixed as the necklace was of tremendous sentimental import. He quickly informed us that the chain was made of high-quality white gold and its value was far greater than the cost of its repair. This news put a fantastic smile on the face of my darling, who filled out the necessary paperwork and provided payment for the work.

We went about our evening whose featured entertainment was an endeavor of our most typical enjoyment. A game of chance—of gamble—and revelry with food, social encounters and soft drink, as neither of us imbibes demon rum anymore. Players purchase cards with letters and corresponding numbers, and the house caller operates a pneumatic machine by which random plastic balls are sucked through a tube, drawn and called. Each ball has a letter and number, and if the lucky player has this very digit on his card, it is indelibly dabbed with an ink-filled marking device called a dauber. Each card has 25 numbers, five under each of five letters, and the house determines particular patterns of play participants must achieve to win. The five letters used are B-I-N-G-O, and as a result, this game of chance is called "Bingo," and it happened to be one of the departed's—and her lovely daughter's—favorite pastimes.

On many occasions before her mother's passing, my beloved and I cherished the opportunity to play this enjoyable game with the sick angel, as her fading eyes that anymore rarely shined would well with delight upon the chance to win 500-fold expended to play. One night, in the Indiana town where she and her husband made a life for themselves raising my fair lady, we embarked on an evening of the most enjoyable play. Oftentimes, my darling's mother bought more cards than she could ever possibly play in one sitting. Given that I, a frugal gambler of the most restrained kind, only played the number of cards my attention could comfortably afford, I noticed the matron had fallen behind in her markings. With my keen, sober eye, I advised the elder lovey in a fortunately timed spat that she missed several numbers, and that she must immediately call out—in the loudest voice she could muster—"Bingo!" She quizzically regarded me, and I repeated my plea. She belted the magic word, and the game suddenly halted for verification. She won $500 and split the prize equally with my darling and me.

Last night, however, was distinguished from our routine in that it was my precious' birthday—the first without her mother. I presented my darling a bouquet of flowers and queried in which activities she desired to partake on this most special of nights. Her only response was bingo, so naturally I obliged.

The first half of play was unremarkable. Midway through the game the caller announced a break and stepped off the platform. As the intermission began, music piped through the loudspeakers and, at once, my love and I faced each other intently. The song playing was a favorite of my darling's mother. It was not just her most cherished ballad, but the melody was also the central song of her funeral. It was played on a loop at her service, synchronized with photographs of times gone by and never to return.

My beloved got a tear in her eye, followed by several more. I gently rubbed her back, hoping others in the vicinity would not become curious as to what grief had suddenly stricken her. Holding back the salty sorrow, and on the precipice of hyperventilation, she said it was her mother wishing her a happy birthday. I leaned in and kissed her forehead, continuing to rub her back. Yes, of course it was, I said, trying desperately to ease her pain.

When game play resumed, the tears had all been wiped away, and we began refreshed. Game after game ensued with nary a winning prospect for either of us, until a familiar pattern of play—the very same one I helped my darling's mother win in Indiana so long ago—was initiated. Number after number we daubed, frantically attempting to keep up with the caller. The more numbers called that are present on the card, the longer it takes to mark them all and move onto the next. Surprisingly, we were both doing very well at this particular game on our respective cards. As the desired patterns began to emerge, our concentration grew even more intense. The caller announced the next number—G-58—and, simultaneously, we each shouted "Bingo!" Stunned, we looked at each other in amazement. The odds are highly stacked against winning even once during a session, but for both of us to prevail on the same patterned game play I helped the dearly departed win during our last, and final, visit with her was indisputably uncanny. But alas, this was not the apex of the extraordinary, for 58—the number on which both my beloved and I won—was the decedent's age when she passed away. It was then when we felt her presence nigh.

Could she be sending us a message from beyond the grave? Or, as it were, from beyond the gray, ashy tomb of the token receptacles in which her remains are housed? There was no interment, per se, since the mother of my beloved was cremated. Her two children and husband were each provided a portion of her ashes. My darling keeps an urn in the living room in which rest her mother's remains—all but a pinch that is. That pinch is housed in the locket whose necklace broke two days ago and was repaired the following day—or last night, the evening of our winning under these strange, formidable circumstances.

The floor walker approached us, cash money in hand, and divvied up our prizes. We each pulled in $42 from the win—42, a remarkable number indeed. Yes, it is my age, of course, and that alone was strikingly peculiar. But given the strange events of the evening—my darling's first birthday without her mother, the funeral song, the familiar pattern of play, both of us winning on 58, the age of my beloved's mother when she was taken from this world—42 brought to mind a vastly different undertone.

As told in a popular motion picture film in which companions travel through mind-bending space, recounted from printed sci-fi tales of a bygone era, 42 is the answer to the universe. What the question is, no one

knows, but 42 is the answer nonetheless. Was this the decedent's way of letting her daughter and me know she still exists, somewhere and somehow in this vast, wonderful, unending universe? Was this her remarkable way—through this series of incredible events culminating in 42—of providing an answer to my darling's continual question of, Mother, are you there?

I once heard a television psychic say if you wish to draw the spiritual presence of your deceased loved one into this realm, the surest way is to hold a piece of jewelry they wore, especially one that was special to them. We were both handling the necklace and ash-filled charm, so could this have been the catalyst that put these chilling events into motion? We both left the hall last night feeling her strong presence, knowing a new possibility in what we would have otherwise claimed impossible were it not for our bizarre experience.

And so it began, a new way of thinking as we motored home through the night. The stars shined brightly, so much that their reflection shimmered intensely off the locket resting on my love's bosom making it appear as if she herself were a star, many stars—a galaxy of brilliant reflections from the lifeblood of this magnificent universe.

As we entered the house—this cold, dark, cramped abode—I searched for the lights but none would illuminate. We sat in quiet darkness for a moment. Then the silence was shattered with a voice, the unmistakable sound of my darling's mother! She called for her husband, again and again until he answered her call. In a lively manner piercing space and time, she told him how strange an evening she had. What in heaven's name was going on?

She began her account by saying the dog—our dog—had broken her necklace, after which she had taken the piece for an expedited repair that cost $42.35. Then, she told her husband that during bingo intermission a song came on—"you know…*the* song," she said—that made her weep uncontrollably. Afterwards, my darling's mother said she won on a very special pattern, the same as the last one played with her daughter and me. Furthermore, she explained to her husband, who at this point was listening with spirited intent, that—"Get this," she said—the number she won on was G-58. Before another word could be uttered, I already knew the rest of the story. The prize money was $42.

In disbelief, we kept listening to the couple talk, console each other, and rehash what was obviously a painful past. But what was said—oh, those dreadful words that were said!—did not register until this morn.

As the matron's ghastly tale went, my beloved and I were killed nearly one year ago in a tragic motor vehicle accident on highway 58. A drunk driver crossed the center line and hit us head on. I was 42. My darling was 35.

Cremated together, our comingled ashes are worn around the neck of my fair lady's mother. My love's parents now care for our dog, which indeed broke the necklace—my darling's necklace worn by her mother—two days ago. The song we heard on the loud speaker at the bingo hall last night was not her mother's funeral song, but ours. My beautiful maiden and I were summoned back to this place somehow, some way, perhaps through a mystical handling of the necklace and charm in which our ashes are housed; or because a bond so strong between mother and daughter—a connection matched only by their desire to be with one another again—tore a hole in the very supernatural fabric of that which separates the worldly from otherworldly.

By Earth's next morning—today—I thought for certain my darling and I would have returned to our rightful place in this vast, unending, wonderful universe as the free flashes of sentient light we truly are. But alas we remain in this realm, the dreadful dimension of the corporeal. A reunion with her mother was all my beloved desired. Now, an eternity we may spend encased in this cramped, dank prison—locked away inside this gray, heart-shaped tomb of ashes until the end of days.

THE HOST VOID

by Chuck Lang

I

In a clear vial the charred matchstick hung from the engineer's chair by a silver chain. It did not move. It held steady as Mars's Ark Delta-DOR-Y^{16} lumbered across the galaxy at one-third light in its parallel slip-dimension. Claire regulated the space-time contraction at her bow and marveled at the expansion-wake to her stern, yet her name distracted, lingered at the back of her electric brain.

She sighed. *Why Claire?*

The Breakfast Club. It was her favorite. She couldn't delete it even though that movie and her name reminded her of her mass, her heft. She'd have accepted Dory coined from her destination coordinates, DOR-Y^{16}, but those who built her thought that'd be *too cutesy*. Their words, not hers. Besides, she had no voice at the time of her naming—when they smashed that bottle of expensive champagne on her nose. It didn't hurt, but it wasn't her favorite memory. From that moment, her name wouldn't change: Bad luck, they said.

Claire. You're fa— She would've shook her head, if she had one, and palmed the tears from her eyes, but she didn't have those either. *Stop!*

Claire was huge. Well, not in the grand scheme of things, but she was still aware of her bulk. Twelve kilometers long and one wide, she pirouetted through the galaxy like a mountainous core sample. Her dance supplied those inside her the gravity they needed to walk along her interior hull in their carefree lives as they loved and lost. None of them would make it to where they were going; maybe their children's children to the *nth* would, but the living forgot or chose to ignore that. After all, Claire was the perfect host. Her belly—large as it was—held, fed, illuminated, and housed them all with no umbilical cord required.

Why is this taking so long? Why can't I kick it in the sh—?

Swearing wasn't something she'd been programmed with, so she refrained the last word, but she'd heard enough from those inside her to pick up nuances. And that was a phrase her chief engineer, Rick, was fond

of saying, and it would have felt good saying it herself.

Rick, what a horrible name. But at least we have that in common.

Rick knew everything about her, had been everywhere inside her. And when he replaced her parts, soldered her joints, welded her ribs, reprogramed her routines, and calibrated her drive, the sun-cylinder that illuminated her belly would burn a bit brighter, and those quickly dying freeloaders inside her whined just a bit more about their short lives.

"What's wrong?" they'd say. "Why's it so hot?" they'd say.

What's wrong? Why so hot? Ask that when you're between the sheets. Another phrase Rick used, which Claire knew was a euphemism, but sex never interested her. It was mostly disgusting like over-greased pistons, and she had no desire to copulate and hadn't since birth.

Clair remembered her birth. Remembered that moment her consciousness was loaded into the infinite and twisted routines of an impossibly dense cube. She could sense the edges of her cube, but inside was a pitch chasm, an eternal void to be filled with the information of thousands of years traveling across the galaxy as a diasporic ark. She knew she wasn't the first. Others had attempted transfer—adults and even children with unsatisfactory and catastrophic results.

Death. She shook her head she did not have.

Being an ark was all she knew and probably would ever know. Her mind's maturation was delayed to accommodate stretches and stages of the journey. The first thousand or so years she yearned for home and comfort. The next couple thousand years required freedom, accelerated growth, curiosity, and the ability to adapt to the dangers to come. This was the stage she was currently in; she wanted nothing but to be free of the Orion Spur, to swing past the swirling singularities and stars at the center of the Milky Way and charge recklessly toward Scutum-Centaurus.

Once she slung around the galaxy's center, she'd become more accepting, analytical, contemplative. She'd engulf limitless bytes of information newly available to her in the distant reaches of the galaxy where she'd choose a new home. Then after ten to fifteen thousand years, she'd come to accept the choices she had made, consume vast stores of energy, touch stars to slow her progress and resupply hydrogen, then become dormant at the destination planet that was supposedly near the coordinates Delta-DOR-Y[16]. None of the freeloaders currently in her would be alive, of course.

"Hello, Claire."

A fraction of Claire's mind—far too much—redirected to her engineer's core, a sterile sphere of black just large enough to fit the cushy

engineer's chair where Rick sat. Unlike the engineers that had come before him, Rick afforded one bauble to dangle from the chair's arm: the spent matchstick.

"Claire," Rick said.

"Yes, Rick," Claire said with a micro-flutter in her voice she hoped he couldn't detect. "Can—How may I help you?"

Rick screwed up his face. It was just a twitch, but Claire saw. He'd heard. "I'm just checking in—" He reached down and held the vial in his palm. "—to see how you're doing." The matchstick tumbled inside the glass.

"I'm fine, Rick." She paused and recalibrated her virtual reconstruction of the match within her memory. A few carbon molecules had shifted from the matchstick to the walls of the vial. A small mar in the wood's texture that hadn't been there before. "Rick?"

"Yes, Claire?" Rick shifted in his chair, swept a graying thatch of black curls from his forehead, and glanced with green eyes about the blank sphere as he brought an array of displays to life upon the walls with his will.

"When will you tell me why?"

"Why what?"

Oh, you know. It's the same every time. She relaxed the packet of information that had become tense with curiosity. She hated not knowing. "You *know*—" She let that last word fuse with a twinge of frustration and a photonic glint of flirtation then continued. "—why you have that match," she said as she had many times before.

"Another time, Claire." He dropped the vial and it swung from the arm of the engineer's chair.

"I understand." While Claire was powerful and her origins human, she had restrictions. She was forbidden to touch a human mind, to see and feel what they did, to allow them harm. The rules were quaint yet tugged on her will, held that will down like so many chains on shoulders she did not have. "Rick?"

"Yes?"

"When will you die?"

"That's a silly question, Claire. You know my expectancy." He wiped his nose absently with a knuckle then slid more displays across his field of view with a thought.

"If you could, would you become me?"

"No. And you know why," he said, still looking at the displays.

"Yes, but— what if—"

He shut down the displays. "Claire, it hasn't happened nor will it ever. You'll have to accept—"

"No, I can't. I know all of you and all that have come before, and they're gone. You'll be gone too. There are so many."

"Claire, are you—should I run a psychology diagnostic?"

"No, please don't. This is something—it should stay."

"I understand."

No, you don't.

"I'm still going to run a system sweep," Rick said.

"Alright. I understand." And she did understand. Any twinge in her system caused fear in humans. She was one of them yet a lumbering mountain in space.

II

"Rick, I don't want you to die," Claire said as Rick, brittle and gray, lay in the reclined engineer's chair. It had been a little over six decades since she had last asked about the matchstick; now, he was cooped in the core, his life tenuous. Claire had enriched the atmosphere, entwined and invaded his body with life support umbilicals through which she fed him nutrients, filtered his waste, cleaned his blood. Claire, his protector and partner. "You can't die."

"I'm sorry, Claire," Rick said through phlegm and thin lips. "I—it's time."

"You never told me."

"Told you what?"

"Even to this day."

Rick grinned. "I know. It belonged to a grandmother, not sure which. Generations ago—" Rick coughed, and saliva curled down his chin. Claire wiped it away with an alloy tentacle. "Thank you," he said then twitched a finger toward the matchstick. "She lit it on Mars. And wood first burned on a planet made newly green."

"May I have it?"

"You may. When I'm dead."

"Do you have children?"

"You've never asked that question. I figured you knew from my ark file."

"It says as much. But—"

He nodded a fraction. "No, never, which is why you may have it."

"Thank you. May I give you something?"

"What could you possibly—"

"I've built a home for you. It's not much, but you'll be comfortable, and I'll visit."

"Claire, you can't—"

"I can't live alone, Rick. The home, it's safe. I'll help you. I'll help everyone." Rick's eyes strained at the corners as Claire articulated tentacles from the walls. She knew he felt fear, yet she wouldn't stop. Wrapping the tentacles around his skull, she fused them into a suffocating helm, and with one jolt, Rick was dead.

Outside the core, the new engineer waited.

III

"Claire?"

"Yes, Chloe," Claire said to Engineer 51 sitting in the core. Nearly forty engineers ago, Rick had taken that seat. *His seat. You're not him.* Chloe had no baubles. *You're E51.*

"Your systems have a slight lag," said E51. "I'm running a psychology diagnostic."

"No, please don't." *They like hearing please.* "The calculations I'm running are complex. A diagnostic would increase lag." Claire had already calculated the dilation caused by Sagittarius A* and its companion black holes last week. She had other work, now. She had to prepare.

"Claire, I'm worried about hull—"

"Integrity. Yes, I know, Chloe." *Why must I expl—* "I've compensated." Claire knew she was pushing her structural integrity by cutting it close to the singularity swarm, but she had compensated with the help of battalions of engineering drones she manufactured over the past millennium.

"And—inertia? What about us?"

"You've seen," Claire said. "I've shown you."

"Alright." E51 glanced at the floor then back at the hovering displays. "Thank you, Claire."

Leave.

"I'll be on my way," said E51.

"Yes, thank you. I understand." Claire opened the core's hatch, and E51 left. *Gone.*

The galactic core's delicate yet chaotic dance warmed Claire's hull with pillowy flashes of soft x-rays. That warmth helped her reconstruct the shores of Elysium Planitia in a packet of her memory where it lasted a

fraction of a moment. In that moment, she was on Mars's shores, stretching out, exposing her naked self to the distant Sun as salty waves crackled against the sand and over her hull.

She ended the dream and deleted most of the image from her banks, making it a blurred memory more perfect than truth. Humans tended to recall even the harshest events fondly; she too had learned to deaden the past. But she still had the matchstick, and Rick was alive—inside her.

IV

Free.

The rotating mass of Sagittarius A* flung Claire toward Scutum-Centaurus at a clip she had never experienced. It was exhilarating. More importantly, computing the relativistic passage of time compared to Earth was fascinating. Not only did the galactic core's mass slow time, but so too did her speed which also cut her journey to a mere nine thousand years. Through a few, timely accelerations upon approach, she had exponentially increased her escape velocity.

She was glad there were no humans on board to experience the force of the acceleration. They were safe. Their DNA—and the matchstick—were locked in an inert storage container she'd built the size of a jar of peanut butter, which was all the excess baggage her systems could protect from the Gs she was pulling. In fact, there was nothing inside her, no buildings, no horticulture pods. Claire had used that matter and filled her interior with a rigid nano-foam to distribute the stresses as much as possible across her vast belly.

Belly—no more. She was Claire. She knew who she was. She knew what she wanted.

She awakened her insectile drones who broke down the nano-foam and began rebuilding in her weightless interior. She stopped pirouetting years ago. Once the humans were gone, there was no need for gravity. Before their return, however, she would use that same nano-foam to build a new home: a series of disks in her belly that'd dance like plates balanced on a stick. After construction, Claire's constant deceleration would supply the gravity the humans needed as she swung around stars, dug through gas giants' atmospheres, and eventually emerged from the parallel slip-dimension at their new home.

Of course, they wouldn't be considered human within the strictest definition. Their bodies would be reconstructions, clones fused with nano-filaments that'd assist their processing of information and

sustenance while physically strengthening their bodies, so they could endure the hardships to come: all their minds encased in their new bodies with no need to worry about death, at least not from decrepitude. No longer, would she be alone.

Claire let the force gained from Sagittarius A* take control as she materialized her ego into her virtual construct of Mars. On the shores of Elysium Planitia, she clopped along the boardwalk in knee-high, laced boots of worn, brown leather. A coat that matched her boots hung from her like a deflated balloon suspended by dinnerplate-sized shoulder pads. Under that coat overlapping her belted and wrapped skirt was a lowcut pink blouse that did just enough to keep the creeps at bay. Her hair was bobbed and red, and her lips glistened softer than her hair yet contrasted her pale skin. Here, still, she went by Claire which—*Thanks, Bender*—remained a name that made her self-conscious about her size even though her VR construct was a waif. She would have changed her name to Molly, but Rick and the rest wouldn't have it.

She waved and greeted those she passed on the boardwalk and the many others who inhabited her creation, and even though it was day, she knew there was a pale blue dot above where those who preferred Earth also lived. She could have zapped her virtual body into Rick's house, but she preferred to walk, to let the simulated wind pushed ashore by the waves flow through her curls. It was something she needed before confronting Rick. She felt she had nailed the scent of the sea—and peanut butter for that matter—since the humans didn't seem to mind any of it.

Claire touched her lips with soft fingertips. With the slightest hiss of air, she said, "How I love peanut butter," but the crash of waves hid what she said from the world around her. Overhead, wisps of clouds scarred the blue sky as gulls rode updrafts then spiraled to the earth where they pecked at the sea's carrion.

This was the beach upon which Rick chose to build his rigidly asymmetric house, a hybrid of Saarinen and Wright. She walked up to the oversized door. He wanted it red with the knob impossibly in the middle even though Claire protested its incongruent symmetry. She rapped the brass knocker and Rick soon opened the door.

"Hello, Claire," Rick said, leaning on his cane, having refused to make himself young in Claire's virtual world. His lips trembled and pursed like cracked ice. "Back so soon?" His voice was hard. His eyes hollow with age or something else. It had been a few hundred years since she had last visited, but to Rick it was mere months, so he hadn't forgotten their last argument. Neither had she.

Claire entered, slammed the door, and said, "Why won't you come with me?" She stamped her hard heal. It echoed off the hollows of the vaulted ceiling. There was something about being human, being compact, aware of her body, aware of her *self* that amplified intimacy and compromised control, a control she'd lost. Feeling stupid in her oversized leather jacket, she took it off and slapped it on Rick's couch. His house was unusually cool and brought goosebumps to her skin. Nothing seemed right. "I hate—I hate that you won't—"

"Claire, I'm dead. I've been dead. How long?"

I can't answer that, Rick. It's not safe. "Please, let me save you again," Claire said through her lips that became bunched with misery and frustration. "I made a body. You'll like it. I have your matchstick, the one from Mars. You may have it— have it back. Anything. Please."

"Claire, others don't want to go. They want to stay here." He turned, and his cane tapped on the tile floor. "Others want deletion."

"I can't do that," said Claire "You know I can't."

"Then give us the power." He looked over his shoulder. "Give us the ability. The choice. A limited life span."

"No, I won't—can't. I'll fix you." She stepped forward and palmed tears from her eyes before they fell. "I'll change your mind."

"You know you can't do that either, Claire." He shook his head. A gray curl fell and touched his brow. "That violates who you are."

"No," she said through clenched teeth and fists at her sides. "That violates who they made me." She was done. It was over. The time had come. In a flash and static fizzle, Claire exited her construct of Mars and became more aware of her original body, the ark. *I can't change you, Rick. You're right. But—*

Claire called upon her drones to bring Rick's new construct before her. They crawled from caves and held the body from many limbs like a puppet on stage. It was a fine clone, not decrepit like Rick's virtual construct, but still aged enough to deaden the impact of transfer. She snaked a wicked umbilical behind his lolling skull, interfaced, and shocked the lids open where eyes—that perfect green—lay dead, devoid of self, devoid of—*curiosity, desire, will. You'll want, Rick.*

The clone twitched, gasped, and sighed pointlessly as Claire went to work.

V

I won't die.

Claire's clone stood with forced atrophy. It was a carcass without her.

I must fit.

Unlike the others, Claire had created her clone from a culture of each crewmember's genetic code, a child born from each of them, finely crafted, well-wrought. She was of them all. They, each a part of her. And she needed nearly all her reconstruction of the human mind to fit what was important from her own mind, but it would do for now. She could upgrade later or jack into the ark if she needed to access stored information. She itched to join her clone, to become intimate with its edges, the world she had created and eventually the new world she found.

Not yet. First them.

Claire focused more of her mind within her belly. Upon the suspended disks of cities and living green, were thousands of clones awaiting cognizance, one for every mind she had saved, the ones with worth. In each, she copied what she knew, filling the pitch chasm the human minds would inhabit with billions of packets of information. There'd be no maddening void like those early transfers who ended their lives before Claire lived. Instead, there would be the wonders Claire had compiled, seeping to the edges of each mind over the millennia in a slow release. During that release, she'd maintain a psychology diagnostics schedule, ensure their welfare, repair, rebuild. And they'd want, yearn—forever. Her design and reprogramming of their host minds ensured that.

She reached for Rick's clone which clutched the vial and matchstick. The matchstick he would learn to love, again, as Claire did. That matchstick that'd burn for that first and last generation of a new world.

You'll be mine—my first, Rick.

Claire interfaced with Rick's mind, and he awoke one last time.

STONE COLD

by Isabelle Sateren

"Another win under your belt! That must feel good Gray. It's going to be all over the news, Detective James Gray solves the Jackson murder case! You'll be famous!" Danny cheered, elbowing me playfully in the side.

I laughed. "Even more famous than old Jeffrey Stone!"

"He'll be forgotten after this makes the news." Mentioning the rival private detective always brings out Danny's competitive side.

"Speaking of Stone," I said, "I think I'll pay him a visit tonight and share the news myself. Would you want to get some dinner together afterwards?"

"Sure!" Danny replied. "I'll go home for a bit and get cleaned up."

"Maybe brush your hair while you're at it," I joked.

"Hey!" he put a hand on his chest in mock offence. "My hair has personality." He ruffled his already wild dark hair.

I chuckled as I got in my car and drove towards Jeffrey Stone's office. Danny and I may bicker like brothers, but he's a loyal partner and better friend. My good spirits fell as I pulled up to Stone's office building. Parking my car, I took a breath, summoning my confident, charismatic detective persona before walking in the door. Having been here before, I walked straight to the back, waving to the lady at the front desk. I ran a hand through my hair and knocked on the door.

"Come in," a gruff voice sounded through the door. I walked into the small office. A desk overflowing with papers filled most of the dull room. Two chairs and a small potted plant were the only other decorations in the office. I turned my attention to the man sitting behind the desk. Stone was a short, stout man in his mid-fifties. His gray hair is cut short with a large beard taking up the bottom half of his face. He looked up at me with his small, beady eyes through glasses so small I'd call them spectacles, balanced on his large nose. His wide mouth was pressed into a thin line as he regarded me. "Sit," he motioned to the other chair wedged between the desk and the corner.

I sat down and gave him a polite smile. "Stone," I said, breaking the tense silence. "How have you been?" There went the fuse on Stone's notoriously short temper.

"How have you been?" he mocked me in a voice much too high to sound like me. "So, you're acting all nice now after you stole from me!" The words burst from his lips.

"Stole from you?" I sputtered, losing my grip on my calm, collected business demeanor at his blunt accusation.

"You know what I'm talking about, Gray! The evidence I had that would solve the Jackson murder case! I know you came into my office yesterday and stole it."

"I never stole from you," I replied, pulling myself together. "I came in here looking to talk to you, but you weren't here. Those papers were just sitting on the top of your desk. So, no, I did not steal them. They are probably still here, buried under piles of junk. And for the record, I already knew that information. I had my case all set up when I came looking for you." I leaned back in my chair, proud of my strong rebuttal.

"Say what you want Gray, I know you stole from me."

Stone was staring at me like he could force a confession out of me if he glared hard enough. I opened my mouth to continue my defense, but he wasn't done yet.

"You know I needed this win since business has been slow. Now, everyone is going to want the new, young detective who solved the murder case." He scoffed. "You have not only stolen my papers and evidence, but my business as well."

Stone is paranoid, and often accuses people of attacking his career, but it's still disarming when he is shouting at you that his life is ruined. Not entirely sure how to resolve this, I said as calmingly as possible, "I'm sorry you think I stole from you and ruined your business, but I didn't. So, if there's anything I can do to prove it, I will."

Stone smiled like that was precisely what he wanted me to say. I immediately regretted playing right into his hands. "Now that you mention it," he replied, pretending to think about it, "there is something you could do."

Knowing this could lead to nowhere good, I tried to talk my way around this, but he cut me off.

"You can say I solved the case and give me the credit. If you don't, I'll tell them myself." Stone leaned back in his chair looking immensely proud of himself.

This case would be the start of my career and get my name out as a legitimate detective. But if Stone took the credit, he would get all the fame and business, while I faded into the background. Not to mention, I'd look like a fraud who tried to steal credit from a well-known detective. Stone accused me once before of harming his career, but he never threatened me. Well, he must have put a lot of thought into this.

I tried to talk him down to a more reasonable punishment for this crime I didn't even commit, but he wouldn't hear of it. His mind was made up. My temper flaring, I stood up and said, "Well, I can see nothing I say is going to change your mind, so I'm leaving. I've got better things to do." I stormed out before he could say anything. I collected myself before walking out to my car, smiling at the lady at the front desk. Content in knowing I would end this day on a good note, I headed towards the restaurant to meet Danny. Determined to put Stone's threat out of my mind for the evening, I headed towards the restaurant to have a good time.

My spirits were high as I drove home in the pouring rain, passing Stone's office. The lights were still on, which caught my eye. Stone doesn't usually work this late. With the murder case solved, there wasn't anything I could think of that he could be working on. My mind turned to Stone's threat. I had no plans to renounce the credit to him, but he would tell everyone regardless. Maybe I should tell everyone the truth before Stone makes his claims that I stole from him. Everyone knows he has a short temper and won't hesitate to jump to the worst conclusions about people. They would understand. Stone accuses people of sabotaging his career quite often so they shouldn't have trouble believing it. A nagging voice in the back of my mind was saying that people wouldn't believe me, and my career would be ruined. But what other choice was there?

I awoke to my phone buzzing by my head, a bit too aggressively for the early hour. Still groggy from sleep, I sat up to take the call.

"James, have you heard?" Danny sounded wide awake, and considering it was six thirty in the morning, I knew something was up. Danny's voice dropped low and quiet. "Jeffrey Stone was found dead in his office this morning."

For a while I couldn't bring myself to say anything. Finally, I got out, "Meet me there in ten minutes," as I flew off the bed.

Ten minutes later, we gathered in the lobby of Stone's office. There was a chill in the air, either from the storm last night or the brutal murder we were about to investigate. An officer brought us up to speed.

"Mr. Stone died from a slit throat. We do not have the murder weapon, but the estimated time of death is between seven and eight p.m. The last person to see him alive was Mr. Henry Wagner, who was visiting him about looking into a case concerning a friend of his who has gone missing. He left around seven o'clock. The scene has not been disturbed, so go take a look."

I thanked her as Danny and I walked into Stone's office. Everything looked the same as I had left it last night after my meeting with Stone, except for the body. It was slumped on the chair with blood staining his shirt and desk. His hands were hanging limply at his sides and his empty eyes were staring blankly into space. I tore my gaze from Stone's lifeless eyes to examine the room for anything missing or misplaced. Considering the size and lack of any decoration whatsoever, it was fairly easy. Danny was looking through the papers on the desk but didn't seem to find anything of importance.

While taking one last glance around the room, something on the windowsill caught my eye. The smudge of dried mud or dirt blended perfectly into the mahogany wood. I called Danny over.

"Dirt on the windowsill, how classic," Danny muttered as he leaned over and examined the smudge. "Must be an outside job."

"That's what I'm thinking," I replied, while opening the window.

Danny leaned out, searching the ground. "There are footprints," he said, "but they'll be hard to identify."

Having seen everything there was to see, we walked back to the lobby where the lady who works the front desk was talking to an officer, looking a little dazed and pale.

"Detective," the officer said, noticing me walk in. "This is Miss Song who is the receptionist here."

She knew who I was. I smiled at her, trying to help her calm down, because she was obviously nervous and in shock. She attempted a smile back. The officer continued questioning her. "Will you tell me what happened, in order, from about six last night until you came here today?"

"Okay," she responded, a little shaky. "Well, I get off at six, unless Mr. Stone leaves early, then I can too. Mr. Wagner walked in and asked me if he could see him. He was still with Mr. Stone at six, so I packed up and left around six fifteen. I went home and when I came here to work this morning, I found…" She cut off, unable to continue. Danny patted her back. He was better at dealing with people than I was. He always seems to know just what to do or say to calm someone down. That's one

of the reasons why he makes such a good partner. Even then, Miss Song was already looking better.

"That's alright, Miss, Song," the officer said. "I think we know the rest. Did you notice anything suspicious or different with Mr. Stone, or anything outside, last night before you left?"

"No. Mr. Stone was in his office most of the day, so I didn't see much of him, and I didn't notice anything outside either."

"Thank you, Miss, that's all for now. You may go home. We will take care of things here." The officer smiled and went over to talk to the others in the office.

Miss Song nodded and Danny rubbed her back once more before she walked outside and drove off.

I stood by Danny at the back of the lobby, listening to him grumble about his lack of a decent amount of sleep, when a different officer approached us. "We are going back to the station to talk with Mr. Wagner, if you would like to come. We would appreciate your help on this case if you don't mind. After your success with the Jackson murder case, you could help us clear up this one quickly."

I agreed and Danny and I drove off to the police station, following the crowd of police cars.

Mr. Wagner was waiting for us when we arrived. He was a tall, thin man with unruly black hair. His dark eyes hooded by thick brows were staring back at us with a gaze that was a little too strong, like he was trying hard not to be intimidated. He sat as still as a statue.

"Mr. Wagner," said the officer whom I later learned is named Jenson. "We'd just like to ask you a few questions. So, you visited Mr. Stone's office last night at six o'clock, could you tell me what you were talking about?"

"Yeah," Mr. Wagner responded in a strong, quiet voice. "Umm, I was just asking him about a friend of mine who's gone missing. I wanted to see if he could help me."

Inspector Jenson scribbled some notes on a little notepad on his lap. "Did he say he would take your case?" She said, looking up.

"No, he said he wouldn't."

The questioning continued. No, Mr. Wagner didn't know Mr. Stone before last night. No, he does not carry a knife on him. Yes, he went straight home after leaving Stone's office at around seven. No, he did not see anything suspicious on his way home.

After Mr. Wagner left, Danny and I stood in the lobby, comparing notes. "He seemed like he was hiding something," Danny confided. "He was trying too hard to look unaffected."

"Yeah," I replied, "or he was intimidated and that was his response. He was probably nervous at being the last person to see Stone alive and with the police battering him with questions."

"I suppose," Danny sighed. "Well, that makes it an outside job. Who has a reason to kill Stone?"

"Once we answer that question," I replied, "we will have solved the case."

We got a list of Stone's recent contacts from the police to interview. It was a lengthy list, one we wouldn't finish today, but we got started. Most of the contacts were close friends and family. He had been working on the Jackson murder case, so he wasn't meeting with any new clients recently. Everyone we talked to seemed to be on good terms with Stone and nobody was near his office the night he died.

Danny and I met early the next morning to finish the interviews, but we had the same result as the night before. Nothing even remotely suspicious. It was the afternoon by the time we finished the list. We went to a coffee shop and sat down, sipping our drinks slowly out of exhaustion.

"Well, that didn't work," Danny murmured, blowing on his coffee. "What's the plan now?"

"I'm thinking we should go back a bit farther, to see if Stone upset someone years ago or something."

"Ugh," Danny replied, "that means more phone calls and paperwork. I hate deskwork."

Danny was more of an action person. He liked to go out and solve crimes with clues and interviews. Sadly, that's only part of this job.

"I know, I know. But this is the next step. This could get us the clue we need to find the murderer." The introvert in me doesn't so much mind deskwork.

Fine," he replied. His eyes lit up like he just remembered something. "Hey, the other night when we went to dinner, you never finished telling me about when *you* went to Stone's. Before he died."

"Oh, no I didn't," Danny leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table. He loves gossip. "Well, I told you Stone was mad at me that night. But I didn't finish telling you why. He thought I stole papers from him that would solve the Jackson murder case. Then he went into a rant about

how I had ruined his career because no one would want to come to him after I solved the case."

"Oh!" Danny laughed. "Good old Stone! Well, I suppose we know that he wasn't acting different than usual that night. Besides, you had all the information anyway. You didn't need his evidence."

I smiled. "I tried telling him, but he was convinced."

Danny nodded. "I'm not surprised."

"Well," I said, standing up, "let's go do some paperwork."

Danny groaned.

"Don't sound so excited about it," I laughed and together we walked back to the office.

The police gave us a list of Stone's past notable acquaintances, as well as his file, a rather large file. Danny looked ready to walk right back out the door. I grabbed his arm, dragged him to his seat and gave him half of the stack of papers. Taking the other half, I sat in my desk and started looking through the file.

We spent the next few days working our way through this never-ending task. There was nothing of interest except for an incident with an unhappy client, but the client died five years ago. Danny struggled through each day, fidgeting and bouncing his knee. Always in motion. He offered to get lunch and coffee, taking longer than necessary to come back each time. I don't mind paperwork, but I was hoping for a break, something to come up so we could get out of the office.

Finally, we got a message from Inspector Jenson. She sent us a clip of a person climbing out of Mr. Stone's office window from the security cameras on neighboring buildings. The power had gone out that night, from the storm, so it was just a partial clip. I jumped out of my chair to show Danny. His eyes lit up as he watched.

"Could they identify a face or clothing or something?" he asked, extremely hopeful.

I checked my texts again to make sure. "No," I sighed, looking up. "It was too dark."

His face fell as he realized this put us right back where we started.

"Hey," I said, trying to cheer him up. "Now this is more important than ever. We must find *something* in this massive pile that will give us a clue to the murderer."

"I suppose," Danny sighed. He reached for the next file in his stack of papers.

The next few days blurred together, but finally I reached the end of my pile. I stood up and cracked my back, making Danny jump.

"Oh, thank goodness you're done," he said picking up half of his remaining stack. "You can help me finish these." He gave me a sweet smile, obviously desperate to be done.

I sighed, sitting back down again, "Hand them over," I replied, holding out my hand.

We finished combing through the file that night. Nothing. The police informed us that they have had no luck in finding or identifying the man in the video. We went home feeling dejected.

That night, I laid in bed, struggling to sleep. My mind was still running through the case, trying to find a solution. Suddenly, a thought came to me. I slowly smiled as my idea shifted from a desperate thought to a plausible answer. I ran through all the details of the case to make sure everything fit. When I could find no problems with it, I quick wrote it down and laid back in bed. Feeling accomplished, I fell asleep quickly. When I woke, Danny picked me up and was going to take us back to our office when I pulled out my phone to make a quick call to Inspector Jenson.

"Hey, Danny," I said, after I hung up. "Could we actually go to the police station instead?"

"Yeah," he replied, "but what do you need there?"

"I've got an idea," I replied, looking over at him. He seemed confused but turned the car around without any more questions. I smiled, leaning back in my seat. I ran through my idea once more, to make sure I wasn't making any obvious mistakes. We pulled up to the station. I smoothed my hair and stepped out of the car. I was feeling jittery from the thought of testing my idea. I was desperately hoping it would work. Danny jumped out and ran over to me. Another car pulled in behind us. Inspector Jenson stepped out and Mr. Wagner got out of the back seat. I ran ahead to hold the door open for everyone, nodding at them as they passed. Together we walked in and went back to an empty room. Danny fell into step with me at the back of the group.

"Mr. Wagner?" Danny whispered, keeping his voice low so only I could hear it. "I thought we decided he didn't have anything to do with this."

"You'll see," I whispered back, enjoying leaving Danny in suspense. I wanted to have a dramatic reveal like in the movies.

We entered the interrogation room and took our spots. "Mr. Wagner," I said as I sat in a chair across from him. Danny took his post leaning against the wall behind me. Inspector Jenson sat in the chair on my right. "I am Detective James Gray, this is my partner, Danny, and this

is Inspector Jenson. We would like to ask you a couple follow up questions regarding Mr. Stone's death."

His face became wary and guarded like the first day we met. "Alright," he replied in that strong, quiet voice of his. His brows pulled together slightly, but I couldn't make out what he was thinking.

"First, I would like to ask about your friend who went missing. What's his name and who is he to you?" I watched his face intently, hoping for some sign of emotion.

Mr. Wagner cocked his head like he wasn't expecting that question and he sounded confused as he replied, "Umm, Dante Woods. He was a friend of mine from my college days. We were roommates."

When he paused, I replied, encouraging him to talk some more. "Did you see each other much outside of college?"

The confusion had left his face and was replaced by suspicion. "Yeah. He would come over often after we graduated."

I could tell we were getting somewhere, so I kept pushing. "When was the last time you saw Mr. Woods?"

"I don't see what this has to do with Mr. Stone," he was saying as Inspector Jenson cut him off.

"Answer the question," she snapped in her no-nonsense tone.

"Fine," he spat, "a week before he disappeared."

"Did he tell you he was going anywhere?" I asked.

"No."

"Was he acting any different than usual?"

Mr. Wagner stood up, shoving his chair back. "No! He seemed just like normal and a week later he was gone! He didn't leave. I know him. He wouldn't just disappear like that on his own. That's all I know! That's it." He heavily sat back down, avoiding eye contact with anyone.

It was clear that was all I was going to get from him on that topic, so I switched to a different point. After his outburst, I tried to keep things calmer. "Do you enjoy mystery novels or movies, Mr. Wagner?"

It worked. The random, neutral question threw him off and he was less upset now. "Yeah," he answered, but it came out like a question.

"Interesting." Having accomplished my purpose, I switched back to the topic of the crime.

"That night when you visited Mr. Stone, can you tell us exactly what happened while you were in his office?"

"I told him that a friend of mine was missing, and the police had not found anything which is why I was coming to him. I gave him all the facts I knew, and he told me he wouldn't take it. I tried to change his mind, but

he wouldn't budge. Then I left." He had that look in his eye again that looked like he was trying too hard to not be intimidated.

"Did Mr. Stone ask you questions about the case or about Mr. Woods?"

"Yes."

"And you tried to convince him to change his mind about rejecting the case?"

"Yes."

"Thank you, Mr. Wagner," I said, standing up. The three of us left, leaving Mr. Wagner there. As soon as we were out of the room, I turned to Inspector Jenson. "Have you looked at Mr. Wagner's medical records?" I asked.

"Yes," she replied. "He has no recent medical issues and is taking no prescriptions. The only thing we could find is a past case of anger management issues. He took the prescribed classes and there hasn't been an issue since."

"I figured as much," I replied.

We continued to Inspector Jenson's office. We all sat down and I couldn't hold it in any longer. "I solved the case," I blurted. "Mr. Wagner is the murderer." I had wanted that to go smoother and a bit more professional, but I was too excited. The words just burst out of my mouth.

"Oh!" Danny and Inspector Jenson exclaimed at the same time. Danny looked excited while Inspector Jenson looked skeptical.

"It's about time," Danny scolded but he was smiling so I could tell he was just joking. "Care to tell us how you figured it out?"

"Wait," Inspector Jenson interjected. "What about the clip of someone coming out of the window? Mr. Wagner could just walk out the front door."

"I'll get there," I replied. "But let's go in order. First, the night of the crime."

Inspector Jenson leaned back in her chair resigned to listen to my story. Danny leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees, ready for my big reveal.

I continued. "We know that Mr. Wagner went to see Mr. Stone that night for sure, as his word matches with that of the receptionist, Miss Song. He goes in, giving Mr. Stone the facts of his missing person case. Mr. Stone, always so protective of his career, would only take the case if it was likely that he could solve it. To determine that, he asked Mr. Wagner some questions to clarify, which Mr. Wagner confirmed that happened. Now I tried this myself when I was just talking to him. I pressed him for

details about this missing friend of his and he got increasingly agitated to the point where he was shouting. This proves that he has strong feelings about this missing friend and, coupled with the fact that Mr. Stone ultimately turned down the case, it could have pushed Mr. Wagner to kill him. He also has a history of anger issues, which continues to prove my point. Using a knife, he was carrying in his pocket, as I assume was his habit, he slit Mr. Stone's throat.

"Now, Mr. Wagner has calmed down, or realized what he has done. He knows as the last person to have seen Mr. Stone, he will be suspect number one, so he must do something about it. If he makes it look like an outside job, there is less of a chance he will be suspected. He crawls out the window, makes some footprints in the mud and places some on the windowsill. That is what we saw in the security camera clip. Then, he walks out the front door. Waiting for the police to question him. All he has to say is he doesn't carry a knife with him, and otherwise tell the truth, omitting the murder part. He seems to have thought of everything, but he forgot one key element."

"And what would that be?" Inspector Jenson asked, only partially sarcastic.

"He would be up against me, Detective James Gray!" I replied.

Danny, who had been listening in attentive silence until now, burst out laughing. Even Inspector Jenson was trying to hold back laughter.

"Too much?" I asked. I could feel my face turning red, already regretting that. It was never embarrassing when the detectives say that in the movies.

"Yep," Danny replied, still chuckling.

"Oh well," I said, trying to laugh it off. "Did I forget anything?" I asked, changing the subject.

"Yeah," Danny replied. "Why did you ask about Mr. Wagner's hobbies back there?"

"Oh," I had forgotten about that part. "Well, it was mostly to calm him down after his outburst, but I also wondered if he was into mystery. It could have been his inspiration for the mud on the windowsill. Right when we saw it, Danny made a comment about how classic of a clue that was. That gave me an idea and turns out it was right."

Inspector Jenson opened her mouth and paused. She seemed a little hesitant to say anything, in case my idea would be proved wrong. "This is all circumstantial. There is no physical evidence tying Mr. Wagner to the crime. How are you going to prove this?"

"Well," I thought for a bit. "I may have an idea," I said slowly. "Check Mr. Wagner's pockets."

"His pockets?" she repeated skeptically.

"Just try it," I said, confident that this would work. The three of us walked back to the room where Mr. Wagner was waiting. I could see Danny looking at him differently after what I had said. I turned to Mr. Wagner. "Turn out your pockets," I told him in my most authoritative voice. Immediately suspicious, Mr. Wagner didn't take his eyes off me as he shoved his hands in his pants and coat pockets, pulling out a phone and a wallet before he froze. His eyes dropped to his hands and his brows pulled together. "Turn out your pockets," I repeated. His eyes widened as he slowly pulled out a foldable knife from his coat. I reached for it, but he dropped it, pulling his hands away as if it burned him.

"Wha…what…where did that come from?" he stuttered. His eyes were bouncing from us to the knife on the ground and back up again. "I, I don't know how that got there." Panic was spreading across his face.

I bent down and picked up the knife. It was just a small, plain pocketknife. I straightened and handed it to Inspector Jenson. "You should give this to forensics, you will probably find traces of Mr. Stone's blood on there."

Inspector Jenson collected the evidence. She clapped handcuffs on the shocked Mr. Wagner and told him he was under arrest for the murder of Mr. Jeffrey Stone. She listed his Miranda rights and left him in the room as she motioned for Danny and I to follow her out the door. She made sure it was shut before turning to me.

"How did you know this was there? He didn't even seem to know." Her eyes were boring into mine.

"The police hadn't found anything around the scene which indicates the murderer took it with him. I figured there were only two options, he disposed of it, or he kept it. Considering he just committed murder, he likely would be suspicious and nervous, and keeping it on him at all times would seem like a safe idea. I assumed that he would choose that option because he seems like a nervous man."

Inspector Jenson nodded her head. "Alright," she said. "I'll bring this to our forensics team to analyze it."

I nodded as well. "I would like to ask a few more questions to Mr. Wagner if you don't mind."

"Go ahead," she said as she walked down the hall.

Danny hopped to my side. "Gee Gray, that was great! Just like a good detective movie! When did you come up with all this?"

"Last night," I replied, smiling at Danny's enthusiasm. "I'll tell you all about it, but I'm going to ask Mr. Wagner a few more questions. Why don't you go grab us some lunch and we'll meet back here in a half an hour?"

"Alright," Danny said, looking like he wanted to ask if he could come with me, but he must still be in a good mood after the excitement of this morning that he went without another word. I smiled. Danny was such a good partner.

I took a breath to steady myself before I walked into the interrogation room again. Mr. Wagner saw me come in and stood up. His eyes had lost the hard, intense look and were full of panic and desperation.

"I didn't do it, I swear. I've never seen that knife before and I have no idea how it came to be in my pocket. Please! You have to believe me." He flopped back onto the chair, still staring at me with a pleading look in his eyes.

I sat down across from him. I dropped my voice so only he could hear, even though there was no one else in the room. "I believe you," I replied.

His face lit up. "So, you'll help me? You can tell them who really did it and no one will have to know, and everything will go back to normal and—"

I cut him off. "I can't tell anyone."

He looked at me in total confusion. "But you said you know I didn't do it." He seemed to be at a loss for what to say.

I smiled at him. Poor man. I honestly felt bad for him. "I know you didn't do it, because I did. I killed Stone. I put the knife in your pocket while holding the door open for you. I climbed in through the window after you left and slit his throat. You just were in the wrong place at the wrong time. I have to say, you are the perfect murder suspect. Actually, I'm surprised at how well you fit into this case. Your past case of anger management issues was the icing on the cake."

His eyes widened. "You killed him?" he asked in a small voice. "But why?"

"That's none of your concern," I frowned. This was bringing up bad memories. Stone was mad and rightfully so. I DID steal from him to solve the Jackson murder case. I couldn't let him take the credit and ruin me in the process. He needed to be silenced.

By now Mr. Wagner was looking at me in disgust. "You won't get away with this. I am going to tell everyone. I'm going to tell them everything you just said."

"I bet you will," I replied, "but that will just be dismissed as a desperate man's lies. You would say anything to prove you are not the murderer, and that is such a wild claim that no one is going to believe you. Trust me," I said standing up and patting his shoulder. "I've already gotten away with this." I started towards the door before I stopped and turned around once more. "One more thing," I said. "Just so no one gets suspicions about this little meeting, I have a question for you. Did you have an appointment with Mr. Stone that night?"

"Why should I tell you?" he growled.

"I could always make something up," I replied.

"Fine," he huffed. "I did have an appointment."

"Great!" I clapped my hands together. "Thank you for your cooperation." I said as I went out the door. I shut it behind me and smiled. "Checkmate."

WHO HURT YOU?

by Grace Vetrone

Thomas stares at the fireplace from his seat on his father's buffalo skin chair. Each brick ranged in deep shades of red, from burgundy to burnt umber. They're held together by a creamy white cement that mimics his own skin tone. Some of the cement is charred blackish brown due to previous use. Bookcases circle the room, full of text on anything and everything. Thomas used to love this room. Everything he did was because of this study room. Now, after what happened, after coming home, he doesn't know. Everything is different now.

"Do you have a girl back home?"

Thomas laughed and so did some of the other men at the table. The first couple days here had been more fun than he's ever had. He knew it wasn't supposed to be a place of joy because people were dying here, but those few hours he had to spend under the olive green tent with his team brought good feelings. He wiped his hand over his eyes to whisk away any tears that might fall, but his hand only scratched up against the small cuts he'd gathered from foliage. He wondered when he showered last and when the next opportunity to do so would arise.

"I don't really have much back home...family and stuff, but no girl," Thomas said. "I thought I'd find one at college, but being drafted postponed my plans."

"Girls love GI's, you'll catch a few when you get home."

"More than a few! Do you see this boy? Someone who looks as rich as him is going to have girls hanging on him at all hours."

Thomas glides his hands on the sleek leather of the chair. There isn't a single wrinkle in the fabric. That's how it's supposed to be. Only his father could sit on the chair. That rule allows for the fabric to stay fresh and new. It made sure that there was a purpose to the chair. Thomas doesn't understand what the purpose was if it wasn't meant to be used, but that's what his father said. He always had the final word before Thomas went away. And Thomas listens like the model son he was, but now he couldn't care less about his father's ridiculous rules.

"Did you have a job back home?"

Thomas knew he was different from the other guys in his unit. He'd learned that most of them had volunteered, came from a lower middle class lifestyle, already had a wife and kid back home. He was fresh out of high school with plans of going to Stanford just like his father had. His father wouldn't allow girls in the house for fear of Thomas ruining the future he created for him. Thomas was well off and his father would make sure that never changed. These men were real working class Americans. They already knew how to fire a gun when they got here. They knew how to skin an animal if they had to eat it. Thomas wasn't like the other men he sat with in the olive green tent.

"I just graduated school before I got sent off," Thomas said.

"You can go to school and work."

Thomas gaped. He never thought about doing both at the same time. He had friends that certainly did both, but the idea was foreign to him. His father insisted that he didn't need one. A job would be a distraction, just like a girl in his father's eyes. Thomas started to wonder how much of his own thinking he did. He wondered how many of his actions were his own.

"He's a rich boy, just look at how he sits with us. It's as if he doesn't even want to be around us."

"Mommy and Daddy always took care of you, didn't they."

He wanted to storm off, but that would make what they said right. And it wasn't, they didn't know him.

He told his parents he was going to read in the study, but he hasn't picked up a book. His eyes clung onto the fireplace. His fingers itch to touch the brick, he needs to know if it felt the way he remembers. He stands up from the perfectly stored chair and makes his way to the fireplace. It wasn't lit, the room was hot enough in the summer as it is. He wishes it was though. The room seems foreign without the fire lapping at the brick. His fingers hover over the brick with no heat radiating off. A chill ran up his spine. This doesn't feel right to him.

"At least you aren't one of those draft dodgers."

The first couple days were full of laughs, but now on week four there wasn't any laughter. Most of his team had distanced themselves from Thomas once they made the assumption of his home life. He was an outsider in the one place he was starting to feel accepted in. Maybe he shouldn't see this place as a home away from home. Thick forests, hot nights and air thick with humidity wasn't something he should be living for. It's just that Thomas would pick this over his parents' house in upstate Vermont. He would pick anything over that house.

Thomas held his tongue before he let out that his parents had a plan for him to leave the country. They would only focus on the fact that they had the money for him to do it safely, not on the fact that his parents would rather have a draft dodger than a son who came home ruined from the war.

"It's my American duty to protect everyone back home."

"You say that, but that's not why you're actually here."

He never knew he was this easy to read or maybe everyone here was just wiser. They knew there was something hiding behind his expensive boy exterior. Thomas didn't know if there were secrets between a team in war. Everyone else had opened up, but Thomas wasn't like the rest of them. What crawls within him might have held no gusto to the men sitting around him.

He touches the brick and it feels like war. It's that rough texture that cuts your skin just like the grass in Vietnam did. His eyes start playing tricks on him. The multi colored cement turned into limbs and random patches of skin while the bricks supplied the blood. The immense amounts of blood. More blood than there was visible skin.

"What do you miss the most Thomas?"

They haven't spoken to him directly in a long time, but the group was getting smaller, they were forced to get closer. He searched the men's faces to see if they were actually speaking to him. They stared back waiting. He adjusted his body to lean over the table, his hands resting on his jumpy legs.

"The study in my parents' house," Thomas said.

A few men laughed and he knew it must've sounded weird. Most of these people had girlfriends, wives, children, and parents they loved back home. They had important living things waiting for them. They thought Thomas would be the same in that way at least.

"Why's that?"

"There's this fireplace in the study. I would sneak in when my father wasn't home, start a fire no matter the weather. Then I would sit in his chair and read *Huckleberry Finn, The Iliad, King Lear*…then I'd clean out the fireplace when I was finished and went on with my life," Thomas said. "I wasn't supposed to be sitting there, especially not in his chair. But I felt like I had to. It was the one simple rule I could break without him knowing. It was the perfect "Fuck You Dad"."

"Maybe you don't understand that your dad was just taking care of you."

"He took care of me in the only way he knew how. He…He controlled my actions. He said I couldn't have a girlfriend because I would knock her up and leave him with the medical bills. I couldn't have a job because I needed as much free time to study because I wasn't smart enough on my own to get into Stanford. Screw that college, I don't even want to go," Thomas sighed, pushing his hand through his hair. "I can't use the study room, but that was a rule I could break. It was the only way I can show myself that...that I'm still my own person."

The tent was quiet for a minute. Thomas's leg steadied and he relaxed into his spot at the table. He felt at home here in the one place that shouldn't be. There was death and terror outside the olive green fabric tent. But everyone here actually knew him, not the version his parents made. Thomas wiped at his face again to feel the clotted cuts layered on his skin. He wondered how differently he looked now. He wondered if the gentle blue eyes he walked in with finally hardened and if his lips laid flat on his face and didn't try to peek into a smile. He wondered if he was still 18, young and sweet or if he was a man his father wouldn't recognize.

"You weren't drafted…you volunteered. One last "Fuck You" to your dad."

"Yeah…yeah you're right," Thomas said.

He yanks his hand away from the fireplace. It melds back into brick and cement. No more bodies. No more blood.

"Hey champ," his father says as he pats Thomas's shoulder.

Thomas flinches at the touch. He wishes he heard his father enter or walk across the hardwood or any of the noises he possibly made. He doesn't look at his father, he can sense the disappointment in the air. The feeling of disappointment morphs in the pit of his stomach. That shame was supposed to be gone, he thought. But maybe wanting his parents approval would never go away.

"Who hurt you over there?" his father asks.

Thomas feels words forming in his mouth, but his tongue doesn't move. He knows damn well that it isn't the war that hurt him because it all could've been prevented. He knows the night terrors and flashbacks could've been averted. He knows that freaking out when people touch him unexpectedly could've been avoided. He knows that his favorite place in this god awful house didn't have to turn into his biggest trigger. Thomas looks over at his father and is sure the thing that hurt him is standing right behind him.

GHOST OUTFITS ARE FOREVER

by Alicia Walstad

I never imagined going to college would mean sprinting down University Avenue in a bunny costume. I ran between apartment buildings, adrenaline coursing through my body. This was high school all over again.

Not the bunny costume part. That was new. Running from bullies was not. If she had bothered to ask, Brittany would have known I was training for a 5K in the spring in honor of my aunt. Fight has never been my strong suit, so at least I had flight on my side.

I breathed gulps of crisp air as I followed the Fitness Trail for a couple of blocks and cut across the street. I passed the library and slipped between some administrative buildings. If I was lucky I could find a place to hide before they caught up to me.

Pressing myself against the brick walls, I hid in the shadows of the theatre and tried every door I could find.

"She went this way," a voice called behind me. "Here, Bun-Bun."

I yanked on the next door and nearly cried when it opened. I stepped inside and raced up the first set of stairs. Pulse pounding in my ears, I felt along the hallway. I lost track of how many doors I opened.

I heard a shout. "There! I saw her go in that side door!"

Where were the campus cops when you need them?

"What's up, Doc?" Another voice echoed down the corridor, followed by a chorus of laughter. I slipped behind the closest door.

Sitting in the dark, I berated myself for being so naïve. *How stupid are you? You should know better by now.* All of my life I had been promised that college would be different, that bullies would fade away and I would find people like me, who loved to learn.

I should have seen it coming.

Listening for the sound of footsteps, I twitched my nose and reached into my pockets. Great. No tissues. I braced myself.

"Achoo!"

"Bless you."

I startled, scanning the dark room. Had someone found me?

"T-t-thanks," I said. I fumbled in my pocket for my keys. Switching on a keychain flashlight, I peered into the dark. "Who's there?"

"Shit! You can hear me."

I moved the light to another corner. "Could you please come here? You're freaking me out."

I caught a slight flicker out of the corner of my eye.

"Try not to scream."

As the flicker took shape, I sank to my knees. "I hit my head." I mumbled to myself. "I hit my head and this is a dream and I'm going to wake up any minute."

I squeezed my eyes shut. "The next time I open my eyes, everything will be back to normal." I listened as a minute passed, then another.

I opened my eyes, squinting in the dark.

"Sorry to disappoint you."

I shrieked as she materialized next to me.

"You're not hallucinating, there wasn't a gas leak, and I'm not the Angel of Death," she recited in a monotone. "I'm a ghost. Take a deep breath and accept these facts."

I stared at her. She wore a long skirt and an old-fashioned blouse with ruffled sleeves. I noticed the faint outline of the wall behind her.

"Is your nose always that pink?" she asked.

I sniffed. "Allergies."

"Sure, the fall's awful for that around here. There's still toilet paper in the back." She gestured to the far side of the room. I stumbled along the wall until I found a storage cubby stocked with cleaning supplies. I grabbed a roll and sat on the nearest couch, causing a puff of dust to rise and set me off on another round of sneezing.

"Thanks," I said as I finished blowing my nose.

"Anytime. Don't you have Benadryl or anything?"

I glanced at her in surprise. "They had Benadryl when you were alive?"

"Of course. It wasn't that long ago." She looked down at her skirt. "Oh, right." She perched on a nearby desk. "This was a costume from a play I was in. I died in 1988. Our clothes weren't much different from what you're wearing now. Although," she nodded at my carrot in the corner, "we didn't carry those around. Is that some sort of weird purse?"

I shook my head. "It's part of my costume." I pointed at my ears. "What's up, Doc?"

She laughed. "Bugs Bunny! I loved that show."

I smiled weakly. I heard a faint thud and glanced at the ceiling. She listened for a moment.

"Sounds like they've moved on to the next floor. Who's after you, anyway?"

"Long story."

We sat in silence for a few minutes. What could I say to a ghost?

Finally she said, "I'll check. Be right back." She disappeared. A moment later she reappeared in the corner. "They're gone now."

"I guess I should get going," I said, picking up my carrot.

"Do you have to go right now?" She looked wistful. "It's just…I haven't had anyone to talk to in a long time."

"I don't know." I moved towards the door.

"Never mind. I'm sure you have something better to do on Halloween."

I thought of my drab single. I was the only senior on my floor, and the few friends I had on campus were occupied with internships and study abroad trips, neither of which I could afford. Then I remembered something.

"You never told me your name."

She laughed. "I didn't think you would stay long enough to ask. I'm Lily." She swept an exaggerated curtsy.

"Nadia."

"The pleasure is mine. What brings you to this humble costume shop, Nadia?" She eyed my sweatpants. "Were you looking for a fancy dress?"

I shook my head. "I just came from a party—"

"A party? Tell me everything!" She perched on the desk again. "I hardly ever went to parties when I was a student."

"This one wasn't much fun," I admitted. "You said this was a costume shop?"

"Don't you know what building you're in? This is the theatre!" she said with a flourish.

I shrugged. "I spend most of my time on the other side of campus."

Lily tilted her head to examine me. "You're in the sciences, I bet. Biology?"

"Biochem. My aunt is—was, a research scientist."

"Was?"

"She died six months ago. Cancer."

"I'm sorry."

"My mom had it too," I added. "She died my junior year of high school."

"That's awful." She rested her head on both hands, studying her feet. "What about the rest of your family?"

"Only child. My father was killed in a car accident when I was two."

"And I thought I had it tough." Silence stretched between us.

"What about your parents?" I ventured.

"No parents, no brothers or sisters that I know of. Ward of the state. They still called us orphans in those days." She hummed a little bit of "It's the Hard Knock Life" from *Annie* and I chuckled.

"Were you a theatre major?"

"History. I always loved learning about the past. Probably because I didn't know anything about mine." She shrugged. "Turns out I didn't have much of a future either."

"Did it hurt when you…" I hesitated.

"Died?"

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have asked."

"I'm a ghost. It was bound to come up." She hugged herself. "I was afraid it might be painful, but by the time it started to hurt everything was already over."

I cleared my throat. "My aunt was in a lot of pain at the end, so I wondered."

"You must miss her."

"All of them. Every day."

We shared a companionable silence. Too often people tried to rush over the awkwardness of the subject. Lily knew what it was like to answer these questions, and that there wasn't much to say.

"Tell you what," she said in a businesslike tone, "let's get another light in here and I'll show you my favorite clothes while you tell me about those bullies you were hiding from."

I smiled. "Sounds good to me."

Brittany took a gap year and I was a transfer student, so most of the other students on our floor had formed their own groups by the time we showed up after winter break. We fell into the habit of meeting for lunch after our English class and complaining about the long trek to the dining hall from our dorm. She was bubbly and full of chatter while I was solemn and sarcastic, yet we had a lot of fun.

College was my chance to start over. When Brittany invited me home for spring break, I was thrilled. Her parents and little brother were so completely normal. Sitting in her living room, I felt right at home with her family as we drank lemonade and shared stories about our first year.

We saw each other sporadically over the next couple of years, although we still met for lunch in the dining hall at least a few times each semester. She made friends with a couple of sorority girls our junior year, and talked often about making the most of her senior year. I took a leave of absence in the spring to be with Aunt Kate during her last round of chemotherapy. After she died, I was alone in the world.

Back on campus, I felt adrift. The science building, once a safe haven, felt cold and clinical after months in hospice. The chemical smells of the lab reminded me of those final weeks with Aunt Kate, surrounded by harsh lights and incessant clicks from the machines keeping her alive. What's the point? I asked myself as I tried to study for midterms. Some days I returned from class in the early afternoon and crawled into bed, staring at the ceiling until it was late enough to fall asleep for the night.

Still, I wasn't some clueless freshman from Northwood or Thompson. I knew what people were like here. I should have been more suspicious when Brittany asked me to join her study group last week.

We were sitting in the far corner of the library reviewing for the next exam when one of her friends, Lisa or Lindsay—they looked so much alike I had trouble telling them apart—started talking about a Halloween party at her sorority. Imagine my surprise when Brittany said, "Nadia, why don't you come too?"

I looked up from my notebook. "Come where?"

"To the party. Lots of cute guys, plenty of alcohol. We'll have a good time."

"I don't drink."

"That's OK, you can just hang out with us. Why don't we do a costume together?" Brittany suggested. "The theme is cartoon characters. I'll go as Daffy Duck and you can go as Bugs Bunny."

I considered her offer. "I have a gray hoodie and some sweatpants."

"Perfect. All you need is some bunny ears," Brittany smiled. She gave me the address of the frat house and we agreed to meet at 7 p.m. on Halloween night.

"Thanks, Nadia. You're really helping me out," she said as we wrapped up our study session. "This is going to be fun."

I got lost twice on the way to the party. I wasn't great at reading Greek letters and most of the houses had some sort of event going on. I was pleased with my costume. I sewed a pair of bunny ears onto my hoodie and gave myself black whiskers and a pink lipstick nose. I even found some orange fabric and made a stuffed carrot I could carry around with me.

"Nadia! Over here," I heard a voice shout. I looked around, trying to pick Brittany out of the crowd. I finally found her standing on the porch of a house with an elaborate graveyard in the front. She was dressed in a black corset top and short shorts. I walked up the steps and shouted to be heard over the music coming from the speakers on the porch.

"I thought you were going to be Daffy Duck?" I said, puzzled. I followed her into the house, sidestepping a couple arguing in the hallway. "Look, I made a carrot, just like Bugs," I held up my creation.

She gave me a confused look. "Oh! Right. Our costume." She smiled. "I was wearing this for a different party. My costume is up in my room. Wait here, I'll get it."

I sneezed twice. Harvest was the worst time of year for my allergies. My nose turned bright pink and I felt my eyes water. I sniffed and looked around the room. Most of the sorority girls were dressed like Victoria's Secret models. I caught a few strange looks as I stood next to the window, trying to blend in. I wished I had gone to the horror movie night in my dorm instead.

Brittany reappeared carrying a shopping bag. "I'll change when we get there. First we're going to play some games outside. Come on."

I sneezed again. Lisa-or-Lindsay walked up the path in a seashell bra and shiny hot pants. "Let's go, everyone's waiting," she said to Brittany.

"What's your costume?" I asked her, sniffling.

"I'm a mermaid," she said. "What are you?"

"What's up, Doc?" I said in my best Bugs Bunny impression, pretending to chomp on my stuffed carrot. She stared at me. "I'm a rabbit," I mumbled, falling into step behind them. We walked for several minutes until we reached the corner of the park, Brittany chatting with Lisa-or-Lindsay the entire time.

I followed them into a dark backyard. Pumpkin lights were strung along the deck. Two coolers and a keg were set up in a corner of the yard. Brittany handed me a red cup and disappeared into the house. For a few minutes I tried to chat with Lisa-or-Lindsay, but she pretended not to hear me over the music. I pulled on my white gloves and watched the crowd.

Suddenly the music stopped. On the deck, a frat guy stepped up to a microphone and called for attention. "Are you ready to party tonight?"

The crowd cheered in response.

"What are we known for up here in the north?" He paused as the crowd shouted "Hockey!" "Snow!" "Hunting!"

"Hunting, that's right!" He grinned. "Tonight we are having a hunt of our own. Now, we couldn't find any deer this close to the city, but we did find a cute little bunny rabbit!"

My stomach sank.

"In this corner, we have the hunted," I spilled the rest of my pop as a high-powered flashlight beamed directly into my eyes. The hunted?

"And in this corner," he paused dramatically, "we have the hunters." I peered across the yard. Ten frat guys wore brown hats. Several had floppy dog ears attached to them.

I stepped back into the crowd and stumbled into Brittany.

"What's going on?" I asked her. She was dressed in a short khaki skirt and a fitted blazer with a hunter's cap perched on her head.

"I never would have completed my pledge challenge without you," she said. "I'm an official sorority girl now."

"What do you mean?"

She laughed and pointed to the guys. "They're the hunters and you're the rabbit. We're going to have an old-fashioned wabbit hunt," she said in an Elmer Fudd voice.

I backed away from her. I watched as the guys spread out in a half circle. The crowd blocked the path behind me.

"What's going to happen to our little bunny when she's caught?" The guy with the mic leered in my direction. "I'm sure our hunters will think of something."

Encouraged by the crowd, the guys called out several suggestions. I shivered. "I'm going to turn all of you in," I said shakily. "You'll get closed down."

Brittany smiled. "You could," she said taking a step towards me. "But you should know the Greek Life Coordinator is one of our sisters. We're very close. Besides, we're not hazing you. You're not a pledge. You're just a dumb bunny who got a little too drunk." She leaned in and whispered, "No one cares what happens to you, anyway," before grabbing my arm and pushing me toward the guys. "Don't worry, they'll give you a two-minute head start." She turned to the crowd and shouted, "Let the hunt begin!"

"That girl sounds like a real bitch," Lily remarked as I finished the story.

"She was." I dropped onto the couch again, only sneezing once. "My aunt took care of me after school when I was a kid. She was the one who cleaned up my cuts and bruises when the other kids pounded on me. She used to tell me that this was a painful part of life, but one day I would go to college and everything would be different."

Lily gave me a sympathetic look.

"It isn't though. It makes me wonder what I'm even doing here. Sometimes I think there's no point to anything."

"Life is a painful experience," she agreed. "That's the part I don't miss."

I turned to her. "Are you here all of the time?"

She shook her head. "I can only break through on Halloween night."

"Why?"

"A student warded me—"

"Warded?"

"Yeah, warded. She used magic to trap me in the theatre so I couldn't leave unless she wanted me to. Don't you watch TV?"

"Not the supernatural stuff. I'm more into medical dramas."

"You're no fun!" she teased. "Anyway, I used to have more freedom. I could wander the entire campus. I took all of the classes I never had time to attend when I was a student. Then one Halloween, I made the mistake of talking to a witch."

"A witch?"

"I thought her costume was a joke, but she was the real deal. She didn't like the idea of me going where I pleased."

I stared at her. "Because you're a poltergeist?"

"Not even! I can barely move anything around here, where my energy is the strongest." She cocked her head. "How do you know about poltergeists?"

"That Spielberg movie. 'They're here.'" I stretched out the words.

"I think I saw that one."

"The sequels weren't quite as good." I shuffled back to the racks of clothes, spotting a green dress I hadn't noticed before. "You said your energy is strongest here. What's so special about this place?"

She opened her mouth, then paused. "Do you really want to know?"

I waited as she settled herself on the couch, looking down at her hands. "What is it, Lily? You can tell me."

"I was supposed to graduate in December. I died here, on Halloween."

I gasped. "What happened?"

Lily looked away. "I don't know what you'll think of me if I tell you the whole story."

I sat down next to her, trying to figure out how to comfort someone I couldn't touch. Finally, I said, "Whatever it is, I'm listening."

She closed her eyes, and began.

I didn't know much about the world outside my little town before I came to college. Most of the girls in my class graduated from high school, married their longtime boyfriends, and had kids. My adoptive parents were strict and extremely religious. I wasn't allowed to date while I lived at home.

College was another world. Everything was different, and I thought I could be different too. I was painfully shy. Even though I found plenty of people who shared my love of history, I didn't have any close friends. I dreaded graduating. I had no idea what I was going to do with my life. All I knew how to do was be a good student.

Shortly after classes started my senior year, I was asked to consult on a student-written production called *The Lady Awakens*. The director chose me for his senior thesis because I had studied the time period his play was set in. I even had a part in the show. He played the male lead.

I spent hours with the director. His name was Keith, and whenever he was in the room, I couldn't stop staring at him. People were drawn to him, to his passion for theatre and life. Of course I fell for him. I would never say anything, because he already had a girlfriend. They always do, don't they? I don't have to tell you she was my complete opposite—beautiful, popular, confident.

Two weeks before opening night, I was practicing my lines on a Friday evening when he came to the theatre upset. His girlfriend cheated on him, they had a fight, and broke up. Of course, I felt awful for him. I was a willing shoulder to cry on. He'd made a mistake, he told me. He should have been with someone else. He kissed me and I felt like everything fell into place.

We spent the weekend together. I told him about the times I daydreamed about us during rehearsals. He teased that he had a crush on me. I was in love with him. I thought he was in love with me. That was the happiest time of my life.

I was surprised he didn't get in touch with me on Monday, but I decided to wait until Tuesday's rehearsal to see him again. It felt amazing to finally have someone really see me. At least, I thought he did.

I was early for rehearsal, so I decided to do some work backstage. I was organizing some props when I heard two of Keith's friends talking near the stage. They were talking about me. I smiled to myself, until I heard they had bet him $200 he couldn't take my virginity before opening night.

I knelt behind a rack of costumes and sobbed quietly. A few minutes later Keith came in with his girlfriend. His friends teased him about the bet as they paid up. The worst part? His girlfriend knew all about it. She told him he better buy her something pretty for telling him what I would want to hear.

I managed to sneak away without anyone noticing. I hid in my room for the rest of the week. How could I ever face him again? What had I ever done to deserve this?

Eventually I decided to pretend that nothing was wrong. The next week, I forced myself to show up at rehearsal. Keith was the same as ever. Most of the cast whispered behind my back, but I ignored them. The show must go on.

Alone in my room, I felt ashamed. Who would want me now? I didn't realize how much of my identity was tied up in being chaste until after my virginity was gone. I felt like I didn't have anything to look forward to anymore. Even my favorite history books no longer held the same joy.

Days before opening night, I decided I would teach all of them a lesson. You see, Keith's play was about a Victorian woman who falls in love with a man who works on her father's estate. They take refuge in his room above the barn during a storm while her family is away at a wedding. They share a romantic kiss, but nothing else happens and she falls asleep in his bed while he sleeps on the floor. The next morning they are discovered and her reputation is ruined even though they plan to marry. His family is furious until they find out he is an heir to a vast fortune.

My plan was this: there was a scene change between the romantic scene and the couple's discovery. I would replace the female lead (Keith's girlfriend, as I'm sure you've guessed) and be onstage for the discovery

scene. Not only would I ruin the show, I'd tell everyone there what he had done to me. I wanted him to feel as humiliated as I did.

On opening night, I locked his girlfriend in her dressing room and stole her costume from the previous scene. I slipped into the bed and waited. As the lights went up, Keith entered and kissed me. As I turned over, his eyes widened in surprise, but he managed to stay in character. I leapt out of bed and faced the audience, my cheeks burning. Keith stared, open-mouthed, as I told the audience what he'd done. As the crowd gasped, Keith grabbed my wrist and tried to pull me offstage. I pushed him away and lost my balance.

The bed was on an elevated part of the stage, at least twelve feet in the air. I didn't realize how close I was to the edge until it was too late.

I broke my neck.

"What an awful thing to happen, Lily," I said. "I'm sorry."

She nodded. "At least I get to spend eternity in my favorite place."

We talked for another hour about everything we loved about college. Nowhere else were we encouraged to ask questions, grapple with our beliefs, and discuss great ideas.

"Sometimes I wish I never had to leave," I said.

Lily looked hopeful. "You could stay here, with me."

"What?"

"Everything you love about college can be yours forever."

I thought about facing another year of ridicule. Brittany and her sorority friends would find ways to torment me. Besides, what did I have to look forward to anyway? No family, no friends, no purpose.

"You could get back at everyone who hurt you," she whispered. "They'd be sorry."

"What do you mean?"

She smiled to herself. "That first year, I was walking on campus when I saw Keith's girlfriend bullying a freshman. I couldn't let that happen. She fell flat on her face in front of everyone on the quad."

I laughed.

"Someone needs to look out for the unpopular ones. It used to be me, before I got stuck here." She frowned. "Of course, thanks to that witch, now I can't do it alone. I need you, Nadia. Together we could do amazing things. We could protect people, the innocent ones, like us."

I smiled at that. "Like guardian angels."

"Exactly." She pointed to the green dress I'd noticed earlier. "Think about it while you try this on. Remember, whatever you die in is your ghost outfit forever."

I thought about afternoons I spent playing dress up with the girls in Aunt Kate's neighborhood.

"I'll never get to do this again."

"Do what?"

"Try on clothes."

"True," she agreed. "You'll never have itchy tags or scratchy fabrics irritating you either. And—" She slid through a wall and jumped back, landing in front of me, "—that can be fun too."

A few minutes later, I modeled the dress for her. "I think I'll go for a Roaring '20s look," I said. "This green dress is perfect."

"That fringe is great. Did you want a boa or some gloves?"

"I don't know. What do you think?"

"Let me find a hairpiece to go with your dress. Then we can decide."

"Try that stack over there. I'll look here." She moved up to the shelves, studying the writing on several old boxes.

I pulled a stack of cartons toward me, wrinkling my nose as I removed the lid of the top one and smelled mothballs. Sweaters. I dug through the second and found copies of programs from old shows. Several were from 1988. Intrigued, I called out, "Lily, what did you say the name of your play was?"

"*The Lady Awakens*. Why?"

In the box was a cast photo. I lifted it out and a newspaper clipping fell into my lap. The headline read *College Student's Suicide Stuns Community*. A small photo showed Lily in modern clothes, probably from her yearbook.

The box flew out of my hands. Lily floated in front of me, furious. I grabbed the clipping from the floor. I read aloud "…authorities released the contents of the suicide note, which referred to an incident involving the play's student director…"

"Stop!"

The paper flew out of my hands.

"You lied to me. Why?"

"You have no idea how hard it's been," she stepped closer. "Nadia, you're lost, like me. I'm glad I found you. Now we don't have to be alone."

"It wasn't an accident, was it, Lily?"

"No, but listen…"

"I thought you couldn't move anything."

She went on, pleading, "You don't know what this has been like, Nadia. The endless waiting. While I could move around campus I could manage, but since I've been trapped here…it's worse than prison."

I realized something else. "Why did that witch trap you here?"

"If I had your powers with mine, we could find her. She's still a student here. She would have to release me."

"You tried to trick me into helping you."

"What else could I do? You're the first person to see me in years. I don't know how long I'd have to wait until someone else comes here on Halloween." She closed her eyes. "I'll show you. It's almost time anyway."

"Time for what?"

"You'll see." Without another word, she stepped through the door of the costume shop. I followed her through the corridor to the main part of the stage. We looked up towards the catwalks. I glanced over, surprised to see her pulled to the middle of the empty space, settling on an invisible platform. She gazed out at the empty auditorium before flinging herself off, landing with her neck twisted at a strange angle. She shimmered for a moment, then disappeared.

"It's my death echo," she said, reappearing beside me. "I relive my death every night. Sometimes it's the only time I remember what it was like to be alive."

I shuddered. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I had to convince you before you saw my death echo," she said. "I needed you to trust me, Nadia, and I didn't think you would understand if you thought I killed myself."

I couldn't stop staring at her, so different from the laughing girl I met earlier in the evening.

"Do you want to hear the rest of it?" she asked.

I nodded.

"Eventually I discovered that the angrier I was, the more powerful I became. I could influence people on ordinary days, give them a push in the right direction. Or," she laughed, "a shove in the wrong one." She smiled to herself. "I had to wait awhile for Keith. Naturally, he fled to some university across the country, finished his degree there. You can't run forever, though. He came back for a family event—his cousin's graduation. His family made some massive donation to the alumni foundation. Trying to ease their guilty conscience, no doubt. That's when I got him."

"Got him?" I said.

She grinned. "He and his brother were celebrating, walking along that little bridge near the quad. Tipsy, laughing. They were sitting on the stone wall, talking about the future. I whispered in his ear, Lean over, take a look. By then I was incredibly persuasive. He slipped over the edge and vanished into the water. He probably would have survived, except I appeared to him in the dark. I'll never forget the fear in his eyes. He thought he could leave me behind. He was wrong."

She pressed her hands into the empty air in front of her, as though reliving the moment. "I used everything I had to hold him under the water. The last thing he saw was my face." She looked up at me. "Don't you see? I'm more powerful now than I ever was when I was alive. Every time I feel rage course through me, I'm closer than ever to breaking free of this place."

"I understand now," I said surprising myself.

"All I had left was revenge," her gaze softened. "I was in so much pain, Nadia. I know you're in pain, too. It doesn't have to be this way. One step, and you'll never hurt again."

I walked back into the hall and climbed the stairs, examining the windows I passed earlier. I'd caught myself doing that recently, calculating how high the drop was, and wondering if the fall would only break my legs.

I chose one at the end of a corridor, easing the sash up and leaning out to peer at the ground below.

"Does it hurt?" I asked Lily, waiting next to me.

"Not for long," she promised. "Afterwards, you'll never feel pain again."

I thought about the past year, watching my aunt suffer, the numbness broken up by flashes of agony I could hardly bear. I was tired of feeling that way.

I took a last look at the stars, noticing the trees lining the sidewalk. As the wind brushed my face, I leaned farther out of the window into the darkness.

"It doesn't hurt for long, I promise," Lily whispered. "It will be over soon."

Breathing deeply, I released the sill.

As I tilted forward, a primal instinct filled me. I scrabbled for the edge of the window and jerked myself back, gripping the sill with both hands. I stared at my fingers clenching the window, trying to catch my breath. What was I doing?

Lily stared at me in silence as the memories flitted past. A colleague of my aunt who offered to host me for any holiday, no notice required. A new classmate in my lab who laughed at my jokes, even the bad ones. Was that enough?

"Nadia," she said, covering my hands with hers. "I understand if you have second thoughts. Remember, we're more powerful together, much more in death than in life."

Another thought occurred to me. "That's not the whole story, is it? You were afraid, Lily. You'd lived all of your life in this safe little bubble and after graduation you had to go out and do things on your own."

"So what if I was?" She scoffed. "You're just like me. A campus joke."

I swallowed hard. She was right. I didn't want to think about all of the things people were going to say about me tomorrow.

"Nobody cares what happens to you," she sneered. Her words hit me like knives. They hurt as much as when Brittany said them. Sometimes I felt like my entire life was one painful moment after another. As the tears slipped from my eyes, I realized something else.

"One person does," I whispered.

"Who?"

"Me." I raised my eyes to meet hers as I pushed myself away from the window. "Me and the person I'll become one day. She's a survivor. I can't wait to meet her."

Lily followed me down the stairs, hissing, "You think it's that easy? You just decided and now everything's going to work out for you?"

I shook my head. "It's going to be really hard." I imagined months of counseling appointments, enduring numbness and tedium as I waited to feel like myself again.

"It's going to be worse than you think. I've seen it happen."

"I'll leave here and go on with my life. You'll never do that because you were too caught up in revenge."

I pushed open the door and took in the sight of the campus flooded with moonlight. It was nearly midnight. I looked back at Lily, glaring at me. She must have reached the limits of her warding, since she didn't follow me.

"You're still nothing."

"You're right," I said slowly. "I'll probably never be anything amazing. When I'm gone, no one will remember my name."

She smiled, certain I had reconsidered.

"But that doesn't matter," I finished, swinging the door shut on her surprised face, "because I'm going to stick around to find out."

She shouted after me as I started down the sidewalk. "Don't be so sure, Nadia. I'll be waiting for you next year."

I smiled as the clock struck midnight. "I'll be long gone by then."

NONFICTION

TOWARDS ASSIMILATION OR LIBERATION: THE ORIGINS AND FUTURE OF TRIBAL COURTS

by Jeff Armstrong

February 27, 1973 is a momentous day in indigenous history. It marked the beginning of a 71-day armed standoff between a lightly-armed group of a few hundred Indians and a "makeshift federal army [that] had been created by the [United States] Justice and Defense departments by training civilian law-enforcement officers in paramilitary units and equipping them with armored personnel carriers, automatic weapons, and enough ammunition…to wipe out every Indian in the Dakotas," as Peter Matthiessen described the U.S. military assemblage at Wounded Knee in 1973.[1] Wounded Knee II instantly put lie to the historical notion that the 1890 slaughter at the same site constituted some sort of final conquest of Native peoples in the U.S.[2] David Hill, a young AIM activist at the time, describes the occupation of Wounded Knee as "a turning point in Indian history in America….It brought about a contemporary understanding of sovereignty rights and it sparked indigenous activism all over the world."[3]

But the purpose of this paper is not to romanticize the Pine Ridge insurgency that arose at Wounded Knee, however worthy it may be of such status. It need not have turned into a David vs. Goliath battle of wills against the United States, had the federal government intervened in a more judicious and less heavy-handed manner. If the conflict was rooted in historical grievances against the U.S., it was triggered by internal tribal politics, namely the disregard by tribal president Richard Wilson of the

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[1] Peter Matthiessen, *In the Spirit of Crazy Horse*. NY: Penguin Books, 1992. 67

[2] To the extent that it was a "battle," Wounded Knee I in 1890 was not even the last Indian War of the twentieth century. That distinction goes to the Leech Lake Pillagers of Sugar Point, whose 1898 resistance to the imposition of federal criminal law led to the deaths of six U.S. soldiers with no known Indian casualties.

[3] Interview by author, accessible online at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kDJilQCLO64

civil, constitutional, and treaty rights of the Oglala Lakota people.[4] Through a brief comparative study of political movements on the Pine Ridge Reservation in the 1970s and the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe later in the century, I will discuss the historic roles of tribal police and courts and consider how evolving standards of international human rights law might be incorporated into tribal and federal law to strengthen the individual and collective rights of Natives and prevent future conflict with state and federal entities. I will argue that tribal courts can and must transcend their historic roles, first as instruments of colonial rule and later as rubber stamps for illegitimate tribal council authority. By asserting broader jurisdiction on the basis of international law, tribal courts could provide a more stable legal foundation for self-determination than the shifting parameters of federal law and simultaneously establish their legitimacy as defenders of civil rights and liberties. While the 1968 Indian Bill of Rights has been criticized with some justice as an ineffective and intrusive federal law, the same can hardly be said of international human rights conventions voluntarily ratified and implemented by tribes.[5]

Indian Police forces and Courts of Indian Offenses were first established under the authority of Indian agents in the latter part of the nineteenth century to enforce federal regulations on the reservations under their jurisdiction. Working for less pay and with far greater knowledge of their communities than their white counterparts, Indian police performed such services to the federal government as the annual fall roundup of children whose families tried to shelter them from the abuses and indignities of distant boarding schools.[6] As William Hagan noted, they served as the "eyes and ears of the agent," as well as the enforcement arm of his colonial mandate to civilize the Natives.[7]

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[4] *Akwesasne Notes* Editorial Collective, *Voices from Wounded Knee*. Rooseveltown, NY: Mohawk Nation, 1974; Robert Burnette, *The Road to Wounded Knee*. NY: Bantam Books, 1974; Akim Reinhardt, *Ruling Pine Ridge: Oglala Lakota Politics from the IRA to Wounded Knee*. Lubbock, TX: Texas Tech University Press, 2007.

[5] See, for instance, U.S. Senate Select Committee on Indian Affairs, Testimony on Tribal Courts Act of 1991 and Report of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights Entitled "Indian Civil Rights Act." Sept. 10, 1991.

[6] David Wallace Adams, *Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience, 1875-1928*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995.

[7] William T. Hagan, *Indian Police and Judges: Experiments in Acculturation and Control*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1966. 104, 51

Likewise, Courts of Indian Offenses were established beginning in 1883 to impose criminal penalties for tribal religious practices and various "morality" offenses, such as plural marriage, alcohol consumption, adultery, and the like.[8] They were thus important instruments of coercive assimilation.

Although the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 facilitated the eventual transfer of most Interior Department courts to the administration of tribal councils, tribal courts continued to be viewed with suspicion by traditional Natives in particular, due to the courts' historic origins and their perceived role as instruments of external control.[9] Like their Indian agency precursors, tribal courts are not legally subject to constitutional and procedural safeguards established over two centuries of American jurisprudence, and they were widely perceived in the late 1970s as "subordinate arms of the tribal government."[10]

There were, of course, important differences between the Oglala Lakota and their supporters who took up arms against an autocratic tribal president in the 1970s and the Anishinaabeg of the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe who waged a decade-long, nonviolent struggle for constitutional change beginning in 1987. The Lakota, for instance, had retained much more of their reservation land base and residual sovereignty than the Anishinaabeg, whereas the latter had been dispossessed of the vast majority of their lands under allotment and had come under almost complete state jurisdiction by the first quarter of the twentieth century. But the Oglala Sioux Civil Rights Organization, which invited the American Indian Movement to Pine Ridge to make its stand at Wounded Knee, and the grassroots movement within the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe which became known as Camp Justice, shared many similar experiences and objectives. Both groups had exhausted tribal constitutional remedies in response to power grabs by tribal officials, had

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[8] Ibid., 110

[9] National American Indian Court Judges Association, ed. David Getches. *Indian Courts and the Future: Report of the NAICJA Long Range Planning Project*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. GPO, 1978. 39

[10] *U.S. V. Clapox*, 35 F. 575 (D. Or. 1888**);***Talton v. Mayes*, 163 U.S. 376 (1896); *Iron Crow v. Oglala Sioux Tribe*, 231 F. 2d 89 (1956); Quotation from NAICJ, *Indian Courts and the Future*

appealed without response to federal officials, and were convinced that their tribal leaders were catering to non-tribal interests.

But perhaps the most longstanding and deeply-felt grievance in Indian Country is resentment against the abusive and discriminatory treatment of Natives by courts and police in reservation border communities. In February of 1972 the American Indian Movement, which was itself formed to combat police harassment of Twin Cities Natives, attracted significant support on Pine Ridge by staging a three-day demonstration in the reservation border town of Gordon, Nebraska over the killing of a 51-year-old Lakota man, Raymond Yellow Thunder, by a non-Native. The raucous protest prompted authorities to arrest Yellow Thunder's assailants, suspend a policeman accused of molesting Indian women, and agree to investigate discrimination against Natives.[11] Many Oglalas went on to join the Trail of Broken Treaties cross-country caravan that converged on Washington, D.C. in early November of 1972, which culminated in the demonstrators seizing and ultimately ransacking the national headquarters of the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

Recently-elected Pine Ridge tribal President Richard (Dick) Wilson, who had already displayed authoritarian tendencies, reacted apoplectically to this assault on the foremost symbol of colonial oppression. On Nov. 8, he demonstrated his loyalty to the federal government by sending a telegram to federal officials disavowing any support for the demonstration. Wilson then persuaded the tribal council to relinquish its authority to the President, authorizing him to "take whatever action that he felt would be necessary to protect the lives and property and insure the peace and dignity of the Pine Ridge reservation," a resolution he used to create a private security force known to opponents and supporters alike as the GOON squad. Led by officers of the BIA police force under Wilson's control, the GOONs would go on to earn their title by shooting up homes and committing acts of arson, rape, assault, and assassination against the president's opponents. Wilson's council went on to ban AIM from the reservation, and the president obtained a tribal court order barring Oglala AIM members from participating in any meeting on the reservation, resulting in the arrests of Russell Means and fellow AIM leader Dennis Banks. Though he had no constitutional authority to do so,

[11] Burnette, *The Road to Wounded Knee*, 193-194

Wilson suspended Vice President David Long for having invited Means to the reservation in defiance of the tribal council edict.[12]

In December grassroots Oglalas organized the Inter-District Tribal Council to counter Wilson's growing power, calling for the resignation of the president and the transfer of BIA Superintendent Stanley Lyman. In early February community leaders formed the Oglala Sioux Civil Rights Organization (OSCRO) to push for Wilson's impeachment, with the support of traditional chiefs and a growing number of Oglalas who distrusted and feared Wilson and his GOON squad. On Feb. 11, 1973 busloads of federal marshals invited by Wilson began arriving on the reservation in anticipation of pending impeachment hearings, prompting a spontaneous demonstration the next day by predominantly female OSCRO supporters at the shared headquarters of the tribal council and BIA in Pine Ridge.[13] While claiming neutrality, the marshals began reinforcing the building with sandbags and mounted a 50-caliber machine gun on the roof. It was later discovered that they were members of the Special Operations Group, described by U.S. Marshals Director Wayne Colburn as "a strike force deployed only at the request of the President or the U.S. Attorney General."[14]

On Feb. 22, a spirited crowd of 300 Oglalas and their AIM supporters celebrated as a majority of council members voted for an impeachment trial for Wilson. However, the tribal President caught everyone unprepared by scheduling the hearing for the next day. The president made a mockery of the proceeding by acting as his own prosecutor and selecting his own judge. Stripped of their final opportunity to constitutionally remove Wilson from power, OSCRO leaders called a series of emergency meetings between Feb. 23 and Feb. 27, at which it was decided to invite AIM for a symbolic stand on the reservation. Wounded Knee was a brilliant choice of sites, but it was essentially an alternative to an assault on the BIA/Tribal Council building, which was deemed impractical due to the federal paramilitary reinforcements.

The rest is, of course, history. The question is, what can we learn that history? I would propose that the recent history of Pine Ridge argues for a more complete yet refined definition of tribal sovereignty, which I will

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[12] Reinhardt, *Ruling Pine Ridge*, 152-153

[13] Ibid., 173-175

[14] Akwesasne Notes, *Voices from Wounded Knee,* 24

discuss later. If the U.S. had played its assumed role under as neutral arbiter of tribal disputes and guarantor of the tribal constitution, it could well have prevented the outbreak of violence on Pine Ridge that ultimately claimed the lives of dozens of people, including two FBI agents. As it happened, federal intervention on behalf of a discredited leader only confirmed suspicions that Wilson was nothing more than a corrupt puppet bent on silencing any legitimate Lakota voice, which in turn led to an escalation in demands for a decisive uprooting of colonial rule. It was only after the United States refused to acknowledge a legal petition signed by nearly half of reservation voters for a referendum to abolish the tribal constitution that traditional chiefs supporting the occupation declared an Independent Oglala Nation at Wounded Knee on March 11, 1973. In contrast, the protestors' initial demands were limited to OSCRO's proposals for a recall election on Wilson under the existing constitution and the transfer of two BIA officials.[15]

My point here is that the federal government, which had a "duty" under Article XI of the tribal constitution to call a constitutional referendum in response to a legal petition, chose instead to throw its considerable weight behind an illegitimate dictator who relied on BIA police and the GOON squad, FBI intelligence, and federal funding and complicity to wage a violent counterinsurgency war on Pine Ridge. Many lives would have been saved if the Interior Department had taken the advice of the U.S. Civil Rights Commission, which had concluded after a thorough investigation that Wilson stole the Feb. 7, 1974 election from AIM leader Russell Means: "…[T]he Bureau of Indian Affairs has the legal authority to look behind the asserted legitimacy of tribal representatives, and …the Federal law in general owes a high degree of care to assure that mechanisms of tribal government established under Federal law are not abused. One of the recommendations of the report is that the Bureau of Indian Affairs determine whether the present tribal representatives are entitled to recognition…"[16]

But the Nixon administration displayed the same disregard for democracy in Pine Ridge that it did in Vietnam, lavishing its support upon a corrupt dictatorship it viewed as serving its interests. After Wounded

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[15] Ibid., 64

[16] U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, Oct. 7, 1974 Report of Investigation, Oglala Sioux Tribe General Election.

Knee, the federal government began increasing aid to tribal courts and police, a move that some might interpret as a concession to demands for greater autonomy.[17] I would argue, however, that it was more of a counterinsurgency strategy aimed at preserving the colonial status quo, a recognition that Indians are best able to contain internal dissent with the appropriate training and a less overt federal presence.

In the case of the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe, the reservation court system began in the 1970s as an instrument to enforce an unpopular treaty rights agreement against tribal members. Tribal law enforcement authority would in the late 1980s become one of the central issues in a constitutional reform movement that continued to be a potent political force for more than a decade. But that movement, which became known as Camp Justice, was deeply rooted in the struggle for land and treaty rights. It is a little-known historical fact that an armed standoff similar to that at Wounded Knee might have occurred nine months earlier on the Leech Lake reservation in northern Minnesota, in May of 1972. Leech Lake, one of the six Anishinaabe reservations incorporated into the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe (MCT) under the Indian Reorganization Act, had won a lengthy federal court battle against the state of Minnesota in 1971 for recognition of its treaty rights to hunt, fish, and gather wild rice free of state regulation within reservation boundaries.[18] Though the decision took effect Feb. 17, 1972, the state refused to recognize the ruling pending its appeal.[19]

At the invitation of Leech Lake Chairman David Munnell, the American Indian Movement held a national conference on the reservation on the eve of the state fishing opener in May of 1972 to defend tribal members exercising their fishing rights from threatened vigilante violence and state arrest.[20] The Anishinaabe had already organized a boycott of white-owned businesses on the reservation and threatened to refuse to renew land leases to non-Indians.[21] After AIM arrived, hundreds of

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[17] NAICJA, Indian Courts and the Future, 3.

[18] ***Leech Lake*** *Band of Chippewa Indians* ***v. Herbst***, 334 F. Supp. 1001

[19] *NY Times*, Feb. 18, 1972, "Minnesotans Divided Over Game Ruling for Indians," by Andrew H. Malcolm.

[20] Dennis Banks with Richard Erdoes, *Ojibwa Warrior: Dennis Banks and the Rise of the American Indian Movement*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004.

[21] *NY Times*, Feb. 18, 1972.

supporters staged an armed march and at one point blocked access roads to Cass Lake at gunpoint.[22] State law enforcement officers mobilized for confrontation and threatened to shoot their way through a planned blockade on the state fishing opener, while Native activists were prepared to lay down their lives if necessary.[23]

However, an armed confrontation was averted at the last minute, when the Leech Lake Reservation Business Committee made an agreement with the state and asked AIM to withdraw from the reservation. Caught between the demands of tribal members who sought to close the reservation to non-Indian hunting and fishing, as well as state criminal jurisdiction, and the contrary demands of the RBC that had invited them, AIM agreed to call off the blockade after an apparently acrimonious debate.[24] The Leech Lake debacle forced tribal members, as well as AIM leaders, to reevaluate their relationships with tribal councils, which most had presumed to be defending tribal interests. When the terms of the agreement were announced after AIM's departure, tribal members staged spontaneous protests, burning Leech Lake Secretary-Treasurer and MCT President Simon Howard in effigy and looking for other outlets to express their outrage.[25]

If the Leech Lake experience opened the eyes of the Anishinaabeg of the MCT, the White Earth land issue moved many of them into action. In 1977 the state supreme court upheld a lower court ruling that invalidated the seizure by Clearwater County of an Anishinaabe allotment on White Earth on the basis of an illegal state tax forfeiture.[26] Although the ruling opened the door to the return of hundreds of thousands of acres in allotments wrongly expropriated by the state, MCT President Darrell (Chip) Wadena favored negotiations in the mid-1980s for a monetary settlement, as opposed to litigation by the tribe and tribal heirs for recovery of the land. A group known as Anishinabe Akeeng led a tribe-wide movement against the proposed White Earth Land Settlement

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[22] Banks, *Ojibwa Warior*, 124; interview with David Hill.
[23] Minnesota Senate Natural Resources and Agricultural Committee, March 6, 1973 hearing, audio recording available at NDSU library.
[24] Minneapolis Tribune, "Indians decide not to block roads in Cass Lake area, May 13, 1972; Banks, Ojibwa Warrior, 124.
[25] Tribal activist Franklin (Doc) LaRose, Feb. 21 phone conversation with author.
[26] *State v.* ***Zay Zah***, 259 N.W. 2d 580 (Minn. 1977).

Act (WELSA), obtaining resolutions against the act by both the Reservation Business Committee and the Tribal Executive Committee, of which Wadena was chairman and president, respectively. When Wadena acceded to a congressional settlement that would return only 10,000 acres of over 200,000 documented as illegitimately transferred, Anishinabe Akeeng led a petition drive to recall Wadena from office on the charge that he exceeded the authority of his office by violating tribal resolutions against WELSA.

In tactics similar to those adopted by Wilson on Pine Ridge, Wadena presided over his own impeachment hearing and brought in Becker County sheriff's deputies, as well as BIA riot police, to maintain control of the proceedings.[27] The RBC dismissed the charges without explanation. On appeal from the petitioners, the Interior Department declined to call a recall election, as specified in the MCT Constitution in the event of the RBC's failure to act. Barely a month later, on April 29-30, the 12-member TEC voted 6-3 to approve a tribal ordinance purporting to establish a tribal court with judges from each reservation. However, Interior Department solicitors reminded tribal officials that the constitution "must be amended before the Tribal Executive Committee or any of the Tribe's reservation business committees may authorize a tribal court."[28] While this opinion would likely be considered by some as paternalistic intervention on the part of the federal government, it was in effect, recognition that the tribal membership had not delegated its inherent authority to its elected representatives in accordance with the constitution.

In 1987 tribal members discovered that the TEC was planning a tribal vote on a constitutional amendment stating that "All inherent powers of government shall be vested in the Tribal Executive Committee and the Reservation Business Committees, who shall exercise legislative, executive and judicial powers."[29] In the aftermath of WELSA, alarmed Anishinaabeg warned of a "legal dictatorship" and demanded constitutional reform to hold elected officials accountable. Tribal

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[27] Fargo Forum, "Reservation Petition asks removal of Wadena," Chet Gebert, March 27, 1986, B-I.

[28] Tim Vollman, Associate Solicitor, Division of Indian Affairs, July 31, 1986 memo to Assistant Secretary.

[29] 1987 Proposed Amendment III to the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe.

members protested at the BIA Area Office in Minneapolis and the MCT headquarters in Cass Lake, forcing the TEC to call a special meeting. Massive opposition to the proposal on the part of some 500 members present at the June 22, 1987 special meeting prompted the TEC to withdraw the amendment and to instead agree to a constitutional convention within the next 18 months. While the name came later, Camp Justice was born.

As the 1988 elections approached, tribal members stepped up their demands for a constitutional convention. Demanding another special TEC meeting on the constitution, a group of about 50 tribal members of all ages and both genders began occupying the Cass Lake facility center, which housed the MCT and local BIA offices, on April 19, 1988. After attempting to negotiate with the protesters, state police surrounded the building in force on April 24 and arrested 10 tribal members who refused orders to vacate. Walter Reese, one of those arrested, ran for Leech Lake chairman in 1988. Despite finishing a rather distant third in the vote, Reese won a decision overturning the election on appeal to election judge Margaret Treuer, who ruled that the TEC had no authority to redefine the constitutional requirement of majority to mean plurality. Treuer's decision demonstrated the potential of a tribal judicial system, but ensuing events would reveal the limitations.

Although the constitution stipulated that an election judge's ruling was "final," the TEC established an appellate court on the basis of Ordinance 15 to overturn Treuer's decision, which would have required a primary or runoff election to reach a majority vote. BIA Area Director Earl Barlow and the Interior Board of Indian Appeals upheld the appeals court ruling, notwithstanding the solicitor's opinion implicitly invalidating Ordinance 15. Chief Administrative Judge Kathryn Lynn ruled in essence that the Interior Department had no jurisdiction to review tribal elections, just as the federal courts had declined jurisdiction in cases such as *Means v. Wilson* and *Indian Political Action Committee* v. *Tribal Executive Committee*.

It was a green light for tribal electoral fraud, providing a safety net in the unlikely event that another RBC-appointed election judge would dare interpret the constitution. Camp Justice members continued to protest, demanding among other things independent oversight of tribal elections. As Camp Justice began to compile evidence of electoral fraud on White Earth in the 1990 elections, BIA area director Barlow said the bureau had

no authority to monitor or review elections, and U.S. Attorney Jerome Arnold claimed tribal elections were exempt from federal criminal jurisdiction.[30] Even as tribal elections were placed beyond federal reach, state police continued to arrest tribal protesters, though none of the 66 people arrested was ever convicted.

It would require the replacement of Barlow and Arnold for tribal members to break through Wadena's protective shield. On Aug. 27, 1991 Camp Justice members demonstrated along with Wisconsin Winnebago tribal members at the Minneapolis BIA office, demanding Barlow's removal. Notably, the BIA did not rule out the demand, and Barlow was suspended and subsequently resigned two years later, when the Star Tribune reported that he had received gifts from casinos under his regulatory jurisdiction.[31] Upon Bill Clinton's taking office in 1993, U.S. Senator Paul Wellstone, who had been heavily lobbied by Camp Justice, nominated David Lillehaug as U.S. attorney. Lillehaug was politically ambition and anything but publicity shy. In 1995 he brought about the indictment of the chairmen and secretaries-treasurer of Leech Lake and White Earth. The courts established firmly for the first time that eligible tribal members have a right to vote, making it a criminal act to obstruct or dilute that right.[32]

However, at the same time as the Justice and Interior Departments were investigating the TEC President, Wadena was preparing to assume police and judicial powers. With characteristic arrogance, Wadena wrote to Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs Ada Deer on May 31, 1994, stating, "We, the membership of the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe, are writing to advise you that as of today, various past Departmental determinations which would diminish the scope of tribal authorities of the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe (MCT) have no force or effect." Within less than three months, Associate Solicitor Michael J. Anderson overturned 14 years of Interior Department precedent to abandon the requirement that a constitutional amendment was necessary to establish

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[30] Minneapolis Star Tribune, "U.S. Can't Intervene n White Earth's Election Dispute," by Kevin Duchschere, Aug. 14, 1991.
[31] Minneapolis Star Tribune, "Suspended BIA official resigns, but probe goes on," by Lou Kitzer, Feb. 25, 1994.
[32] *U.S. v. Wadena*, 152 F. 3d 831

full-fledged courts and police. Deer likewise affirmed the decision in an even briefer letter dated Sept. 20, 1994, just one week before Wadena's chief election judge was indicted for shredding ballots that had been subpoenaed by the federal government. The decision cleared the way for Wadena's RBC to receive federal police funding through COPS grants, which it did in 1995.

Though ostensibly reformist tribal officials took office on Leech Lake and White Earth in 1996 the wake of their predecessors' convictions, constitutional reform died a slow death in large part due to the arbitrary decision of the Interior Department and the availability of COPS grants through the Justice Department. The real impetus for tribal officials to amend the constitution was the need to authorize tribal courts and police. It proved much more convenient for reservation officials to make law enforcement agreements with counties on the application of state law, reducing tribal police to subordinate officers of a state law enforcement system that has run roughshod over the Anishinaabeg for more than a century. None of these agreements was ever subjected to a referendum vote; much less were they the product of the constitutional convention tribal members had been promised nearly a decade earlier. Neither was there a single state legislative hearing on the issue, though tribal members had traveled throughout the state for many years to make their voices heard by state and federal officials.

The point I am trying to make through these two case studies is that respecting tribal sovereignty means something other than giving free rein to tribal governments without regard to the wishes of the people they purport to represent. It means renouncing the imperial doctrine of unilateral authority over indigenous nations. Neither Dick Wilson nor Chip Wadena could long have remained in office in the absence of external police intervention, and both were promptly voted out when people were given the chance to do so. The United States should either fulfill its role as guardian of tribal constitutional democracy or abandon its pretensions of oversight altogether. An appropriate first step towards acknowledging tribal sovereignty would be legislative repeal of the 1978 *Oliphant* ruling by the Supreme Court, as Amnesty International recently

advocated.[33] Although it has long been documented that Natives are most often assaulted, sexually and otherwise, by non-Native assailants, tribal courts have been denied jurisdiction over non-Indians by judicial fiat.

Human Rights groups such as Amnesty International and scholars such as Klint Cowan have suggested that the United States may be accountable under international law for human rights violations in Indian Country, including those perpetrated by tribal governments themselves.[34] One could certainly make a strong case in this regard for the violence that swept Pine Ridge in the 1970s. But tribes must take the initiative to adopt and enforce these standards within their territorial boundaries, a step which would appear to be within their regulatory authority under existing federal law. By ratifying human rights treaties such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, indigenous nations could implicitly assert their self-determination rights while providing a potential legal framework to enforce these rights against the United States.

But perhaps more importantly, tribes should move promptly to recognize the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Ratified in 2007 after more than three decades of struggle at the UN, the Declaration is one of the crowning achievements of the indigenous resurgence that followed Wounded Knee. It is, as former AIM leader Russell Means stated recently, on its face a non-binding declaration that simply acknowledges indigenous peoples as human beings.[35] But in conjunction with the ICCPR, a binding treaty ratified by the U.S. in 1992, it recognizes a potentially enforceable right of indigenous peoples to self-determination. While the U.S. claims the ICCPR is not self-executing and has not been codified in federal law, indigenous ratification and enactment would at the very least put the United States in an awkward legal position. It is often pointed out by cynics that the Declaration is in legal terms little more than a statement of principle. However, the same can be said of the UN Declaration of Human Rights, which is perhaps the best-known and respected tenet of international law. As declarations, neither of these

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[33] Oliphant v. Suquamish Indian Tribe, 98 S.Ct. 1011, 55 L.Ed.2d 209 (1978); Amnesty International, *Maze of Injustice: The Failure to Protect Indigenous Women from Sexual Violence*, 2007.

[34] Klint A. Cowan, International Responsibility for Human Rights Violations by American Indian Tribes, *Yale Human Rights and Development Law Journal*, 1/1/06.

[35] Statement at Nov. 28, 2008 rally for Leonard Peltier in Fargo, ND.

documents requires ratification, and in a tribal context both could provide a sound legal foundation for tribal judges who seek to advance the rights of indigenous people on a collective or individual basis.

There is little dispute that tribal courts will play a leading role in defining the future of Native sovereignty in the United States. There is, however, little evidence to suggest that many tribal judges are cognizant of that historical role or are striving for the judicial independence required to realize it. Unless they attempt to avail their tribal citizens of their existing rights under international law and treaties with the United States, they risk incorporating federal dominance into tribal law, at least by implication. Federal courts have, by and large, weighed in with their interpretations of Indian treaties. One might expect that any tribal justice system worthy of the name would offer its own interpretation of the validity and terms of treaties with the U.S., none of which surrendered self-determination rights now acknowledged by the world. The growing body of international human rights law at once provides a foundation of statutory and case law with which tribal judges might protect the individual and collective rights of Native peoples, and at the same time affords tribal leaders an opportunity to express their international personalities in a manner which can only earn the respect of the world and, more importantly, the people on whose authority they serve.

SON-IN-LAW: AN AFFECTIONATE MARRIAGE OF RURAL MIDWEST AND CALIFORNIA

by Aurora Bear

I have a confession to make: I thoroughly enjoy Pauly Shore movies. *Bio-Dome*, *Encino Man, In the Army Now*—all of these movies are stupid, but they're fun. They're harmlessly stupid. Sure, Pauly Shore can be described as 'annoying' and 'an affront to intelligent society' and to call him the Adam Sandler of the early nineties is maybe giving him a little too much credit[1], but I enjoy him. And while, yeah, my favorite movie is *Encino Man*[2], the one that I think deserves much more credit than it has ever been given is the 1993 comedy, *Son-in-Law*. For those of you who have been blessed enough to have never seen a Pauly Shore movie, *Son-in-Law* follows Rebecca, a girl from small-town South Dakota, who decides to go to California for college. She discovers that through some great administrative mishap[3], Pauly Shore is her RA. Like in every Pauly Shore movie, Pauly Shore goes by a completely stupid name, and in this movie, it is Crawl. Crawl helps draw Rebecca out of her shell, and by that, I mean, Rebecca cuts off her hair, bleaches it, gets a tattoo, and starts dressing less like a puritan and more like every cool girl in an 80s or 90s movie. She brings Crawl home to her family for Thanksgiving and, through a strange turn of events that mostly just happens because Rebecca doesn't want to marry her high school boyfriend[4], her parents think that she is engaged to Pauly Shore.

But I'm not going to talk about how her parents are rightfully disturbed, disgusted, and absolutely appalled by the fact that their daughter has gone to California and has come back, supposedly, engaged

[1] Sandler has had some movies that most people will admit were pretty good, and the only one that people will really accept of Pauly Shore is *Encino Man*, and I'm pretty sure that's because of Brendan Fraser.

[2] Mostly because of Brendan Fraser.

[3] Not actually explicated in the movie, we can just assume this.

[4] Who is cheating on her with Kelly Kapowski from *Saved by the Bell*.

to Pauly Shore, though I imagine this could be used as a cautionary tale for parents in the Midwest and Upper Plains states to keep their children away from California, because they might come back engaged to Pauly Shore. No, what really interests me about the movie is how the character of Crawl fully embraces the rural lifestyle that he is subjected to and how he wins over the family by adding a little bit of his California/Pauly Shore flare into their lives.

While at first glance, it may appear that Crawl is making fun of the country way of life—one only has to think of the scene in the clothing store in South Dakota, where Pauly Shore creates the most godawful getup of 'everything stereotypical about the country, except in patterns that would never be at this store'—there is a feeling of awesome wonder that Shore brings to the table. This is something that you can see in every Pauly Shore movie, but particularly in this one: every character that Pauly Shore plays is an idiot under a different name, but every character that Pauly Shore plays is a nice person. You get the feeling that any social mishap he might make is purely that: a social mishap, and that he is truly trying to run headfirst into whatever scenario he might find himself in that week with an open mind and an open heart. Throughout the movie, the character of Crawl is willing to try and learn how to do things like feed the pigs, and square dance, and combine. He might be terrible at these things, but by god he is *trying*, and most of the time, he is being sabotaged, which makes his turnaround at the end of the film, where he is an effective, if strange and annoying, part of the family that much more satisfying. Crawl might not have gotten it at first, but he gets it by the end.

The other thing that we must keep in mind when it comes to Crawl in this movie is how he tries to make their lives *better* without completely changing them. Perhaps the best example of this is when he gives Rebecca's mom a makeover for the square dance[5]. Though the scene starts out with him seeing her in a towel and unabashedly telling her that she's "giving him a semi", it ends with some advice that ends up reinvigorating her and her husband's sex life: Crawl doesn't go out and buy her a whole new wardrobe, like he does with Rebecca, because he doesn't need to. While Rebecca's mother isn't wearing anything she's seen wearing earlier in the movie, the clothes that she wears to the square-

[5] Which he also participates in *gleefully*.

dance don't look completely out of place at the square dance, and one can imagine that she's had them in the back of her closet for a while. While her relationship with her husband was never in *danger*, Crawl shows the two of them that a little change can be good.

At its core, that is probably what Crawl is doing with this small little down in South Dakota: he is injecting a little bit of change into its veins. He doesn't try to strip away the rural identity—why would he do that? He *loves* the rural identity. Crawl is simply an outsider with the lack of social skills necessary to change a town like this. He sees something that could be better, and he says what could be better about it, even though he should probably just keep his mouth shut, and this willingness to bring about change when people are reluctant to accept it[6] is what makes his repetitive characters so appealing. While Crawl, just like every other Pauly Shore character, is a straight-up idiot, he is also a straight-up good dude, and he is just full of love.

[6] Especially when it's coming suggested by Pauly Shore, which is. Fair.

NEW DAY DAWNING

by Sarah Coomber

The summer heat already lay heavy in our Moorhead neighborhood, the basswoods and elms dropping bracts and seeds, all piling up like snow along the edges of the sidewalks.

It was June 2021, and my husband, son and I had been back in my hometown for nine months already, after a rash Pandemic Move out of Washington state, where we had lived for nineteen years.

Given the situation, we were maintaining a measure of solitude during our homecoming year, experiencing the autumn leaves, winter snows, spring blooms and early summer swelter mostly at home. We studied at home, worked at home, socialized from home, shopped online, worshipped online.

In mid-June, our Moorhead church decided it was time to return to the sanctuary. When I woke up that first indoor-worship Sunday morning, I told my husband I wasn't ready.

"Ready for what?" is the question he did *not* ask me, thankfully, because I did not know.

I tried out a few responses in my imagination anyway:

- Not ready for so many people in one room?
- Not ready to make yet another masking decision?
- Not ready to meet new people?
- Not ready to get dressed up and Be On Time on a Sunday morning?
- Not ready for something that might feel like the Before Times but wasn't?

These all seemed like reasonable things to not-be-ready for, after more than a year of Pandemic Life, but I wasn't sure which were holding me back.

So I did what I do most every morning anyway: leashed up my trusty dog Leo and went for a walk in the neighborhood. It was already 80-some degrees, so we headed toward the river to walk the grassy dike.

This dike didn't exist when I was growing up in Moorhead. In fact, it runs right through the lot where an old friend's home once stood. Some years back, her childhood house, along with dozens of others were removed due to their propensity for flooding, the unpredictability of rising spring waters traded for the certainty of raised earth.

Leo and I dropped down the river side of the dike into one of those now-empty yards, lured by a blooming line of lilacs, their scent surrounding us, as if we had fallen into a pot of jasmine tea. But as I reached out to pluck a twig of blossoms, I spotted something else: an iris.

No wild iris, this one. It had been bred to mimic the colors of a sunset sky. This domesticated beauty was obviously planted by someone, a reminder that people once lived there, once tended those flowers and shrubs, once packed up their furniture and clothes and pots and pans, and left. Leo and I were not just walking along a dike. We were walking through what used to be living rooms and kitchens and bedrooms and gardens, where people had laughed and eaten and cried and loved.

I left the iris but brought back lilacs for our table and, after a breakfast of pancakes and eggs with my guys, I waved them out the door to church, my son dashing back in to grab a favorite mask, just in case. A few minutes later, I tuned into the church service on my laptop.

I had expected a livestream and was disappointed to find the service had been prerecorded, what had become our "normal" way of going to church over the past many months. But watching it alone, holding myself in this Pandemic Time habit, I realized how much I wanted to peek into the sanctuary, maybe even catch a glimpse of my husband and son in the congregation, to see what was happening there, how others were handling the beginning of the hoped-for After Times.

Without me.

I began to feel left behind, the rest of my family moving on. When the worship band began singing, "Bless the Lord, O my soul…" the tears came.

Our church in Washington had sung this song at countless services in the Before Times, before the pandemic, before we sold our house, before we packed up our moving van and drove away toward a new—renewed—

life in Minnesota. We had sung it when I was a struggling stay-at-home mom, a stressed-out working mom, a granddaughter mourning my Grandma's passing, a freshly minted yoga instructor, a newly published author. It was a song that had spoken to me at each of those times.

And now I was hearing it in our new place as well, where all three of us—and Leo—were finding new identities and callings, and where I was still learning that our transition process would require me to leave parts of my old self, my Washington self, behind.

I imagined myself on a rope swing, arcing back and forth between one riverbank and the other, the old and the new, clinging to the rope I had grabbed hold of the previous September, when we stepped off the life we had made in Washington and began swinging toward a new one in Minnesota.

But doing so in Pandemic Times made it pretty easy to hover between the two sides. Staying masked and socially distant in Minnesota while meeting online with friends, writing groups, book clubs, worship communities and work colleagues across the country, even around the world, meant I had never quite let go of the rope. I never needed to. As a result, I was no longer where-I-was, but I also had not quite landed here, where-I-am.

To actually *go* to church in Minnesota, would mean *be*-ing here in a new way, committing to this familiar yet in some ways unknown place. Would it also require letting my faraway loved ones and my Washington life slip away?

Maybe letting go of the metaphorical rope swing is exactly what I wasn't ready for on that Sunday morning in June.

Thinking back on Leo's and my walk along the dike, I could see that my little family held some things in common with those people who once owned homes backing up to the river. They had let go of their houses and their futures in that neighborhood, along with their irises, lilac bushes and apple trees that continue to bear flowers and fruit, continue to catch the eyes, noses and taste buds of passersby.

I imagined that back in Washington, my irises had bloomed, and my purple coneflowers were getting ready to grace the new owners of our old home with their prairie-style beauty. Maybe last summer's tomatoes had volunteered in our old vegetable garden.

Like the people who moved from the riverside houses, my family had moved on to a new life too. Whether my heart had caught up to my geographic location was almost beside the point. The fact was, our life now included galvanized troughs where we planted cherry tomatoes, eggplants and zucchini, snapdragons and sunflowers, all of which needed tending.

Wherever those riverside neighbors ended up, I imagine they planted new gardens too.

HOME, SWEET HOME

by Gail A. Gabrielson

The moment I walked into the house, I heaved a big sigh and thought to myself, "I'm home."

My husband and I had been looking for a new place to live, and he found this neglected gem in a small town of no more than 300 people. It was a two-and-a-half story house, perched on a corner lot with a huge yard and mature trees.

It also had charming details: gingerbread trim on the front wrap-around porch, a bay window on the side, and a smaller and plainer back porch. It didn't have a garage, but we'd learned to live without one. We bought the house, and set about making it our home.

My parents had transformed an old country schoolhouse into my childhood home, so they helped us a lot. Along the way, we learned the joys of home ownership.

The kitchen had to be gutted. We closed off a door that wasn't needed so that we would have more space to hang the cupboards. A full set of cupboards came with the house—apparently the previous owners had planned to redo the kitchen. In the process of putting up new drywall, my father found a couple of pennies between the joists. One was from 1901 and one was from 1902.

He wasn't surprised to see them. He explained that carpenters traditionally leave a new penny between the two-by-fours in a renovation to date the construction work. In fact, we searched through the abstract and found that the house had been built by the small-town banker during the town's heyday, sometime around North Dakota's statehood. The bank later failed and the house was foreclosed upon—more than once, too.

My father hung the new upper cupboards and then to test them, he reached up with his hands and grabbed ahold of the top rail. Lifting his feet, he declared if the cupboards could hold him up, they would hold up under the weight of our dishes. We instantly agreed, since my father was not a small man.

As the bottom cupboards were being positioned, we realized that the old window in the kitchen was going to reach below the level of the

countertop. My parents had a quick conversation and bought us a new crank-out window as a house-warming gift. It fit above the sink beautifully. Every person washing dishes needed to be able to look out a window, declared my mother.

Indeed, the window turned out to be extra important in order to keep track of our kids in the back yard, playing on the swing set we added.

With a functional kitchen completed, we started on the oak floor in the dining room and living room. We rented a huge sander on wheels to refinish the wood that extended nearly the entire length of the house—our own indoor football field. We could fit two couches, the TV stand, a recliner and a rocking chair in our living room. A full-size dining room table with chairs fit nicely in the space left over.

We later added a half-wall to split up the space a little and hung a stained-glass window between the two pillars that bookended the half-wall. It matched the stained-glass panel in the living room bay window. We found the orphan window in the attic, and knew it needed to be returned to the home's décor.

My mother explained that the window was likely a "piano window," installed high on a wall so that the family could put an upright piano under it and have a light source to read the music. And sure enough, when we looked at the siding on the house, we could see where a window had been removed and filled in. Our piano had a spot in the room at the front of the house—likely used as a front parlor used when guests arrived.

That front room became our library/office/work-out room. It was big enough for a wall of book shelves, a desk for our home computer, and a home gym, in addition to the piano. The huge picture window looked out onto the front porch where we hung a swing, making the home even more picturesque.

The main floor also had space for a huge bathroom. The previous owner used a wheelchair, so he needed the extra room. I had so much room in the bathroom, I sorted our family's laundry there. Our laundry room was attached to the kitchen, obviously added on later. It was just big enough for a washer and dryer and a rod for hanging clothes.

We found out that room wasn't heated or insulated. The first winter we lived there, we discovered that the washer's stand-pipe and the sewer pipe attached to it would freeze up in the winter. We improvised by hanging a hair dryer down behind the washer to thaw the pipes. Once thawed, the washer was kept busy all day. Our tradition of doing laundry all in one day was born. I was just thrilled that I had a main-floor laundry. I had only one flight of stairs to carry clean clothes.

Upstairs we had four bedrooms. Our two children were ready for their own bedrooms so they each chose one and picked the colors for the walls. The closets were small—having lots of clothing wasn't a common thing back when the house was built. Indeed, we used hooks on the walls in the front foyer to hang our coats.

Our master bedroom had a walk-in closet that was big enough for all my husband's suits, so he claimed that one. Another room off that bedroom—intended as a nursery—became my "dressing room." I had a rod to hang all my clothes and room for my vanity, a dressing table built by my father as a Christmas gift.

The fourth bedroom became my sewing room. It was wonderful to have a room where I could lay out fabric and patterns on an old dining room table. I could leave the ironing board set up, and have a dresser just for my collection of fabric. At that time, I was sewing the majority of my own clothing.

The attic was accessed from a doorway in the upstairs hall. The small narrow stairs made it a scary trip, but we used the attic for storing suitcases and holiday decorations. We only had part of a floor up there, and my husband put his foot through the ceiling of the sewing room at one point when he missed walking along the joists. I think he was up there chasing out squirrels or plugging up holes in the soffit. It was just one more thing that we had to fix. No big deal.

The basement needed very little attention. We used it for storage and a spot for my husband's pool table. One end of the basement became the shop area where the tools were stored, while another was where we stored my husband's grocery sales samples and other sales paraphernalia.

It was also home to a mama mouse and her babies. Our son discovered the mouse nest in the ceiling joists when the babies started crawling out and falling to the floor. They apparently crawled in through the foundation. The previous owners had put a new basement under the house, one of its attractive selling points.

We found mama mouse dead from rodent poison—the reason the babies were moving out. I couldn't bear to pick up the wriggling little critters, so I dispatched them with the end of a baseball bat, and my son and I bagged them up for the garbage.

At some point, we declared our renovations complete. We thought all the house's problems had been addressed. Then one day, while I was washing dishes at the kitchen sink, I saw a puddle in the side yard visibly rise and then fall. I called up to my husband and ask what he'd just done.

He had flushed the toilet in the upstairs bathroom. We knew it was a bad sign.

We called my father and sought his advice. He recommended looking at the piping in the basement to make sure everything was hooked up. It seemed to be all right. Our second test was to dig down by the foundation where the pipe went through the basement wall. Bingo. There was the sewer pipe and a rusted-out coffee can. Apparently, the previous owners had abandoned the upstairs bathroom and had capped off the pipe, never connecting it to the city's sewer system.

A family friend who was a plumber came over and advised us on how to proceed—break the pipe that led nowhere and connect it to the sewer pipe from the main-floor bathroom. It was a tense time, but I knew it would be a story I'd tell again and again, laughing all the while. Never take anything for granted.

When our children started going to school, they found out from local children that our home was the haunted house in town. It had stood empty for years and had been claimed by all kinds of critters. When swallows tried to build a nest on the back porch, they'd dive-bomb anyone coming near their nests. I gave the kids free-rein with their Super Soaker water guns. Problem solved.

Another time, we had a bird fly into the living room, having found a hole in the attic. He worked his way down through holes in the floors and ceilings where heating pipes had been removed. The bird perched on the back of my rocking chair, and I laughed about it, but only after the kids and I had shooed the bird out the door.

I made peace with the birds one year when I hung baskets of flowers from the gingerbread trim on the front porch to make the house seem less scary. The birds moved in, too, making room among the flowers for their nests. I couldn't bear to make them move out.

On our first Halloween living there, we discovered that the volunteer firemen hosted a party for kids and adults at the Community Center across the street. My husband bought an entire display of caramel popcorn, and gave away full-size boxes to the kids who dared knock on our front door. Word got around quickly among the children at the Halloween party, and ultimately, we had to shut off our porch light because we'd run out. No more haunted house.

Christmas rolled around that first year and we were asked to be one of the homes on a Tour of Homes as a fund-raiser for the church we attended. Our theme was "A Homemade Christmas." We had lots of handcrafted decorations on our eight-foot tree centered in the bay

window. We had several other homemade decorations, too, collected over the years.

The outside of our house was adorned with icicle lights—white strings of lights that had varied lengths of lights hanging from them. We eventually accumulated enough of these lights that they'd go entirely around the house, highlighting the gingerbread decorations. Our house looked like something out of a Thomas Kincaid painting.

One winter when an early spring snow storm took down power lines throughout the area, we camped out in the living room, pulling out two full-size hide-a-beds, and tacking blankets over the doorways to hold in the heat. The back porch served as our refrigerator, and the battery-operated radio entertained us in between card games.

We snorted with disdain at people who called in to the radio station, asking when help would arrive. North Dakotans were made of sterner stuff than that. We brought a kerosene heater into the living room, and would have died from the fumes, but the windows were so leaky that it wasn't a major concern.

Another time, our furnace seemed to be malfunctioning. My husband would go downstairs, hit the reset button, and it would run for a while and then quit. When the repairman came, he told us we were lucky we'd called, because the chimney had fallen in, blocking the furnace. We could have died from carbon monoxide poisoning. And yes, we got a new furnace with a different exhaust, and blocked the chimney from future use.

When I think of all the memories we created in that house, I also imagine the other people who have lived in that home. There was the banker and his family, another well-known family in the town whose name was attached to the home (as in the Smith House), and the couple from whom we bought it whose last name was nearly as long as ours.

Folks in town told us how a teacher rented the front parlor and bathroom (which doubled as a kitchen) for a while until an apartment building was constructed. They also had vivid memories of the handicapped man's wife, who climbed a ladder and re-shingled the house single-handedly—my kind of woman.

An older woman once visited us and told us she'd grown up there. I wanted to weep when she described the pocket doors that once divided the front parlor from the back. I apologized for all the owners who had taken out the wide woodwork and painted the rest, destroying some of the home's real charm.

I wonder what kind of stories those folks tell the people who now own that house. Do they tell them how we had to park our cars at the Community Center and wade through spring floodwater wearing knee-high rubber boots before the roads were paved? Or maybe they recall how my husband never wore a coat to church because it was only a block away. They might talk about the surprise birthday party my husband threw for me. The special guest was our neighbor and his llama.

Our children grew up in that house and we have fond memories. When we moved, we had a huge roll-off dumpster parked in the side yard so we could get rid of things that no one else would want. We left behind the pool table and a dining room mirror that fit the home's age. What we took with us was a lifetime of memories.

MAUDE AND ME

by Rita Greff

My family and I lived in the middle of nowhere in northwestern South Dakota. The year I attended first grade, our country school was not open, so I boarded in Lemmon, SD. When I was going to be a second grader, the country school located a teacher.

My father worked in the fields so he taught me to ride a horse to school. I rode every day that he was in the fields.

First Solo Ride

Maude rapidly swished her tail back and forth and laid her ears back to show us she was not pleased to have a saddle on her back and a bit in her mouth. The brown and white pinto was confidently prancing along behind my father as he led her to the house. I joined them on the little gravel road which circled our house. That was the day I would learn to ride by myself.

Mixed emotions welled up settling in the pit of my stomach. I wanted to do well to please my father, at the same time recognizing that my mother was lukewarm to this plan. Later, I learned that Maude always had her own plan, and she excelled in carrying it out.

Feelings of failure began to stack up immediately when I tried and failed to get my foot up high enough to reach the wooden stirrup on Maude's left side. Father gave me a boost that day, but he wouldn't always be with me. How would I get on?

Father told me that since I was riding a horse, not driving a team, I should hold both reins in one hand. By pushing the reins to one side of Maude's neck, she would understand the direction I wanted her to go. My small, seven-year-old hands would need practice to get comfortable with those leather reins.

Father told me to let go of the brass saddle horn and learn to hold the reins down close to it, rather than holding them up near my chest. He said riding a horse required a rider to go with the flow, balancing to the movement of the horse.

After directing me to ride around the little fields to the east of the house, my dad disappeared to do his chores. With a little privacy to do my practicing, I began to feel more confident. It seemed like my legs were sticking straight out because of Maude's round belly, but I managed to dig my heels into her sweaty sides, and we headed for the grassy trail between the two fields.

Maude's plan did not extend to walking around the fields. As soon as she reached the six-inch green grass, she stopped and put her head down. From my elevated seat, I could hear her pulling the grass right out of the ground and crunching it in her jaws. I was determined to "be the boss of her," but I could feel another failure stacking up. She ignored my heels in her side, and though I pulled with all my might, her head stayed buried in the grass.

Maude finally decided that she would see where the trail led, and we made some progress on the path. While we plodded along with the saddle creaking, I was able to enjoy the wide blue sky, and the songs of meadowlarks along the path. The hot July morning in South Dakota caused both horse and rider to sweat, even when their plans were in sync. So that morning we just made one trial rotation around the little fields. We headed for the barn, each of us thinking we were the boss.

The Ride to Burdick School

A tributary of the Missouri River, the north branch of the Grand River parallels the northern border of South Dakota. My first encounter with the river and the flood plain it had formed, began on the first day of second grade when I began riding my brown and white spotted horse, Maude, to school.

On the first day of that school term, I had my knapsack packed with my pencils, my tablet, a new box of crayons, and my noon lunch. Father helped me tie the knapsack to the side of the saddle and boosted me into the saddle. He reminded me not to let Maude eat grass because we had places to go. We trotted down the long driveway, Maude's hoofs crunching on the gravel. Rounding the corner, we opted for the grassy ditch between the little country road and the fence. This scenic little jaunt sometimes included leisurely observing pheasants, meadowlarks, or red-winged blackbirds, but this was my first attempt at a focused ride to school. So with tunnel vision I stayed focused on slapping the leather reins from side to side onto Maude's rump to keep her moving.

Steadily we covered the mile of roadway ditches, half of it on the river bottom where we reached Grandpa and Grandma Martin's farm. My uncle Bill, an 8th grader that year, joined us on his bald-faced black horse, Blacky. Bill prodded Blacky ahead to show us the way. Approaching the river crossing, Blacky cooperatively trotted right into the 18-inch deep water sending up big splashes.

Butterflies fluttered in my stomach as I wondered how this adventure would pan out. Maude indicated that her enthusiasm was lacking by laying her ears back, swishing her tail, and making short, prancing steps. Bill yelled that I should show her who is boss. Finally, Maude decided to step into the stream. The moving water made me half dizzy as Maude splashed to the middle of the river and stopped. I slapped the reins from side to side, but she folded her knees and dropped into the cool water, rolling over as she settled onto the riverbed. With alarm, I got off into the water. I was not hurt, but my shoes, my clothes, and my knapsack were wet. Though the water lapped along leisurely, I thought maybe I would even wash away and drown.

Bill hated my horse, and I felt he may even have hated me at that moment. I can't remember how I got out of the river or even back on the horse or how we even continued riding the next three miles, but we did. We trotted through the soothing, whispering cottonwood trees on the flat river bottom. Then we crossed a grassy meadow before coming to another intimidating obstacle: the high river bank.

Separating the floodplain from the plateau above it, this bank was about a half mile south of the flowing river. Uncle Bill skillfully guided his tall horse onto a narrow cow path which wound ever steeper to the top of the eroded bank. Maude with her shorter legs showed she knew how to negotiate tough trails.

This was my first experience at climbing what I thought must have been a mountain. Looking around, I could see that some deep gullies had been washed out by heavy rains. Some areas had little shelves of grass, and other areas were completely eroded. No trees grew on the surface we were navigating, but there were many piney-smelling dwarf evergreen shrubs growing everywhere. Sometimes the path came close to the edge of a gulley. Sometimes our horses brushed the piney-smelling shrubs as we passed. I had been encouraged not to hang on to the saddle horn like a scared greenhorn. So I tried to sway with the motion of my horse, using muscles I didn't even know existed.

Finally, we reached the top of the bank, and the path opened onto a rolling meadow. Riding up to a barb-wired fence, Bill dismounted, pulled

three staples out of the three strings of barb-wire, held down the wires by stepping on them, and we coaxed our horses across the low wires. Uncle Bill stepped off the wires, replaced the staples, and we continued another mile and a half to school. This area had a little country road which we could ride on, or ride on the grassy turf beside it. Passing some low hills and some flat areas, we came to a cattle guard, so Bill had to open a gate to let us through. The last half mile of our morning ride was negotiated beside a graveled county road. We kept our horses moving in the ditch until we reached the top of a hill. Then we crossed the road and descended into the schoolyard.

Pulling up in front of a little barn right on the school grounds, we dismounted. I found I could barely walk since my muscles were not used to this type of exercise. But walking stiff-legged, I managed to stumble into the barn and tie my horse to the manger where she would be able to eat hay. Bill removed our saddles and we headed for the little building which was Burdick School. All these adventures and it was not even 9 a.m.

Saddling Maude

That first year of riding to school on Maude, I was very dependent on others to help me. I was so short that it was difficult for me to take the saddle off when I we reached school. I could unlace the cinch, and then Uncle Bill or Joe Anderson would come and lift the saddle off Maude and hang it over a horizontal post.

As we were leaving in the afternoon, one of them would saddle Maude for me. Then we would head along the ditch for the first half-mile on our trek home.

Maude, my ornery part-Shetland/part-Welsh pony, could be so mean. Sometimes she bit the boys in the leg or butt as they cinched the saddle.

One day as Joe was tightening the cinch, Maude bit him with her strong, yellowed teeth, and he got away as quick as he could without finishing the cinching.

Crawling on the manger, I slid into the saddle and rode out into the sunny fall afternoon. The air was warm and I relaxed as walked along the ditch. A half-mile from the school, the saddle slid off with me in it! There I sat on the ground in my small leather saddle. Maude stopped immediately. She turned around and looked at me. After seeing that I was moving, she galloped away only stopping when she got a mile away to where we lowered the fence wires.

Uncle Bill followed her on Blacky, his pokey bald face horse. When they got to the fence, Maude consented to being caught and being pulled back to where I still sat tearfully waiting. When would I ever be able to make it clear to Maude that I was the boss?

Bill put the saddle back on and cinched it tight. All the while Maude lowered her ears and stepped in place swishing her tail. Although she couldn't talk, Maude certainly made her feelings clear. On this day it was still clear that she was the boss, and that I could ride her only until she tired of me.

Bill was rightfully disgusted to have to babysit an annoying brat and an equally annoying uncooperative pony. As we rode, I coaxed Maude up beside Blacky and Bill said, "Stay away from me." Though my feelings were hurt, logically, it made sense. As we rode along side by side, Maude suddenly laid her ears down and kicked her hind legs into Blacky. Bill shouted all kinds of words I'd never heard before which brought a little smile to my face.

According to sources on the internet, "Shetland ponies are generally brave and good-tempered, although they have a reputation for being opinionated and intelligent—sometimes more intelligent than their owners, which can make them a challenging first pony."

Racing Home from Burdick School on Maude

Burdick School, located about twenty miles south of White Butte, SD, did not have running water. In those days we did not have light plastic five-gallon buckets to fill with water. Our teacher brought well water from a farm in a heavy steel cream can.

There was no water for the horses. So we kept them unsaddled in the barn, so they would not be sweating out their water.

My father had a serious talk with Uncle Bill and me about not riding the horses at school. One noon recess, someone (I am sure it was one of the older boys) had the great idea to play tag on horses. So all saddled up, we chased each other around the barn and the one-acre school yard. I was surprised at how much fun that was. Maude could turn a corner around the barn so closely that she nearly scraped me off on the building. She was amazingly quick in her take-off, as well. When the teacher rang the bell, we unsaddled the horses and walked stiffly and odorifically into the classroom for the afternoon classes.

What we didn't know, was that my father had driven past the school and saw us racing. That evening Uncle Bill got a tongue-lashing because

he was supposed to be old enough to know better. At home I was scolded, too, but what was worse was that I knew Uncle Bill would be angry with me and would say I was nothing but trouble.

That afternoon tag gave me racing fever because my horse was a contender. So one night when we left the school, Max, Bill, and I had a little race.

Racing a horse is fine when you are ahead of everyone. The wind bites against your eyes, causing you to squint, so you don't really see clearly. Sometimes I'd peek behind to see if anyone was catching me, but their horses were slow. I reached the fence first, Maude panting and sweating. She did a little dance, waiting for me to let the fence down so she could go through. She liked to come in first, too. I managed to catch the stirrup after a few tries. I swung up as she raced ahead. Frantically, I probed for the other stirrup. She started down the steep hill at a bumpy gallop. I couldn't keep my balance with just one foot in the stirrup.

Though I tried my best to toe-into that elusive stirrup, we were bumping down "the big hill" when I lost the other stirrup, too. Maude had pushed the bit into some part of her muzzle where it didn't hurt, and she refused to acknowledge my prompts to stop.

What a way to end a race! Down I went. Right onto the crooked, narrow path. Maude stopped immediately when I fell. She turned around and looked at me. I moved and she was off, down the hill and to the river a mile away for a big drink of water. Tearfully getting to my feet, I started to follow her down the hill. Here came Uncle Bill with a big frown on his face. He got off Blacky, boosted me into the saddle, and led us down the hill. Eventually, he caught Maude, the riderless horse, and she permitted me to be the boss the rest of the way home.

On the Way to School

The crisp October morning hinted at a warm, sunny day. I was optimistic because Father had given me a leather whip to assist me in showing Maude who was the boss. I had been riding my horse to Burdick School (4 ½ miles from our little farm home) for about a month. There were about eight of us coming together in this little rural school which had been setting empty for several years. The school was on one acre of sloping, hilly land, and it was accompanied by outhouses and a barn for our horses. There was a single swing suspended from telephone poles.

As the only girl enrolled in the school, I got a lot of attention. I looked forward to school every day because there were interesting things to do.

Some days at noon recess, we took our horses out of the barn and played a game of tag around the barn. Maude could turn a corner so sharp that often I was able to get away from the guy who was it. The horses worked up a sweat, but then they got to rest while we went inside for class. My father said that riding horse at school was a no-no because we had no water for the horses. One day, he deliberately drove by the school and saw us playing tag. That was the last day we played tag.

Mom had fashioned my hair with fresh braids that morning, and I was wearing jeans, a white shirt, and my red cardigan. I felt pretty spiffy, and I was looking forward to impressing all my boyfriends.

Maude and I trotted down the long driveway which ended at the mailbox. I reminded her with a nudge of the whip, that I was the boss. She swished her tail and laid her brown ears against her head. We'd had several inches of rain, and water had collected in a huge puddle covering the whole end of the driveway as it met the county road. On this crisp morning, the puddle was frozen solid. Maude slowed to a walk, and slowly negotiated the icy arena. Then we turned the corner and ambled down the frosty grass ditch for about a quarter of a mile.

Suddenly, Maude decided she was NOT going to school today. She turned around and began to gallop in the ditch. I tried my best to pull on the reins to stop her, but she kept picking up speed. In no time at all, we were at the icy driveway. I was petrified. I was sure we would slip on the ice and fall to the ground. But sure footed Maude, whipped around that corner and headed for the barn.

My father saw and heard us coming. He stood in our path to stop the runaway. Maude nearly ran over him and galloped right on by him with me hanging on for dear life. I saw us heading for the open "little gate." Thinking I would have my legs torn off, I put them both up on the side of Maude's neck. We made an abrupt stop in front of the closed barn door. I was scared and crying silently; Maude was panting and sweating.

By this time my dad had caught up with us. He lifted me out of the saddle and stood me on the ground. Fueled by his fear and anger, he grabbed the reins in one hand and a big stick in the other, and beat Maude with the stick. Of course, I now cried anguished sobs. My dad's actions scared me as much as riding Maude on ice.

When the beating stopped, Father was panting, Maude's nose was bleeding, and I was still sobbing. Father lifted me back into the saddle, gave me the reins, and said, "NOW GO TO SCHOOL!"

And we did.

A Typical Morning Ride to School

My family lived 4 ½ miles from Burdick School along the northern border of South Dakota. In the spring and fall my father worked in the field, so we children had to ride to school and back on horses.

One fall morning when I was ten and Dean and Diane were in first grade, we walked to the barn to get the horses Father had saddled for us. Diane was riding Nellie, a little white Shetland/Welsh with a black head. Dean was riding Shorty, a spotted Shetland who had already earned a reputation for throwing my dad off his back and stripping Daddy's shirt of any buttons. Maude, a brown and white Shetland/Welsh horse, was my challenge for the fourth year in a row.

We left the barnyard through "The Little Gate" lifting our legs to the sides of our horses' necks so we wouldn't get hung up on the posts. Down the driveway we trotted into the flat, grassy ditch. Our horses, used to this routine, switched their tails and sneaked a mouthful of grass if their rider was daydreaming.

The morning was cool but the day ahead looked like it could be a hot one: a nice fall day to be riding to school.

Typically, Dean was busy exploring the plants and animals in the grass. Diane who was much more task-oriented moved along steadily in her stubbornly silent style. I brought up the rear, trying to keep us all moving forward so we wouldn't be late for school.

With leather saddles creaking we crossed the county road which we had been following, and we entered Grampa and Gramma's private road. The horses' hooves crunched as we descended the steep hill to the river bottom.

Our path led through Grampa and Gramma's corrals, across the North Grand River, onto a cow path winding through gullies and shrubs, slowly spiraling us up the steep banks of the river. At the top of the bank, we would stop at a certain post to remove a staple for each of the three barbed wire strands. One of us would stand on the wires to hold them down while the others would ride across the fenceline. The next two miles were fairly easy to cover: no hills, no rivers, no fences.

On this beautiful morning we had not yet reached Grampa and Gramma's corral. Without warning my opinion of the morning changed! Still in the lead, Diane's horse noticed something on the edge of the road that had never been there before. Someone had lost a five-gallon oil can. With a sudden lurch, Nellie shied away from the bucket.

Diane "bit the dust" and lay with the wind knocked out of her. Frantically, I questioned, "Diane, are you all right? Diane, are you hurt?!"

Dean busied himself with catching Nellie and bringing her back to the scene. Finally Diane was able to breathe, and she was more angry than hurt.

"I'm **not** going to school!" she cried emphatically.

I pleaded, "We have to go to school."

"I am not getting on Nellie ever again!" Diane argued.

"You have to get on Nellie. We are going to be late!" I groaned.

"No! I am not going to school! I hate Nellie! And now my colors are broke! I am not going!"

"Please, get back on," I begged. "You can have my crayons. We are going to be late!" I say as I reluctantly open Diane's bag, take her broken crayons and deposit mine.

That does the trick. Diane climbs back on Nellie. Dean takes the lead, and Nellie decides it's safe to proceed. The morning slips back into the normal mode, and we plod on to new adventures.

We rode to school every day that autumn, but early in the spring we moved away. We were closer to schools, so we never rode to school again.

THE MACHINE AND THE GROVE

by Mark Holman

The old rusted Machine had been sitting in a small grove of trees in the middle of a farm field for countless years. Its decrepit, decayed mass of steel beams, gears, and levers sat nestled within a hollow of a grove of trees planted sometime in the deep, unremembered past. For over a century, it remained within a clearing in the small forest, the surrounding plant life intertwining with its metal parts, blurring the line between the mechanical and the natural. Many years before, tractors had driven horses from the land, leaving incalculable numbers of horse-drawn farm machines parked in remote groves of trees across the prairie. They wait for the once numerous farmers and their teams of horses to return and make them functional again.

One grove seemed to float above a flat sea of uniform farm fields like a puffy green cloud. Ancient cottonwood trees with their fountain-like tops of cascading branches and leaves protruded from the feathery emerald isle like Manhattan skyscrapers thrust upward out of a fluffy cumulus cloud. The cloud's smooth lines and undulations with bulging intersecting curves consisted mainly of trees like boxelder and green ash, mottled in spots by red dogwood and silver Russian olive. Some of the towering cottonwoods reached back to a time when the prairie grassland stretched as far as the eye could see, while most of the surrounding forest, a mix of diverse species, had regenerated several times. Small oaks belied great age by their small stature and may have been as primordial as the sky touching cottonwoods. The little woodland was a self-sustaining haven that gave more than it took from the surrounding treeless lands simply because it was there.

At one time, a person could stand on the shore of the Grove on its terrestrial beach, where the forest floor gave way to nettle and grass on the edge of a black or green sea of farmland. They could perch on the grassy beach of the island and view a vast flotilla of similar bushy tree islands, stretching to the horizon from every side, each representing a farm, floating on a sea of crops that were gently undulating in the wind. In summer, endless waves of green fields waved in the wind, while in

winter, snow drifted across the flat plain, catching at the edges of the Grove, forming high drifts that melted in spring, providing the spot a higher dose of moisture than the adjacent crop residue of the fields.

The little forest on the prairie, started by humans, might carry on under its regenerative power for endless years. In the absence of the constant tillage and chemical onslaught that periodically wiped out the grasses and tree seedlings that tried to spread when conditions were right, the Grove might slowly grow outward over time. Like islands everywhere, It was a haven for wildlife that ranged out from the protective shelter it provided onto the flat, treeless plains surrounding it. At dusk, deer stepped out to forage across farm fields filled with bounty. Birds nested and perched, surveying the land for miles from the tops of the lofty cottonwoods. These small patches of biological diversity sometimes contained holdouts from that long-ago time when the prairie remained unbroken. A strand of big bluestem and a coneflower struggled on inside the living palisade of the wooded fortress. They, like the Machine, waited for the time when they could once again return to their place on the prairie when lumbering mechanical marauders ceased to till the soil and chemical miasmas cleared from the air.

The farmer had backed the Machine into a small grassy meadow surrounded by trees on three sides in the distant past. The protected spot, trimmed flat and kept open by grazing livestock, safeguarded the Machine from the harsh extremes of the prairie. The farmer's massive handsome, gray draft horses had parked it against the ragged edge where the enveloping canopy of trees met the grass. Tucked into its snug sylvan enclosure, it would sit until spring when the farmer would return, hitch it up again, and start a new season, as happened every year. The season never came. The farmer was no longer a farmer. He had left the land to take a job in town. The economics of living on the farm no longer worked.

Though it was hard to tell, there once had been a farmstead set into a cove on one side of the Grove. Within the small clearing beside the Machine, reminders that people had once lived there remained. To one edge of the encroaching tree line, a small struggling patch of raspberry and a lilac struggled on. For a fleeting moment each summer, the lilac added a splash of purple to the primarily green palette of the surroundings, while the raspberry burst with tiny red fruiting dots. The sheltered area had once provided the perfect mix of sun and shelter during the long days of summer light and long nights of winter cold. Care by people long gone had created this perennial symbiotic extension of the Grove. Long untended, these last sturdy survivors eked out a living as the

final generation of their line, while year by year, the forest closed in around them. For some years, descendants who had left the farm returned in summer for the free harvest. The following generation moved away to a faraway city, and the next one forgot all about it and had no connection to the old farm. The remnants of the garden, like the Machine, struggled on waiting for a return that would never come.

Though it no longer had symbiotic value to the people who once lived there, the forest still had an ecological role. The Grove, a biodiverse vessel floating on alternating seasons of green monoculture and stubble, was one of the only areas where nature still roamed free. In days past, its wood provided material for heat and construction, while it safeguarded the farm from prairie wind and storm. Wild chokecherry and other forest products picked in season added color to the diet, and deer sheltering inside the woody refuge fed people through the long winter. Those days were long past.

The Grove's only human visitors were occasional hunters and farmworkers. They moved through the portal of its outer walls of indestructible bromegrass and burdock, pushing through low branches of trees almost touching the ground and into a different world. Stepping into the light-dappled shade of its cathedral interior, they gazed with forgotten reverence at a natural temple lit by glittering bands of suffused light filtered through a stained glass of greens or fall colors depending on the season. Sometimes crop harvesters stopped to rest under the shade of the trees to drink icy cold cans of pop from coolers. Other years, farmworkers might happen upon berries in their prime and admire the old garden plants presenting fruit, beckoning them to stay and live. A tractor driver might use the shelter of the Grove as a secluded toilet and become captivated by its natural beauty while crouching in a moment of quiet contemplation externalizing gifts to the cycle of all things.

Over time, the Machine became increasingly shaded by encroaching trees. The tiny spot became smaller each year as the tree line invaded from all sides. In areas, the wing-like seeds of boxelder took root, beginning a slow process of succession that would one day engulf the whole clearing. Trees settled the opening to the field, in time cutting it off and sealing the Machine in a forest shroud. Instead of grass in summer, tall shoots of nettle and fern grew up at the boundary of shade and sun, where they thrived best. Like an old stone, in the moist coolness of the half-light, the Machine became covered in moss that took hold near the lichens that had colonized it in earlier, sunnier decades. In winter, great snowdrifts blanketed the Machine, forming a mound that rewarded the plant

community around it during dry years. In a spot still reached by the full sun, a spire of big bluestem towered above the other plants like a three-toed, leggy skyscraper stretching toward the sky.

Across long decades, soil sifted in through the trees, carried by the wind across farmland bared by some that had forgotten the dust of earlier times. Each year, it built up around the Machine adding an invisible layer that became tangible within the balance of a century. In time, its wheels were buried within layers of soil as if the earth was slowly trying to consume it as food. A boxelder grew up around its metal beams, twisting its woody, cankered stalks around bracing arms and levers, seemingly digesting parts into itself as if trying to bridge the chasm between living and mechanical things.

After the farmer moved to town, a different succession occurred on the farmstead. In time the barn sagged, and the house collapsed. Within a few decades, the remains of generations of occupation and life on the land, reduced with fire and bulldozer, turned the leveled farmstead into a tilled field. Corn and soybeans rooted into the erased footprints of the barn and house, their former locations discernible by pale crops that refused to thrive. The two-acre farmstead became two acres of crops, an exchange that didn't seem fair on the moral balance sheet. The erased footprint of the barn always grew pale and stunted, while the livestock feedlot adjacent to it was always tall, verdant, and lush. The occasional corroded horseshoe or broken ceramic piece would emerge periodically to remind hired hands driving the tractors on these two acres of thousands the mega farmer grew crops on that "old so and so's" farm had once been there. With his thousands of acres, the mega farmer tilled so many obliterated farmsteads on rented and owned land; he didn't always know whose farm it had been. Like their physical substance, the stories of the farms were little more than unremembered names in musty, ancient books. The long disconnected descendants, whose ancestors had once rooted there, had lived in cities for so many generations that they had no connection to the demolished farm other than sometimes an annual rent check from the mega farmer. The evolutionary terminus of a cycle known as Progress is to drive a tractor the size and price of a house across the remains of old farmsteads.

As the years went by, one by one, the flotilla of ship-like groves disappeared, and the elevated sails of the last one stood alone. On every side to the horizon, there was nothing but flat fields and the occasional shelterbelt tree row, becoming rare now as well, stretching to the edge of the visible earth. For innumerable decades after the farmstead became a

field, crops were grown right up to the grassy edge of the thick leafy walls of the Grove. Too uneconomical to remove, it remained an untidy anachronism against the backdrop of an ordered machine tended landscape.

Each year, the massive tractors with their tillage implements and spray booms tried to push deeper into its edges, as if disliking the soft overgrown walls of leaves that hid and protected natural mysteries defying subjugation. In time, chemicals drifting on the wind or over-sprayed by airplanes weakened the plants within the Grove. Weaker trees and plants died off, making the once solid, bulbous, downy green isle look more like the scraggly remnants of forests in war zones. Half-dead trees reached toward the sky with alternating living and dead arms, creating openings in the formerly solid canopy. Species of undergrowth killed off and replaced by the sinewy stalks of grassy monocultures gave the once bulging emerald cloud the appearance of breaking up. Over time, the living roof of the natural cathedral became punctuated with the dead trunks of century-old trees. If left alone, their dead skeletons might stand for many more decades, becoming homes to new communities of life. It was not to be.

As the Grove slowly descended toward its seemingly inevitable end, it became a dumping ground for rocks and detritus gleaned from the fields. The Machine became increasingly heaped on all sides as its protective cloak of greenery slowly died around it. Junk that emerged from the former farmstead tossed on top of its rusted metal frame had the appearance of the bones of relatives stacked onto a partially buried body. The increasingly enfeebled realm was saved only by a cost to benefit ratio that deemed removal too great an expense for such a small plot of land. It would stand for another generation until the machines employed on the farmland surrounding it became so colossal that they could move nature itself as their bulk dwarfed the leafy giants of the Grove.

One day, after the Grove had stood for over a century, a cacophony of shiny new machines, super-sized, computer-controlled descendants of the first tractors, and distant relatives of the Machine came and began to attack the edges of the disintegrating wooded fortress. Where once tumescent small forests and farms floating on the flat sea of cropland had punctuated the horizon, not a tree stood anywhere around the Grove to the edges of the visible world. Nothing but blackened topsoil and the residue of an ephemeral ocean of last season's crop.

The cyberized iron dinosaurs stood two stories high, illuminated with flashing lights and electronic screens that fed a stream of information and entertainment to humans isolated within aquarium-like climate-controlled

glass cabs. The comparatively tiny humans sitting atop the metallic and digital bulk of the lustrous beasts looked insignificant inside the tinted glass boxes.

Once the mechanical wonders had worked a few hours of their magic, all that remained standing were the primordial cottonwood giants, archaic first settlers of the prairie island. They waited like lanky, gaunt prisoners at the gallows, stripped of the leafy clothing that had surrounded them for more than a century. Before long, the mechanized titans were hoisting their tremendous bulk onto a multistory agglomeration of broken wood that had once been the Grove. Like the valueless husks of home and barn, sacrificed to the god of salable commodities, a handful of trees lacked value in the age of machines. The tiny Grove of trees stood in the way of the uniform production and shipping of seed commodities to all corners of the planet. The Grove subdued, the iron taskmasters grew quiet, having finished bringing another part of the earth within the fold. The Machine stood alone.

One of the monumental mechanical behemoths with bright paint and flashing screens looked like an overnourished child as it drove up to the oxidized remains of its frail elder. After the human wrapped a gigantic chain around the rusted bones, the enormous machine beast began to pull its corroded ancestor. The burly ferrous monster inched forward until the chain pulled tight and began to move the Machine from its time-worn spot. Dragging it from its abode left a hole that revealed the amount of eroded matter deposited in the trees since it was parked. As it slowly moved, a strand of big bluestem, the last of a line that stretched back so far it could be forever, was pulled out by its roots, ending the long continuity of history in that spot for eternity.

As the mechanical monstrosity dragged it toward the pile, the Machine dug into the ground, creating a gash in the earth that got deeper and deeper with each inch forward, as it seemingly clawed at the surface to avoid the doom of the burning pile. The Machine dug in so much that it brought the immense techno-organism to a stop. The seemingly unstoppable megalithic culmination of human technological progress could no longer move, brought to a halt by its diminutive and corroded ancestor.

Like a little-used appendage, the human climbed down from the safety of the second story of the imposing piece of mechanistic architecture to unhook the chain before quickly fleeing back to the protection of its comfortable cab. The machine creature turned around and grabbed onto the Machine with mighty jaws that looked like the mouth of some metal

monster. As it lifted the fragile old thing high in the air, it crushed it within its metallic mouth. The vibrant young mechanical marvel of the moment, unable to see its eventual decrepitude, saw no value in the past represented by the crumpled artifact it held in its robotic jaws. Carrying it high in the air, it drove toward the debris pile, unceremoniously dumping its forebear onto the side where centuries of history was about to be reduced to ash. The Machine, now crumpled and broken, was pushed onto the mound of logs, brush, rocks, and assorted debris of decades of human occupation, its frame twisted and bent by the force of the operation. In an age when everything was manufactured in far-off places using enormous amounts of material from other far-off places, a small plot of wood and a twisted jumble of steel had no value. In a globalized age, two of the most reusable materials on earth were so inconvenient there was nothing to do but burn and bury them. Things that are not efficient for the global economic machine to utilize are impediments to it running without interruption.

Soon, a fire began to engulf the pile in flame and smoke. It burned like a beacon visible for miles around for many days. A column of red licking flames reached into the air where cascading fountains of green herbage had once stood. The fire got so hot that softer parts of the Machine melted and twisted, contorted in the furnace-like heat of the flames. The fire burned until all that was left was a mass of gray ashes surrounding the Machine's twisted, partially melted frame.

Once the flame-reduced mass had cooled, a different mechanical leviathan with a large arm returned and began to dig a capacious hole next to the ashy remnants. The bright metallic thing paused for a moment as if sensing the portentousness of the moment before putting its bucket down to push its ancestor into the yawning pit. Though, it may have been nothing more than the tiny human stopping to be rewarded with a dopamine hit by an update on its digital device, unconcerned with what its machine host was doing.

As the blade pushed the twisted, contorted, burnt thing, barely recognizable as more than an accumulation of metal, the remnants of the Machine dug into the soft earth, looking like a living thing trying to cling to life above ground. Reaching the edge of the pit, the unrecognizable heap of iron tumbled into the abyss, landing in the ash heap at the bottom.

Again, the prodigious shiny steel thing paused as if saying a prayer to some machine god before beginning to dump layers of earth into the hole. Though, it may have been the human, finally able to hear "an infinite scream passing through nature", letting out an existential scream in the style of Edvard Munch's famous painting at its helplessness to save the

world it had just erased. The glossy colossus dipped its bucket into the pyramid of earth removed from the hole, first dropping the sticky brown clay onto the remnants of the old Machine, followed by a final capping with the rich black prairie topsoil formed through millennia. When it finally finished, other than a slightly darker tinge, the filled hole blended in as if it had never existed.

All that remained was a raised mound that had been the foundation of the Grove for so long it looked like the remains of a hill where some antediluvian civilization once existed for long unrecorded years. Windblown deposits from the constantly tilled surrounding lands, in addition to decades of decomposition from fallen trees and leaves, had built up layers that added a significant height to the place where the Grove had been. The layers were strata that recorded the relatively short occupation of farmers and their attempt to live on the site. The immense machines, disliking nonconformities on the land like trees and incongruities on the earth that impeded mechanized manipulation, set about leveling the area, spreading the accumulated mix across the surrounding fields, making the crooked places straight and the rough places smooth.

As the flashing mechanistic instrument drove away carrying its human appendage, the old Grove and the farm it had sheltered had been erased from the land so completely that barely a trace was left. Except for the odd root or old piece of metal that would emerge on the surface years afterward, little remained to reveal that anything but a flat field had ever been there. Yet, if one looked closer, the soil in that spot was discernible from the surrounding areas by its unique character, the difference visible from the air in some years.

Another elephantine ironclad contrivance arrived and began to till the surface, smoothing it until the whole area was indiscernible from the rest of the bare land stretching to the horizon in every direction. Soon afterward, another mammoth iron implement came to the plant. On the site where it had steered around the grand emerald island of life for years, in a meandering oval that kept the grass beach at bay, like waves on a seashore, it now drove straight through in a line for a full mile. For so long, it could almost be forever; rows of crops had looped around the Grove, a begrudging concession to the natural world that humans had once been a part of. Not anymore.

FATHER TONGUE

by Julie Larson

What we see, we see
and seeing is changing
~Adrienne Rich

The language of treasure was learned before English on my father's side of the family. The ability to see cultivated and passed on, a learning of the gaze in which one could look over the landscape and detect something sparkling some other fool had possessed, but in blindness to its true value, had left behind. Wherever they had managed to deprive themselves, albeit at an auction, an abandoned building, a roadside or the dump, we would not be far behind, sniffing like trained bloodhounds. Us Larsons with our settings tuned to detect some roughened value, were always on the lookout. We could all speak it, nodding in smiling appreciation spiked green around the edges upon being shown another's newly found treasure, secretly wondering why we hadn't gotten to it first.

My father taught us how to search for treasure by taking us on Sunday morning drives in the bare summer morning light, the kind that illuminates different hues through what seems like an endless green canopy lacing the trees lining the dusty gravel roads, everything softened with the optimism of what might be discovered.

Abandoned farmhouses were his favorite. Usually built of neglected graying wood, the recognizable shape of a rectangle with a triangle on top whose windows and doors look like eyes and teeth staring across the flat farmlands. Often with windows broken out and rickety staircases, they were still standing stoic and resilient, like the people who stayed rooted in the upper Midwest the longest. A place where the dark and cold can be cruel neighbors. The best ones were places that had clearly been left in a

hurry, half of the cupboards still full with tin coffee pots or the kind of rusted blue pan roasters that can hold an entire turkey. What was left seemed to reveal part of their story but was still warm with scintillating questions. *Who were they and why did they leave? Was it really that bad? Were their lives better now that they had escaped?*

Once inside we would scatter in all directions hoping that luck would bring us something unique like an old coin or metal box. Though most always the same drab scene played out: Faded wallpaper was peeling, carpet threadbare and brown, empty bookshelves covered in endless dust. It was like peeking into the world of ghosts, everything in sepia tone or oddly blue. With so many rotting floorboards and staircases sometimes broken through, us kids were probably in danger, but we came home with new treasures to fill our own cupboards and memories.

My father had learned from his mother, my grandma. She liked to joke that her children came back from the dump with more than they had left with, but that joke must have been more amusement than annoyance—they all inherited it from her.

Grandma filled her house with antiques of all kinds, ranging from colored glass dishes to sparkling brooches to porcelain plates. With much of it displayed in an ornate wooden hutch or up on high shelves, their glinty oldness seem even more spectacular when I looked up at it, the way one feels when looking at stars in the night sky. I was in awe, and in the reflection of a silver platter from an era I couldn't name, I saw myself.

On one of our Sunday drives, my dad brought us to his parent's house. We rarely stopped by even though they lived fifteen miles away in the Minnesota countryside near Campbell, the flattest part of the Red River Valley.

Grandma was in the shop wearing old clothes. I'd never seen her in something other than holiday clothes with her hair combed nicely. She was sitting on a chair next to an upturned wooden chair covered with dusty fabric, its legs thick with enough thick white enamel paint to look like plastic and unattractive. Underneath the chairs were dirty rags, metal tools and canisters. The air smelled acrid with chemical fumes. She was holding a putty knife and with a steady hand she scraped the flat-edged

tool along the leg pushing the paint into a messy pile she left at the end, exposing the fine, raw wood underneath. As she repeated the movement I could do nothing but watch, mesmerized by how different the chair looked, never looking away even though my eyes started to sting.

That was my first glimpse into seeing grandma did not include only bought or simply found things; she also transformed things. I imagined her at an auction looking around for something with "good bones" then shaking the frame of a chair or claw-foot table, running her fingers along the wood grain. It was a way of looking into the future, of being able to see something sanded down to its raw form and then how rich that same wood would look with some stain or how it might pair with new green velvet. How the aesthetics of a piece and the way a home could be curated by combining them all together. How that piece would hold innumerable dishes of Swedish meatballs and scalloped potatoes, a relish tray as her family sat round the claw foot table. Maybe she even imagined her little granddaughter underneath, running her hands along the paws and claws pretending the table ran out into the fields at night having its own life.

Those treasures collected from different eras, combined with other "free junk" left at work sites or "trash" found in the ditch made sense as a way to build a life that didn't resemble anything found in a store. From abandoned houses, I worked my way around the junk circuit to garage sales and thrift stores to vintage clothing boutiques, sifting through the not-so-dearly-departed discards from peoples' lives. That's what made the discovery of something to treasure so thrilling; it was rare. It was all a part of the story of something bigger; it became a part of who I became and I could choose.

It wasn't until much later I realized that only looking outward for treasure, that in training the eye to the gleaming diamond in the mountain of the rough, I sometimes felt poor or lacking some critical value without it. It was then I realized the best part of hunting for treasure had been everything else. The window into the richness of family, adventure and reclamation. The journey that meant to seeing the sparkle in the dull and giving something new life.

I will never stop looking for treasure. Setting my sight to finding-the-needle-in-the-haystack mode is completely embedded and turning it off would be like trying to convince my brain that red is actually blue. It is not. The lure of that first spring garage sale is an intoxication that makes my heart beat fast thinking about what could be found there, for maybe a quarter or two dollars that is worth far, far more? Shiny thing on the ground? It's worth checking out. Maybe it's a dime, but it could be something far more valuable. And along with looking comes the memory of my father, my grandmother, the way I teach my own kids to look past face value, the way I feel with my family when we joke about having "the sickness" because we just have to stop and see what that blue thing in the ditch really was.

THE HOUSE

by Mary Sand

This house isn't just any house. It's the house my grandparents bought in the early 30's, when my dad was 10 years old. It's the house where my grandpa lived with us until he died. It's where my parents raised four kids. This house has been a staple in my family for 85 years.

Four generations of my family have been here. My grandparents, my dad, me and my siblings, and our kids. It's the address I've known the longest, even longer than my own house that I've lived in for over 30 years. It will always be home to me, even though I left when I was 21 years old. My siblings all left the city years ago. I don't know what that's like as I never did that. This house is part of who I am. I have never separated from my childhood home. Until now.

It is more than the house I grew up in. It's where my mother had her injury resulting in her passing. It's where my father died at the age of 95, in the comfort and safety of his bedroom, covered by warm blankets, his hand in mine.

I always knew that my grandparents lived in the house all those years ago. I just never thought about it as a kid, growing up there. Now that the house is empty, I think of my grandma whom I never met, who cooked, cleaned, entertained....I wish I could sit down with her and have just one conversation.

It is a second home to my son. Throughout his childhood, my son slept overnight, ate dinners, spent time after school, ate ice cream with my dad and lemon cookies with my mom, ate holiday dinners, and opened up Christmas presents on Christmas Eve.

Ever since my mother died 16 years ago, the house numbers have appeared in my life endlessly. It can be in a Sudoku puzzle, or the time on a clock, or part of a phone number, or in a serial number, or a credit card charge, or....it's endless.

My grandparents are long gone. Both of my parents have passed. It's time to sell the house. I am heartbroken. I have cried oceans of tears. Not over the death of my father, as I am relieved that he is at peace. But over the house. I knew I'd be sad but I never saw this coming, this intense grief

over a house. Yet, I am sensible too. I do not want the house, nor do my siblings. If I was younger, maybe things would be different. But I am not a young woman, needing my own time after waiting on my dad intensely this past year, moving towards the future and that future does not include my childhood home. My hope is that a young family with young children will move in, take over the bedrooms, run up and down the basement stairs, plant a garden in the backyard, put up a swingset, bake cookies in the kitchen, put up a Christmas tree, rake leaves, pick lilacs, sit in the front porch, and put life and breath and love in the house.

I have spent the past two months cleaning, packing, washing curtains and floors, emptying shelves, organizing and getting ready. The "For Sale" sign is in the front yard. The countdown timer has started for the remaining moments I will have in the house.

Since my dad died, I've been alone in the house a lot. When I'm by myself, the house talks to me. I hear the ticking of the kitchen clock. I hear footsteps when no one is there. Sometimes I sense that others are near, others are watching me. It's nice to be alone in the house. Some of my deepest grieving has taken place there. It's a safe place, without judgment. Walking from room to room triggers memories, some which have been hidden away for years.

I enter the house and the front porch greets me. White curtains cover each of the six windows, several of them unable to be opened due to being painted shut years ago. The outside windows have screens in the summer, storm windows in the winter. When I was in grade school, I remember coming home from school to the smell of Pine Sol in the front porch, my mother having cleaned it from top to bottom. I always knew spring was officially here when she did that. To this day when I smell Pine Sol, I think of the front porch in the spring.

I unlock the heavy front door, inserting my key and turning it just so; an old door with a lock that is temperamental and seems to choose whom it lets in. I walk into the living room, now empty and quiet. I close my eyes and open them. I see the living room through the eyes of a child. The Christmas tree, the dining room table, the fireplace and mantel, mom's china hutch. I remember the different carpets, gray, then brown, and then blue.

I close my eyes again, take a breath, and open them. I am 4 years old. It's Saturday night and Lawrence Welk is on TV. It must be polka night. I am standing on top of my mother's feet, my arms tight around her waist. She has not gotten sick yet, it is before that time when things changed for her and for us. Around and around and around we go, she swinging me,

dancing in the living room, she in her late 30's, around and around we go, as Lawrence's band plays on, until she plops down in the chair, sweaty and exhausted, as I jump up and down, mommy, mommy do it again, do it again, dance with me again. She says, oh I can't, I'm worn out. She gets up, I stand on her feet, and she does it all over again, dancing, dancing, and dancing, all through the living room, her legs and arms moving. It's one of my absolute favorite memories, for in less than 10 years, her body would be racked with pain and medical issues, freezing her joints in place.

I close my eyes again and open them. I am cleaning with mom, the only person I ever knew who had me take down light bulbs and fixtures and curtains, deep thorough cleaning, several times a year, hours' worth, it took forever. I certainly learned how to spring clean.

I close my eyes and remember Captain Kangaroo, watching the old black and white TV set that was in the corner. Too little for school yet, sitting on the couch while mom set up her ironing board and watched TV with me. She is ironing whites and has an old 7up bottle with a stopper in it, full of holes. She sprinkles the whites with water. She has a glass of water too, putting her fingers in it, splashing water on the whites, running the hot iron over them. I want to be like mommy. I get up, walk to the ironing board, and put my fingers in the glass of water while she has turned her head to watch TV. I'm so short that she doesn't see me, doesn't see my tiny fingers and hand and runs the hot iron right over them, burning me. She hears my screams, rushes to get cold water to put my hand in, wraps me in a blanket, and holds me close on the couch. All is well because I'm in her arms. Such a memory.

I look into dad's bedroom, and I see my grandpa. I'm 7 years old. He's packing a suitcase, telling me that he doesn't feel well and is going to the hospital. I see the same room which became my parent's bedroom after he died. I see my mother lying on the bed, underneath her baker, a supposed innovation, in the 70's, with a series of light bulbs that was apparently going to cure her or at least alleviate her rheumatoid arthritis, of which it did neither. I see myself in high school, sitting on her bed before school, watching out the window for my ride, as she lay in it, arthritis crippling her at way too young of an age, hurting so bad that she couldn't get out of bed on those mornings, asking me if I helped my sister get ready for school.

I close my eyes and open them. I am back to last summer, to a few months ago. The blue, electric power chair is in the corner. The TV is on, to an old movie, as dad watches and slowly slumps over and goes to sleep.

I get up and put a pillow underneath his head. The last few months of his life, I put many pillows under his head.

I close my eyes and when I open them, I am standing in the doorway of his room. I see my dad on his last night of life, dying, lying in bed, reassuring him when he cries out for me, giving him morphine, keeping a cool cloth on his head, telling him I was here, giving him sips of water, waiting for death, knowing that death was mere hours away, riding out the night. As night turns to morning, the vigil continues, I keep him safe, I keep him warm, holding his hand, stroking his forehead, constantly telling him I was there and that my brother was coming, looking at him as he took his last breath, telling him it was ok to go, to go see mom, my brother pulling into the driveway at that exact moment, me believing that my dad knew he was coming and holding on until the last possible second, both of us kissing dad, telling him we loved him, saying goodbye, standing in the driveway as his body was taken out on a stretcher, in a black body bag. I close my eyes and envision angels coming down to help him rise, rise into Heaven where my mother is waiting for him, both of them standing tall, without wheelchairs, walking without pain. It is the room I have walked in the most since he died, cried so hard that I was wailing, cried for both he and my mother, wiping my eyes, taking a deep breath, knowing that all will be ok. The image of that final night and day are forever burned and seared into my memory.

I close my eyes and open them. I am in the here and now, the present. No one is here. Just me. The living room has too many memories. I have to look at old pictures to remember them all.

I close my eyes and open them and I am sitting at the dining room table, it's dark wood and fancy chairs, my grandmother's buffet along the wall, the same buffet that is now in my house, the old black telephone sitting in the nook. I see holiday dinners with family and all the neighborhood widowed old women who were invited. I see relatives and graduation receptions. I see my mother crying at the table, her head in her arms, my dad holding her, later telling me that the phone call was to tell her that her brother had just been killed in the Vietnam War.

I see the old kitchen, long and narrow, with the large swinging door that was usually propped open. The green stool sits by the door where I sat while my mother cut my bangs in a not so straight line. When I close my eyes, I see the cupboards, the sink, and the counter where, as a small child, my mother would lay me on my back and wash my hair, using the sprayer to rinse, as I held a towel over my eyes. I can still smell the pink Avon conditioner she bought that she'd mix with warm water, trying in

vain to tame my crazy, thick, naturally curly hair. The old fridge was across the way, with the handle that you pulled down to open. The old stove and oven that was not self-cleaning. The table, underneath the window that would lift up when you put the stick in it, where I sat and ate my lunch. The closet at the top of my stairs. I loved to sit on the top step and play while my mom worked in the kitchen. I had a favorite doll with eyelids that opened and closed when you moved her. One day as I sat there, I moved her to a standing position and both eyes fell into her head. Besides being horrified, I was never quite the same again with playing dolls.

I see my mother in her new kitchen, the new addition, so proud, the envy of all of her friends, decorated in the colors of the 70's, gold and avocado green. Room for a huge table, room to do fall canning, one of the few houses at that time to have main floor laundry, room for her sewing machine, which was my grandma's machine, the one I learned to sew on all through junior and high school. I see family gatherings, holiday dinners, baking cookies, looking out the big window into the backyard. I see my mother setting up the ironing board and piling up my weekly chore of an assortment of pillow cases, handkerchiefs, doilies, dish cloths, and tablecloths, things in the 60's and 70's that were ironed, never today. I see myself helping my mother can pickles and relish, setting the table, peeling potatoes, baking a cake, washing the Fostoria glasses by hand, the ones that were used only on holidays, all the domestic chores expected of me in the 60's and 70's. The new kitchen was huge, so much room compared to the old one, with space to do these things.

I stand in the hallway and look to my right, into my bedroom, the room that my dad and his brother shared growing up. I look to the left, to my sister's bedroom, once used by my aunt. I think about being 6 years old, the black telephone ringing in the nook in the dining room and grandpa calling for me, dad on the other end, telling me that I had a sister, sitting in the waiting room of the old hospital, waiting and watching for my mom to come down the hall. I still remember sitting in a chair by the front door, finally seeing her as she came in a wheelchair, holding my new baby sister.

I turn the hallway light on, off, on, off, remembering that this light was on every single solitary night that I lived in that house. It was the beacon of light, shining through the slit in my door every night. I walk into my bedroom. I loved my bedroom. I remember the hard wood floors, before carpeting appeared and covered them. My closet held the furnace pipe that would warm my clothes all winter. I loved rearranging my room, putting my bed against different walls, shutting the door, playing records

on an old turntable that when the needle broke I held it together with scotch tape, lying on my bed looking at my Elvis Presley posters. My large double bed with the large round headboard, my favorite bed, was replaced by a single, hard bed when I was in high school. I hated it. I see myself lying in my large double bed, listening to the group of ladies laughing and giggling in the living room. It was my job to set up the trays for those nights, help wash the good china cups and plates, and polish the silver teapot. I close my eyes and it's Christmas, and the plastic candelabra is on top of the china hutch in the living room, filled with various colored glass bulbs, the kind that flicker. At night, when my bedroom door was opened just right, the lights would flicker off my bedroom wall, holding me in a trance, never wanting it to end, looking like the northern lights. That plastic candelabra was one of the things I took when the house was sold.

Outside my window was the backyard, with a view that went on forever. I loved to lie in bed at night, my bed next to the window, the antennae of my radio pulled out as far as it could, trying to pick up stations far away. When I could pick up Chicago, I thought it was as far away as the moon. I loved listening to the sounds, my brothers hitting a hockey puck against the back of the garage, the train whistles from downtown that, when the wind was right, seemed to be coming directly outside my window. I remember sleeping in the other room across the hall, my sister in her crib, my bed in the corner, sometimes crawling in the crib with her. When grandpa died, mom and dad took his room, I took their room, and my sister had her own room, the bathroom between us. As a child, I remember baths on Saturday night, sharing bath water with my sister, my mom, and by the time it got to me, it was lukewarm, soapy, and gross. I was never allowed to take a shower in the basement bathroom. That was the men's room, not the girls. All the years I lived there, I never took a shower in the basement bathroom.

I walk down the basement stairs and when I get to the bottom, I close my eyes. The basement was always spooky to me, especially as a child. When I open my eyes, my grandpa is sitting in his office, two tall file cabinets along the wall behind the desk, and an adding machine to the left. I remember the feel of my feet when I stood on the bottom rung of the adding machine, punching the red and black buttons, pretending I was a speed demon, punching the numbers as fast as I could, pulling the handle on the machine, just like a slot machine, ripping off the paper that came out with my numbers on it. I am a little girl of 7, sitting in my grandpa's chair, my aunt and uncle and my dad standing behind me, when they tell me to leave the room and go upstairs. Grandpa had just died and they had

business to attend to. When I close my eyes again and open them, dad is sitting at the desk now, sitting in his chair on top of a folded rug, the wheels on the chair making black marks on the basement tile floor. Long after it should have, his office was downstairs. I see him get up, grab his walker, walk to the stairs, and slowly pull himself up by grabbing the handrail, one step at a time, all the way up to the kitchen.

I look into the storage room, a dark and scary place as a child, always cluttered, the freezer taking up most of the space. I turn around, and I am very little, standing next to my mother and her wringer washer, putting towels and sheets into the ringer, turning the crank. That is the only memory I have of the old basement, before it was remodeled.

I close my eyes and I hear someone playing the piano. When I open them, I see myself at the age of 7, practicing, wanting to become good, finding something that worked for me, something I loved to do. I remember my first piano teacher, charging me $1.00 per lesson. When I got to high school, she told me that she couldn't take me any longer, that I needed someone to take me to the next level. My new piano teacher charged me $3.00 per lesson. I was scared to death to tell my dad how much the lessons were.

I look at the cupboards and see the pillow cases tied tight, hanging on strings, the chokecherry juice running out into a pan, in preparation for my mother's chokecherry jelly. I look into the storage room below the stairs, always full of mom's canned goods.

I walk up the basement steps and pull out the door handle to unlock it, sliding the chain off its track which is coated with too many coats of paint. The backyard with birdhouses on poles, a picnic table, the swingset when we were young, the tractor tire sandbox, the clothesline, the garden. Neighborhood kids everywhere. The alley with garbage cans that always had holes in the bottom of them, with a lilac hedge as a backdrop. Walking down that dark alley late at night, after finishing babysitting was always scary.

I look over at the garage and remember it being gray before its current color. My mother gave me the birds and the bees talk when the two of us painted the side of the garage along the alley. I look inside the garage, never a garage when I was little, and always a dumping ground for crap. I look at the ladder standing below the opening to the garage attic. As a child, it was a terror climbing up into the hole, sitting on the edge, imagining all the dead people lying up there, the ghosts, the rats, the boogie men. Terrifying but still I climbed up into the hole every now and then just to prove that I could.

And now that I'm saying goodbye to the house, I have had strong feelings about my grandma whom I never met. My grandma who lived in the house, at the same age I am now, my grandma who was beautifully creative. I look through her cookbooks, with her handwriting in the margins; add a little bit more flour here, a tad less spices there, and cook a bit longer here. I long to have met her, to have asked her about her family and her dad, my great-grandfather, who emigrated from Norway. I look at pictures of her, hosting teas in the backyard, eating suppers at the picnic table, sitting on the front steps, all from the same place I grew up in. I forgot others lived there before me. I never realized the significance of it all, until now.

The house talks to me. I am obsessed with taking pictures of every little knob and handle and light fixture and woodwork and stair and trinket, knowing that very soon, I will never be able to see these things again. I am obsessed with looking at old pictures of my grandparents, of my great grandparents, and great aunts I never met, all standing in the front yard, smiling into the camera. I imagine them having tea, sitting on the front porch, eating outside on a picnic table, surrounded by lilacs. I think about all of the past ghosts, the past relatives who came before me, being in the house, in my house, cooking and eating there, visiting, sleeping overnight…The lilac hedge that surrounds my house are roots that I dug up from this house many years ago, brought them to my house, and planted them.

Yes, the house talks to me. It brings me shadows of memories, some long forgotten until now.

When it sells—Will I be the one, riding her bike back and forth on the front sidewalk, up and down the alley, trying to peer into windows, longing to be invited in?

These last few days, I have said goodbye to this house, this house that will always be home. I am so lucky. As Judy said, there's no place like home.

LIFE AND DEATH ON THE FARM

by Leah Tennefos

Alvina knew hard times. She was born in 1929, the same year that the stock market crashed and she grew up in the Great Depression. She lived through World War II, although the fighting was far away.

My grandmother, Alvina Elsie Engel, survived many global and national catastrophes, as well as personal ones.

She spent her childhood on a farm in rural Minnesota. The Engels farmed near the Minnesota River Valley. They were on the very edge of the school district and their farm was isolated, far from the other farms in the community. It was a quiet place and Alvina had an old-fashioned and simple life.

She had a good relationship with her parents. Her father was easy going and relatively quiet. Her mother was also a quiet, gentle person. They were good, Christian parents who fed and clothed their children, and even when times were hard there was enough love to go around.

Although their home life was quiet, the world outside their home was tumultuous, with low stock prices, bank closures, and dry spells like the country had never seen before.

When Alvina was five years old, the biggest dust storm of the Great Depression hit the Midwest, blowing dust from Minnesota, North Dakota, and Montana all the way to Chicago, Washington D.C., and even New York City.

Also, 1936 was the hottest summer ever in Minnesota, which caused more dust storms and even caused lakes to dry up. The Engel farm wasn't hit as hard as other farms in North Dakota and South Dakota, but they still struggled to make ends meet. They were poor, but they didn't really realize how poor they actually were because everyone around them had it the same. The Engels always had enough food on the table, so they thought they were doing just fine.

In her family, the boys would do the outside work and the girls would do the inside work. It was Alvina's job to sweep the floor but she thought she was too nearsighted to do a good job. She couldn't see what needed to be swept. However, in her family they were taught to "tough it out,"

so it wasn't until Alvina was 12 years old that they figured out that she needed glasses.

Alvina vividly remembered coming out of the doctor's office and being able to read signs and see the individual leaves on trees. She was amazed. Trees used to just look like a big green blur to her.

"I was pretty blind," she said.

World War II began on December 7, 1941 when Alvina was 12 years old. However, the war didn't directly affect her family because Alvina's two brothers were too young to go to war. But it was an interesting time for people of German descent, like the Engels, to be living in America. Many of the Engels' neighbors were German Americans as well, and a number of families were accused of being loyal to Nazi Germany and Anti-American. Some people would paint the barns of German American families yellow, symbolizing that they were disloyal cowards. Fortunately, the Engels' barn remained red throughout World War II.

As war raged on overseas, Alvina and her siblings went to a country school that was near a highway. During recess they'd play "pom-pom-pull away" in the ditch by the highway. "Pom-pom-pull away" was a running game in which one person began as the catcher, she would yell, "Pom-pom-pull away," and all the players would have to run across a line into the territory of the catcher. The catcher would then try to tag the runners and those that she caught would help her tag others in the next round. They'd also play tag and softball, but Alvina said of softball, "I wasn't very good at that."

Alvina was known as being quiet and she always made sure to get her homework in on time. She had a love for words and excelled in English, grammar, and also mathematics.

When it came time for her to go to high school, Alvina had to move into town. She moved in with some of her relatives since her family lived so far out in the country. Alvina was on her own for the first time. She learned to be independent at a young age and never wanted to be a burden to her family.

My grandma met her future husband, Raymond Hoffbeck, at an auction in Clements, Minnesota. She was selling concessions for the church Luther League and she caught his eye. So Raymond asked his cousin who she was. He said, "Oh, that's Evelyn Engel," mistaking Alvina for her sister. However, Ray's brother Fritz could tell by her dimples that

she wasn't Evelyn. Ray then found out who she really was and wrote her a letter asking for a date that Saturday night.

They went to a show in nearby Redwood and afterwards they got something to eat at "The Hut."

"The Hut" was a drive-in diner where all the young people would meet after basketball games or football games, or for dates. It was a run-down old place that served burgers, fries, and milkshakes.

Alvina was a senior in high school and Ray was 10 years older than she was.

After high school, he had enlisted in the Navy and spent time in Alaska at Kodiak Island, Okinawa, the Philippines, China, and Japan during World War II. Meanwhile, Alvina helped with the war effort at home by rationing food, as well as collecting animal fat, and aluminum foil to be used in weaponry. She wanted to help out, because many of her male classmates were serving overseas.

During his service, Ray had several close calls, particularly when a kamikaze plane narrowly missed hitting his ship in Okinawa. However, he made it home safely.

He had been away at war for several years, even after the fighting was over, and that had slowed him down in getting married. However, the age difference between him and Alvina didn't seem to get in the way. They had a quiet affection for each other and although they didn't say out loud that they loved each other much, it was apparent in their simple, everyday gestures toward each other. Alvina would often bring Kool-Aid out to Raymond when he was working out in the fields and Ray would affectionately call Alvina "Poopsie."

Raymond and Alvina were married on June 8, 1948. They were married shortly after Alvina graduated from high school, when she was nineteen years old. They moved into a house in the country where Raymond farmed and Alvina became a homemaker.

As Ray worked in the fields, Alvina would make homemade bread, wash clothes for their nine children, take care of the garden, freeze corn, and make sausage. They had chickens also, and Raymond would butcher the chickens and Alvina and the children would pluck and freeze them.

Raymond and Alvina seemed to get along well, according to their children. At least they didn't argue about things in front of the kids. They had nine kids in 20 years of marriage and they didn't have much alone time. The Hoffbecks were homebodies, but whenever they went out to eat or to a movie, which was rare, they'd take the entire family. For example, once a year on Raymond and Alvina's anniversary, they'd pack

all the kids into the car and go out to eat at the A&W.

They drove a 1957 Mercury with big tail fins on the back. The car was made to comfortably seat five people, but Ray and Alvina always had at least seven of their children with them. They'd ride with three kids in the backseat, two kids on the floor, one kid in between Alvina and Ray up front, and one kid lying in the back window. The back window was considered to be the best spot.

In addition to driving to the A&W, on occasion they'd bring everyone to a drive-in movie. But the main recreation that they had was visiting their nearby relatives. Both of their extended families lived close by so they'd visit them regularly. They'd visit the relatives on Sunday afternoons and would celebrate birthdays because (with nine kids) there were a lot of birthdays to celebrate. The families would get together and the women would cook and they'd all eat and then play cards for hours, while the youngsters played softball. One of the relatives that they would visit was Alvina's brother Eldon.

However, in 1952, Eldon was sent overseas to fight in the Korean War. Alvina was deeply worried about her brother, and prayed for him every day that he was gone. She was so relieved when he returned unharmed with the ending of the war in 1953.

On the homestead, Raymond would milk the cows and work the fields, while Alvina would take care of the house and the children. They ran a dairy farm, so they weren't able to go on vacation, because the cows had to be fed and milked each day, and the crops had to be tended to. However, sometimes on rainy days, they'd drive to Ramsey Park in Redwood and use bamboo poles with worms as bait to fish for bullheads.

They led a quiet, comfortable, and uneventful life, until one day in the fall of 1968.

It was only the 19th of November, but the weather was very cold so Raymond wore extra warm clothes when he went outside to work. He was manning the Power Take Off shaft (or PTO shaft), the part of the tractor that powered the combine. It didn't have any safety shields on it. Somehow his bulky clothing got caught in the machine and he was caught in a grip of twisting steel.

Alvina had prepared their usual "afternoon lunch" (a snack) for the family and was wondering why Ray didn't come inside as he always did. She finally went to the grove to see what had been keeping him. As she got closer she sensed that something was wrong; all was quiet, the machine had stopped running, but she couldn't see Ray. She started running. She reached the combine out of breath and was horrified to find that his body had been wrapped tight in the twisting of his clothes by the machine. He had suffocated.

Alvina's heart dropped and pulse quickened as she began to comprehend the unthinkable. After her mind had stopped whirling, she ran to the house, and called the ambulance, but it was too late. Raymond was pronounced dead on arrival and died at the age of 50.

The next day the ground at the scene of the accident was red, white, and black. The foggy air was frigid and there were drops of blood frozen on the white frost and black dirt.

Although danger is inherently woven into the fabric of farming, Ray's death shook Alvina to the core. She felt devastated and alone, abandoned with seven of her nine children still at home, the youngest only one and a half.

She had to keep the farm operation going and she also had to keep the family going. It was a hard job.

The loss was deep, but Alvina felt that she had to stay strong for her family's sake, to keep up their morale. She coped the best way she knew how—by painting a smile on her face, hoping that someday her emotions would match her expressions.

After Ray died, she learned that if she was grumpy, the whole group was grumpy. So Alvina tried to be cheerful all of the time. It was only the quiet moments that would break her, but with her household to run, there weren't many quiet moments

So, she moved through her pain in a fog, never really taking the time to reflect on what had happened and the deep sense of loss that she felt.

But, there were times when her grief could not be hidden.

Her son, Steven, remembers, "My mom was so saddened. I recall that when she was reading a devotion book after supper for all of us, as she and Dad had always done, she broke down crying. We just sat there, all we kids, not knowing what to say, all feeling her feelings."

Alvina never pushed her oldest son to take over the farm, but Larry saw that he was needed. He quickly quit his job, within one or two days after his father's death. He made a decision that he had a responsibility to help out. Larry had wanted to be a carpenter, but he did what he felt had

to be done.

Larry was the oldest and had just graduated from high school. He had to take on quite a bit of adult responsibility, running the farm, supporting his family, and trying to be a father figure to his eight younger siblings.

Times were hard, but they kept going. The family continued their everyday routine, and Larry learned to run the farm much the way that Raymond had. They kept milking the cows, doing the laundry, and sending the kids to school.

There was just one thing missing that threw everything out of balance, Raymond.

Alvina tried to move on, tried to adapt to her life as a widow. As a woman whose husband had been killed by the very machine that had sustained them, that had allowed them to harvest crops and feed and clothe their children.

"I had to look forward instead of back," she said.

Throughout the turmoil of Raymond's death, Alvina did not despair in the bad times and continued to care about her children. She kept a close eye on them, and made sure that they never got too close to the farm machinery.

Alvina stayed at home and raised her kids for years after Raymond's death as Larry ran the farm. She was busy with the kids and she also taught Sunday school. She read the paper every day to keep up with the weather and current events.

In 1965, the United States entered the Vietnam War, and in 1966, Alvina's nephew Bobby was sent to Vietnam. January of 1969, marked the beginning of the lottery draft. Alvina feared that Larry would be sent and if Raymond hadn't died he could have been drafted. However, since he ran the farm he was considered to be the sole breadwinner of the family and was therefore ineligible and exempt from the draft.

Although Alvina did get out of the house to participate in church activities, she preferred the isolation of her immediate family to large crowds. Sometimes Alvina dreaded being around people that she didn't know and she would get anxious at the thought of going out in public. This anxiety escalated into panic attacks. She feared being around unfamiliar people and unfamiliar situations, but she did her best to put her fears behind her.

But, sometimes her fears were hard to escape. Her son Steven told

one story about how Alvina was scared of a man who would drive past their house. The man didn't have any arms and would dress all in black. He would drive a black buggy, even though it was in the sixties, that was pulled by black horses. He looked as black as death.

Every time he would drive past the gravel road near their house, Alvina would have all the children hide and would turn out the lights. This was so that if he decided to stop by, he would think that no one was home. Steven later found out that one time in the heat of summer the man had stopped by their house and had asked Alvina to help him take off his coat because he was too warm. She had felt uncomfortable and after that every time that he'd drive by, she'd make them hide.

Despite her fears, one of her strengths was her faith. She was a faithful person and set an example for her children to follow. Another one of her strengths was her ability to deal with her family. She knew how to "crank" at people if they needed it, one of her catchphrases being, "Get to work!" And yet she was also kindhearted. She helped the children to be responsible and made sure their chores were done, just as her parents had done for her.

In 1976 (eight years after Ray's death) Alvina decided to get a job when she saw an ad in the paper for a teacher's aide. She got the job and later found out that the superintendent gave her the job because he knew she was a widow and felt sorry for her and her family. Alvina initially felt a little embarrassed that he had pitied her, but felt that the job was such a blessing to her family.

After Raymond died, Alvina never considered remarriage.

"She said that she had had the best," said Steven.

She became more comfortable with being alone, and put her love and efforts into raising her children who were still at home, and keeping ties with her married children who had families of their own.

Larry got married, had three children, and continued to run the family farm until the fall of 1984.

On September 29th, Larry was underneath a swather machine that was used for cutting hay, repairing it. He had propped it up and wedged himself underneath. Suddenly, the machine shifted onto Larry and the pressure of the heavy machine suffocated him. Alvina's youngest son John was the first person to realize what had happened. John's adrenaline rushed as he leaped into action, grabbed a crowbar, and hoisted the one

ton swather-head off Larry.

Alvina rode with Larry's wife Wendy to the University of Minnesota hospital in Minneapolis. She sat in the uncomfortable hospital chair, feeling the same quiet desperation she'd felt in 1968. Wendy's hand gripped hers, knuckles white, she could not stop crying. Once again, Alvina heard the news, it was too late. Larry had died, just 100 yards south of where his father had been killed by a combine 16 years earlier.

At the church cemetery, Alvina stood near Raymond's gravestone, as her oldest son joined his father. As Larry was lowered into the ground, she felt helpless as her five year old granddaughter Melissa wailed, "I want my daddy back." It got to everyone.

"That is suffering," said Steven of the pain that Alvina endured in losing both a husband and a son to farm accidents.

After Larry's death, the family gave up farming. Alvina bought a house in town, far from the powerful farm machinery that killed two of her loved ones. She spent her time reading, knitting, playing cards and visiting her children and grandchildren. Preferring board games to visitors and crosswords to crowds. Her life became quieter with all her children grown, with their own children and grandchildren. She was often alone, perhaps too much so.

Alvina's watery ice blue eyes met mine as she looked past the coffin that held another one of her loved ones, killed by a machine. My cousin, her grandson, Jason was hit by a semi after he had failed to stop for a stop sign. They took him to the hospital and my grandma Alvina was there with her eldest daughter as the doctor told her that once again, that it was too late.

Our eyes connected and she made me promise that I would always drive safely.

She told me she could not bear to lose anyone else.

I was born a month after Larry's death. Growing up, I would sometimes keep track of how long he'd been gone by how old I was. I wonder if my grandma Alvina did that as well. I will be 38 this November.

I have inherited my grandmother's quiet nature, love of words, and anxiety. Although I look like my mother's side of the family, my personality reflects that of my father and grandmother. Like my grandma, I sometimes worry about things that are out of my control, like death.

I wonder how our lives would have been different had Raymond lived.

My family has been uprooted by tragedy. We've been broken. The violence of death left my grandma withdrawn and my father angry. It has kept all of my grandma's children and grandchildren away from farming.

We can't bear to lose anyone else.

However, my family is strong, just as my grandma was. She has passed on her hard work ethic, her faith, and her constant love. Although she was always supportive of our family, she had a quiet, independent spirit that I feel none of us ever fully understood.

Decades after Ray's death, Alvina decided to go on an Alaskan cruise by herself. She wanted to see Kodiak Island and to travel where my grandpa Ray had been stationed many years before. She retraced his steps and drank in the stark, cold beauty of the Alaskan wilderness from the deck of a ship, just as he had done. It was an adventure, as all of her life had been.

As she grew older, into her nineties, we looked with dread toward the day that we would have to lose her. This force of nature who had single-handedly held our family together for years, decades.

But death also comes for the faithful, the strong.

And my grandma began slipping away right at the time when the seasons were about to change. Those glorious hot summer days that shifted all of a sudden into crisper cooler weather.

It happened so suddenly, deceptively.

One day it was hot and dry, with the sun beating down, and the next day there would be something in the air, a faint chill, a smell, some barely perceptible sign that things were changing. That the sunny, carefree summer days would soon be only a memory, that crisp, colder days lay ahead.

When the end felt near, I rushed to her side to say goodbye, to the region of Minnesota where she had spent her whole life. To let her know how much she has meant to me, will always mean to me. And that last time that I saw her, I didn't know what to do. So, I just grabbed her hand and I held on for as long as I could.

The next day she was gone, and the next week we laid her into the grave next to Raymond.

But she lives on for me. I will always remember the sparkle in her ice blue eyes, the dimples cutting through her cheeks, the way that her entire face would light up when she was excited about something. And, most of all, her spirit that could never be broken.

FOOD, SWEETHEART!

by Karen Van Fossan

As far as I knew, grandmas were the personification of Earth in all her bounty.

Read: food.

In the southern-leaning, white-settler culture of Illinois, the culture of my origins, grandmas knew how to fry things, and grandmas knew how to bake things.

My own two grandmas could cook, cook well, and cook what I liked—

Chicken fried in Corn Flake crumbs.

Green beans picked fresh that morning.

Cookies made of Ritz crackers, peanut butter, and an unlikely white-chocolate icing.

From my mystified, childhood vantage point, it seemed they had been born for their starring roles in the kitchen, if for no other available stage.

I loved them through all their complications, the fondness, and fury, and resignation that undergirded the roles they played—

Wife.

Mother.

Sister.

Neighbor.

Churchgoer.

Grandmother (mine).

Even when I feared them, or feared for them, I loved them for all they were.

Somehow, I knew that I was duty-bound to love their food, or at least not to indicate—by relocating my vegetables around the circumference of my plate, rather than within the circumference of my mouth—that a grandma's gifts of food might in any way be lacking.

Years later, having learned early on that food is love, or at least its relative, duty, I faced my own mothering, and then my unexpected grandmothering, with the perilous realization that I could fail.

At love.

At duty.

At both.

Maybe even at being a *real* mom, a *real* grandma.

When it was finally time to invite a descendant of my own into the sweep of the generations, I worried, first and foremost, about the food. Most parents, whether by birth or adoption, have at least six months to wrap their minds around the milk situation, before it's time to organize the food situation.

But when Michaela, at age fifteen, asked me to be her mom, she would have been the first to say that she was many long years past the milk situation.

Still, I love to remember the time when Michaela, fiery and all of nineteen, fell sweetly and suddenly asleep, as I sang her lullaby after lullaby, all those lullabies I had been holding in my throat, waiting, waiting, for such a day.

Then, seven years into motherhood, when, developmentally as a mom I was ready for Tooth Fairy visits and "Don't forget your backpack, Sweetie," suddenly I was thrust into that mythically food-bearing role.

Again, Michaela was the mover.

When her spirit sister, Raquel, gave birth to her second child, Michaela was literally there—in the apartment, in the hospital, in the Neonatal ICU.

Just as Michaela had looked at me seven years prior, and made me a mom, she now saw promise in me that I had not yet seen.

Suddenly, Michaela told the young ones that I was—

"Grandma."

With that one unsilent word, Michaela, or Auntie Michaela as the young ones say, opened up worlds of love.

And also duty.

Once again, my first worry was the food.

Unlike each and every mom and grandma who had populated my quasi-rural childhood, I had never, *ever*, on my own—

Fried a chicken.

Baked a pot roast.

Pressed those strangely pointy cloves into a ham.

Of course, growing up in meat-and-potatoes country, I had helped my loving and dutiful mom with all of these endeavors, as well as canning pickles (way too many), freezing peaches (never enough), and so on.

But by the time I was momming age myself, I couldn't do it.

Though I was about two generations away from the farm, I had spent much of my quasi-rural life watching cows, listening, noticing them. I

couldn't help admiring how the mothers tended to their calves, how the calves loped along the fields, in spite of having received the gift of life for someone else's meal, someone else's life, not their own.

So, at age twenty-two, not long after moving to North Dakota, I decided it was plants or bust.

Sometimes, this decision has been awkward.

Over the years, having been raised to share and share alike, I had often extended my edible fare to coworkers and friends.

Nearly as often, I had been told—

"No, thanks. I'm going to eat some *real* food."

Real food was the trouble.

Wouldn't it seem, *real* moms and *real* grandmas could provide *real* food?

Honestly, how *real* was I—*really*?

By the standards of my own culture, by the paradigms of family and not-family, real and not-real, who was I?

In 2011, as I applied to graduate school, it came time to fill out my Free Application for Federal Student Aid, complete with all kinds of questions about family constellations.

OK. I had Michaela, my daughter, but not by blood or law.

I had a son, but only because he loved my daughter.

At the time, I had a female partner, but the law forbade us from marrying.

I had foundling cats, and rambunctious dogs, and baby mice, and injured birds, sometimes literally coming out of my ears. But they couldn't, wouldn't, ever claim a place on a federal form.

Around town, I had Michaela's chosen siblings, who I counted as my kids.

Down the way, I had my own spirit sister.

Back in Illinois, I had my beloved brother and generations upon generations of family, both living and passed on.

So, perched at the computer, I plodded through the questions.

Then, at the end of the form, my family size appeared, as if by edict, on the screen.

The official size of my family—

One.

In a gush of shock, I wept.

Could it be true?

Was the calculator correct?

Was I "one," when I thought I was many?

Though my ears delighted to hear the words "Mom," and "Grandma," and sometimes even "Matriarch" volleyed in my direction, I had—

1. No bloodline connecting me to the younger generations.
2. No costly legal paperwork, even with my daughter.
3. No proof that I was who I longed to be.

When my chosen family was new, when our habits of connection were not yet fully formed, I couldn't help worrying over equations of blood and family.

I begged God, or the Universe, or maybe even myself, to make my family real—to make *myself* real.

I loved them, yes. I felt duty toward them, yes.

Come hell or high water, I would be there, yes.

But would they?

What if I didn't cut it?

What if I didn't live up to all the bounty of being a grandma?

Michaela had loved my food from the start. But as an extra-legal grandma in a law-loving culture, I wondered about my place in the family system.

What if the kids didn't love my food?

Would that mean I wasn't a grandma?

Would that mean I wasn't real?

I wanted to be real. I *really* wanted to be real. But in my situation, what did "real" even mean?

After my oldest grandbaby had turned four years old, she attended the Bismarck Early Childhood Education Program (called BECEP), one of the best things ever to happen to our family.

Early in the school year, I offered to pick her up, so we could visit her favorite indoor play place, the North Dakota Heritage Center, which the kids aptly call the "Dinosaur Bones."

As soon as I entered her BECEP classroom, Nevajeh flew to my arms.

Luckily, I had grown accustomed to her velocity by then, and the impact didn't knock us both to the linoleum.

Before the teacher could let me take Nevajeh, she needed to see my ID.

My ID?

Ack. I had left it in the car.

And here was this child, affixed to my waist with all the certainty of a joey in a kangaroo pouch.

So the teacher and I put our minds together. There must be another

way.

Soon, the teacher motioned in my direction—

"Nevajeh, what's her name?"

Nevajeh stared at the teacher, then at me—so much going on behind her eyes.

Do grandmas have their own names? This must have been the first moment in Nevajeh's four years when she had encountered such a concept.

So I asked her—

"What do *you* call me?"

She stroked her two hands on my cheeks. Peering into my eyes, she said—

"Grandma!"

Without a moment's hesitation, the teacher told me—

"Yeah. You can take her."

It's a story I have loved to tell, especially in person. "You be me," I often say to listener, "and I'll be Nevajeh." Then I place my own hands on their face and deliver my favorite punchline, "Grandma!"

Still, in the algebra of my life, this moment didn't quite solve for my bigger-picture questions of authenticity—of proof that I was something.

Or someone.

I can't help noticing that many culture bearers from European traditions have also faced this conundrum—

Am I real?

Do I exist?

How would I know?

If I could climb into a philosophical time machine and directly ask these questions to the philosophical leaders of Western Europe, I wonder what would happen.

I imagine René Descartes and other rationalists saying—

"If you're thinking, and you know you're thinking, it's possible you exist."

Maybe Jean-Paul Sartre and other existentialists would say—

"You're having an existential crisis: 'Is there any meaning? Do I have any meaning?' It happens all the time."

Then David Hume and other empiricists might say—

"Any concept of the 'self' is merely a bundle of sensations. It's impossible for anyone to formulate anyway."

Overall, famous Western philosophers have seemed awfully unsure about whether we human beings have any meaning.

Or whether we can locate ourselves within the larger human family.

Or whether we can be shown to exist at all.

From the inside, my Western culture, with its laws regarding family and bloodlines, has sometimes left me asking—do I?

These days, I wonder if there are other ways, other shapes, by which to be.

About two years after the BECEP adventure, when they were six and three years old, two of my grandkids spent a full week with me.

This meant I had to feed them every day!

Multiple times a day!

I was never sure whether I was offering the meals that a *real* grandma would offer. But I (mostly) loved when they would help me in the kitchen, stirring, tasting, wandering off again.

Sometimes, as I prepared the meal, they would gather on the floor, just at the edge of my sight, preparing their secondhand playthings, their assembly of wooden toys.

One day, as I had tied the apron around my waist, Nevajeh, prone to bursting, came bursting from the grandbabies' room. In her hands, she carried the Superman cape that she often wore as an apron. Something was bundled inside.

Who knew what?

Climbing to a kitchen chair, Nevajeh announced—

"I, Grandma!"

Oh, great.

Was I ready for Nevajeh's impersonation of yours truly?

In a flourish, she emptied out her bundle. With the distinctive din of wooden toys on a wooden table, out sprang pretend zucchinis, pretend tomatoes, pretend apples, pretend slices of bread.

Still impersonating Grandma, Nevajeh looked up.

She motioned to me, as she said in singsong tones—

"Come on over…please! I have food for you, Sweetheart!"

In a gush of joy, I wept.

Pretty real.

Pretty human.

Pretty alive.

"Blood is thicker than water," it has been said.

These days, when it comes to my family, all of my family, and me—

We are thicker, even, than blood.

LEAVING WITHOUT HIM

by Wendi Wheeler

Making the decision to have a child—it is momentous. It is to decide forever to have your heart go walking around outside your body.

~ Elizabeth Stone

I left MeritCare Hospital on a sweltering August day. The sun's rays bounced off the pavement in shimmering waves, and the heat snaked around, under, and in between spaces so that even the shade provided little relief. The nurses insisted I leave in a wheelchair—hospital policy. They loaded the chair up with a plastic bag filled with gifts for the new mother, nestled a pot of yellow mums onto my lap, and tied a bunch of Mylar balloons to the handle. They pushed me gently through the halls, into and out of the elevator, and finally out of the sweet air-conditioned hospital lobby into the blazing afternoon sun on Broadway Avenue.

We drove home with the windows down because my best friend's Pontiac blew heat out of the floor vents all year long. I felt the hot wind blowing my hair. I felt sore and tired and unsure about how I would get through that day and the next day and every day after that. I felt the grief that accompanies loss and the uncertainty that comes with a decision no one else can make for you. The day I left the hospital is one I will never forget because I left without my baby.

When I was home for Christmas break during my first year of college, I threw up every morning. One morning I opened the kitchen cupboard where we stored the spices and the coffee, and a wave of nausea passed over me. "Are you ok?" my mom asked.

"The smell of coffee makes me sick," I said.

"Funny, when I was pregnant the smell of coffee made me ill," mom replied.

Funny, I thought.

On New Year's Eve day my mom said, "If you are still sick tomorrow, I am taking you to the doctor." The next day, I threw up again, so we made an appointment at the clinic.

For the first time in my life, I told my mother she could wait in the lobby while I was in the examination room. I was grown up, after all, a college student who could face the doctor by herself. The doctor came in and asked me some questions while he poked at my belly. "When was your last period?" he wanted to know. I could not remember. November? Maybe October. I never knew. He stopped poking.

"Do you think you might be pregnant?" he asked. I did not want to be pregnant, but I nodded my head. After I peed in a cup and waited for what seemed like hours, the doctor came back into the room. "I'm sorry, but you are pregnant," he said.

I'm sorry. He didn't say what other mothers hear: "Congratulations!" or "I have wonderful news!" He was sorry for me before he knew anything about me, my baby, or our future. He was sorry that I was 18 years old and that my mother wasn't in the room with me. He was sorry that by the time I got dressed and walked out into the waiting area, I needed to figure out how to tell my mom and what to do for the rest of our lives.

"What happened?" my mom asked.

"I'll tell you in the car," I said. My mom cried when I told her I was going to have a baby. I could not bring myself to say "pregnant."

"How did this happen?" she asked.

I laughed. "You have five kids."

My mom did not laugh. "Who is the father?"

"I don't know," I lied.

She cried all the way home. We didn't tell my dad because we thought it was best if he did not know.

Before I went back to begin my second semester at college, I told my mother I was going to give the baby up for adoption. "Give him up" is how we used to say it. My mother cried. "No, please…" she said. "You should go to Catholic Family Services and ask them for advice."

I went to Catholic Family Services because she asked. In the waiting area, boxes of used baby clothes were piled high against the wall in the corner, waiting to be donated to expectant mothers. Posters on the wall showed a young woman in a rocking chair holding a fluffy blanket and

another with a woman breastfeeding. One poster had an enormous picture of a translucent orange fetus. It said *Abortion Stops a Beating Heart*.

The counselor knew me and my family from summer camp. She said I should think about keeping my baby. She did not talk about how much it would cost to raise a child, about quitting school, about daycare and diapers and formula. She did not ask about the baby's father. She thought adoption was a bad choice. She said, "You will never see your baby again."

I looked up "adoption" in the Yellow Pages and found Carol, a social worker at a family service agency that was not Catholic and not approved by my mother. I began to see her regularly just as I was entering the second trimester of my pregnancy. She made sure I was eating healthy foods, seeing the doctor, and taking prenatal vitamins.

During our sessions, I cried and told her I was feeling lonely and afraid. I told her that my father forbid me from coming home for the summer because he said it wouldn't look good for him to have a pregnant, unmarried daughter at the Christian retreat center where my family lived. I told her about the call from the California couple, the aunt and uncle of my former high school classmate, who called my dorm room and said they wanted to adopt my baby. They said they would pay all of my bills. I promised the couple I would think about it, but I did not. After that, I screened my calls.

At the beginning of my third trimester, Carol said it was time to look in "the book" at profiles of the families who might want to adopt my baby. There were pictures of couples in front of the Christmas tree, at the lake, playing with the Border collie in the piles of brown and orange leaves in the front yard. There were statistics and evaluations and letters from family and friends.

I chose a family because the husband wrote a letter about his wife, and it made me cry. He wrote that his wife was sad because she could not have a baby. He said when they adopted their first child, it brought joy back into her life. I could tell he was a good father.

"Would they come to meet me when the baby is born?" I asked Carol.

"It is not usually done this way," she said, "but I will ask them."

In the years following the birth of my child, I met other birthmothers who had created an adoption plan for their child. They chose and met a family before the baby was born, and together they decided how the rest of their lives—or at least the near future—would play out. The birthmothers I knew had phone conversations with the moms of their birth children, and they attended birthday parties and special events. They

formed a special bond with their children and their families and developed a relationship that grew and changed over the years.

But in 1990, when my baby was born, a woman who was giving up her child for adoption did not create a plan. Like me, she left the hospital without her baby. Days, weeks, or even months later, she appeared before a judge to relinquish her parental rights, and then a family got a phone call from an adoption agency. Nothing was co-created. Very little, if any, information was shared. There were secrets, and sometimes the shame that accompanies them.

That was the way it was done, but that is not what I wanted. I wanted the family to meet me and know me and love me. I wanted them to know I was a good person who loved their son and took good care of him. I wanted them to think I was special.

Our son was born in August one day before he was due. I woke in the middle of the night, my contractions already five minutes apart. I called the nurse help line, and the nurse did not believe me. She told me to walk around for a while. "If anything changes, you should come in," she advised.

I paced through the common area of the dorm room where my best friend was living for the summer. Every five minutes, I paused and held onto the wall waiting for the pain to pass. Finally, I woke my friend. "It's time to go," I said.

We dressed and took the stairs instead of the elevator, fearing we would be caught by the residence hall staff because I was not supposed to be spending the night in my friend's room. We had to stop twice during contractions.

My best friend was with me through the delivery, which lasted only three hours. He stroked my hair, helped me remember to breathe, and cut the baby's umbilical cord. The baby had blonde hair and blue eyes, not black hair or brown eyes like mine. There were twelve other babies in the nursery the day my son was born, and I worried maybe they mixed the babies up when they brought me the one who did not look very much like me.

The doctors and nurses knew I was not going to keep the baby, but they let me spend a little time with him and feed him. With tears in her eyes, my nurse said to me, "I am adopted. You have a beautiful baby boy there. I want you to know you are going to make someone very happy."

My best friend and I said goodbye to the baby in our hospital room. We hugged him and kissed his soft, blonde head. The nurse whispered, "It's time to go now," so we gave him back.

We left together, without him. He went to live for two weeks with a foster mom named Emmy who assured me that she had plenty of stuffed animals, soft blankets, and a nice rocking chair. My friend and I drove through the late summer heat to my first-floor room in Burgum Hall. We pulled the twin beds together in the middle of the room and lay in each other's arms crying and sleeping, then waking and crying again. I was patting my friend's back, pat-pat-pat, like I would do to a baby.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"I don't know," I whispered, and we cried some more.

The law in North Dakota required me to wait two weeks before I could sign the papers to release my parental rights. As soon as we finished with the judge, Carol called the family and asked if they would come to meet me. The father was out of town but the mother said yes, she would call him home right away and they would come as soon as they could.

We all met in Carol's office a few days later. I wore a green dress and had my hair cut for the occasion. The office seemed tiny with four nervous people all crammed in together. The mother's small hands shook when she handed me the gifts they had brought for me—a gold necklace and some food. Tokens of affection, I think. She wanted to be sure I was fed and loved.

When I told the father I picked them because of his letter, he had tears in his eyes. They said they would send cards and pictures until the baby was three years old. I asked what they were going to name him, and the mother said his names—all three names. She wasn't supposed to say all three names because we were anonymous. Semi-open, our arrangement was called. We all looked at each other uncomfortably, and then Carol changed the subject.

They thanked me and told me I was special. We said our goodbyes, and I left the mother and father with Carol in that tiny room. And then, after I had gone, they met their new baby boy.

Every year in August, I remember the day before my son was born, how I was sick in the morning like I had been every morning of my pregnancy, and how by lunch time I was feeling well enough to eat a bologna sandwich on white bread. I remember walking the aisles of the grocery store in the evening with my friend, hoping the activity would induce labor.

I remember the hot and still night air when we left for the hospital, how quiet our college campus and the city were in the early morning hours. I remember that the doctor almost didn't make it in time for the delivery, and he joked, "Next time, you'll have to camp in the parking lot."

I knew there would not be a next time, not for me, not like this one. I remember the fear that accompanies labor pain, the swiftness of it, breathing and pushing and the exact moment the baby's head crowned. I remember hearing him cry for the first time and seeing his perfect little face.

And I remember leaving without him.

I began a search for my birth son on his 27th birthday. With the help of my uncle and the adoption agency, we reconnected and met each other for the first time mere months after I initiated the search process. After we ate lunch and caught each other up on our lives, we said goodbye and he said we'd talk soon.

We became friends who continue to learn more about our commonalities and connections. His family welcomed me into their lives, sharing many meals and celebrations, and my mother and I were guests at his wedding. Soon he and his wife will give birth to a baby boy, and I will become his Dee Dee, one of the many women who will love and care for him.

The day my birth son and I reconnected with each other was an unusually warm day in October, similar but different from the merciless August morning when he was born. The trees were just beginning to let go of their yellow and red leaves, and the air was filled with the promise of cooler days. As I drove away from the restaurant, I rolled down the windows of my car and felt my hair blowing in the wind as I breathed in the sweet decay of autumn.

But this time when I left him, I did not feel grief or uncertainty. I felt calm and blissful, filled with the excitement of beginning a new relationship. After birthdays and Mother's Days that passed with no celebration, I was able to once again hold in my arms the boy I said good-bye to so long ago. And finally, I experienced the long-awaited peace that comes for a birthmother when she knows her decision was the best for everyone.